

Student migrant, refugee or both?

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ABSTRACT

Tertiary education institutions in resettlement and asylum countries across the world are asking what role can and should they play in responding to today's forced displacement crises. Exploring and better understanding opportunities within higher education for complementary protection should be a priority. On September 19, 2016, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, which not only referenced education as a crucial part of refugee protection and development throughout its 90 paragraphs, but also highlighted the importance of tertiary education for refugees. The positive impacts of tertiary education on refugees' wellbeing, their integration into host societies, and their contributions to home countries is relatively well-understood from a livelihoods or development perspective. What is less understood is the impact of tertiary education on forced displacement patterns, or the when, where, why, and how of refugees' forced movements.

We know from studies on education migration that education is a key driver of movement in most societies. We also know that refugees perceive higher education as crucial to rebuilding their lives in host countries. Further, interviews with organizations supporting refugee education, such as the Jesuit Refugee Service, Danish Refugee Council, and Windle Trust, reveal a considerable unmet demand amongst refugees for tertiary education. Therefore, this research set out to understand: *How do refugees who pursue higher education in asylum countries, shape their forced displacement patterns in relation to tertiary education?* For instance, if a person's higher education was interrupted, prevented, or simply not possible in his or her home country because of conflict, crisis, or persecution, how might the prospect of higher education elsewhere play a role in that person's decision-making about where and how to seek asylum?

Understanding how refugees' pursuit of tertiary education impacts their forced displacement patterns has important implications for complementary protection and refugee mobility. According to UNHCR, complementary protection pathways are "safe and regulated avenues by which refugees may live in a country and have their international protection needs met, while also being able to support themselves and reach sustainable and lasting solutions." In the context of tertiary education, such pathways might take shape through student migration channels to "third" countries. This research argues that protection may also extend to refugees' stay in asylum countries and be a strategy that certain individuals undertake to avoid contact or sever ties with the refugee regime. Organizations working with refugees should find ways to support this process and explore the full potential of tertiary education in facilitating these pathways.

In terms of implications for refugee mobility, understanding how refugee's pursuit of higher education impacts how they negotiate their movements invites us to re-examine the limited ways in which we think about forced displacement with respect to refugee agency. It compels us to challenge concepts like "secondary movement" and to recognize

refugees' freedom of movement within asylum countries. Integrating a more nuanced concept of agency into the refugee movement discourse, particularly with respect to the pursuit of higher education and skills, and hence employment, has the potential to impact the way policy and practice conceptualize and seek to manage refugee mobility.

This study is multi-sited and employs a qualitative and interpretive methodological approach. It is set within Kenya, South Africa, and Uganda, as these are hubs for tertiary education and forced displacement in Africa and each country represents a unique refugee hosting policy (camp-based, self-settlement-based, or a hybrid policy). Further, these countries have different proximities to conflict and development contexts. This study collected and analyzed 149 narrative interviews with Congolese and Somali refugees and migrants on their displacement and higher education trajectories, in all three receiving countries. Research participants were sampled based on their level of tertiary education (university, college, technical/vocational school), gender, and relationship to tertiary education (graduated, enrolled, dropped-out, never enrolled). This study also analyzed the macro-level drivers and patterns of forced displacement between the DRC and Somalia and Kenya, South Africa and Uganda to understand the structural context framing respondents' micro-level decisions and actions.