
**‘I FIND MYSELF AS SOMEONE WHO IS IN THE FOREST’:
URBAN REFUGEES AS AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE IN KAMPALA, UGANDA**

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I am appreciative of all feedback on this draft, however, please do not cite or share without my permission. Thank you.

Abstract

The growing number of urban refugees coupled with the dearth of information on these populations is my point of departure. An in-depth investigation of the Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre (KURCEC), a refugee community-based organization in Uganda, allows for detailed exploration of the livelihood strategies employed by urban refugees in the sphere of education and of the ways in which these strategies can promote self-reliance and individual and community development in urban situations. The urban refugees' development of the Centre challenges perceived notions of refugees as burdens or as passive recipients in a system that fosters dependency, and shows that they are agents of social change within their own and their host communities. The focus on 'goodness' in the midst of crisis, desperation, and uncertainty is a deliberate attempt to promote research and policy-setting that is forward-looking and productive rather than reactionary and regressive in the context of new developments in policy and practice relating to urban refugees worldwide.

Abbreviations

ASSOREF	Association des réfugiés francophones
CARA	Control of Alien Refugees Act
CFA	Country of First Asylum
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EPAU	Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit
ICVA	International Council of Voluntary Agencies
KURCEC	Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre
MFPED	Ministry of Finance, Planning, and Economic Development
NGO	Non-governmental organization
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
RLP	Refugee Law Project
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPE	Universal Primary Education
UShs	Uganda Shilling

1 Introduction

I am already dead, having lost all hope. Sometimes, I have the idea to return to my country, even if I risk getting myself killed. I would not suffer hunger, I would not sleep outside because my family is there; they could even see to my burial. I don't know what to do, what to say, or what to think.

—‘Daniel,’ refugee from Democratic Republic of Congo,
living in Kampala, Uganda (Email, 2.2.04)

Refugees who live in urban environments are—like Daniel—some of the world’s most vulnerable citizens.¹ Urban refugees are predominantly self-settled, living outside of formal assistance structures and often unable to access their rights of protection through either the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) or through host governments. Their living conditions are overcrowded and squalid; and while usually they are not poorer than the citizens in whose midst they live, they persist without legal status, without support networks, and often as victims of xenophobia. Due to their ‘invisibility’ in rapidly urbanizing spaces where their legal status is often undetermined, refugees in urban areas of the global South² are a particularly understudied population.

‘Urban refugees’ include all refugees, whether of urban or rural background, who are resident in an urban area (EPAU, 2003: 1).³ Their numbers are growing as a percentage of the

¹ I would like to thank the Mellon Foundation, the Migration and Urbanisation Node of the University of the Witwatersrand, and the Fulbright Commission for their generous support of my larger project on refugee education, out of which this work on refugees in urban areas comes.

² As is common in the field of forced migration, the term ‘global South’ is used to refer to non-industrialized societies, most of which are south of the Equator. Other terms used to describe these countries include ‘developing countries’ and the ‘Third World.’

³ There is disagreement over the definition of ‘urban refugees.’ As noted in a recent draft of ‘Guiding principles and good practice’ from UNHCR (2003), existing UNHCR documentation uses the term ‘urban refugee’ to describe “(1) refugees from an urban background but who are living in a camp or settlement; (2) refugees of an urban background

number of refugees worldwide (Obi & Crisp, 2001: 1; EPAU, 2003: 1), with fourteen percent of persons of concern to the UNHCR now living in urban areas (UNHCR, 2004: 81), and with the number who have not been counted or who are living without recognition larger still (Crisp, 1999; Parker, 2002). The urbanization of refugees is consistent with urban growth rates across much of the global South. Africa, where the majority of the world's displaced people live (UNHCR, 2004: 2), has the highest urban growth rates in the world at nearly five percent per annum, on aggregate (Ogbu & Ikiara, 1995: 53; Harsch, 2001: 2; Simone, 2003: 2). While thirty-nine percent of Africans lived in urban areas in 2003, the United Nations predicts that fifty-four percent of the population will be urbanized by 2030 (United Nations, 2004: 5). These patterns of migration make it likely that the number of refugees living in urban areas will continue to grow.

The presence of refugees in urban areas is a phenomenon that is beginning to surface in the literature on forced migration, as researchers study refugees in Khartoum (Karawadi, 1987; Kibreab, 1994; Rogge, 1985), Dar es Salaam (Sommers, 2001; Willems, 2003), Cairo (Briant & Kennedy, 2004; Sperl, 2001), and Johannesburg (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003) and as advocacy groups highlight the vulnerability of these populations in Nairobi (Parker, 2002) and in Kampala (Parker, 2002; Bernstein, 2005). The UNHCR has also recognized the trends in urbanization of refugees and is beginning to adapt its policies to address the challenges and opportunities facing urban refugees. Yet there continues to be a paucity of research on how refugees in urban settings pursue their livelihoods, strategies that promise to inform effective policy formation.

who are living in a city; and (3) all refugees, whether of urban or rural background, who are resident in an urban area”(1). Landau (2004), in a guide for research on urban refugees, alternately describes urban refugees as “all those coming from ‘refugee-producing countries’ who are living, however temporarily, in a given urban environment” (2004). I have chosen to adopt the definition that the UNHCR now recommends: “all refugees, whether of urban or rural background, who are resident in an urban area”(UNHCR, 2003: 1-2).

The growing number of urban refugees coupled with the dearth of information on these populations is my point of departure. In Kampala, Uganda's capital city, refugees identify access to education as one of the most critical issues in need of attention in urban settings of displacement (Huff & Kalyango, 2002; Dryden-Peterson, 2003; Bernstein, 2005), and my research centers on this community-identified priority. I employ a case study design in examining the dynamic quality of livelihood strategies adopted by urban refugees in Kampala as they forge access to education, focusing on the Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre (KURCEC),⁴ a community-based organisation that provides free primary education for refugee children, primarily from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

An in-depth investigation of this one case allows for detailed exploration of the livelihood strategies employed by urban refugees in the sphere of education and of the ways in which these strategies can promote self-reliance and individual and community development in urban situations. In the context of the development of new approaches to working with urban refugees, this one case provides an important example of how urban refugees themselves can be agents of assistance and social change. Further, in choosing to focus on an example of what is 'good' in the situation of urban refugees in Kampala, I adopt a particular stance as a researcher, one that I believe to be central in the search for durable solutions to intractable and protracted refugee 'problems.' My approach recognizes that "[t]he researcher who asks first 'what is good here?' is likely to absorb a very different reality than the one who is on a mission to discover the sources of failure" (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997: 9). This focus does not preclude the recognition that "goodness will always be laced with imperfections" (Lawrence-Lightfoot &

⁴ The name of the Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre and the adults who work with this initiative have not been changed. I recognize that this decision violates Western norms of confidentiality; I have, however, chosen to respect the wishes of Mr. Jacques Bwira and Mr. Dela Bituka in identifying them and their school by name.

Davis, 1997: 9) and “that reality is complicated and made up of many partial and often conflicting truths” (Lammers, 2003: 8). Nevertheless, I believe that a focus on ‘goodness’ in the midst of crisis, desperation, and uncertainty will lead to research and policy-setting that is forward-looking and productive rather than reactionary and regressive.

The paper is organized as follows. In examining the issue of urban refugees ‘from above,’ I first analyze current UNHCR policy relating to refugees in urban areas; significant space is devoted to this analysis as it has not been done elsewhere. Second, I present the policy and practice of the Government of Uganda and the effects on the lives of urban refugees. Third, shifting my focus to views ‘from the ground,’ I explore the development of KURCEC and the consequences of this initiative for individual refugees, the urban refugee community, and the host population. Finally, I conclude by evaluating how the experience of KURCEC contributes to an understanding of the livelihoods of urban refugees and the implications of this understanding for both international and national policy.

2 International Urban Refugee Policy

In 1997, the UNHCR adopted a new policy related to urban refugees. This introduction followed a 1995 discussion paper that outlined main issues of concern to UNHCR in its work with refugees living in urban areas. Central among these concerns was a dilemma: “[w]hilst there is no mandate to assist, the question arises as to how broadly the organization should interpret its mandate to protect” (UNHCR, 1995: ¶2). Despite this imperative, the 1997 policy focused on establishing that, in urban areas, “as a rule, UNHCR’s assistance should be reduced to a minimum” (Obi & Crisp, 2001: ¶15) in order to promote self-reliance and avoid dependency. It also conceptualized urban refugees as “problems” (UNHCR, 1997: ¶1), whose

settlement in urban areas should be discouraged. Interpreting UNHCR's mandate to protect was relegated to a secondary concern; while the document clearly stated that "UNHCR's obligations in respect of international protection are not affected either by the location of the refugees or the nature of the movement to that location"(UNHCR, 1997: ¶2), mechanisms to enable this protection were not explored.

The 1997 policy was, in many ways, obsolete before it was made public. Drafts of the policy had been so criticized by non-governmental organization (NGO) partners (UNHCR, Inter-Office Memorandum No.90/97: ¶3) that the document was distributed with a cover letter, emphasizing that the policy was a work in progress and would be revised based on comments and suggestions from UNHCR offices and partners (UNHCR, Inter-Office Memorandum No.90/97: ¶3). As a result of this uncertainty and of difficulties in execution, many stakeholders experienced—for over a decade—a policy void related to urban refugees. In response, UNHCR's Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit (EPAU) undertook a review of the 1997 policy and its implementation (Obi & Crisp, 2001), including the commission of case studies of selected cities (Sperl, 2001; Obi & Crisp, 2000; Furley, Obi & Crisp, 2002) and further consultations with NGO partners (Obi & Crisp, 2002; ICVA, 2004). On the basis of this evaluation process, the EPAU compiled a draft document, 'Protection, solutions and assistance for refugees in urban areas: Guiding principles and good practice' (2003), in which it suggested the withdrawal of the 1997 policy and proposed its replacement with a version of these guiding principles and good practice.

The guiding principles and good practice presented in the 2003 draft document responded directly to the criticism levelled at the 1997 policy. First, the document emphasized "the need for a protection focus" (EPAU, 2003: 3) and outlined the particular protection threats

encountered by urban refugees, including “arbitrary arrest, detention and extortion by police and other authorities; human trafficking, especially of refugee women and girls; exploitation by employers (including child labour), traders and landlords; discrimination and physical abuse (including sexual violence) at the hands of the local population, police officers and other authorities, or by refugees themselves” (EPAU, 2003: 4). Second, it called for creative approaches to the provision of assistance to urban refugees that could be sustained within budgetary limitations while at the same time recognizing the vulnerabilities of this population. The guiding principles supported the conclusion of a recent evaluation that “a level of engagement which goes some way beyond providing the minimum level of support for the shortest possible time” (EPAU, 2003: 8) was necessary. Third, the document argued that the promotion of self-reliance was critical to finding durable solutions for urban refugees. With this aim, the EPAU suggested that UNHCR might engage in self-reliance programs for urban refugees (EPAU, 2003: 11-12), advocacy for national legal frameworks that allow urban refugees to exercise civil and socio-economic rights (EPAU, 2003: 10-11), and support for cultural, social, recreational, sporting and refugee community activities in cities (EPAU, 2003: 5).

Despite the clear recommendation of the EPAU to withdraw the 1997 policy and to replace it with a version of these Guiding Principles and Good Practice, the draft document has never been made public⁵ and, as yet, languishes without adoption by UNHCR. In a statement to the 2004 Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting of UNHCR, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) expressed concern over the failure of UNHCR to accept the draft

⁵ I am grateful to Jeff Crisp, former Head of the EPAU and current Director of Policy and Research at the Global Commission on International Migration, for allowing me access to this document.

document as policy and to move forward (IVCA, 2004). Indeed, while UNHCR has recognized the inadequacies of the 1997 policy, a more effective policy has yet to supersede it.

3 Host Government Urban Refugee Policy and Practice: The Case of Uganda

While international policy, set by UNHCR, provides a framework in which to provide protection and assistance to refugees, the policies and practices adopted by host governments are critical. Such is particularly true on the issue of urban refugees. Most governments in countries of first asylum⁶ consider displaced people living in camps or settlements to be *prima facie* refugees and thus to be eligible for assistance; the displaced who are living in urban areas, on the other hand, are often without such recognition and eligibility for assistance (Jacobsen, 2004: 58). Uganda provides an example of this type of legal structure vis-à-vis refugees.

The current legislation relating to refugees in Uganda is the Control of Alien Refugees Act (CARA).⁷ Enacted in 1964, over a decade before Uganda ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, the CARA is inconsistent with international standards relating to the treatment of refugees. As its title implies, the act focuses on the *control* of refugees. Although the Act has never been strictly applied in Uganda (Kiapi, 1998: 42; Hovil, 2002: 30), this emphasis has nevertheless had an impact on the realization of civil and socio-economic rights for refugees. It regulates, for instance, the way in which assistance is delivered to refugees: aid is contingent

⁶ The country of first asylum, sometimes written CFA, is defined in international law as the first country into which a refugee enters and may seek asylum. As most mass movements of refugees occur over land, CFAs are usually neighboring countries and themselves located close to or within conflict zones. Uganda is the first border that refugees from DRC, Sudan, and Rwanda cross in seeking asylum; thus Uganda is their 'country of first asylum.'

⁷ A new refugee bill was introduced by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) in 2003, however, it has yet to be passed by the Ugandan parliament. The draft version of this new bill respects the right to freedom of movement for refugees, but the bill also notes that freedom of movement is subject to "directions issued by the Commissioner" (¶30).

upon a refugee living in a designated settlement, all of which are in rural and isolated areas of Uganda.⁸

Despite attempts by host governments to direct the settlement of refugees to certain areas—as in the local settlement policy in Uganda—most refugees worldwide are self-settled, living dispersed amid local populations.⁹ Indeed, according to UNHCR's 2003 (provisional) statistical yearbook, only thirty-four percent of refugees worldwide lived in camps, whereas fifty-two percent were self-settled (UNHCR, 2003: 81). This same yearbook reported that, in Uganda, 210,657 refugees—primarily from Sudan, DRC, and Rwanda—lived in settlements (UNHCR, 2003: 79), that no refugees were self-settled, and that 832 refugees lived in urban areas. Self-settled refugees, both rural and urban, are considered 'aliens' by the Government of Uganda and are therefore not recognized as refugees. However, on-going research by the Refugee Law Project (RLP) demonstrated that, in every refugee-hosting area of Uganda, there were large numbers of self-settled displaced persons who fell under the definition of 'refugee' as defined by the 1951 Convention (Kaiser, Hovil & Lomo, 2005; Hovil, 2003; Bagenda, Naggaga & Smith, 2003; Werker, 2002).

Most of the refugees living in urban areas in Uganda are similarly self-settled. UNHCR-Uganda has a small urban caseload of 200 refugees on average each month (Nasinyama, personal communication, 11.18.02) who are assisted in Kampala rather than in settlements due to security threats or medical emergencies. In addition, however, 10,000 refugees are registered with the

⁸ This local settlement policy was designed to promote a degree of self-sufficiency for refugees, specifically through the provision of land (OPM/UNHCR, 1999: 12). However, the lack of sufficient arable land; the general insecurity that has, for decades, characterized the areas of northern Uganda in which the majority of settlements are located (Global IDP Project, 2005; Hovil & Morehead, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2003; International Crisis Group, 2004; Lomo & Hovil, 2004); and the restrictions imposed on movement, which promote economic isolation and social seclusion, have compromised attempts at self-sufficiency in most cases (Kaiser, 2002; Werker, 2002; Hovil, 2002; Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004).

⁹ For a detailed discussions on the processes and experiences of refugee self-settlement, see Bakewell, 2000; Black, 1998; Kaiser, Hovil & Lomo, 2005; and Malkki, 1995.

Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)¹⁰ and the Ugandan police as 'self-sufficient refugees'¹¹ in Kampala (Huff & Kalyango, 2002), and an estimated 5,000 to 10,000 others live in Kampala un-registered and without assistance or protection (Asiimwe, personal communication, 11.04.02; Lomingo, personal communication, 11.19.02; Nasinyama, personal communication, 11.18.02; Parker, 2002).

Several studies suggest that refugees are motivated to settle in urban areas for a number of reasons, including expanded employment opportunities, improved educational possibilities for themselves and their children, increased security through anonymity, and proximity to family, telecommunications, and resettlement opportunities (Kibreab, 1996; Macchiavello, 2003). Despite these 'pull factors,' many urban refugees in Kampala face enormous obstacles in seeking to fulfil their primary goals of acquisition of refugee status and achievement of self-sufficiency. First, the system of application for asylum and for resettlement to a third country is inefficient, unstructured, and confusing. This bureaucracy and ambivalence of both the Government of Uganda and the UNHCR cripples the agency of refugees in securing their futures (Huff & Kalyango, 2002; Bernstein, 2005); many urban refugees spend each day filling out paperwork, attempting to schedule meetings with appropriate authorities, and becoming cynical and frustrated with their lack of ability to move their cases forward (ASSOREF, meeting observation, 04.25.03, 05.09.03, 05.21.03, 05.29.03, 06.23.04, 07.07.04, 07.21.04).

Second, the skills that urban refugees possess and their ability to use these skills in providing for their immediate needs and, ultimately, for self-sufficiency are truncated.

Macchiavello (2003) studied 221 individual refugees living in Kampala and concluded that,

¹⁰ The Office of the Prime Minister, Directorate of Refugees, is the government structure under which responsibility for refugees falls.

¹¹ OPM provides refugees with official papers permitting them to live in Kampala if they can prove 'self-sufficiency' by way of a letter from an employer or evidence of residency. This policy does not exist on paper (Bernstein, 2005) but has been in practice for at least three years.

given the education and skill level of these refugees, “most individuals in the sample have the potential that, under the right circumstances, would enable them to become self-sufficient” (2003: 8). Despite the absence of assistance, Macchiavello demonstrates that 33.5% of the refugees in the sample are indeed self-sufficient within the economy of Kampala (2003: 9). Yet even with previous training, professional experience, and portable skills, the majority of urban refugees in Kampala continue to be stymied by structural constraints such as the lack of employment opportunities for refugees and nationals alike, confusion over the legality of hiring a refugee for a job, xenophobia and the exploitation of refugees by the host population, and lack of ability in English (Macchiavello, 2003). It is in this context of Ugandan policy and practice that urban refugees in Kampala forge access to education for their children.

4 Education of Refugees in Kampala, Uganda

Education of refugee children in Kampala takes place in the context of Ugandan policy and practice related to urban refugees as well as in the context of the national education system. In January 1997, Universal Primary Education (UPE) was introduced in Uganda, exempting four children per family from paying primary school fees. The number of Ugandan children enrolled in primary school increased that year from 2.6 million to 5.5 million (UN, 2000). By 1999, 6.5 million children were enrolled in primary school in Uganda, equivalent to a net enrolment rate of 85% (UN, 2000). The guidelines governing UPE in Kampala, however, are different from those in the rest of the country. While aiming to maintain universal access to primary school, UPE schools in Kampala have higher costs and thus charge school fees of US\$10,400 per pupil per term, the equivalent of US\$5.40 (Jjuuko, 2001; Zirimenya-Mirumdi, Interview, 03.19.03).¹²

¹² For further discussion of UPE in Uganda, see Prather, 2004; and Deininger, 2003.

Due to this relatively high cost of education, access to the national education system in urban areas is out of reach for most of the refugees who live in Kampala yet who are not on the UNHCR urban caseload. Documentation of the educational needs of family members of women involved with the Association des réfugiés francophones (ASSOREF) in Kampala revealed that forty-two percent of children were not in school.¹³ Recognizing the importance of education and the lack of opportunity within existing structures, urban refugees have needed to begin their own education initiatives. The Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre (KURCEC) is one such initiative. I selected KURCEC as the subject of this case study because it is the only school educating children from the Democratic Republic of Congo in Kampala.¹⁴ In this way, it represents a unique case (Gerring, 2004; Yin, 2003). While this school is unique in Uganda, it nevertheless appropriately represents the possibility of access to education for the largest refugee population in Kampala, that from DRC.

The Site

In 2002-2003, KURCEC was located on the outskirts of Kampala in a church, set halfway up a hill and nestled in a community of poor, usually unemployed, families. The church building appeared old and run-down, even though it was built less than two years before. Cement walls rose from a dirt floor to a high roof made of corrugated tin; the space inside was not quite indoors. Wide gaps in the cement walls were windows, open to the elements at all times. This wide-open space was multi-use. In the evenings and on weekends, it was the Fountain of Life Ministry church; at night, it was the sleeping place of eleven stray dogs; from the hours of 8 in the morning until 12:30 in the afternoon, it was a school.

¹³ Copies of this data, collected by the refugee organization ASSOREF, are held by the author.

¹⁴ Refugees of other nationalities have also started self-help schools in Kampala. There is a school of this nature for Somali refugees and one for Sudanese refugees.

The physical space of KURCEC has not been constant. KURCEC was started in January 2000, with the assistance of Père Michel Lingisi, in the Bondeko Centre, Najjanankumbi I, Central Zone I, Rubaga Division. At that time, there was an influx of refugees from the DRC fleeing anti-Kabila and factional wars. Some of these refugees came directly to Kampala, and many came via rural refugee settlements (Interviews with key informants, 2002-2003). Unable to find adequate housing for their families, many refugees new to Kampala sought temporary shelter with Père Michel at his Centre (Huff & Kalyango, 2002). The children of these refugees were “simply hanging around” (Refugee parent, personal communication, 01.23.03), and parents began to wonder what they could do for the children’s education. After observing unsuccessful attempts by parents to gain access to local Ugandan schools for their children, two men who had been teachers in DRC agreed to hold classes for the children, on a voluntary basis. It was thus that the initiative of KURCEC began.

As of May 2003, sixty-two pupils had availed themselves of the opportunity for free education and were registered at KURCEC. Forty of these pupils came regularly to the school (Personal observation, 11.12.02-11.29.02; 02.24.03, 03.10.03, 05.09.03, 05.12.03). One of the pupils was from Rwanda, seven were Ugandan nationals, and the other 54 were from DRC. Eighteen of these children had ration card numbers issued by UNHCR; twelve were asylum seekers and had registered with OPM; five had been in Uganda since 1964, having originally come from DRC as refugees; and the status of 20 were undetermined (Parent Survey, 2003).

Methods

This case study of KURCEC is part of a three-year longitudinal study of the education of refugee children from Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) who are displaced in Uganda.¹⁵ The literature on education of refugees focuses primarily on education of refugees in resettlement countries (for example, the review of best practices by Hamilton & Moore, 2004) or on education in emergency situations within the confines of camp or settlement structures in countries of first asylum (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003; Sinclair, 2002; Sommers, 1999; Triplehorn, 2001; UNHCR, 2002). In many countries, however, including Uganda, education of refugees takes place in diverse settings.¹⁶ My research design addresses the multiple ways in which refugees access education, including a particular focus on access in urban settings.

I hypothesized possible implications of this study for local integration of refugees in Uganda (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004; Crisp, 2003; Harrell-Bond, 2002; Jacobsen, 2001) and therefore saw the need to frame the study in the context of national development (Dryden-Peterson, under review). For this reason, I collected data on refugee children and national children within each school setting. I further designed this study to provide several levels of comparative analysis: within a school among the individual refugee pupils; within a school comparing refugee and national pupils; across the case study schools representing different

¹⁵ The research questions for this larger study are as follows. First, the study determines the access refugee children have to education in different settings. In this way, it addresses the question, *what forms of education best reach refugee children?* Second, the study examines the effects of different types of schools on the creation of psycho-social stability and social integration of children. In this way, it addresses the question, *what are the most effective educational situations in which to promote the well-being of refugee children?*

¹⁶ In Uganda, the primary education of refugees takes place in three distinct arenas, which provide the sites for the case studies that form the larger study: UNHCR-sponsored primary schools in refugee settlements, attended primarily by refugees and some nationals; government-funded primary schools in refugee settlements, attended primarily by nationals and some refugees; and self-help schools in the major urban centre, Kampala, attended primarily by refugees and some nationals.

educational settings; and over time. The first two levels of analysis are relevant to this case study.

I used multiple methods to collect data (see Figure 1). First, I interviewed key informants—including both refugee and national community leaders, district-level officials, and educational officials—with open-ended protocols. Through these interviews, I aimed to collect data that would characterize the social and political environments in which refugees and nationals lived and went to school.

Second, I conducted school-based research that included interviews with pupils and teachers, classroom observations, and participant observation. The interviews with pupils included a series of drawing prompts where I asked children to ‘Draw your home’, ‘Draw yourself’, ‘Draw your school’ and ‘Draw your friends.’ I used these drawings as a springboard to semi-structured interviews on the themes of home, self, school, and friends. I interviewed a total of seventeen children at KURCEC—ten refugees and seven nationals (the total number of nationals in the school). I selected these participants at random from among pupils in the primary 4 and primary 5 classes.

The interviews with pupils, both nationals and refugees, were more complicated than those with adults due to language barriers and bring to light important methodological considerations about the use of local research assistants and the issue of translation (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003). I did all of the research for this study myself but did employ local translators to facilitate the interviews with pupils. Refugee children were interviewed in kiSwahili with the help of a Ugandan translator, hired from a reputable local language school, who had lived in exile in DRC years previous and was fluent in kiSwahili. National children were interviewed in Luganda with the help of a translator who had a diploma in education and experience in research

translation. Jacobsen and Landau warn that “using research assistants from the same country or area as the respondent risks transgressing political, social, or economic fault-lines of which the researcher may not be aware” (2003: 10); in employing translators from outside the communities, I attempted to alleviate this problem.¹⁷

I interviewed all of the teachers who taught study participant pupils, as well as the head teacher and deputy head teachers. These interviews were designed according to open-ended protocols that focused on characterizing the social environment of the school and probing decision-making in the classroom. I interviewed the teachers at the conclusion of my research time in their school. By that time, we had in fact discussed many of the issues raised by the open-ended questions I posed. This possibility for triangulation of data from interviews and multiple conversations allows me to place greater confidence in the reliability of the data. I also observed twenty-three lessons at KURCEC, arriving unannounced at a given class after gaining the teacher’s permission to conduct such an observation. In addition to this classroom-based observation, I conducted two weeks of sustained participant observation and eight days of follow-up visits.

Finally, I conducted a survey of the household of each participant pupil, both refugee and national. While the sampling of households for this study was not random, the selection of students for the study was, as is appropriate to analysis conducted at the school-level and not the community- or population-level. This survey, which drew significantly on the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS) Uganda, developed by USAID and tested and administered by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (UBOS), provided quantitative data on economic well-being and educational opportunity for refugees and nationals.

¹⁷ All interviews, in audiotape and transcription form, are held by the author.

My role within the school was complex for reasons other than being a researcher. Indeed, mine was the only white face for miles around and, while in certain ways I shared the position of outsider to Ugandan society with the refugees, I was an outsider in a different way. My position as a foreigner who had economic means far beyond most in the refugee community was necessarily imbued with power. Critical analysis of interview data as well as fieldnotes has included consideration of these issues.

[Figure 1 about here]

The Teachers: Refugees As Agents of Social Assistance

Jacques Bwira, age 29, and Dela Bituka, age 28, arrived in Uganda in 2000 and 1998 respectively. Originally from the Nord-Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo, they were both forced to flee their homes, victims of civil and inter-ethnic war. While both men spent time in refugee settlements in Uganda, they described feeling that they could be “more useful” (Bwira, personal communication, 12.09.02; Bituka, interview, 12.05.02) to themselves, their families, and their communities by residing in Kampala. This sense of purpose derived from their roles as teachers within the urban refugee community in Kampala.

Bwira and Bituka were trained in DRC as primary school teachers. Each had the opportunity to teach for less than two years before beginning his flight from Congo. Despite their short professional lives in their home country, Bwira and Bituka exhibited a deep sense of purpose as educators. Bituka described his calling:

When we were studying...[our teachers] gave us examples of.... if we were to arrive in the middle of a forest, where there was no education, but where we

would find people, children. It is in the middle of the forest, there are indigenous peoples, people who are not civilized. It is up to you, if you find yourself in that forest, to struggle to teach those children so that they will have something in their heads. And, for me, here in Kampala with these refugee children, I find myself as someone who is in the forest where there are children who do not know schooling.... And I, I have this vocation [of teacher]. I must struggle so that these children can study. It is for this reason that we are here at this school. And, even though there is no salary, even though there is no assistance, I still have, in my heart, this vocation. So, when I see children who suffer, who don't even have an idea in their heads, a child who is not even capable of reading or writing his name, that touches me a lot. And because of that, I find the courage to say that even though there is nothing, no salary, there are still these children (Bituka, interview, 12.05.02).

The notion of vocation, or 'calling,' that pervaded Bituka's description of his work in Kampala surrounded the operations of the Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre. This school was indeed created out of necessity by two men who found children in the middle of a forest with no educational opportunities and who took it upon themselves to create something out of nothing. As individuals, they were agents of social assistance—that UNHCR was not able to provide in Kampala—both to themselves as they created vocational opportunities and to their refugee community in Kampala as they provided access to education.

The School: Refugee Self-Reliance in An Urban Area

One of the central problems faced by refugees arriving in Kampala is the lack of educational possibilities for their children. And yet, education is a way to prevent the recurrence of violence and to create economic opportunities that allow refugees to become self-reliant, both in their situation as refugees and in the event of a durable solution (Brown, 2002; Jobolingo, 2002; Sommers, 1999; UNHCR, 1999; UNHCR, 2002). As such, many urban refugees cited lack of educational opportunities as their most pressing concern. The work that Bwira and Bituka did in initiating KURCEC responded to this lack of opportunity with the provision of education.

The specific lack of educational opportunity in Kampala involved problems accessing local Ugandan schools. Access, in this case, is defined broadly to include not only enrolment in school but also the ability for a refugee child to access—or benefit from—the education once he or she is in the classroom. Bwira defined the extent of these problems:

The first condition [of entry into a local school] is to have money, a condition that we refugees cannot meet because many of us are very poor. They pay even for food with great difficulty [and]... parents are simply not capable of sending their children to these schools. The second problem also is language. Even if [a child] was, for example, in a French-speaking country in P.5 [Primary 5], once arriving here, he is obligated to go back maybe to P.2 or maybe P.3, which retards the level of learning (Bwira, Interview, 11.25.02).

In providing an alternative to the out-of-reach national education system for refugee children in Kampala, Bwira and Bituka sought to address the issues faced by refugee children: free access to school and appropriate language of instruction.

Bwira and Bituka created a structure in which refugee children could access school free of charge. Bwira explains that "... access [to this school] is free.... [A] child is accepted without having to pay anything and without condition. Pupils must only have a notebook and a pencil or pen. That's it. They may come to school" (Bwira, interview, 11.25.02). Beginning in 2000, Bwira and Bituka taught classes for 20 to 30 pupils in people's homes. Bwira says, "I saw that if there was someone who started, there would be people who would come" (Bwira, interview, 11.25.02). Indeed, children came. They soon moved the classes to the Bondeko Centre, run by the Père Michel, to accommodate the increasing numbers.

A policeman observed this 'school' in operation in 2001 and threatened to close it down, citing the law stating that a gathering of 30 children without official permission is not allowed. In order to avoid this closure, the teachers proceeded to the Office of the Prime Minister to begin the process of obtaining a license for the school. A school without an adequate school building cannot obtain a license, however, and thus KURCEC could not obtain its official license. Nevertheless, with the perseverance of Bwira, the school secured permission to operate from the OPM (Ref. OPM/R/59), the Kampala City Council (letter dated 16 August 2001), and the Ministry of Education and Sports (Ref. ADM/137/235/01). As an agent for his community, Bwira ensured that free access to education for refugee children would not cease to exist on a legal technicality. Yet still without a permanent school building, physical space in which to conduct classes was a pressing issue for KURCEC. In February 2002, Père Michel no longer had the funds to pay for the space out of which the school operated. Bwira thus sought other options and convinced the Pastor of Fountain of Life Church, David Tomusange, to host the school in the space of his church, where the school continued to operate through March 2004.

The Pupils: Beneficiaries of Refugee Agency

In creating a school for refugees from DRC, Bwira and Bituka were able to structure it pedagogically to meet the needs of their pupils. One of the central issues was language. Indeed, refugees from DRC come from a country where the language of instruction in schools is French and not English, as is the case in Uganda. Bwira and Bituka, in consultation with the parents of their pupils, decided that the language of instruction at KURCEC would be French. They came to this decision for a number of reasons. First, it would allow children to continue their education in French without the frustration, and potential academic delay, of beginning again in a new language. Second, education in French would be beneficial in the event of repatriation to DRC. And third, conducting school in French would play to the strength of Bwira and Bituka, the teachers. They were educated in French and, having no books or funds for supplies, followed the curriculum from DRC in their instruction at KURCEC, relying on their own memories of the content. Bituka said, “We don’t have any materials, books, or manuals. But in Congo, we were taught to know everything that we teach in our heads” (Personal communication, 11.18.02). The teachers know that content in French.

While set up with the intention of serving refugees, KURCEC also met the needs of poor Ugandans who live in Kampala. “I come here because my father has no money,” one national child explained (interview, 11.27.02). In this way, the social assistance expanded beyond the urban refugee population of Kampala and to the host community. Bituka explained:

In this school, to obtain access to education, there is not the condition that you must be a refugee. Instead, this school is for all the people who do not have the means to pay for their studies in local schools here. Even if you are Ugandan, a native of this country, you always have the right to come to school here if you do

not have the means to pay for schooling here in Uganda (Bituka, interview, 12.05.02).

That Ugandan nationals would choose to attend KURCEC underlines some of the issues of access to primary education in Uganda. Even though the language of instruction at KURCEC was French—a language new to Ugandan children and arguably not substantially useful for life in Uganda where the language of common currency is English—some parents felt that KURCEC would provide a better and more stable education than local UPE schools. Indeed, despite the introduction of UPE, there continues to be insufficient infrastructure to meet the needs of all Ugandan pupils (Lubega, 2002). For example, in UPE schools in Kampala—the only schools that are accessible to the poor—there may be up to 200 pupils in one class (Personal observation, 2003; MFPED, 2001: 24). In that situation, pupils do not receive the attention they need to succeed in their studies.¹⁸

Despite a lack of resources, the teachers at KURCEC were able to give each pupil abundant individual attention and thus to promote real learning for all pupils. With two teachers for an average of 40 pupils, these children had one of the best class sizes in all Uganda. This lower pupil to teacher ratio allowed for greater interaction between pupils and teachers, more frequent marking of books, and increased class participation by individual pupils. For example, by 11 on a given morning, Bituka had checked each of his pupil's notebooks three times, giving constant feedback on progress (Personal observation, 11.18.02). Unlike in neighbouring classrooms, where pupils went days without any individual attention from teachers (Personal observation, 03.13.03-03.21.03), the pupils at KURCEC were truly learning. One refugee child said excitedly: "I'm learning everything [at this school]!" (interview, 11.29.02). The social

¹⁸ See MFPED, 2001: 24: "Internationally, class size has not been found to be very powerful in explaining learning outcomes, but very few countries have class sizes as large as Uganda's now; the evidence in Uganda is that class size does make a difference."

assistance that Bwira and Bituka were providing to urban refugee children in Kampala was of high quality.

The Urban Refugee Community: Refugees As Agents of Social Change

The innovation of KURCEC, however, goes beyond its unique provision of access to education for refugee children in Kampala. While the product of access to education is a critical opportunity for urban refugee children from DRC, the process by which this opportunity comes about is perhaps yet more important. Indeed, the process by which agency is employed in developing an initiative such as KURCEC is integral to understanding the dynamic qualities of coping strategies adopted by urban refugees and the impacts of these strategies on both individual and community development. It is to this process that the analysis now turns.

The situation of KURCEC is different in certain ways from the legal and economic examples of constraint on urban refugees provided in recent publications (Kibreab, 1986; Macchiavello, 2003). The aim of starting a school was not for personal benefit but instead to provide a service to the refugee community. In fact, the work of Bwira and Bituka at KURCEC did not contribute to their economic self-sufficiency as they did not receive any monetary compensation for their work. On the other hand, the development of KURCEC similarly required the exercise of agency in the face of structural constraints. And the process of overcoming these structural constraints and circumventing the limitations placed by UNHCR and the Government of Uganda on urban refugees in the development of KURCEC is indicative of the strength of the coping strategies of individual urban refugees.

The agency exhibited by Bwira and Bituka in the development of KURCEC derived both from their attributes and ideologies about individual responsibility and from their abilities to

negotiate a system that is premised on the restriction of refugee livelihoods in urban areas. Their vocation for teaching led them to respond to a community need for education of refugee children; and their sense of responsibility to this refugee community urged them to teach its children voluntarily despite the difficulties posed for their individual self-sufficiency. Most importantly for the exile context in which they lived, Bwira and Bituka were able to deal with Ugandan authorities in non-threatening ways, particularly through earnest attempts to comply with Ugandan law in all its vagaries and to acquire the correct paperwork for the operation of their school. In addition, KURCEC gained the respect of the local community by providing a tangible benefit of free education to children in the host community.

The process by which agency was employed by individual refugees contributed to social change for the individual refugees involved—both adults and children—and for the greater urban refugee community. Each day, Bwira said, he accomplished what he sought to do: to ensure that “refugee children benefit, just like other children, from education” (Bwira, interview, 11.25.02). The process of activating their agency and embarking on the initiative of KURCEC allowed Bwira and Bituka to feel productive as individuals and useful to their community, despite their liminal status as urban refugees. Parents of pupils at KURCEC reported that their children were also happier since having a place to go to school; “this school creates stability for my sons, and they are learning,” said one father (Personal communication, 01.23.03). Similarly, for the community of urban refugees from DRC in Kampala, the existence of KURCEC was proof of the assets they bring to their own situations and also to their hosts. “Look what we refugees are doing,” said one community leader, speaking of the social change that refugees can help to affect—not only for themselves but also as part of a larger Ugandan war against

poverty—through provision of education to marginalized children (Personal communication, 11.19.02).

5 Toward Policy That Facilitates the Agency of Urban Refugees

Started in 2001, KURCEC operated without interruption for three years through the commitment of a small group of volunteer teachers from DRC. In March 2004, the school was evicted from the church in which it operated due to pressure on the Pastor from several parishioners who were suspicious of the activities of ‘foreigners.’ Up to May 2005, no classes have been held. The teachers see this closure as temporary and have been working tirelessly to find a new site for their school. In April 2004, a wealthy Ugandan donor attempted to give the school a parcel of land on which to construct its own permanent building; according to Ugandan law, however, refugees cannot own land, and the process of transferring the land and beginning construction of the school has been held up with lawyers and city officials since that time.

This disruption of educational provision at KURCEC has had a number of consequences for the pupils of KURCEC, their families, and the education of refugee children in Kampala. These consequences, outlined below, only serve to underscore the critical gap that this refugee-borne organization filled in Kampala and the need for international and national policy and practice to facilitate these types of initiatives in urban areas.

The suspension of classes at KURCEC meant that access to education for refugees from DRC in Kampala became limited. While all of the national pupils who previously attended KURCEC enrolled in other local primary schools, two of the seven Congolese refugee pupils who remained in Kampala were not in school.¹⁹ The dispositions of these two children visibly

¹⁹ In addition, two participants have been resettled to the United States and one has been resettled to Canada.

changed; while they once exuded curiosity, the two boys developed vacant eyes and resigned attitudes (personal observation, 06.24.04 and 07.09.04). In my fieldnotes, I wrote:

‘Samuel’ sits on the row of grass by the side of the house and just watches the world. Judging from observations of him in class [last year], I never would have guessed he could sit still for so long. He doesn’t seem to be doing anything. He seems to have lost all passion (06.24.04).

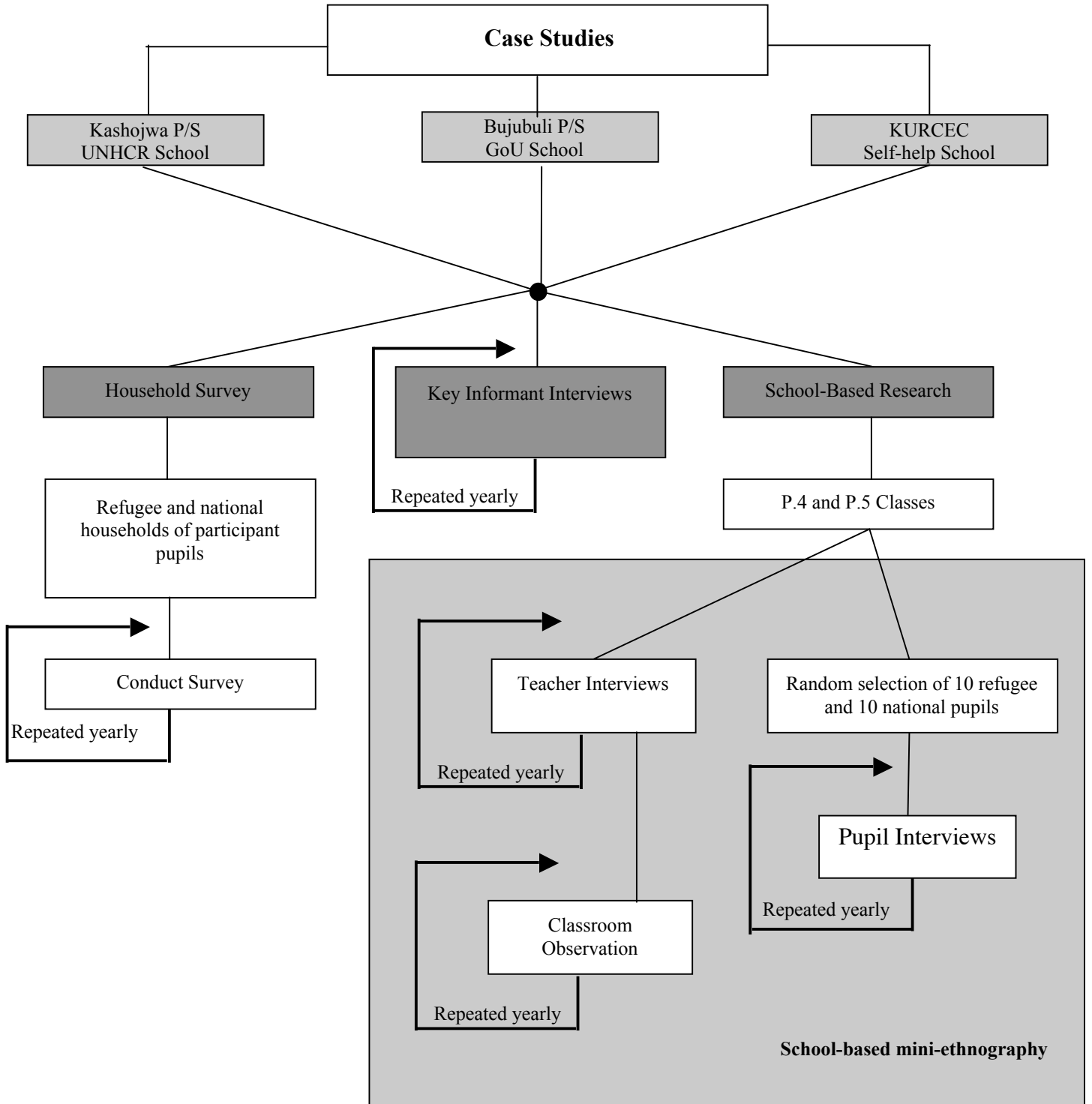
Four months later, Samuel explained that what makes him most sad “is to see my friends go to school in the morning, but not me. I have decided to wake up every day at 9 o’clock to avoid seeing these other children who are able to go to school” (informal conversation, 10.29.04). For Samuel, a sense of hope for the future all but disappeared with the closing of KURCEC. Further, the situation of the refugee children who were able to persist in school became precarious, with children repeatedly chased away from their local government-aided and private schools for failure to pay school fees. Between July and November 2004, all of the five refugee children from KURCEC who had transferred to other schools were forced to miss at least ten days of school for failure to pay school fees (household survey, 2004) and two were forced to further disrupt their studies by changing schools yet again in order to avoid being kicked out of school completely.

Acknowledgment and understanding of the growing presence of urban refugees and of their contributions to refugee and host communities are necessary guides to future policy formation by UNHCR and host governments. Indeed, if refugee policy is to seek truly to promote the protection, assistance, and self-reliance of urban refugees, then its development would productively engage with individuals and groups such as those involved with KURCEC. In seeking out examples of ‘goodness,’ of what works, possibilities for productive policy and

practice in difficult situations reveal themselves. As this initiative demonstrates, urban refugees themselves serve as their own agents of assistance in Kampala, creating structures that support the self-reliance of urban refugees on a community level. Yet as the current struggles of KURCEC reveal, there are limitations to what individual refugees can do within a legal structure that does not recognize the rights of refugees. Without any institutional support, there are further capacity constraints; it is clear that large numbers of urban refugee children remain without access to education, outside of the small reach of a small organization like KURCEC.

In this situation, the opportunity is ripe for UNHCR and host governments to work together to facilitate—structurally and institutionally, but not necessarily financially—the continued existence of a successful refugee-borne organization. That is perhaps the most important and sustainable role these larger entities can play. In the important work that UNHCR does in advocating to host governments for the civil and socio-economic rights of urban refugees, initiatives like KURCEC might productively be used to generate the political will that has proven so necessary to productive outcomes. Indeed, the urban refugees involved with the development of the Kampala Urban Refugee Children's Education Centre have challenged perceived notions of themselves as burdens or as mere actors within a system that fosters dependency and presented themselves as agents of social assistance and social change within their own and their host communities. If structures to help facilitate this kind of initiative were more commonly in place and effectively maintained, urban refugees would quickly become social and economic assets to cities of the global South.

Figure 1. Study Design



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