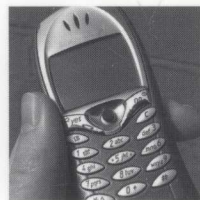
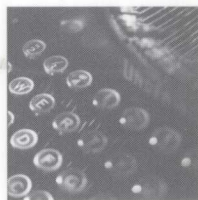
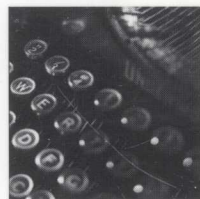
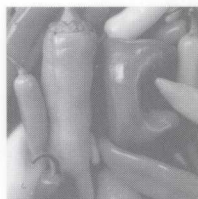
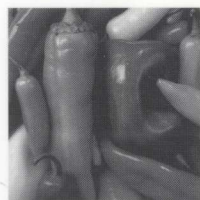

The Economic Life of Refugees

Karen Jacobsen




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Preface

This book is about the thousands of refugees in protracted situations who survive and even thrive after their initial flight across borders: having come through danger, they find opportunity. Common to almost all refugees is destitution resulting from their flight experience, paired with a strong desire to support themselves by pursuing livelihoods. The ways in which they do this, the obstacles they face, and the assistance that comes to them from many sources, are the subject of this book.

People who migrate across borders are usually seen as occupying two different spheres: labor migrants are associated with voluntary migration and economic motives and behavior; refugees are associated with forced migration, traumatized responses, and dependency on relief assistance. Until recently, the social sciences treated the two categories quite separately, but in recent years, this dichotomy has begun to be recast by scholars who seek to show that all migrants engage in a spectrum of behavior and motivation, and that it is often difficult to draw the boundaries clearly between forced and voluntary migration. Forcibly displaced people, such as refugees and internally displaced people, are beginning to be seen as economic actors too. Many of the innovative concepts and ideas influencing migration theory are being applied to the study of livelihood activities of refugees and their economic consequences for host communities, sending countries, and co-nationals in other countries. For example, the study of transnational livelihoods now includes refugees, and—for good or bad—terms like “irregular migrants” and “mobile livelihoods” (a term used to refer to circular migration between two countries) are also applied to refugees.

There is now a burgeoning literature on refugees in protracted situations, addressing issues like urbanization, conflict reduction, repatriation, gender inequity, and violence. But there are relatively few studies that probe deeply into how refugees pursue livelihoods. This book seeks to document and analyze their livelihood experiences by synthesizing recent work, particularly that of researchers such as Lacey Andrews, Shelley Dick, Sarah Dryden-Peterson, Cindy Horst, Loren Landau and Eric Werker. The book draws on their findings and the growing body of livelihoods research in humanitarian situations to gather what we know about the economic behavior and impact of refugee movements from a variety of social science perspectives. The book is intended for “non-experts,” including undergraduate and graduate students taking courses or doing research on forced migration, as well as field practitioners and a general audience interested in refugee issues.

I wish to thank the following people for their support and input during the course of writing this book: Loren Landau, my frequent co-author, who proves that collaboration can be a rewarding experience; my research assistants Sarah Titus and

Christine Makori; my editor at Kumarian, Jim Lance; the faculty and staff of the Feinstein International Famine Center—who provide an institutional base that is more like a family than a work place; the partners and interns of the Alchemy Project; and the MIT Inter-University Migration seminar which has been a source of intellectual stimulus and learning for twenty years. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the friendship and support of Jill Kneerim, Bill Bell, and Kyra and Jean Montagu. I dedicate this book, with love and thanks for his patience, to my son, Sam McGuire.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ARC	American Refugee Committee
AOR	affidavit of relationship
CMB	“cash money boys”
CORD	Christian Outreach for Relief and Development
CREDAP	Committee for Reflection on Agro-Pastoral Development
DLI	Development through Local Integration
DFID	Department for International Development
DP	displaced person
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EPAU	Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit
ERMA (Fund)	Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance
EU	European Union
FINCA	Foundation for International Community Assistance
GF	Good Friends: Center for Peace, Human Rights and Refugees
IASFM (Conference)	International Association for the Study of Forced Migration
ICAR	Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees
IDP	internally displaced person
INAR	Instituto Nacional de Aopip aos Refugiados
IOM	International Organization for Migration
JVA	joint voluntary agency
LRA	Lords Resistance Army
M.A.L.D. (Thesis)	Master of Arts in Law and Diplomacy
MFI	microfinance institution
MMP	microfinance and microenterprise programme
MRA (account)	Migration and Refugee Assistance
NGOs	non-governmental organizations
OCHA	Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
ORR	Office of Refugee Resettlement
ROSCAs	rotating savings and credit associations
SEEP (Network)	Small Enterprise Evaluation Project
SPLA	Sudan Peoples Liberation Army
SRS	Self-Reliance Strategy
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund (formerly United Nations Fund for Population Activities)
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
UNITA	União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola (National Union for Total Independence of Angola)
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
USCR	United States Committee for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme
WHO	World Health Organization
WIDER (Conference)	World Institute for Development Economics Research

Contents

Preface

vii

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ix

1	Introduction: Displaced Livelihoods	1
	Who Are Refugees and Asylum-Seekers?	4
	Some Characteristics of Protracted Refugee Situations	5
	Refugee Livelihoods	9
	The Need for Cash and Credit	12
	The Institutional Context of Displaced Livelihoods	13
2	Economic Survival in Refugee Camps	23
	Flight and Arrival: An Economic Perspective	24
	The Evolution of a Refugee Camp	25
	Constraints on the Economic Activities of Refugees in Camps	31
	Factors Enabling the Economic Activities of Refugees in Camps: Humanitarian Inputs	33
	Camps as Hubs of Economic Activity: The Economic Impact on the Host Area	34
3	Urban Refugees	39
	Definition, Patterns of Distribution, and Demographics	40
	The Institutional Context: Host Government Policy and Humanitarian Assistance	41
	Pursuing Urban Livelihoods	43
	Obstacles to the Economic Activities of Urban Refugees	44
	Explaining Refugees' Entrepreneurial Success	48
	Conclusion	48

4	Beyond the Country of First Asylum: Refugees in Third Countries	53
	The Wider Diaspora: Resettled Refugees, Asylum-Seekers, and Other Migrants in Third Countries	54
	Refugees' Economic Experience in Third Countries	56
5	Can Humanitarian Programs Support the Livelihoods of the Displaced?	69
	Enabling Livelihoods: The Need for Credit	70
	UNHCR, Refugee Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance	73
	NGOs: Supporting Refugee Livelihoods in Camps with Microfinance Services	77
	Beyond International Assistance: Local Organizations	82
	Conclusions and Persistent Challenges	85
6	Supporting the Livelihoods of Refugees: A Model for Refugee Assistance	91
	A Proposed Model for Refugee Assistance in Protracted Situations	92
	Principles for a Refugee Policy in Countries of First Asylum	93
	Principle I: Designated Zones of Residence	95
	Principle II: Rights and Obligations in Host Countries	96
	Principle III: Doing Away with Parallel Services	98
	Past and Present Examples of Host Countries that Approach the Proposed Model	100
	Applying the Case Studies to the Model	104
	Making the Model Work	105
	Conclusion	107
	<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>113</i>
	<i>Index</i>	<i>121</i>
	<i>About the Author</i>	<i>131</i>

Chapter 1

Introduction: Displaced Livelihoods

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, well over 30 million people have been displaced by conflict and violence in their home countries. A significant proportion of these—perhaps 20 million worldwide—remain internally displaced within their home country, some moving to safer villages nearby, others to urban areas.¹ Relatively few people have the resources to move far beyond their place of origin; in conflict zones, as in natural disasters, many people do not leave their homes at all, risking great danger and deprivation. Perhaps a third of those forcibly displaced by conflict and violence cross the border of their countries to seek safety and asylum in other countries, mostly in the developing world. By the end of 2003, according to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), these refugees numbered some 9.7 million people, a decrease of about nine percent from the year before. Most did not travel much beyond the border zone of neighboring countries, staying close enough to monitor the situation at home, and preferring to be in a place somewhat familiar to them. Others traveled further, to the urban areas of host countries or, if they had the resources, onward to more distant destinations.

The popular image of refugees is that of a mass influx during an emergency: thousands of traumatized people pouring across a border and congregating in camps, where relief agencies try to meet their health and food needs. At this writing, December 2004, it is the emergency in Darfur, Sudan, that is in the news, but for every year of the past decade there were other sites: Liberians in 2003, Afghans in 2001, Kosovars in 1999, Rwandese in 1994. However powerful, these familiar images do not capture the reality of refugee life. For one thing, mass influxes of tens of thousands that occur over a short time are quite rare. Most forcibly displaced people move in small groups or as individuals, stopping to seek assistance en route and slipping across borders when they can, to join fellow refugee communities. Many refugees take up residence in camps under the care of various authorities, but a much greater number live among the local community, in rural or urban areas, and never register or seek international assistance. Common to almost all refugees, however, is the destitution that results from their flight experience, paired with a strong desire to support themselves by pursuing livelihoods. The ways in which they do this, the obstacles they face, and the assistance that comes to them from many sources, is the subject of this book.

A second reality of refugee situations, not captured by TV images, is the protracted nature of displacement. Once the emergency phase with its rush of aid and media attention has passed, many relief agencies depart—along with most of the

humanitarian assistance, which was aimed at meeting emergency needs. In most cases, however, the conflict in the refugees' home countries does not end with the emergency phase, and for thousands of refugees, return is not an imminent possibility. The mass repatriation of Albanian Kosovars from Macedonia and Albania that took place a scant six weeks or so after they were displaced from Kosovo in 1999 was an exception. In most cases—for Afghans, Congolese, Somalis, Liberians, Burmese, Sudanese, and many other nationalities—some repatriation occurs, but new outbreaks of violence and conflict arise, and refugees traverse the border, unable to return to live securely in their homelands. If mass repatriation does occur, there are always many who remain behind, unable or unwilling to return. Perhaps their homes have been destroyed or occupied by others; some are too traumatized by the events they have witnessed or experienced in their home countries; others continue to fear persecution if they return.

Most refugees remain in their country of first asylum for years as the civil strife and insecurity in their home countries plays out. For most there is little likelihood either of their being invited to become citizens of the asylum country or being resettled in a third country. Stuck in this limbo, refugees are in what is known as *protracted situations*. According to UNHCR:

Using a crude measure of refugee populations of 25,000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries, and excluding Palestinian refugees who fall under the mandate of UNRWA, it is estimated that, at the end of 2003, there were 38 different protracted situations in the world, accounting for some 6.2 million refugees in total. The great majority of such situations were to be found in Africa (not including North Africa), which comprised 22 major protracted refugee situations including 2.3 million refugees. However, in terms of numbers, the majority of refugees in protracted situations were located in the region covering Central Asia, Southwest Asia, North Africa and the Middle East..., where eight major protracted situations accounted for 2.7 million refugees. [The rest of] Asia comprised five major protracted refugee situations including 670,000 refugees, whereas the three major protracted situations in Europe accounted for 530,000 refugees.²

Whether in camps or self-settled among the local population, the living circumstances of refugees in protracted situations are economically challenging and unsafe, with few means to support or educate themselves and their children. They face security problems ranging from harassment by the authorities to crime and forced military recruitment. Refugees living in the border zones of host countries frequently suffer from the spillover of conflict from the home country and must pursue livelihoods in undeveloped and isolated areas, where both displaced and local people struggle to support themselves with few resources and many challenges.

One of the most daunting problems facing refugees in protracted situations is the decline in the level and quality of humanitarian assistance that occurs once the emergency phase has passed. In camps, this decline can be gradual and intermittent

or quite sudden. For self-settled refugees not living in camps, there are almost no official sources of assistance, and they must rely on the good will of their hosts. In these circumstances, the resilience and creativity of the refugees are revealed in a wide range of survival strategies. Though faced with economic deprivation and marginalization, many refugees maintain their cultural practices and values, join and form communities, and meet all manner of livelihood challenges in new and familiar ways. How refugees do this—how they adapt their survival strategies and develop new ones to maximize all available resources and opportunities, and the obstacles they face in doing so—is explored in this book.

In exploring refugees' survival strategies and the obstacles they face, we are drawn into the political economy of war and displacement, and the global politics of asylum in the twenty-first century. Refugees are a subset of all international migrants, who numbered some 200 million in 2004.³ While migrants share many similar livelihood experiences, the difference for refugees is the existence of a well-established international refugee regime led by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose office, since 1950, has been mandated by UN member states to provide refugees with protection and assistance. Refugees offer us an opportunity to see how this humanitarian system acts as a direct source of livelihood support, and creates—albeit inadvertently—a set of obstacles arising from poorly designed programs and policies. The book ends with a discussion of ways in which international refugee assistance could better support livelihoods, and proposes a model for refugee policy that takes into account the political factors influencing host countries' responses to refugees in the twenty-first century. This book moves between a local and a global perspective. We examine the day-to-day activities of refugees as they pursue livelihoods in their communities, and we consider the role of the international organizations and states that assist or obstruct those same livelihoods.

The remainder of this chapter sets out some definitions used in this book and the economic rights of refugees prescribed in international refugee law. Chapters Two and Three explore the main sites—refugee camps and urban areas—where long-term refugees live and pursue livelihoods in host countries. These chapters describe how markets emerge, and the economic impact of refugees' activities both on the host community and the wider region. In Chapter Four, our perspective widens to explore the economic activities of refugees who leave their first countries of asylum and travel to third countries, either through resettlement or as asylum-seekers. This chapter explores the economic experience of refugees in third countries, and particularly how their links with their home countries affect their ability to pursue livelihoods and emerge from poverty. Chapter Five explores the role of the international refugee regime—international humanitarian organizations, nongovernmental relief agencies, donor countries and host governments—in supporting or obstructing the livelihood strategies of refugees. Can humanitarian assistance go beyond food aid and emergency services to support refugee livelihoods? We explore whether microfinance services and income generating programs offer realistic alternatives to traditional forms

of humanitarian assistance, which usually come in the form of relief grants. Chapter Six concludes by considering alternative approaches to supporting the livelihoods of refugees in protracted situations. We consider how refugee assistance programs can be designed so as also to help host populations who are often as poorly off as the refugees, and who face their own economic and security problems. In many host countries, humanitarian services for refugees exist in parallel to a separate, underfunded set of services for the surrounding population. Refugees and nationals live apart, with separate systems for food and nutrition, education, health, and water and sanitation. As in all cases where such separation exists, the systems are far from equal, and often the balance tilts in favor of the refugees when it comes to meeting basic needs. On the other hand, when it comes to economic activities like trade or employment or working the land, it is the refugees who are at the disadvantage. Parallel and unequal systems represent a waste of resources, and an unfair and politically untenable distribution of supplies. This closing chapter proposes a model of refugee assistance that could improve the lot of both refugees and host populations. The model takes into account the current political climate of growing restrictions on refugees. The feasibility of the model is discussed, in light of refugee assistance policies in host countries that come closest to the model's approach. We end with a look at the kinds of advocacy strategies that could move institutions in these desirable directions. Ending this book with such a proposed model is intended to offer a challenge and stimulate debate on how to take the problem of refugee assistance forward.

Who Are Refugees and Asylum-Seekers?

In common parlance, refugees are people displaced by persecution, war, or conflict, who have fled across an international border and are in need of international humanitarian assistance. However, underlying this common usage of the word, is specific legal status associated with a complex and longstanding set of legal requirements and based on a definition set out in international agreements and refugee law.⁴ Once states have ratified these international agreements—which most have by 2004—the act of conferring formal refugee status on a person includes assigning to him or her a set of rights and protocols, including protection and access to international humanitarian assistance. This gives those with formal refugee status a privileged position vis à vis other immigrants, and it is a status that is not quickly and easily conferred by states. Crossing a border in flight from danger is not sufficient to acquire it. People who have just fled across a border are technically *asylum-seekers*; in order to acquire refugee status they must first be assigned the status by the state. There are two ways in which this assignment is made: on an individual basis and as part of a group determination. The individual determination procedure requires that a person prove to the state that their experience of persecution warrants refugee status according to the definition set out in the 1951 Convention. Those who undergo this lengthy determination procedure and receive formal refugee status are

referred to as "Convention refugees."⁵ However, when a host country is confronted with many thousands of refugees from the same country, the procedures for conferring refugee status on an individual basis are too cumbersome, and an alternative mechanism has been devised which is known as group determination of status on a *prima facie* basis.⁶ According to Bonaventure Rutinwa, group determination means the state recognizes those in a mass influx as refugees based on "the readily apparent, objective circumstances in the country of origin giving rise to exodus." The purpose of this group mechanism is "to ensure admission to safety, protection from refoulement [forced repatriation], and basic humanitarian treatment to those patently in need of it."⁷ Most of the world's refugees have *prima facie* status. In 2003, some 64% of the world's 9.7 million refugees were granted refugee status on a group or *prima facie* basis, and less than a quarter (24%) were granted refugee status following individual determination.⁸

Prima facie refugee status is a presumptive status, that is, it presumes that the people granted refugee status would be defined as refugees if they underwent individual determination; and therefore, that they should be treated as refugees and entitled to all the rights of refugees, as stipulated by the 1951 Convention and other applicable instruments. However, while this mechanism is convenient in mass influx situations, it leads to several problems, which will be revisited later in this book. One is the difficulty of excluding criminals and combatants or other elements that are not deserving of international protection.⁹ When these elements create problems for the host country, all the refugees suffer the consequences. In this book, for the sake of convenience, all people crossing the border from conflict-affected countries are referred to as refugees, regardless of their assigned legal status in the host country.

Some Characteristics of Protracted Refugee Situations

Cross-Border Movements

The picture of an acute mass influx, in which thousands of refugees cross the border in a short space of time, describes relatively few refugee situations. Most refugees travel as individuals or in small groups, leaving when they are able and often in secrecy; their movements constituting many trickles back and forth across borders over extended periods of time—depending on the ebb and flow of conflict in their home country. There are periods of increased refugee movement, but many countries never experience a mass influx; instead, refugee populations accumulate over prolonged periods, with return movements frequently interspersed. The situation of Liberian refugees in Côte d'Ivoire, described by Tom Kuhlman is illustrative:

By the end of 1990, the Liberian refugee caseload in Côte d'Ivoire had increased to 272,000. In succeeding years, the numbers rose and fell as the civil war worsened or abated. The maximum may have been as high as 400,000 in the mid-1990s....From 1996 onwards, many refugees returned home, well before UNHCR began its organized repatriation

programme in 1997; by the end of 2000, 70,500 refugees had been repatriated with UNHCR assistance, but more had left of their own accord. Even as the repatriation was underway, the violence in Monrovia in 1998 provoked a new wave of 23,000 refugees towards Côte d'Ivoire.¹⁰

This movement back and forth across the border is characteristic of protracted refugee situations, and as we shall see, has important implications for refugees' economic activities.

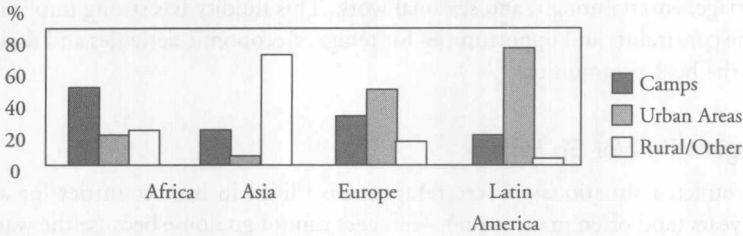
Patterns of Settlement

Once across a border, refugees are in the country of first asylum, or the host country, and their first task is to find accommodation. An important decision is where and how to live. A significant proportion of refugees stay away from camps or official settlement sites, and settle themselves among the local population—in rural hamlets and small towns, in “refugee villages,” near towns, or in the shanty towns of megacities. This pattern is known as self-settlement or dispersed settlement. Many do not register with the authorities, and thus are without legal status. Generally, self-settled refugees do not receive official government or international assistance, relying instead on the hospitality of the host community. They share local households or set up temporary accommodation, and are helped with shelter and food by their own networks or by community or religious organizations. According to Sarah Dryden Peterson and Lucy Hovil,

While “official” refugees fall under the control of the national government structures... self-settled refugees tend to operate within the local government structures, both rural and urban. They are integrated into their host community, pay graduated tax, contribute to the local economy, and even run in local council elections. However, their legal status remains insecure and ambiguous: they fall within the category of *prima facie* refugees, but are in danger of being seen as illegal immigrants.¹¹

In some host countries, self-settled refugees are left undisturbed, but when there are very large numbers—or mass influxes—host governments often restrict refugees to areas near the border, usually in camps or settlements of some kind. This policy is based on various concerns, including security, manageability of large numbers, and the desire to prevent refugees from moving to the urban areas. In some cases, refugees themselves prefer to live in camps, since there they have access to humanitarian resources, including the possibility of resettlement. We will return to these issues in later chapters.

As shown in Table 1.1, of the 14.6 million persons of concern to UNHCR in 2001, some 60 percent were self-settled—13 percent (1.9m) in urban areas, and 47 percent (6.9m) dispersed in rural areas (or their type of settlement was unknown)—the other 40 percent (5.8m) resided in camps. In Africa and Asia, more than 50 percent of refugees live in camps and ten percent live in urban areas.¹² However, we should be cautious about these statistics. Refugees' often desire to remain

Table 1.1: Location of Officially Recognized Refugees

Source: Figures from UNHCR Statistics Unit. Chart adapted from *Alchemy Project Annual Report, 2003* (famine.tufts.edu/work/refugees.html).

flexible about their living arrangement, and this means they can be unwilling to be counted and reluctant to reveal their exact locations to authorities. The numbers and proportions of refugees in different types of settlements are notoriously difficult to determine, although it is generally accepted that the number of self-settled refugees is much higher than that of refugees living in camps.¹³

Whether refugees choose to self-settle in urban or rural areas, or to live with humanitarian assistance in camps and official settlements, will affect their economic experience in the host country. However, as we discuss in Chapter Two, settlement is a fluid process, depending on when refugees arrived, their survival strategies, the local socioeconomic and security conditions, and the actions of local and national authorities. Earlier arrivals may settle in different situations than later ones. Self-settled refugees can be forcibly relocated into camps by local authorities, and sometimes refugees move out of camps and become self-settled, or back into them. Many refugee households use camps as part of a broad strategy of survival: in which the workers live outside in order to farm or find employment, and the non-workers (elderly, mothers, and children) live in the camp where they have access to assistance. Refugees move in and out of the camps to find work, to trade, to explore repatriation options, to join the rebels, to visit, or to move to the city. They might return to the camps during the hungry season, or when there are security threats outside, or to use the camp schools. If camps are near towns, refugees living in the town pay social visits or come to the camp when resettlement interviews are being conducted. In turn, camp refugees go into towns to engage in various economic activities or to go to school. Local people frequent the camps too—making use of schools and health clinics set up by aid agencies, buying and selling in camp markets, or sometimes posing as refugees in order to get food aid. Refugees living in camps are never fully separated from the local community because of the difficulty of preventing movement in and out by both refugees and local people. Many host areas have a history of migration and mingling with the people who are now refugees. For example, in north-western Tanzania, the town of Kigoma on the shore of Lake Tanganyika has long been a migration target for Congolese on the other side of the

lake, and Congolese and Tanzanians have historically mixed together for purposes of trade, marriage, entertainment, and seasonal work. This fluidity has strong implications for the constraints and opportunities for refugees' economic activities and their impact on the host community.

Why Refugees Do Not Go Home

In most protracted situations—where refugees have lived in host countries for at least three years (and often many more)—refugees cannot go home because the war, conflict, or persecution of ethnic groups in their home countries is not over, and it is unsafe for them to return. This is presently the case for refugees from Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Mauritania, Algeria, Sudan, Burma, Colombia, and others. What about situations where the war is over, where peace accords have been signed, and perhaps even where the government calls for refugees to return? This is currently the case in Rwanda, Angola, Sierra Leone, and—to some extent—in Afghanistan (although the conflict is not over), Bosnia, and Eritrea, among others. There are two linked reasons why long-term refugees do not return in these situations. One is that individuals still do not consider it safe, either for their particular ethnic group, or for the region of the country to which they would return. Peace is seldom spread homogenously across post-conflict countries,¹⁴ and there are often pockets of resistance or ongoing conflict, which pose dangers to returnees. It is not uncommon for conflict to break out in parts of the country, as the peace is consolidated. This has occurred in Liberia repeatedly, and in Angola, Sierra Leone, eastern Congo, southern Sudan and Afghanistan. Many refugees adopt a “wait and see” attitude, and remain in their host countries—sometimes for several years—after peace accords are signed. As part of their repatriation programs, UNHCR sets up “go and see” visits, in which refugees are taken on visits to their home areas, to see and appraise the situation for themselves, then come back and report to others in the camp. If their judgment of the situation is negative, this will be communicated to others, quickly dampening prospects for return. Shelly Dick quotes a Liberian refugee living in Ghana in 2000:

I would like to go back [to Liberia] some day, but not while Taylor is in power. I have friends who went back in 1995. Then the war came again in 1996 and things were much worse for them than the first time they ran. They had to run back to Ghana for a second time. They said going back to Liberia was the worst mistake they ever made. How can you go back to that kind of insecurity?¹⁵

Refugees' concerns about safe return are usually shared by relief agencies. In recent years, repatriation programs insisted upon by host governments—to countries like Burundi, Liberia, southern Sudan, and Afghanistan—have been strongly disputed by some agencies.

A second reason why refugees do not return, even where peace agreements have held and security is not a major concern, is because economic conditions in home