We tend to think of refugees in the global South as living in camps or settlements, but a growing number move to the cities and towns of host countries. According to official figures of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 18 percent of all persons of concern to UNHCR worldwide lived in urban areas in 2002, up from 13 percent in 2001 and just 1 percent five years earlier. The official number of such people in 2002 is over 2.4 million, but this does not include the vastly greater number of refugees who have not declared themselves to UNHCR or the host government. Compared with their co-nationals in camps, urban refugees often face greater protection risks and receive less assistance with shelter, healthcare, education, and other social services—sometimes none at all. Still, many refugees prefer to live in urban areas rather than camps. How do they survive? This article focuses on the refugees themselves, their strategies for economic survival, and the consequences for urban areas.

As the number of urban refugees grows, both absolutely and as a proportion of the people of concern to UNHCR, researchers are paying more attention to them and to the problems (and opportunities) they present to host governments and communities. There is growing literature on the subject, both in the forced migration field and in urban studies, demography, and anthropology, including the results of several research projects on urban refugees in the South. This article draws extensively on a study of forced migrants in Johannesburg, South Africa, in which Loren Landau and I have been engaged since 2002. In February 2003 we conducted a survey in Johannesburg exploring the experiences both of forced migrants and South Africans. In many ways, Johannesburg is representative of the urban experience of African refugees. South Africa hosts 105,000 refugees, of whom some 26,000 are legally recognized refugees and more than 78,000 are asylum seekers. They are from all over Africa and mostly live in urban areas as South Africa does not have refugee camps.

Despite South Africa's relative wealth and development, urban refugees encounter many of the same problems in Johannesburg as in other African cities and cities of the global South. I explore whether being a refugee carries with it particular difficulties not faced by the urban poor among whom refugees and other migrants usually live. I also consider whether it makes sense to consider urban refugees separately from other kinds of migrants.

Who Are They? Urban refugees are self-settled refugees—formally recognized or not—residing in urban areas. In the sprawling and destitute migrant communities of the global South, it is difficult to separate refugees—those who flee persecution—from those who migrate for economic or other reasons. The livelihood problems facing all urban poor, whether displaced or not, are similar; the difference for urban refugees and migrants is that they face additional problems related to their legal status and to xenophobia.

In the UN Refugee Convention, refugees have rights related to their economic activities. These include freedom of movement and rights to earn a livelihood through wage-employment, self-employment, professions, property ownership, etc. (see Rights sidebar, pp. 40-41). The rights assigned to refugees by international agreements are clear, but host governments in the countries in which refugees try to make a living need to implement them. Often they do not.

Refugees and internally displaced persons often flee to towns and cities that are in or near conflict zones,
like Kabul, Afghanistan; Peshawar, Pakistan; Khartoum, Sudan; Kampala, Uganda; Bujumbura, Burundi; Goma, Congo-Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo); and Luanda, Angola. But even cities that are relatively distant from conflict have experienced significant influxes in recent years, including Cairo, Egypt; Nairobi, Kenya; New Delhi, India; Bangkok, Thailand; and Johannesburg. Many cities in or near conflict zones, such as Kabul and Luanda, also contain large numbers of their own citizens who have been forcibly displaced or who are returnees from displacement. In some host countries, different refugee nationalities live in different locations. In India, for example, Sri Lankan and Tibetan refugees are required to live in camps, but Afghan refugees are in urban areas, mainly New Delhi, where, although the Indian government regards them as economic migrants, they receive assistance from UNHCR.

Urban refugees find their way to towns and cities for various reasons. It is widely assumed that most are from urban socioeconomic backgrounds and choose to come to towns because they cannot farm or pursue livelihoods in rural areas and camps. While some urban refugees pass through camps, many come directly without humanitarian assistance along the way. In our Johannesburg survey, we found that just six percent of our sample had ever stayed in a refugee camp, and only two percent reported receiving aid from an international organization.5

In Africa, studies in Kampala; Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and Johannesburg have found that urban refugees tend to be younger males of urban background.5 Those forced migrants in our sample who made it to Johannesburg were considerably younger than the host population, with only 5 percent above the age of 40 compared to 22 percent of South Africans. They were also predominantly male (71 percent vs. 47 percent for South Africans) and far fewer had children: 64 percent of migrants reported having no children as opposed to 35 percent of the South Africans. Just under 80 percent of all the forced migrants surveyed reported living in cities for most of their lives before coming to South Africa, and another 17 percent had spent the greater part of their lives in towns. Less than four percent claimed rural origins.

In other cities, refugee demographic profiles vary. In New Delhi, one study found that slightly more than half of the Afghan refugees were female and that, unlike the first asylum seekers who came to India after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, the refugees there in 2000 were not educated professionals or prosperous urban traders. Many of the earlier cohort were resettled in the 1980s or made their way independently to other countries. According to UNHCR:

A considerable proportion of those who remain in New Delhi are more recent arrivals, traders and shopkeepers of rural origin who fled to Kabul and other urban areas to escape the fighting, and who subsequently moved on to the Indian capital. Around 60 per cent are illiterate.7

Refugees also move to urban centers when food aid is cut off in camps. In Pakistan, in the mid-1990s, one unintended consequence of UNHCR’s and the World Food Programme’s (WFP) decision to cut off food aid to camp residents—one that the Pakistani government may not have anticipated and did not welcome—was that tens, perhaps hundreds, of thousands of refugees subsequently migrated to the cities in search of work (see “Steps Forward, More to Go: Afghans in Pakistan,” p. 90).

Host Government Policy and Humanitarian Assistance

In countries of first asylum in the South, most governments adopt the position that those in camps are prima facie refugees, and those who come to urban areas are economic migrants. In many situations, UNHCR assumes that those who make it to cities can support themselves—otherwise they would have stayed in camps where assistance was available.8 Because they assume that these irregular movers have moved voluntarily, authorities generally do not offer them asylum or assistance in urban areas.

According to UNHCR, an irregular mover is a refugee/asylum seeker who leaves a country where he/she has found or could have found and enjoyed basic protection, to seek asylum in another country, unless doing so for compelling reasons [which] include a threat to physical security of self or accompanying close family members, or family reunion with immediate family members who are not themselves irregular movers in the current country...

[R]efugees who are irregular movers have a right to effective and adequate protection. This is inviolate and is therefore not affected by irregular movement. However,... in view of the various push and pull factors causing irregular
ties tolerate them sometimes, but they are always in legal jeopardy.

Other countries, usually with fewer refugees, adopt a more benign approach. Mozambique requires refugees to remain in a camp, where international agencies meet their basic needs, until they can support themselves; they are then allowed to move to the cities. In host countries where camps are near urban areas, like Mozambique and Ghana, refugees often commute between the camp and the town in order to trade and work, using the camp as a base where other family members remain while they pursue livelihoods. In Uganda, the government allows a small number of registered refugees to live and work in Kampala as long as they do not request assistance. This group is made up of professionals, skilled individuals, and individuals supported by relatives. In addition, an unknown number of refugees have self-settled in Kampala without registering with the authorities.

In countries that permit refugees to live in urban areas, such as South Africa and Egypt, there is little assistance, material assistance, may legitimately be denied to irregular movers by UNHCR offices. In addition, resettlement which is not prompted by protection needs, may be denied as well. 9

Nevertheless, according to the UNHCR Policy on Urban Refugees, the agency “should promote the refugees’ right to work and access to national services, wherever possible.”10 The 1951 Convention requires states to consider the claims of asylum seekers regardless of the route they took. The issue of irregular movers is particularly relevant to South Africa, where Zimbabwe is the only bordering country sending refugees. Most refugees have passed through other countries to reach South Africa.

Host governments are rarely able to prevent the arrival of urban refugees, but they can deny them permission to work and any form of assistance. In Tanzania and Kenya, authorities require refugees to live in camps or settlements and view urban refugees as illegal migrants. Those who leave the camps do so at their own risk. The authori-
distance compared with that available in camps. Aid organizations are concerned that local resentment and increased xenophobia will occur if self-settled refugees are entitled to assistance but the impoverished community in which the refugees live is not. In Johannesburg, relatively few refugees are eligible for assistance; many struggle to meet their basic needs, including shelter and food. Although there are a few refugee mutual aid associations and local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that seek to assist and advise refugees, they lack support. In some countries, including India and Egypt, UNHCR has provided monthly subsistence allowances to the most needy. UNHCR issued a subsistence allowance to urban refugees in New Delhi until 1997 when, as part of a self-reliance policy, they cut it off even though India still prohibited their legal employment.

Most urban refugees do not seek humanitarian assistance and do not register with UNHCR. In Pakistan, in 1996, only 16,000 of the 40,000 new arrivals sought UNHCR help. In 2000, more than 172,000 Afghans entered Pakistan fleeing heavy fighting in the north and the widening effects of a severe drought. Many refugees stayed with relatives or moved to cities throughout Pakistan without registering with the authorities or seeking assistance.

Pursuing Urban Livelihoods With little or no help from the state or humanitarian agencies, urban refugees have found a number of ways to get by. Recent studies show how urban refugees and migrants survive and even prosper, compared with their co-nationals who remain in camps. In urban areas, social networks of co-nationals help refugees find employment, housing, and credit. Friends and relatives in the diaspora in other countries also send cash.

But the economic activities of urban refugees do not match their levels of education or business and professional experience. In Johannesburg, when asked what kind of work they would like to be doing, given their training and work experience, 24 percent of our non-South African survey respondents described professional work ("doctor," "lawyer," "journalist/media professional," or "other professional"), and 26 percent described themselves as businesspersons.

Refugees must work largely in the informal sector, mainly self-employed in trade and services, or in some form of paid employment; few work full-time in either the formal or informal sector. In our Johannesburg survey, 32 percent of South Africans reported working full time, compared with only 7 percent of the migrants. Of those who were working, 28 percent of the migrants claimed to be self-employed, compared with 6 percent of South Africans.

Microenterprise For economically active urban refugees, informal small businesses of various kinds offer some income. These include trade in small goods and services, which range in size from hawking a few wares on the street to small stores and businesses. Many refugees start their own businesses as food sellers, carpenters, shoemakers, hairdressers, telephone kiosk operators, curio makers, and tailors. Sometimes these are new occupations for them and they rely on friends and networks to provide training or funds for training. In the survey, petty trading was forced migrants’ most significant occupation: 21 percent against less than 1 percent for South Africans. The income from such activities tends to be limited and unpredictable, and street traders who work outside risk theft, violent robbery, and police harassment.

Despite these problems, a small number of refugee entrepreneurs flourish, and they are often a source of economic rejuvenation in areas that otherwise lack resources and have been largely abandoned by the formal sector. In Johannesburg, most formal businesses have fled the inner city, but a variety of thriving businesses have sprung up, owned and run by refugees. A Burundian panel-beating
shop services ten cars a week. A small shoemaking factory makes quality shoes and trains a small number of refugees and South Africans. With a loan from an NGO, a Kenyan refugee woman has started a business making bead jewelry and Christmas decorations, which employs three other people. Our survey found that, of those who are economically active, a significant number of refugees had employed other people. When asked, “Since coming to South Africa, have you ever paid someone to do work for you?” 34 percent of the non-South Africans said yes, compared with 21 percent of South Africans. Of the Ethiopians, almost 60 percent had employed people—most of them South Africans rather than other migrants.

**Obstacles** Urban refugees face the same economic problems as do the urban poor: scarce jobs, housing, credit, and banking services; and crime and political marginalization. Refugees and asylum seekers face additional challenges. Having borrowed money to make their journeys or because they are living on the goodwill of locals, they often owe large debts to family members or others. The authorities restrict refugees’ right to work, grant little or no public assistance, and require documentation. In addition, the local population and law enforcement agencies often react to refugees, as to urban migrants generally, with xenophobia, ranging from ignorance and resentment to harassment and violence.

**Housing** In the rapidly growing cities of the global South, migrants often have to pay more than locals for accommodation. Government slum clearance programs limit self-built housing in shantytowns or peri-urban settlements, reducing the supply of low-cost housing. In many cases, people are not given advance warning of clearances, nor are they compensated when their residences are condemned or destroyed. Policymakers often consider informal settlements illegal and are particularly unlikely to adequately compensate or assist their residents with alternatives.

Refugees often must compete in the low-cost housing market without enough money for a deposit, local references, or permanent employment. Local or national housing regulations that require proof of residence or citizenship make housing more expensive for them than for other urban poor. Contract holders may exploit forced migrant subtenants. Sharing accommodation with unknown families also risks disease, theft, and physical or sexual violence. Urban refugee families often must sublet rooms with another household, or they must find a landlord willing to grant a short-term contract at a premium price. Those on city streets run even greater risks.

Refugees’ housing strategies are diverse and include frequent relocation. The associated time, expense, and psychological uncertainty hurt refugees’ livelihoods. Frequent relocation retards the ability to build social capital, the personal networks necessary to find employment and gain access to schools and other social services.
“Show Your Papers”  Even in countries like South Africa and Egypt, which allow refugees in urban areas, obtaining and renewing refugee identity documents and work and travel permits are a constant burden, requiring long hours and expense. If the government does not renew refugees’ documents regularly, they can be jailed or forced to pay bribes in order to prevent arrest. Police frequently shake down refugee entrepreneurs for bribes in urban areas. Without papers, refugees are unable to sign leases, open bank accounts, cash checks, or seek formal employment. In some countries, even Convention Travel Documents are not widely recognized by service providers or the authorities. Where refugees are entitled to services, they may be unaware of their rights, and there are few organizations to inform them. Refugees often cannot get legitimate travel documents from their home countries or lose them in flight or must leave them behind. Without them refugees cannot easily cross borders—a serious obstacle if in a country where much of the trade is international.

In host countries where refugees are allowed to work, they need to get work permits or business licenses, which in turn need to be renewed. This process requires fees, travel fare, and time off work. Although refugees often work for lower wages, employers are wary of hiring them if they don’t recognize their papers or are unsure about their right to work. Employers also distrust refugees’ long-term commitment or qualifications, and refugees often lack references.

Article 19 of the Refugee Convention allows for the practice of professions (see Rights sidebar, pp. 40-41), but refugees who are doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals often lack local credentials. Many skilled or professional refugees in urban areas are unable to work in the formal sector because they lack certification in the host country, or because employers do not recognize their foreign qualifications. Credentials from their native country are usually not valid without additional training or local certification. Other barriers to refugee employment, even when their papers are in order, include inability to speak the local language, straightforward discrimination, or an
employer’s belief that the presence of a foreigner will turn away customers.

Xenophobia, Competition with Locals, and Encounters with Authorities. The degree of local antiforeigner hostility toward urban refugees and the forms it takes vary from one country to another. Locals often see refugees as responsible for crime or even disease, as competitors for jobs and customers, and as a threat to cultural values. The situation in Pakistan (see “Steps Forward, More to Go: Afghans in Pakistan,” p. 90) is typical of many host countries.

In addition to the potential for violence, xenophobic attitudes and actions hurt refugees’ income and stability through petty harassment, extortion, and discrimination in hiring, housing, and access to services like health and education. When local vendors are unhappy about competition from refugees, they often complain to local authorities who then remove the refugee businesses.

Authorities often tolerate or even encourage police harassment or even vigilante justice against refugees including violence, illegal detention, or deportation. While in most cities the police perennially raid informal businesses and try to prevent hawking and other forms of street trading, they are more likely to seize the goods of immigrants or ask them to pay bribes or other forms of protection money, especially if they lack proper documentation. In Johannesburg, we found migrants far more likely to be victims of crime or police harassment than South Africans. Despite being in the country for a shorter time than natives, 72 percent of the migrants surveyed reported that they or someone they live with has been a victim of crime, compared with 43 percent of South Africans. Rather than protect foreigners, police often contribute to the problem. Seventy-one percent of migrants said the police had stopped them at least once, but 20 percent of South Africans said the same. Most of the time, police stop people to check immigration and identity documents, but forced migrants report that the police take or even destroy their papers. Many spoke of paying bribes to avoid arrest and possible deportation.

Local people widely believe migrants to be responsible for urban crime. In our survey, most South Africans who thought crime in the city was increasing believed that immigrants were among the primary perpetrators. But neither police statistics nor survey evidence support this. The Director of the South African Metro Police at the Hillbrow Police Station told us that only some seven percent of those arrested for crimes were foreigners, which is below the percentage of foreigners in the area. The police said that foreigners living in Johannesburg are overwhelmingly the victims, rather than the perpetrators of crime.

Credit and Financial Services. Many urban refugees are dependent on small business to make a living, but their start-up costs are often higher—and the start-up phase longer—than for locals. For example, in Dar es Salaam, landlords require 12 months rent paid up front. Lack of credit and other financial difficulties are serious economic constraints when trying to start or expand a small business. Urban areas have more banks and credit facilities than do camps or rural areas, but refugees do not generally have access to their services.

In Johannesburg, the main obstacle to refugees opening a bank account is obtaining a Refugee Identity Document issued by the Department of Home Affairs. Possession of a Refugee ID book (which looks like the ID book all South Africans carry, but is maroon-colored) does not guarantee credit, but South African banks do not generally permit refugees to open an account without one. All refugees are entitled to free ID books under the 1998 Refugee Act, but the majority of legally recognized refugees in South Africa do not have one because there is a large backlog. According to a study by UNHCR in South Africa in 2002, only 11 percent of refugees hold maroon identity documents. Asylum seekers—whose refugee status has not yet been granted—possess only Section 22 permits, which cannot be used to open a bank account. If their cases were resolved in six months as the law provides, the denial of bank accounts might be tolerable, but the asylum process can take up to a year or more.

In most host countries, refugees have almost no access to credit. They cannot open bank accounts or get loans and have few safe places to keep their cash and assets. Traditional sources of credit, such as extended family networks or the social capital found in home communities, are absent or soon exhausted. Some get start-up loans from religious and humanitarian assistance organizations, relatives, and friends, both in the area and abroad. Moneylenders charge high interest rates and can exert rough repayment demands, but they are easily accessible and have uncomplicated terms.

Refugees who use moneylenders are likely to en-
clears only enough for the family's evening meal. This daily grind enables household subsistence at best, but is rarely enough to clear outstanding debts or to start one's own business.

Refugees are effectively forced to work in a cash economy and risk being robbed of their goods and earnings. Those living in shared or insecure housing, or who work outside hawking, building, or cleaning, for example, are particularly vulnerable to theft, xenophobic violence, and—especially given their awkward legal status—police extortion.

**How Do They Manage?** With so many barriers, the success of many urban refugee entrepreneurs in urban centers begins with understanding. Self-selection brings the most entrepreneurial and educated to cities and there is some evidence that urban refugees have higher levels of education and skills than the host community. Many of the more successful urban refugee entrepreneurs have business experience in their home countries: more than 28 percent of Ethiopians and 26 percent of Somalis in Johannesburg reported owning businesses back home. Refugees’ ability and willingness to exploit niche skills in existing markets may explain much of their success. Urban refugees often bring with them new or different skills, more business experience than their local counterparts, and knowledge of markets in their home countries. In Maputo, Mozambique, and Johannesburg, the refugees’ skills in sewing traditional African clothes and in wood carving have proved highly marketable. Refugees’ knowledge of markets in other African countries gives them an advantage in import-export trade. Many Congolese refugees in Johannesburg, for example, send goods from South Africa to Congo-Kinshasa, and receive Congolese crafts to sell locally.

It is also possible that lack of access to public assistance and formal employment make refugees more willing to take risks to make their businesses work. As a result, many have expanded microenterprises into small businesses, some of which employ local people, in a relatively short period of time.

**Conclusion** Urban refugees can easily be an economic asset rather than a burden to cities in the global South. Developing countries need to harness the economic power of the informal sector by creating or smoothing the passage of informal sector businesses into the formal sector. Urban refugees are a good example of a potential win-win situation for both host countries and refugees. Many urban refugees are entrepreneurs whose economic contributions to the city can be maximized by implementing their rights to work and to freedom of movement.

Government authorities that create obstacles to refugees’ livelihoods through backlogs of status determination procedures or police harassment, not only prevent refugees from pulling their economic weight, they create environments of resentment and rule breaking. By speeding up access to refugee status, as well as simple improvements in access to credit, bank accounts, and recertification procedures, governments and the corporate sector can
smooth the way into the formal sector, where refugee businesses can be taxed and regulated. The situation described by an Eritrean refugee in Johannesburg benefits neither the host country nor the refugees:

You know, for those of us in the inner city, there are really two governments. The big one [i.e., the South African government] doesn't collect any taxes from us. The other one, the one on the street, collects at least 20 rand every time we use the street.  

Host governments would do well to ensure that only one government operates in the refugee and migrant-dominated inner city, and that this is one that both protects refugees’ rights and benefits from their economic skills.

Donor states and relief agencies ought to consider encouraging and enabling host countries to ease up on urban refugees. One way to do this would be for donors to offer to compensate host countries for reasonable expenses to their public health, education, and other social support systems that benefit refugees. This support should not take the form of parallel relief structures and special services for refugees, but should supplement existing national services.

In addition, donors should consider supporting vocational education, microcredit, and other programs that support urban refugee livelihoods, but which most urban refugees cannot afford or access. Even if such support was spread out over all the urban poor—but explicitly conditioned upon full enjoyment of Convention rights for refugees among them—it would still be cheaper than typical care for refugees. Why?

Endnotes


9 UNHCR, Resettlement Handbook, July 1, 2002, Ch. 8, p. 7, July 1, 2002 (emphasis added). UNHCR says this definition is based on “due regard to the 1989 Executive Committee Conclusion (No. 58 (XL) on irregular movers” and UNHCR Comprehensive Policy on Urban Refugees.

10 UNHCR, UNHCR Policy on Urban Refugees, December 12, 1997 (UNHCR Policy 1997), ¶3.


12 Macchiavello 2003, p. 4.


16 Willems 2003.


18 Interviewed with Loren Landau at the Hillbrow Police Station in Johannesburg on July 18, 2003.


20 Willems 2003, p. 201.


22 Jacobsen and Bailey 2003.

23 Statement to Loren Landau at University of Witwatersrand, March 12, 2004.