

Transnational linkages between refugees in Africa and in the diaspora

by Dianna J Shandy

This article explores how the ties between resettled Sudanese refugees and those who remain in Africa shape the lives of people in both settings.

Discussions of refugee issues tend to downplay third country resettlement, because it is the rarest of UNHCR's three durable solutions and is seen to affect such a small minority of refugees. Third country resettlement, however, has material and cultural impacts on refugees in Africa beyond the small numbers that actually board the plane and set off for a new land.

Immigrants have always retained some ties with the homes they leave behind but in the 21st century the possibilities are greatly expanded. Communication is now much cheaper and speedier, and accessible to a broader swath of the population, and African refugees are well aware of this technology. The recently resettled and much-publicised Sudanese youth, or Lost Boys as they were dubbed in the media¹, arrived in the US requesting internet-based technology to get in touch with the relatives and friends from whom they were separated. These realities contrast sharply with popular images of African refugees that depict people leaving 'stone-age' societies en route to Western countries. There is a growing pool of data to support the fact that refugees retain and maintain multi-stranded relations between home and host societies. This shift in how we think about the relationships between forced migrants and the rest of the world has important implications for refugee policy; refugee policy and practice that seek to respond to the complexities of refugees' lives need to move beyond popular stereotypes to consider the transnational dimension of African refugees' experience.

Sudan to America

The Sudanese armed conflict, active since 1983, has displaced an estimated three to four million people within Sudan, including more than a million living in shanty towns on the outskirts of Khartoum. Out of an estimated population of 27 million, conflict has claimed approximately two million lives and prompted another 300,000 to leave the country.²

20,000 Sudanese refugees have been resettled in the US since the early 1990s when sizable numbers first started arriving. My findings are based on ethnographic in-person research and interviews since the mid-1990s with several hundred Sudanese refugees living in the US. Most of the refugees I interviewed belong to the Nuer ethnic group. One noteworthy facet of their adaptation to life in the US is the importance of maintaining close ties with family and friends in Sudan, in other African countries and, to a more limited extent, around the world.

Refugees as individuals; refugees as groups

Refugee status is conferred at the level of the individual. Yet the experiences of Nuer refugee migrants demonstrate the ways in which actions of individuals were undertaken on behalf of family groups. Indeed, it was often only through the pooling of family resources that individuals were able to access third-country resettlement opportunities. In one case, for instance, a Nuer family pooled all the blankets they had just been given by UNHCR and sold them;

the eldest living son was selected to undertake a perilous journey from the refugee camp in Ethiopia to a camp in Kenya that was known to be offering resettlement slots.

These social investments link Nuer in the US with those remaining in Africa, and Nuer living in the US are expected to fulfill certain reciprocal obligations. Nuer do so by remaining in close contact through letters and phone calls, sending monetary remittances, completing paperwork (such as Affidavits of Relationship or Visa 93 forms) to facilitate family members' efforts to come to the US, and returning to Africa to visit and to marry. Recent technological innovations – accessible even to those living in relatively remote rural areas and to those who are not literate – have facilitated these processes in terms of rapidity in ways never before possible.

Staying in touch

Staying in contact is very important to Sudanese refugees. Sudanese in the US communicate in the same ways as everyone else: phone, fax, electronic mail, letters, photos, videocassette recordings and in-person visits. They use many of the same means to stay in contact with family and friends in Africa. Letters and phone calls, however, are far more common than electronic mail and faxes. Sending photos and videocassette recordings is also very popular. In this way, important life events such as graduations and marriage celebrations can be shared across continents.

Remittances through formal wire transfers or informal banking systems are also important ways to maintain ties with those left behind. Sudanese who send remittances on a regular basis see this money as critical to meet immediate subsistence needs among refugees in Africa and to invest in the future. Money to buy

food to supplement UNHCR rations or to supplant a meagre harvest is seen as fundamental to the survival of those left behind. Investing in education by paying school fees is also an obligation of those who secured resettlement slots. In addition, men in the US who are betrothed to Sudanese women living in Ethiopia with the groom's family describe sending money back to their families to support their fiancées and to pay for bridewealth cattle.

Looking for a wife

Marriage and courtship, in fact, are key reasons for many Sudanese men to return to Africa for a visit. Nuer men in the US wish to marry Nuer women but there are very few single or unbetrothed Nuer women in America. In addition, some Nuer men are troubled by what they call "unreasonable levels of freedom" accorded to women in the US. By returning to Africa to marry, some Nuer men feel that they are more likely to find a wife who has not yet been "corrupted" by American ideals and ways of life.

The enduring importance of cattle

For Sudanese in Africa or the US, the transfer of cattle remains central to the recognition of marriage and any children from that union. Keeping cattle does not appear to be viable for Sudanese in the US. Therefore, the transfer of cattle takes place in Africa – even to recognise Nuer marriages that take place in the US. The current rate for bridewealth among Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia is US\$3,900 which will buy "28 big cows, two small cows, and five bulls" according to a Nuer informant who had paid bridewealth recently.

Family ties

In addition to marriage, maintaining ties to family members is an important reason for temporary return migration to East Africa. Many of these visits revolve around visiting elders. More than nine out of ten Sudanese in the US are under the age of 40. In fact, the Nuer referred to as "elders" in the US are in their mid-forties. For some who return to East Africa for visits, some motivation appears to be to maintain a stake in family wealth. But far more often it is

described as an emotional connection with loved ones, particularly those such as grandmothers who have no desire to migrate to the US.

Investment in peace

One final dimension of the temporary return migration phenomenon is the work of those Sudanese who devote themselves to the cause of Sudanese peace and alleviation of suffering of those left behind. One Sudanese man, Stephen Chambang, founded an organisation called SudanHope to try to make a difference in the lives of those who remain in the Sudan war zone and in refugee camps in neighbouring African countries. In 2001, Stephen self-funded a three-month trip back to Africa, where he conducted research to find out what Sudanese IDPs' and refugees' needs were. Upon his return to the US, he secured sponsorship from his American employer to set up an organisation to raise funds to purchase a boat that would serve as a reliable means of transportation between Maker, Sudan, and Gambela, Ethiopia, to enable people to travel for necessities like medical care during the July-February rainy season. Recognising the potential for linkages between those in the diaspora and those who remain in Africa as refugees to have an impact on improving their own lives is an important dimension of the refugee experience that needs to feed policy and practice.

Implications for policy and practice

In the long run, the contributions of Africans in the diaspora to those who remain in Africa raise a number of questions. To what extent do undocumented flows of resources from the outside mask the extent of problems in southern Sudan and the condition of those seeking refuge in neighbouring African countries? If Africans who have been resettled in the US are using resources to support families in Africa as well their immediate families in the US, what impact will this have on their integration in a new society? How will this sharing of resources play out in the next generation? Do these remittances mean that the humanitarian burden is being unduly shouldered by those who are themselves least financially stable and most marginalised in society?

If humanitarian interventions targeting African refugees are to be effective, transnational realities need to be considered. For instance, cultural orientation programmes for third country resettlement candidates that assume less sophistication on the part of African refugees ignore key dimensions of the social world of refugees. Monetary remittances are an important part of their social ties. For Africans in the US, the decision to attend school in the hope of obtaining a better job in the future can necessitate reducing or eliminating remittances to Africa for a specified period of time. This funding stream needs to be seen as unpredictable: highly dependent on the well-being and employment of the US counterpart. The current downturn in the US economy is likely to be felt by refugees in Africa who may have come to depend on those remittances. Alternatively, Sudanese in the diaspora might forego opportunities that enhance their ability to earn a living wage if it means suspending remittances.

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1. See FMR15 p7, www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR15/fmr15.2.pdf.
2. For more information, see www.db.idpproject.org/Sites/idpSurvey.nsf/wCountries/Sudan
3. More information about this project can be found at www.SudanHope.com.

