Sherkole Refugee Camp: From a Refugee Settlement to Urban Center?

Tirsit Sahldengil* and Fekadu Adugna**

Abstract

Refugee encampment policy has been implemented around the world assuming that refugees are temporary settlers who might either repatriate to their home country or be relocated by getting permanent settlement in the Global North. Yet, currently evidence suggests that the temporarily constructed camps are transforming into urban centers because of refugees' prolonged settlements and their interaction with the host community. Building on this body of literature, this article studied the case of Sherkole Refugee Camp in Benishangul-Gumuz. Qualitative research approach was used for data collection having in-depth interviews, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings of the study showed that Sherkole Refugee Camp is one of the oldest refugee camps in Ethiopia and can be an example of how refugee camps can drive urbanization or even change to urban areas. Before the establishment of the Sherkole Refugee Camp, there were no settlements, be it urban or quasi-urban type in the area. However, due to this refugee camp, which at the time of the fieldwork was about thirty years old, more than two new urban centers had developed in the area and the refugee camp itself has urban characteristics. The research indicates that local government offices should recognize that refugee camps have the potential to evolve into permanent towns or cities. Therefore, it is crucial to incorporate them into the urban planning process, particularly in the outskirts of Ethiopia where urbanization is progressing at a slower pace.

Keywords: Refugee camp, protracted situation, sherkole, urbanization

*****Tirsit Sahldengil is a researcher at Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University. she can be reached at tirsit.sahledengil@aau.edu.et

****** Fekadu Adugna is associate professor at Social Anthropology department of Addis Ababa University. he can be reached at fek.adugna@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Refugee camps are traditionally conceptualized as temporary shelters that are primarily designed to restrict refugees, control their movement, and establish boundaries (McConnachie 2015). As such, they should stay spatially alienated from the surrounding host community. The idea of temporality and extraterritoriality of camp was also explained by Agier (2013) who argues that refugee camps are extra-territorial and they are not included in the official maps of the country. It is anticipated that refugees will return home and the camps will be demolished.

Contrary to the conception of refugee camps as transient, bounded and isolated entities, Turner (2015), for example, argues that practically camp's boundaries are porous, allowing commodities, people, and ideas to flow in and out freely. Refugees have agency and they can explore beyond the demarcation and the imaginary border, interact with the host community, and they give what they bring from their home country, and also utilize resources and opportunities from their surrounding host (Ramadan, 2013). Moreover, camps are no longer transient as previously thought, where, several camps have several decades of age. Even though no one desires a permanent character for refugee camps, they tend to last for years, and, sometimes for generations. For instance, Palestinian refugees are now entering their 70th year in exile; and Somali refugees are entering their 27th year of displacement from their home country residing in different neighboring countries and to the global north (Alshoubaki, 2017). It has now been four decades since Sudanese refugees have been staying in the camps located in Benishangul-Gumuz and Gambella regions in Ethiopia.

On the other hand, urbanization is a complex process bringing forth enormous and notable changes on the environment, economy, and socio-cultural relationships (UNFPA, 2017). Explaining how urbanization takes place in refugee camp setting, Alshoubaki (2017) argues that refugee camps tend to be urban zones in terms of gradual growth in population density and consequent modifications implemented by the refugees themselves. High fertility rate among the refugees, expansion of infrastructures, physical and environmental changes and socio-cultural transformation are some of the

parameters mentioned by Alshoubaki that contributes to the transformation of refugee camps into urban centers. Refugee camps face several challenges, including social isolation, inadequate resources, poor infrastructure, lack of educational and employment opportunities, inadequate healthcare services and access to other basic services. These challenges have contributed to various socio-economic problems in the camps and continue to hamper the provision of adequate assistance to refugees. Despite the challenges that refugee camps poses towards the host community, the existence of refugee camps can also contributes positively towards the urbanization of the host area (Fajth *et al*. 2019). Transforming refugee camps into urban centers offers an opportunity to address the challenges facing refugee camps, including the provision of access to public services such as clean water and housing, creating economic opportunities for vulnerable individuals and fostering social cohesion. Despite the benefits, this approach poses significant challenges such as integration into host communities, urban planning, and considerations of affordability (Turner, 2015).

Taking a closer look at specific camps, Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, for instance, was constructed in 1990. It was considered to be the largest refugee camp in the world (UN-Habitat, 2021) with 19 primary schools and 6 secondary schools to serve 15,600 school-aged children and one referral health center with 100-beds offering special and secondary health care services. Most of the refugees inside Dadaab complex also participate in different activities such as: farming, fishing and trading (UN-Habitat, 2021). This reflects the potential and the practice of transforming the refugee camp into permanent settlement area.

Kakuma refugee camp is another example. Established in 1992 on an area where pastoralists from Turkana were living, it ended up as an urban center by 2015. Kakuma served as urban center for both the refugees as well as the surrounding pastoralists (Vemuru *et al*, 2016).

Driving from the above, this study focuses on the experience of Sherkole Refugee Camp in Benishangul-Gumuz to showcase how refugee camps turning into urban centers or can contribute for urbanization. Sherkole Refugee Camp is one of the oldest refugee camps in Ethiopia and can be an

example of how refugee camps can drive urbanization or get changed to urban areas.

1.1. Conceptualization of towns

The definition of "towns" varies widely. A town is a populated area generally smaller than a city, typically with fewer than 10,000 inhabitants. It usually has a distinct character defined by its history and geography (Jones *et al*, 2015). Towns often serve as centers of trade for smaller surrounding communities, with businesses ranging from local merchants to national chain stores within their boundaries (Gerometta *et al*. 2005). A city, on the other hand, is a larger, more densely populated area than a town. It has more than 10,000 residents and features a range of commercial, industrial, residential, and cultural activities (Couch *et al*. 2003). Cities are usually the economic and cultural hubs of their surrounding regions and feature urban infrastructure such as mass transit systems, parks, and high-rise residential buildings (Koeppen & Kumar, 2014). Rural areas consist of sparsely populated regions and have low population densities. They can be defined as places where economic and social activities are primarily agricultural-based or rely on extractive industries such as mining or forestry (Cloke & Perkins, 2003). Rural areas are characterized by a geographic distance from urban centers and may have limited access to essential services, such as healthcare (Jolliffe & Tavares, 2004).

Urban areas, on the contrary, are densely populated areas that typically have higher levels of economic growth and social activity. These areas are characterized by their vibrancy, high-density housing or commercial buildings, and numerous public, social, and cultural events (Scott & Storper, 2015). Urban areas are also known for their extended infrastructure networks featuring public transportation and highways, and easy access to essential services, community organizations, and social institutions (Berry, 2001). This distinction only has a small share of towns being classified as urban (UN-Habitat 2022:33).

Coming back to urbanization in Ethiopia in general and its context in refugee camp areas in particular it is still difficult to come up with a clear

conceptualization. This is due to, even though Ethiopian urbanization process has led to the development of metropolitan cities, secondary urban centers but with inadequate planning and infrastructure provisions. But Ethiopia's urbanization process is still at its early stage (Alemu and Adugna2017).

On the other hand, refugee settlements can contribute for the urbanization process of the country by challenging traditional notions of identity and belonging, as well as produce new forms of social organization (Zetter, 2015). However, this process can also challenge the governance, security, and access to resources (Harrell-Bond, 2013). However, initiatives that promote inclusion, co-existence, and collaboration between refugee and host communities can foster more resilient urban areas (Veronis & Lough, 2019). This article tries to build up on how the existence of refugee settlement can contributes in transforming the area to the urban centers as well as how the camps themselves can be served as a hub of urban centers for the host community by taking one of the oldest refugee camps in Western Ethiopia as a case history.

2. Methods

The data used for this study was generated using qualitative data collected between 2016 and 2021. During the first phase of the study in 2016, preliminary field visits and interviews were conducted. During this period, the major activities were introduction to the camp community, understanding the context, and identification of informants. In April 2017 and August 2019, two major rounds of fieldwork were conducted, whereby seventy-three individual, in-depth interviews with refugees from different countries and host communities were conducted. Refugees from different countries were selected to participate in the study with the aim of exploring their differing experiences. The members of the host community from different age, gender, and economic groups were also interviewed.

Twenty-five key informant interviews with both governmental and non-governmental sectors were also conducted. In this regard, Key informants were assumed to be people who have a better understanding of the refugee context, so that the information gathered through in-depth interviews could

be validated. Hence, key informants were recruited from the host government representatives and non-governmental institutions. Regarding the host government representatives, ARRA, recently renamed RRS, was the major institution since it has an office inside the refugee camp in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, and at the federal level, its representatives were interviewed at refugee camp level. Additionally, key informants from the government administration office at Homosha woreda, which is the host woreda for the refugee camp, were also involved. On the other hand, non-governmental organisations, especially humanitarian agencies, also participated in this category. Hence, UN agencies such as the United Nations Higher Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), and World Food Programme (WFP) personnel were interviewed as key informants.

Six FGDs were conducted with various refugee groups and host communities. The FGDs were organized considering the nationality of the refugees to allow open discussion about the common issues and different attitudes across various refugee groups in the camp. Among the six FGDs, four of them were conducted with the refugee communities, and the other two were conducted with the members of the host community. The focus group discussions were conducted to triangulate the data obtained from the IDIs and the KIIs.

Ethical clearance was obtained both from Addis Ababa University and from the Refugee and Returnee Service. Therefore, after securing a support letter from Addis Ababa University, the Federal Refugee and Returnee Service provided a research permit in Addis Ababa. Once permission was secured at the federal level, the regional RRS office and the office at the refugee camp were contacted for confirmation.

Written informed consent was obtained from each participant where possible harms were clearly indicated in the form. IDIs, KIIs, and FGDs were conducted in a place that gave optimum privacy, and the data generated was stored on a password-secured computer. Further, all identifier information is kept confidential, and all data from refugees is made anonymous. There was also continuous virtual follow-up and conversation with the informants so as to update some developments.

The data generated was later transcribed word by word, thematically categorized, and interpreted. The analysis followed a qualitative approach by systematically categorizing the data generated thematically to give meaning to the experiences of the participants through interpretation and description of events and processes.

3. Results

3.1. Sherkole and other refugee camps in benishangul gumuz region

Benishangul-Gumuz region is one of the regional states in Ethiopia. The Central Statistics Authority (2013) projected the total population in the region was to be about 2,234,342 in 2023 population projection also shows that only 289,000 or 24.3 percent of the region's population are urban inhabitants. Moreover, 93.3 percent of the rural population depends on agricultural activities ranging from hoe-farming to settled agriculture and pastoralism (BGR, 2004). Besides agriculture, other means of livelihood such as trade and traditional gold washing in some rivers are undertaken by the residents in the region. Despite the fact that the region is quite rich in terms of agro-ecology and various minerals, challenges such as inefficient farming of land, lack of skilled human resources and new technologies, poor infrastructure, and, crop and livestock diseases expose the population vulnerable to food insecurity (Cross-Border Analysis and Mapping, 2016) Subsequently, rural households have been subjected to food deficit and challenges in feeding their family due to poor agricultural farming resulting in low levels of production.

Benishangul-Gumuz is the third biggest refugee hosting region in Ethiopia next to Gambella and Somali regions. There are more than 60,000 refugees living in five refugee camps in the Region (UNHCR, 2019). Most of these refugees were from Sudan and South Sudan. However, there are also refugees from the Great Lakes region such as from Burundi, Rwanda and Democratic Republic of Congo. Bambasi, Tongo, Sherkole, Tsoré and Gure are the five refugee camps located in the region. The oldest camp is Sherkole followed by Tongo, Bambasi, Tsoré and Gure. Tongo is the biggest refugee camp with

more than 20,000 refugees followed by Bambasi with more than 16,000. Guré is the newest and the smallest camp with 8,000 refugees.

Sherkole Refugee Camp, which is the focus of this study, is located in Assosa Zone, one of the three Zones of Benishangul-Gumuz Region. The "indigenous" people around the Sherkole Refugee Camp are known as the Berta people having different religion, culture, and language from the refugees who came from the Great Lakes Regions, while they share Islam as a religion and international border with the Sudanese refugees[1]. In addition, to the Berta community which is the dominant host, people from other parts of the country collectively known as "Habesha" also live surrounding the refugee camp.

Sherkole Refugee Camp was established to serve Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees who had crossed the border via Yabus River and reached in Abrhamo[2] and Kurmuk first due to the prolonged civil war between the central government of Sudan and the rebellion of South Sudan and, after the independence of South Sudan, due to civil wars in each of the countries[3]. Due to a fluid border between Ethiopia and Sudan, people from both sides moved freely and lived temporarily without being registered as refugees.

As mentioned above, Sherkole Refugee Camp is unique because it is the oldest camp in the region and it is composed of refugees from many countries such as Sudan, South Sudan, Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, and Liberia[4]. Currently, there is no space to host more refugees, yet, there is a continuous arrival of refugees and asylum seekers. The new arrivals hope to find relatives or other refugees from their own ethnic groups' to temporarily host them until they get a shelter of their own. According to the information obtained from the camp shelters there are 2,855 households and 11,028 registered refugees and asylum seekers. The number of refugees fluctuates because of the continuous arrival and departure of refugees and asylum seekers. Such a fluctuation is observed even in weekly reports also because of the mobility of refugees and asylum seekers to different places in search of jobs. According to the information obtained from the RRS office in the camp, the zoning of refugees is made based on their nationality and ethnic group to avoid inter-ethnic conflicts (Tirsit 2022).

3.2. Origin and development of towns: Kibur Hamsa and Kibur Arba

Sherkole refugee camp is found in a place called Kibur Arba. Anyone who is traveling by car from Assosa to Kurmuk should pass Tsoré located on the left side of the main road from Asossa to Kurmuk, Homosha, Kibur Arba and Kibur Hamsa before reaching Kurmuk. Homosha is a town that does not have refugee camp itself but is close to Sherkole and Tsoré refugee camps. Kibur Arba is a refugee camp-turned-town and the seat of Sherkole refugee camp. Currently the name Kibur Arba is used for inferring to the area which include Sherkole refugee camp and its surrounding. The name Kibur Arba and Sherkole refugee camp are used interchangeably in many ways. According to the informants, before the establishment of Sherkole refugee camp, there was no place known by the name of Kibur Arba.

Kibur Hamsa is a refugee inspired town, ten kilometers away from Sherkole Refugee camp or Kibur Arba to Kurmuk. According to FGD discussants, prior to the establishment of Sherkole refugee camp, Kibur Hamsa was a marketplace for the local community. However, after the establishment of Sherkole refugee camp, it became a marketplace for both local communities and refugees. It is expanded geographically towards the refugee camp.

According to informants from the host community, before the refugee settlement, the area was covered with bamboo forest and there was no asphalt road connecting the area. However, after the camp was established, a road was constructed, shops were opened and market areas also expanded and finally Kibur Arba grew as a town. Another informant from Berta community also underlined that previously, there was no shop and market place between Assosa and Kurmuk. Hence, they used to go to Kurmuk or Assosa to shop for basic necessities and, buy or sell in the market. Moreover, they were also forced to go to Homosha town to get health care service. After the establishment of the refugee camp in the area, first, a small town was established at Kibur Hamsa, a place ten Killo Meters from the camp and between Kurmuk and Sherkole refugee camp. The informants also stressed that Kibur Hamsa was established as a market center by the merchants from Kurmuk and Sherkole refugee camp settlers. Kibur Hamsa first emerged as a

market place for the refugees living in Sherkole refugee camp since they were not allowed to go far from their camp to buy different things from the market. Gradually they started to navigate into Kibur Hamsa and engaged in petty trades and activities. Then the small market grew into a town.

Likewise, a Sudanese refugee, who was among the first refugees to join Sherkole refugee camp during 1997, mentioned that Kibur Hamsa was first a petty market and gradually expanded following the increasing number of refugees. Especially the arrival of the Great Lakes refugees since 2005 contributed a lot for the expansion of the market southwards to the camp area. Hence the other small town called Kibur Arba emerged because of the further expansion of the town and increasing number of refugees. Refugees are highly involved in business activities in these emerging urban centers and they contribute for the expansion of business activities in the area.

Sherkole refugee camp is now considered as one of the towns in the area. People prefer to call it Kibur Arba town than refer to it as a refugee camp. This is in fact because of the changes it brings to the area and for transforming itself from simple temporary settlement to two decades of protracted neighborhood combining both refugee camp and urban characteristics. This is happening because of the protracted status of the camp. The humanitarian agencies including UNHCR still distribute limited amount of aid to the refugees. However, many of refugees are engaging in different business activities than merely dependent on such aid.

Regarding the formal governmental structure of the region, none of them are recognized by the local government as towns. In this regard, it is worth to remember the extraterritoriality of refugee camps (Agier, 2013). Hence, they are not planned and they are not recognized in the official structure. Agier explained that refugee camps are many not to be included in the official maps of the country. Moreover, the urban centers that are either transformed from refugee camps to towns or established by refugees are also not recognized officially. This is also true for Sherkole refugee camp. If one searchs the name Kibur Hamsa town in the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State's map, we may not find either Kibur Hamsa town or Kibur Arba town. Moreover, Sherkole also officially appears in the regional map as in one Woreda, which is found

70 Kilometers away from Sherkole refugee camp itself. This confirms the extraterritoriality behavior of the refugee camps.

3.3. Birth and fertility patterns

As mentioned above, Homosha Woreda is the host woreda of Sherkole refugee camp. There are two refugee camps in Homosha woreda: namely Sherkole and Tsoré. There are 15 Kebeles in Homosha Woreda having a total resident population of 20,000 in 2016 while the number of refugees in the two camps was more than 25,000. The number of refugees in the Sherkole camp is increasing not only because of new comers but also because of new born babies. During their stay in the camp, several pregnant women having three or four children are commonly observed. According to the focus group discussion with the refugees from different nationalities, despite all the challenges they are confronted with in the camp, there is a high demand for children.

A medical doctor from the health center managed by the RRS underlined that there is a family planning package and the health center in the camp which is supposed to distribute condoms for the refugees besides the regular family planning service provided in the camp. However, the family planning intervention could not bring the desired change among the refugees due to different factors such as refugees' lack of awareness and lack of desire for using condom, refugees desire to have more children, reluctance to use contraception, and their perception about having more children. According to the information from the RRS health center of the refugee camp, on average 35 to 40 refugee mothers give birth every week. This means that 480 new born children join the camp per month and the number increases to 5,700 per year. This further indicates that the number of the camp population will increase by 50% per year only due to the new born children which contributes more to shortage of the humanitarian assistance including food and other services. On the other hand, the refugees who are leaving the camp frequently due to various reasons is also considered as a factor that contributes for the managed number of refugee population.

Refugees also reported that they are not ready to use birth control mechanisms due to various reasons. First, most of refugees believe that they are victims of genocide and survivors of war as a result, they want to have as many children as possible in order to ensure the continuity of their lineage as well as their ethnic group. Refugees feel that they are endangered to be assimilated and they are also at risk of persecution in their home country. For instance, Tutsi refugees perceive that they are a minority group in the world; and always have a fear of persecution and extinction[5]. As a result, they want to have more children and most of them are not ready to use contraceptives. Most of them take the family planning education provided in the camp, but they do not practice the knowledge gained by utilizing contraception. Some of them may take the tablets home but they do not use them properly.

Second, most of the refugee women are not involved in any activity in the camp other than raising children. So, giving birth to more children is a way of spending time as a refugee. Even though the refugees also suffer from a shortage of facilities and food, the data from the field shows that they still want to give birth for more children. A Congolese refugee woman said that after giving birth to her first son, the depression that she had been suffering from had decreased because she got busy with her son. Then she gave birth to the second son a year later. Her plan is still to have two more daughters[6].

The third reason for having more children among the refugees is related to the food and other items that they receive per head. Having more children is advantageous because they receive additional food items per child. Therefore, most of them want to have more children and they are not willing to use contraceptives, including condoms. Although, there is a family planning education which is provided by the RRS health office for refugees, in practice refugees are reluctant to use contraceptives and they want to increase the number of their children. Some of the informants also confirmed that the food aid they receive from the WFP is based on their family size, hence, they consider having a large family size as an advantage.

According to the discussion with RRS health sector experts, many refugees do not use condom and as a result in addition to unplanned pregnancy, the refugees especially women are also exposed to different sexually transmitted

infections including HIV/AIDS. According to RRS, many refugees are tested HIV positive which will be covered in the next sub section.

3.4 Sexual and drug/alcohol consumption behavior

Many of the women refugees had experienced gender-based violence and rape in their transit to Ethiopia. Besides, in the camp, it is difficult to manage the sexual behavior since most of them are desperate youth who have passed through several challenges (Tirsit, 2022). There is a high rate of commercial sex work inside and around the camp among some refugees. Most of the women also have sex with men for food. During the in-depth interview, some women refugees living with AIDS said that they do not hide their HIV positive status since it has no impact on their relationship with men. It was indicated that most men would have sexual relations with the women without using condoms even if they know that they are HIV positive and vice versa. Since there is no strong demarcation of the camp people from the host community, there is also no demarcation of sexual relation between the host community and refugees. As a result, this may affect the community at large as well where high rate of HIV transmission among the host community is also anticipated as per the information obtained from RRS health center.

Key informants reflected that most of refugees come into the camp with HIV positive result. FGD with the refugees revealed that there are also people from the host community who have opened liquor house near and inside the refugee camp and are engaging in commercial sex work. Further, there are women refugees who were engaged in commercial sex work in Assosa town and this may expose the host community to the virus and it could intensify the prevalence of HIV in the area. According to the conversation with the Ethiopian women living in Sherkole refugee camp, there are refugees who engage in commercial sex in Assosa town. Some of them also come to visit their family in the camp frequently. When they come to the camp, they also have sexual relationships with refugee men living in the camp.

The establishment of new mega projects such as the Ethiopian Grand Renascence Dam in Benishangul-Gumuz region also attracts many people to the area either to engage in the project directly or to grab the business

opportunity following the stimulation of the area due to the project. This is also indicated as one factor that could increases the spread of HIV/AIDS as a result of interaction among different societal segments. According to FGD with the women refugees, the number of commercial sex workers is increasing from time to time. Previously Commercial sex workers were living only in Assossa city and Kibur Hamsa town but recently there are significant numbers of commercial sex workers in the camp settlement and there is no clear demarcation between the refugee community and the host community in terms of engagement in this activity. One commercial sex worker from the refugees also narrates the situation as follows:

> *In 2011, many people came to Assosa from different parts of the country. At that time, I was desperate because of the delay of my resettlement process. Then my friend told me that there is a good job opportunity in Assosa. Then I went to Assosa with my friend. Then we met with the owner of a bar and I agreed to work as a waitress for the late-night term. He told me that since I am speaking English, I can earn more money. Then I started the work and indeed at the beginning I earned big money. However, I was not able to stay in Assosa due to my own personal reasons. Finally, I returned to the camp and I started doing the same business.*[7]

The prevalence of alcohol use, chat/khat and other drugs also aggravate the increasing rate of HIV/AIDS. Many refugees are engaged in selling alcohol. There are both local and non-local beverage houses in the camp. The South Sudanese refugees prepare their own traditional alcoholic drink for both commercial and domestic purpose. They prepare the beverage called "wine" from sorghum and serve it in their shelter. On the other hand, there are Ethiopian people around and inside the camp who sell Ethiopian traditional alcoholic beverage called *Areque* and many refugees use this beverage and some of them even prefer *Areque* over their own local alcholic drinks as *Areque* has more alcoholic percentage and they indicate they can get intoxicated much easier than other alcoholic beverages.

According to one Congolese refugee, beer and gin are very expensive alcoholic beverages for refugees. As a result, they adopted local *Areque* or

yegojam Areque from Ethiopian people and most of the refugees use this alcoholic beverage more. They prefer it because it is cheap and is very strong. The gatekeepers at check points do not allow carrying alcohol into the camp by refugees. However, there is no checkpoint in the market places like Kibur Hamsa where the host community and refugees drink freely[8].

In addition to alcohol, using chat/ khat and other drugs is highly increasing among the refugees and the host community as well. The RRS camp coordinator confirmed that when he used to work in Gambella refugee camp, it is the host community especially, those known as the highlanders or Habesha, that introduced chat to the refugees. In his opinion, there are many refugees in Sherkole camp who were in Gambella refugee camp and further pointed out that, those refugees from Gambella could probably be responsible for the introduction of chat to Sherkole refugee camp and the surrounding host community. However, the Culture and Tourism Officer of Homosha Woreda has a different opinion about the prevalence of chat consumption in the area. According to him, the Berta people learned chewing chat from people living in Assosa, not from the refugees. He also talked about the Great Lake refugees newly learned about chewing chat in the refugee camp. Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees had already started chat consumption before the arrival of the Great Lake refugees in the camp.

According to another Congolese refugee, in addition to Chat which is the most widely used, other drugs used by refugees include *gaya*[9], Marijuana, cigarettes, and recently introduced capsule or tablet. The shortage of money constrains the refugees to buy chat daily. Thus, there are some Sudanese refugees who bring different weeds and drugs including cocaine by crossing Ethio-Sudanese border and sell it to the refugees in cheaper price. Drugs with different forms have a stimulant value, the refugees who have friends from the host community also invite their friends to use the drugs. Moreover, it is only found in the hands of very few Sudanese refugees who frequently commute back and forth between Sudan and camp.

Yet, the reproductive health problem looks neglected as both RRS and UNHCR focus on humanitarian support. Not only refugees, according to the FGD with the host community, the latter complained that the host culture is

changing due to the influence from the refugee. For example, previously the Berta women were not engaged in commercial sex activity. However, now some women started practicing it covertly. In addition to this, the Berta men now started using alcohol which was previously not the case in the area.

High fertility, prevalence of HIV/AIDS, and alcohol as well as drug consumption in the camp changes not only the peaceful situation of the camp, but also the refugee's behavior towards the host community. Alcohol use, contributes to aggressive behavior of refugees not only among each other but also with the host community. According to Beck (2013) who cites the World Health Organization, the use of alcohol is more closely associated with aggressive behavior than any other type of psychotropic substance. The degree of aggression may vary depending on cultures and psychosocial conditions, but refuges, with desperate camp life, are more likely to change their behavior due to alcohol use, which is observed in the context of Sherkole refugee camp. The effect of khat addiction may also be negatively contributing to a weary relationship with the host community and eventually prompting conflicts.

3.5 Introduction of new livelihoods strategies in the area by the refugees

Over 54.3% of BGR is covered with forest and woodland (BGR, 2020) which includes bamboo, eucalyptus and rubber trees, incense and gum forests as well as the indigenous species. The region is endowed with the highest presence of bamboo forest in Ethiopia, especially lowland bamboo, *Oxytenanthera abyssinica*. This species is adapted to dry land, poor and shallow soil, and degraded landscape. Bamboo forests play a crucial role as a buffer to desertification that is expanding from neighboring Sudan (Boissière *et al*, 2019). There are over fifty-five indigenous tree species in the region (BGR-BoFED, 2017).

However, the forest coverage in the region is rapidly depleting due to increasing number of settlements in the area. In the last 10 years, bamboo in BGR has been highly degraded due to unsustainable agricultural practices (e.g. use of fire), land conversion for agricultural investments, and mass

bamboo flowering followed by subsequent deforestation, starting in 2006 (Boissière *et al*, 2019). A case study of land use and land cover change, for example, for Assosa Zone shows in 1978, 69% of the area was covered by natural forest followed by shrub/grasslands which is 30%, agriculture 0.9% and settlement 0.01%. In 2016, the forest cover declined to 41%, shrub/grassland increased to 33%, agriculture increased to 24%, and settlement to 2% (Teshome *et al*, 2019).

The local authorities complain that the establishment and expansion of refugee camps and refugee population is one of the responsible factors for the de-forestation. Many refugee informants argued that they understand the value of trees. Covered with forest they admitted that their existence relies on the existence and the well-being of good natural environment. However, there are factors which force the refugees to exploit the natural environment. Refugees in Sherkole Camp are totally dependent on the surrounding environment for their fuel demand. There was a non-governmental organization called Gaia Ethiopia, which was distributing kerosene and ethanol for refugees with disabilities and elderly refugees between February 2015 and June 2017. However, the organization is no longer in operation and its program has already phased out. Currently there is no energy source that is distributed for the refugees. As a result, refugees are dependent on the forest for their energy consumption. One of Sudanese refugees witnessed the following:

> *The host community is the reason for the refugees' existence. We are totally dependent on the local people for our firewood. We collect firewood from the bush. We also buy charcoal from them. Our women also collect firewood from the bush. The Berta people are very kind and no one has denied our women access to the firewood when they enter the bush. If they refused us to collect the firewood, we would not have eaten cooked food*[10].

Refugees' dependence on the bush for firewood and charcoal from the host community inevitably contributed to deforestation. This led the host community and the local Berta administration to increasingly challenge the refugees' access to firewood in the local environment. According to Zipper et

al (2020), typically the first effect of urbanization is the removal of vegetation. Hence, deforestation is the major manifestation for urbanization. And the main reason for deforestation are revolving around the demand for clean land for agriculture, demand for firewood, as well as demand for shelter construction. Since the refugees have no alternative energy source, it became challenging to control their access to the forest resulting in the depletion of the natural resource particularly the forest.

According to an environmental protection expert at Homosha Woreda, the Woreda hosts two big refugee camps, i.e. Tsoré and Sherkole. In addition, it hosts two transit centers known as Ashura and Abrhamo. The local population lives in 15 Kebeles of the host Woreda. All communities, including those living in refugee camps, transit centers, and the host community all depend on the trees of the forest for firewood. In addition to cutting trees for the firewood, refugees also cut trees, especially bamboo for construction of houses and different home materials such as chairs, tables, and beds. Further, they also sell wood and bamboo to generate an income. In fact such types of economic activities are not welcomed by the host government. Yet there is no strict mechanism which controls these activities. In this regard, it is important to understand that many of economic activities that are carried out by the refugees are either informal or are not known by the host government.

In addition to using forest wood for cooking, making household equipment, or to generate cash, all of the shelters in Sherkole refugee camp are constructed using the savanna grasses available in the region. The refugees cut the grass from the forest for their shelter construction. According to the environment protection officer of the Homosha Woreda, the local government does not strictly forbid the refugees from cutting the grasses. The local communities do not complain about the cutting of grasses as well because the Berta people are known for the slash-and-burn agriculture and when the grasses are dried, they put fire on them to clear the land for cultivation. As a result, the refugees are not considered as depleting the environment by cutting the grass. Rather they are both benefiting themselves from cutting the grasses while at the same time they benefit the community in slash-and-burn farming. These kinds of win-win activities are be encouraged.

According to the host community members living in the Homosha town, the refugees' demand for firewood and charcoal is encouraging many people from the host community to engage in selling firewood and charcoal. As a result, many people from the host community are attracted to the business of selling charcoal and firewood on the street sides of the road from Assosa to Sherkole refugee camp. Before the arrival of refugees, the Berta people were not aware of constructing their house by decorating with grass. But the Sudanese people prepare the dry grass in a decorative way and sell them to the host community. Through time, the local people also learned how to decorate their fences and roofs by using grass. Besides, some refugees sell the grass for the locals and for other refugees.

In the previous times, the host community used charcoal for cooking at home only and had not been much involved in selling it. However, as refugees started producing charcoal for the market, the host community members also started to sell it as well. One of the informants from the host community said that during the dry season, she would sell a bundle of firewood for 20 Ethiopian birr (which was about USD 0.7 in 2017) while the same amount of wood is sold for 50 birr during a rainy season. This informant also said that refugees from the Great Lakes mainly use charcoal while Sudanese and South Sudanese refugees predominantly use firewood to cook food.

Refugees' shelter is also made from the bamboo which is available in the region. Refugees mostly buy the bamboo from the local people for a cheap price to construct their shelter. Sometimes refugees extract bamboo trees without the permission of the locals and they sell it to other refugees. Officially, IRC is responsible to construct shelters in new refugee camps. However, Sherkole refugee camp is considered full and there is no place to construct new shelters for new arrivals. Only informally, some open spaces are distributed to new arrivals that are willing to construct shelter on their own. Moreover, the shelters are temporarily constructed and they need a continuous renovation as the camp is transforming into permanent settlement.

There is also frequent wildfire which is most of the time deliberately created by refugees in order to hunt wild animals for food. As a result, the wild animals have been decreasing in the area for the last few years due to the

frequent wildfire in the area. The Homosha Woreda Administration Office also admitted that according to their assessment of the wildfire between 2015 and 2019, about 40 wildfires were recorded in the Ashura, Jimma, Tsoré, and Sherkole areas. These areas are predominantly occupied by refugees. This by itself contributes to deforestation of the area. The deforested areas are also occupied by settlers and are also used for shelter construction and small business areas, which contributes for the expansion of the urban areas.

In response to the serious problem of deforestation and threat to wildlife, the camp administration and the Homosha Woreda attempted to introduce alternative energy sources for both refugees and the host community by producing biogas and energy saving stoves. Additionally, the Homosha Woreda environmental protection office was forced to establish a taskforce to rescue the environment. The taskforce was responsible to protect forests from cutting. They are also responsible for bringing refugees and hosts who violate environmental rules to the court. There is also Forest Management Committee, which is responsible for awareness creation, reforestation and preservation of the environment. The wildfire Protection Committee was also established for extinguishing wildfires and protecting potential wildfire areas. These three committees work for the wellbeing and protection of the forest. In this regard, it is good to underline that there had been no platform to encourage refugees to participate in reforestation and environmental protection. It is only post 2018 that refugees got access to plant trees in their surrounding as part of the countrywide "Green Legacy" campaign.

3.6. Creating a new socio-cultural identity suitable for the urban community

The host community is dominantly Muslim with strict code of Islamic dressing. Refugees from Darfur and the Blue Nile states are also Muslim. Therefore, there is a high intimacy in terms of religious identity between the host community and refugees from Sudan. On the contrary, refugees from South Sudan such as Maban, Dinka, and Nuer are predominantly Protestant. As a result, the Berta people have more religious bond with refugees from Sudan than elsewhere. Moreover, the Berta elders blame refugees from the South Sudan and the Great Lakes areas for influencing the youth to violate

the community's dressing code. One informant from the Berta community explained the culture shared between the refugees and the host community as follows:

> *…. these refugees have been living in this area for a long period of time. We shared many things with the refugees from Sudan for a long time. We go to the same mosque and we use the same language, Arabic, in the Mosque. However, recently the arrival of many refugees from South Sudan is changing the behavior of our youth. Our daughters started wearing trousers which they imitated from South Sudanese*[11].

Another key informant from the Culture and Tourism office also reinforced the idea of the above informant. According to the key informant, the refugees influenced the dressing code of the youth in the host community. For example, previously the Berta community women never wore a trousers and miniskirts and they had their own traditional clothes. Women refugees however wear miniskirts and use artificial hair (Wig). Even if the Muslims considered it as haram, some of the refugees consider wearing artificial hair as being modern[12] .

Language is another aspect that is shared between refugees and the host community and contributes for the urbanization. The Berta children are eager to learn the Arabic language. There are also some Arabic schools owned by Sudanese refugees in the camp and are open for the Berta community from the neighborhood to learn the Arabic language. Many children from the Berta village came to the Arabic schools owned by the refugees. One Berta boy confirmed that he is among those who had learnt Arabic for two months. He said that learning Arabic language helps him understand the Quran and to know more about his religion. He also added that he is happy for getting the opportunity to learn Arabic and appreciated the Sudanese refugees for their dedication to teach the language[13].The Great Lakes refugees also have French course training schools that are accessible for both refugees and the host communities.

In addition to the language schools, more than 200 children of the community are enrolled in refugee's secondary school which was constructed by International Rescue Committee (IRC) in 2018 to serve both refugees and the host community. In the schools, both refugees and students from the host community play football games together.

The refugee community has nine schools in each of the nine zones from preschool to the eighth grade. After completing grade eight, refugee students join a secondary school with the host community in Homosha town. This situation created a good opportunity for refugees to create friendly relationships with the local community. According to informants, there are many refugee students who used to live in rented houses with the local people in Homosha town in order to avoid the daily travel from the camp to the town which is about 20 KMs and a cost of six birr paid for transportation. Living with the local people gives the refugee students an opportunity to adopt the culture of the local people.

Refugees became familiar to injera (local fermented bread) and for some of them it has become a favorite food. When they get money, some refugees also go to Assosa to enjoy Ethiopian food in different restaurants. In addition to injera and wot (stew), refugees also learnt drinking the local Ethiopian coffee. Although there is also coffee in their country, they purposely participate in the Ethiopian coffee ceremony.

Even if the Berta community relies on porridge as their main dish, the youth of the Berta community prefer to eat at restaurants. Informants discussed that the Berta were not much accustomed to injera before the establishment of the refugee camp. On the other hand, the local community introduced refugees Bordé (local drinks); in return the refugees also introduced some local drinks of their own to the community. The culture and tourism expert of Homosha town said the following:

> *Both the refugees and the host community prefer to have meals there at these restaurants as long as they can afford. The Berta youth consider eating their local food such as porridge and root of plants is "backward". Instead, they preferred to eat injera and*

> *other food at the restaurants. Thus, as culture and tourism office, we are observing a shift in food habits after the refugee influx into this area. The Sudanese sweet foods are also highly adapted by the host community and using wheat flour for pancake and biscuit are now expanding*[14].

Besides consuming Ethiopian meals in restaurants, some refugees also started baking *injera* and cooking stew in their shelter. We met two Sudanese refugees; they were preparing feast food for the baptism of a kid which contains many Ethiopian food items including *injera.* They said that they make *injera* from sorghum and maize. One of them said that the following:

> *I love injera. I have learnt how to bake it from Ethiopians in Kurmuk and here in the camp. I have many Ethiopian friends who teach me how to bake it. I also show to my Ethiopian friends how to prepare Sudanese food. The main thing that I am motivated to make injera as it is good to share with many people and also encourages people to eat together*[15].

The above quote shows how the interaction of the refugees and the host communities is depicted in culture share as well as how the food habit is changing. In this regard it is also possible to understand that exchange in the food culture of the community is one of the manifestations for the urbanization of the area. Because it is obvious that the food culture in the rural center is not the same with the food culture in urban center.

3.7. Flourishing businesses and new economic activities

Petty trade and mining are the major economic activities in which most of the refugees are involved in informally. Refugees from different countries have different job preferences based on their economic networks and pre-flight experience. Most of the refugees who came from Sudan prefer to open small shops and sell food and non-food items for the refugees and for the host community. Some Sudanese refugees also have butchery houses in the refugee camp. They buy oxen from the local people surrounding the camp or sometimes they go on foot to buy them from Assosa. When they bring oxen from Assosa, their local friends support them to pass the check points since

refugees are not eligible to transport animals and other agricultural products into the camps unless they are allowed by the camp administration. Some Sudanese refugees also bring cattle from the bordering areas between Ethiopia and Sudan for sale and supply for the butchers both in the refugee camp and in the towns of the host community. Others also have small restaurants, movie houses and barber shops.

On the other hand, refugees from the Great Lakes region are predominantly engaged in mining activities. While Kibur Hamsa and Homosha are the two towns that South Sudanese and Sudanese refugees go to search for jobs, the Great Lakes Refugees go to Mänge Woreda (ninety kilometers away from the camp) to engage in gold mining activities.

Ethiopia's refugee law, before the new proclamation in 2019, did not allow refugees to work. However, many refugees had been engaged in labor intensive work informally. There are brokers both from refugees and the host community who connect and receive commission from both parties after the deal between the employers and employees. Even if the new proclamation issued in 2019 theoretically allows refugee the right to work, until the completion of data collection for this dissertation, refugees relied on informal work arrangements.

The host communities who want laborers among the refugees come to the refugee camp on market days and request refugee brokers to supply them with laborers. After parties reach an agreement, the laborers are engaged in different farming activities including sowing, plowing, cultivating and preparing the land for the next harvest. The payment may be agreed based on the size of the farm and the duration of the activity.

The participation of the refugees in business activities is steadily increasing. Refugees are engaged in all business activities similar to the local communities. The Homosha Woreda Trade and Industry Office reported that the local community complains against refugees' involvement in the business and at the same time being free from paying tax. However, the officer added that the Woreda administration cannot solve this problem; it is a mandate of

a higher level administrative body. According to a Business and Trade officer, there is no law which gives the Woreda a mandate to control their business.

According to data from Homosha Woreda Customs Office, as of August 2019, there were six butcher houses, one grain house, eight barber shops, as well as nine cinema houses in the camp which have never paid tax since their establishment. There are also refugees living in Kibur Hamsa town, who own businesses such as tea houses and clothing shops. These refugees simply rent houses from the locals and run their business. On the other hand, Ethiopians also rent the same shops in the same neighborhood and run similar business. However, the difference is that Ethiopians pay tax to the government while the refugees do not. This means that the Ethiopians sell their items at a more expensive price than the refugees, making the Ethiopian counterparts complain against this unfair trade practice. In addition to these business activities, the customs office of Homosha Woreda alleged that refugees are also involved in money laundering.

4. Conclusion

Refugee camps have been traditionally considered as temporary places that are built to meet emergency situations for refugees and asylum seekers (Agier, 2013). However, settlements that are considered provisional could turn to permanent settlements eventually and evolve into towns with poor living conditions. The issue of refugee camps in East Africa is complex and multifaceted. While they were initially established as temporary measures to provide aid and shelter to displaced individuals, many have now become semi-permanent fixtures that are unable to meet the evolving needs of refugees. Many experts have suggested that refugee camps may not be sustainable in the long term and that there is a need for a new approach towards managing refugees in the continent.

Based on the view of an urban characteristic from the perspectives of the origin and development of towns, demographic structures, economic activities and socio-cultural identity, this study shows an ongoing process of transformation of Sherkole Refugee Camp and surroundings into urban areas. In Sherkole camp and its environments, towns have emerged and are

developing due to the refugee settlement in the area and the resulting socio-cultural and economic interaction between the refugees and the host community and environment. The population of the camp and the nearby towns is increasing and its structure is resembling more like an urban slum; engagement in non-agricultural activities are enhancing; and new socio-cultural identities characterizing the urban residents are developing. As the example from Sherkole refugee camp shows transformations can improve access to services, create jobs and businesses, and promote social interaction between refugees and host communities. However, it is clearly notable that the trend is expanding, and one cannot expect it to return to its point of origin unless the process of transformation is reverted forcefully by the Ethiopian authorities. Besides, assuming that the refugees will evacuate after sometime, one cannot expect the area to return to its initial circumstance. This suggests that the local government needs to be aware of the inevitable development of urban centers in and around the refugee camps and align the development with its urban planning and coordination strategies to ensure that it is sustainable, affordable, and serves the needs of both refugee and host communities.

Acknowledgment

Addis Ababa University Graduate Program contributed finances for the data collection of this research.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest with any other body regarding the data ownership or the copy right issue.

References

Agier, Michael.2013. Managing the undesirables: Refugee Camps and Humanitarian Government. *St. Antony International Review* 9(1); 185-198

Alshoubaki, Hind.2017. The Temporary City: The Transformation of Refugee Camps from fields of Tents to Permanent Cities. *Housing Policies and Urban Economics* 7: 5 – 15

Berry, B. 2001. Geography of market centers and retail distribution. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

BGR (Benishangul-Gumuz Region- Ethiopia). 2004. Food Security Strategy. Assosa: BGR. https://www.cangoethiopia.org/assets/docs/Benishangul-Gumuz%20FS%20Strategy%20-%202005.pdf

BoFED. 2017. *Physical & Socio-Economic Profile.* Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State Bureau of Finance and Economic Development: BOFED: Assosa.

Boissière M, *et al*. 2019. Guiding Principles for Sustainable Bamboo Forest Management Planning: Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State (BGRS). Rome, FAO. Licence: CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO

Cloke, P., & Perkins, H. C. (2003). Rural transformations and rural policies in the UK. London: Sage.

Couch, C., Fraser, C., & Percy, S. (2003). Urban regeneration in Europe. Oxford, England: Blackwell Science.

CSA (2013).*Population Projections for Ethiopia (2007-2037).* Addis Ababa: Central Statistical Agency

Fitz Gerald, David Scott Rawan Arar.2019. "The Sociology of Refugee Migration."*Annual Review of Sociology* 44:387–406. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117- 041204

Gerometta, J., Haussermann, H., & Longley, A. 2005. Social capital and the third sector in Italy. Urban Studies, 42(5-6), 963-981.

Harrell-Bond, B. 2013. Imposing aid: Emergency assistance to refugees. Oxford University Press.

Hsing, Y., & Jones, R. 2018. The Economic Impact of Refugee Camps. Global Development Institute.

Jolliffe, L., & Tavares, A. F. 2004. The rural non-farm economy, livelihoods, and their diversification: Issues and options. Agriculture & Rural Development Discussion Paper 9, World Bank.

Jones, R. *et al* (2015). Conceptualizing and testing a new approach for evaluating land use change and rural policy in Europe. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 38, 40-51.

Koeppen, B., & Kumar, P. (2014). Urbanization, Energy Use, and Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Asian megacities**.** *Urban Climate***;** 10, 744-758.

Mcconnachie, Kirsten.2015. *Governing Refugees Justice, Order, and Legal Pluralism*. Routledge, Tyler and Francis Groups.

Scott, A. J., & Storper, M. 2015. The nature of cities: The scope and limits of urban theory. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research**,** 39(1), 1-15.

Teshome Betrua *et al*. 2019. Trends and drivers of land use/land cover change in Western Ethiopia *Applied Geography* 104, :83-93.

Tirsit Sahldengil.2022. "Dynamics of Economic Interaction between Refugees and the Host Community in Šärqolle Refugee Camp, Benišangul-Gumuz Region" Journal *of Ethiopian Studies* LV (1),2-24

UN-Habitat.2021. UN-Habitat Dadaab Survey 2021 Report on Socio-Economic Conditions, Businesses and Local Economic Development. http://www.unhabitat.org/

UNHCR .2016. Congolese Refugees Protracted Situation: Priority Situation Fact Sheet Restricted distribution.

UNHCR.2018.Sherkole Camp Profile as of 31 January 2018.pdf

UNHCR.2019. Ethiopia Country Refugee Response Plan: The integrated response plan for refugees from Eritrea, Sudan, South Sudan and Somalia January 2019 — December 2020.

Vemuru, Varalakshmi *et al*.2016. *Refugee Impacts on Turkana Hosts: A Social Impact Analysis for Kakuma Town and Refugee Camp Turkana County, Kenya*. World Bank Groups. Washington. USA.

Veronis, L., & Lough, B. J. 2019. Promoting integration in urban areas hosting refugees: Lessons from Kampala. *International Journal of Migration and Border Studies*, 5(4), 397-413.

Wondwosen Teshome. 2009. Colonial Boundaries of Africa: the case of Ethiopia's Boundary with Sudan.*Ege Academic Review* 9 (1): 337-367

Notes

[1]KII with the RRS protection officer of Sherkole refugee camp 2017

[2] KII with RRS protection officer, Sherkole refugee camp. August 2019

[3] KII with Tsoré Camp Coordinator, Tsoré refugee camp. April 2017

[4] Sudan and South Sudan were the same country before south Sudanese independence in 2011.

[5] Many of the informants from Great Lakes region and particularly from the Tutsi clan provided this information

[6] IDI with Congolese woman, Sherkole refugee camp, August 2019

[7] IDI with Congolese woman, Sherkole refugee camp, August 2019

[8] IDI with Congolese man, Sherkole refugee camp, August 2019

[9] Gaya is a kind of smoke, most of the time produced locally by simply putting the herb on paper.

[10] IDI with Sudanese refugee man, Sherkole refugee camp, April 2017

[11] IDI with host community member, man,Homosha woreda, April 2017.

[12] KII with Homosha Woreda culture and tourism office officer, August 2019.
[13] IDI with host community member,Man Homosha Woreda, August 2019.
[14] KII with Homosha Woreda culture and tourism office officer, August 2019.
[15] IDI with Sudanese refugee women, Sherkole refugee camp, August 2019.