

# **‘Forced to flee’: Conflicts and Mobilities in Africa’s Great Lakes Region**

**Ufo Okeke Uzodike**

**Sakiemi A. Idoniboye-Obu**

**Ayo Whetho**

## **Abstract**

Natural disasters and violent conflicts trigger physical mobilities. In Africa, the Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Great Lakes Region (GLR) constitute prominent flashpoints of internecine conflicts but, arguably, the GLR is the most tempestuous. Violent conflicts in the GLR often lead to forced physical mobilities in the form of massive refugee flows into Southern Africa (and Europe). In view of the thematic concerns of this journal issue, the paper situates the analysis of refugee flows and experiences in the context of the ‘mobilities paradigm’. Two dominant forms of mobilities – corporeal and real-time – were applied to the explication of the refugees’ migration trajectories. Using data derived from a questionnaire, this paper explores the modes of movement and transnationalised experiences of conflict escapees with specific reference to refugees based in the South African city of Pietermaritzburg. The paper presents the articulation by refugees of their everyday challenges and coping strategies, and concludes that the ‘foreign spaces’ within which conflict escapees find themselves may not necessarily obviate the vulnerabilities that engendered their flight in the first place.

**Keywords:** mobilities, mobilities paradigm, violent conflicts, Great Lakes Region, refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs).

## **Introduction**

People are always on the move. They move for various reasons. People com-

mute to work, many travel for leisure, others for business. Then there are those who run away from adversity in search of places of safety. All of these point to human displacement or physical movement. Movement from one location to another takes several forms: by foot (walking), and by car, bus, boat, ship, train, and aeroplane. These means of travel enable humans to move from one place to another. They are integral to physical mobilities, which occur in the contexts of voluntary and forced migrations. This paper examines physical mobilities from the perspective of forced migration in what is arguably Africa's most volatile region.

In Africa (as elsewhere), natural and man-made disasters induce human displacement. For instance, drought, famine, volcanic eruptions, and tsunami force people to move. Political instability and conflicts cause human dispersal and social dislocation. Violent conflicts force people to flee in search of safety. Conflict escapees are categorised as internally displaced persons or refugees. Given the relative profusion of violent and intractable conflicts in Africa, the continent's share of the world's internally displaced persons and refugees is significant. The Horn of Africa, West Africa and the Great Lakes Region (GLR) have been prominent flashpoints of internecine conflicts, with concomitant human displacement/forced mobilities.

In many ways, the Great Lakes Region (GLR) is the most tempestuous region in Africa. It has been plagued by genocide (Rwanda) and conflicts (Burundi, Democratic Republic of Congo, and Uganda), leading to forced physical mobilities in the form of internal displacement and massive refugee flows within the GLR and into South Africa. This paper explores the dynamics, manifestations and effects of conflict-induced/forced migratory patterns drawing from qualitative interview data on the experiences of refugees based in the South African city of Pietermaritzburg. In view of the thematic concerns of this journal issue, the article situates the analysis of human displacement (i.e. refugee flows) from the GLR in the context of the 'mobilities paradigm'.

This article is divided into six sections. Since it interrogates refugees' migration trajectories and everyday experiences, section one provides an overview of the GLR and addresses the question: 'who is a refugee'? Section two discusses the conceptual framework (i.e. the 'mobilities paradigm') and its utility to the study of conflict-induced migration. Section

three outlines methodological issues pertaining to data collection and the study participants. The paper highlights the pattern of human displacement, and presents the migration trajectories of refugees in section four. Section five focuses on the respondents' articulation of everyday challenges that refugees grapple with in Pietermaritzburg while section six explains their coping strategies.

## **The Great Lakes Region and Refugees: The Politics of Definitions**

Conflicts are a major source of human displacement. Spouses walk away from each other over disagreement; children run away from home; friends walk out on one another; alliances break up over disagreement. Walking away, as in walking out in anger or to avoid a fight, is a way humans deal with conflict at the personal level. An idiom says 'he who fights and runs away may live to fight another day'. This is what refugees do: they run away to live to possibly return alive to their countries of origin after a conflict might have come to an end rather than stay back and possibly die in the conflict. In the grid-crises of the GLR, running away is involuntary to those who flee. According to Reverend Samson Matabaro (Interview 08.08.2011),

some of them were out of their houses when conflicts erupted and they didn't even go into their houses to take their documents or belongings. They came by themselves and they found that they are in Zambia or Tanzania.

They leave all behind and take off from wherever the crisis catches up with them. They run without any destination in mind. This was the situation with the majority of participants in this study. They found themselves in South Africa on fleeing from the GLR.

But what is the Great Lakes Region (GLR)? There are different understandings of what constitutes the GLR. A definitional perspective draws on the lakes in the region. As Kainkwa (2010:214) notes, some analysts posit that the great lakes of Africa comprise lakes Victoria, Albert and Edward all of which empty into the White Nile while other observers

include lakes Tanganyika, Kivu and Malawi as part of the great lakes system. Lake Victoria is shared by Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya. Both Lakes Albert and Edward are on the border of Uganda and the DRC. So if the great lakes comprise only lakes Victoria, Albert and Edward, then the GLR refers to Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, and the DRC.

However, if the six-lake system is adopted, the region will extend to the countries bordering lakes Tanganyika, Kivu and Malawi. Lake Tanganyika is shared by Burundi, the DRC, Tanzania and Zambia. Lake Kivu is on the border between the DRC and Rwanda. Lake Malawi is shared among Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania. Thus, the countries bordering one or another of the Great Lakes of Africa are Burundi, the DRC, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia. But the great lakes system comprises not only the great lakes of Africa but also the system of rivers which drain or interconnect them to one another. The key rivers in this regard are the White Nile into which lakes Victoria, Edward and Albert empty themselves; the Congo River system which drains lakes Tanganyika and Kivu; and River Shire which drains Lake Malawi into the Zambezi River. So conceived, the GLR extends to South Sudan, the Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic and Chad.

Mpangala (2004:2) highlights five different perspectives of what constitutes the GLR. The widest of these defines the GLR to include core countries and parts of countries. The core comprises 'Burundi, DRC, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda' while the parts of countries include parts of 'Congo Brazzaville, the Central African Republic, Chad, Sudan and Zambia'. The common feature of the various perspectives identified by Mpangala (2004:2) is that they all constitute the GLR on the basis of land forms. Thus, the Great Lakes of Africa 'are a series of lakes in and around the geographic Great Rift Valley' (Kainkwa 2010:214) comprising Lake Victoria, Lake Tanganyika, Lake Albert, Lake Edward, Lake Kivu, and Lake Malawi. The GLR refers 'to the zone around lakes Victoria, Tanganyika, Albert, Edward, Kivu, and Malawi' (Kainkwa 2010:214). From this perspective, the GLR includes 'the entirety of the nations of Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda as well as portions of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Tanzania, and Kenya' (Kainkwa 2010:214), as well as Mozambique, Malawi and Zambia.

But the GLR is also issue defined. The key issue in recent times that

has given the region one of its most definitive characteristics is closely linked to the range of political crises (especially the genocide in Rwanda and its immediate aftermath), massive human displacement, and the exodus of people from their regions of origin – the refugee problem. While the definition issue does not completely ignore or do away with the landforms, the basis of inclusion into or exclusion from the GLR has underpinned the political crises and their impacts. Against this backdrop, Lunn (2006:3) espouses a definition in which the GLR comprises the DRC, Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda and Tanzania (see Figure 1). This paper adopts an issue focus definition of the GLR and a trajectory of refugee displacement to the South African city of Pietermaritzburg.

Who are refugees? Refugees comprise people in search of refuge from violence, threats, insecurities, deprivations, crises, fears; people attempting to escape from threats that have come to so reside in their imaginations and imageries as to have a physical co-presence with them. They are a people on the move; a running people. They are not defined by law but by their mobilities in search of safety and peace. Their fears are co-present with them: fears of being found out by the long arm of the governments of their countries; fears of being rejected by their host communities and being confined to prison-like situations; fears of being attacked by their host communities; and worse, fears of refoulement or being turned back and returned to their regions of origin. Their fears are physical and always present with them.

The dictionary defines refugees as exiles fleeing for safety but national legislations call them asylum seekers. They become refugees only after they have been accepted to stay in a country as such. But this is not the position under the *United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* (1951) and the *Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa of the African Union* (1969) which define a refugee as a person who

owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the

protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it [Article 1(2) of UN Convention and Article 1(1) of AU Refugee Convention].

The African Union Refugee Convention adds that,

The term ‘refugee’ shall also apply to every person who, owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual residence *in order to seek refuge* in another place outside his country of origin or nationality [Article 1(2)].

In other words, once a person is forced to flee outside the borders of his/her country of origin, that person is a refugee. According to these Conventions, being a refugee is not contingent on acceptance of such a person by a country of refuge but by the fact of being ‘compelled to leave his place of habitual residence *in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country of origin or nationality*’. A person is a refugee because he is seeking refuge. Thus, international conventions largely agree with the dictionary meaning of the concept of refugee. However, national legislations often hold a different view. For instance, Refugees Amendment Act, 2008 which regulates refugee processes in South Africa defines a refugee as ‘any person who has been granted asylum in terms of this Act’ (S.1 [xv]). The person fleeing for safety; the person seeking refuge is not defined as a refugee. S/he actually lacks a description until s/he officially applies to a relevant government agency for recognition as a refugee. Then s/he becomes an ‘‘asylum seeker’ ... a person who is seeking recognition as a refugee in the Republic’ (S.1 [v]).

Findings from interviews with refugees in Pietermaritzburg show that differences in definitions have repercussions for conflict escapees who have crossed a national border. Differential definitions of a refugee create a gulf between refugees’ expectations (in terms of how they should be treated) and the actions of government officials. Most of those interviewed regarded

themselves as refugees after they crossed their national borders and embarked on their journeys to South Africa. They viewed and referred to themselves as refugees even before the South African government issued them with any form of refugee identification. However, until they were accorded refugee status by the government, they could not enjoy the rights statutorily mandated by the Refugee Act. For conflict escapees, divergence between international conventions and domestic legislation exacerbates the problems that they face in new, often unfamiliar and hostile, environments.

### **Conceptual Framework: Urry's 'Mobilities Paradigm'**

The 'mobilities paradigm' aims at,

establishing a 'movement-driven' social science in which movement, potential movement and blocked movement, as well as voluntary/temporary immobilities, practices of dwelling and 'nomadic' place-making are all conceptualized as constitutive of economic, social and political relations (Buscher & Urry 2009:100).

This paper situates the analysis of human displacement and refugee flows from the GLR in the context of Urry's 'mobilities paradigm'. Urry (2007:7) notes that there are multiple aspects of mobility or different mobilities. The paradigm uses mobilities 'in a broad-ranging generic sense' (Sheller & Urry 2006:212), including physical movement, movement enhanced by technologies, movements of images and information in the media, one-to-one and many-to-many communications. Urry's paradigm speaks to the different forms of mobilities, some of which lend themselves readily to the explication of forced migration arising from violent conflict. Therefore, we extrapolate relevant aspects of the paradigm to illuminate the discourse on conflict-induced migration. The mobility forms that this article adopts are *corporeal mobility* and *real-time mobility*.

Corporeal mobility involves human displacement, which Cresswell (2006:2) defines as 'the act of moving between locations'. It refers to the actual movement of people from one place to another. Such movement takes

different forms, including ‘walking, travelling by train, car-driving, and air travel’ (Urry 2000:4). Corporeal mobility pertains to human displacement or migration which could be voluntary or forced. In this context, Urry (2007:8) describes mobility as ‘semi-permanent geographical movement’ from one country or continent to another ‘often in search of a “better life” or to escape’ from adversity. Mobility in this context encapsulates ‘asylum, refugee and homeless travel and migration’ (Urry 2007:10). Such migration involves ‘often very risky, complex and expensive travel to get to certain rich places around the world which might offer a contingent ‘hospitality’’ (Urry 2007:263).

This conceptualisation of mobility or human displacement captures the fundamentals and manifestations of conflict-induced migration. Violent conflicts engender massive human dispersal and social dislocation. Often, people are forced to flee from conflict zones to (relatively) safer areas within their own countries (such as in the case of internally displaced persons [IDPs]) or to other countries (in the case of refugees). The flight from conflict zones is usually perilous, as ‘mobility escapees’ (refugees and IDPs) often have to cross battle lines or risk abuse by combatants. Political strife, civil wars, genocide and inter-state conflict in the GLR have led to massive population displacements. Those interviewed for this study described their migration trajectories and modes of movement encapsulated by the mobilities paradigm. Respondents’ modes of movement include fleeing on foot, travelling by boat, canoe, car, bus, train and airplane.

Real-time mobility includes movements of images and information through communication technologies such as the computer, telegraph, fax, telephone and mobile phone (Sheller & Urry 2006:212). These communication technologies are used to transmit ideas, images and experiences about imagined and actual ‘destinations’ which may be places of leisure and tourism (in the case of voluntary migration) or safety zones (for persons displaced by conflict). Schapendonk (2009:299) notes that communication technologies produce and give substance to imaginative, virtual and communicative travels. Imaginative travel presupposes that daydreaming and imageries influence the actual migration process while virtual travel enables migrants to create new aspirations based on information obtained from the internet, television and other media.



Information obtained through communicative travel prior to or during journeys also influence migration trajectories (Schapendonk 2009:299). These travel forms often resonate in the migration stories of leisure seekers, economic migrants and backpackers, and 'mobility escapees'. The significance of communication technologies and these travel forms to the circumstances of refugees and IDPs is largely limited to a search for peace or safety.

The migration trajectories of some of those interviewed were influenced by reports of safety in the would-be 'destinations'. For instance, respondents relied on information and images from countries in southern Africa for their journeys. The images and information then influenced some mobility escapees' decisions as to routes, transit areas and destinations. Furthermore, the interface between corporeal mobility and real-time mobility is evident in the impact that these communication technologies have on the escapees' decisions. It should be stated that communication technologies and the images/information transmitted via them could facilitate or inhibit movement from conflict zones to potential destinations. Findings from qualitative interview data suggest that these travel forms did not apply to the majority of those who fled the conflicts in the GLR. They were forced to flee and did not make a conscious decision as to routes, transit areas and destinations.

We found that the dynamics of forced migration from conflict zones in the GLR to South Africa (and elsewhere) exemplified aspects of the mobilities paradigm, including escapees' material conditions in the host communities and countries. For instance, Urry (2007:263) notes – with reference to migration across borders – that mobility escapees face the problem of 'profoundly 'unequal access to foreign spaces''. Such 'unequal access to foreign spaces' has a decisive impact on mobility escapees; it impinges on their very survival. For migrants (including refugees), access to 'foreign spaces' (and opportunities) is determined by an assortment of factors: linguistic ability, possession of official documents (and their acceptance by private and public agencies), possession of skills (and their recognition thereof by host communities), and dominant popular and official attitudes towards migrants. Those interviewed lamented the lack of opportunities, popular and official discrimination, and threat to their personal

safety. For most of the interviewees, 'foreign spaces' which offered the potential for 'a better life' have become an arena for daily struggle for survival. In the section on transnationalised lives, we highlight some of the everyday challenges that refugees grapple with in Pietermaritzburg.

The relevance of Urry's paradigm to this paper lies in its assumptions about push and pull factors in migration trajectories, the modes of movement in corporeal mobility, the significance of communication technologies, conditions in host communities and their impact on mobility escapees. Accordingly, this article utilises Urry's paradigm in the analysis of human dispersal from the GLR while the description of refugees' experiences in Pietermaritzburg takes cognisance of the journal issue theme of 'transnational lives'.

### **Methodological Issues: Data Collection and Participants**

The data for this study was derived from a short questionnaire administered in July 2011 on a small sample of nationals of the Great Lakes Region states who are refugees living in Pietermaritzburg. The study does not cover mobility escapees from all the countries of the GLR in Pietermaritzburg; rather, it includes only individuals from the core conflict countries -- the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda, and Burundi. These countries are the largest sources of mobility escapees, mainly refugees, in the GLR. The questionnaire focused on the experiences of refugees in South Africa, the nature of their integration into South African society, their decision to emigrate to South Africa, and their mode of movement. The sample was selected by the snowballing sampling technique. In the course of our interaction with refugees from the GLR, we were directed to the leadership of some diasporic/national associations of the region in Pietermaritzburg. The leadership subsequently referred us to three faith-based organisations involved with refugees in the city. Due to time constraints, we were able to engage with two of these organisations in Pietermaritzburg: Key Ministry International based at Project Gateway at the Old Prisons Building, and Christ Winning Church on Church Street. The leadership of these two organisations assisted with the task of distributing the questionnaires for completion by their members. The use of the snowballing

technique meant that most of the respondents are from the DRC. This is representative of DRC's refugee population in South Africa, which is significantly higher than those of other countries in the GLR (UNHCR 2011).

The instrument was developed by the researchers for this study and face-validated by officials of Key Ministry International (KMI) who themselves are refugees and have diverse experiences in dealing with refugees with a view to minimizing the trauma that the participants could experience in recalling some of the information required for the study. The questionnaires were administered as interview schedules by an official of Key Ministry International (KMI) on refugees associated with that organisation. It was necessary to use this official for three main reasons. First, there exists a level of trust between him and the respondents. This, it was expected, would allay participants' fears with regard to the purpose of the interviews, especially, as some of the items on the questionnaire were similar to those on forms issued by the Department of Home Affairs to refugees for documentation. Secondly, many of the respondents were not proficient in the English language but in French and kiSwahili and therefore we needed someone proficient in those languages. Thirdly, the official has significant experience as an interviewer. At the outset of the interviews, two of the researchers sat in to observe and clarify items that presented difficulty in interpretation to minimize loss of meaning. The questionnaires issued through Christ Winning Church were completed by the respondents.

Altogether, fifty questionnaires were distributed. Of this number, 45 were returned. However, 16 of the questionnaires were completed by non-targeted refugees who were from Zimbabwe (11) and the Horn of Africa (4) along with one respondent whose nationality was not indicated. Therefore, our report is based on the remaining 29 participants who are from the DRC, Burundi and Rwanda.

The nationality distribution of the participants is as follows: the DRC – 23, Burundi – 5 and Rwanda – 1. Our participants were evenly distributed in terms of gender: 15 men and 14 women. Their ages ranged between 17 and 62 years. Overall within the target group, 11 participants were aged between 20 and 29 years and another 11 between 30 and 39 years. Only three (3) participants were aged between 40 and 49 years and two (2) participants

each were over 60 and under 20 years respectively. Also, 12 of our participants were single, one was divorced and three were widowed. The remaining 13 participants were married. In terms of education, two (2) had no formal education, three (3) attended primary school and six (6) attended but did not complete high school. A total of nine (9) respondents completed high school and another nine (9) had tertiary education.

In addition, the researchers conducted an in-depth interview with Reverend Samson Matabaro, the President of KMI, which is a faith-based organisation involved in refugee assistance and rights advocacy. Matabaro, a Burundi national and a refugee, works closely with refugees in Pietermaritzburg to alleviate their plight. He also executes community outreach projects to educate locals including local government officials about refugees and why they are in South Africa. Our interview with Matabaro clarified and provided insights into respondents' articulation of challenges that refugees face in Pietermaritzburg.

The findings are presented as refugee stories. The stories are presented as told by the refugees. We follow their movements from their countries of origin to South Africa, sometimes directly, at other times through other countries, focusing primarily on capturing their mode of transportation.

## **Conflicts and Human Displacement in the Great Lakes Region**

Population displacement and dispersal within the GLR predated the political independence of most of the countries in the region. According to Erlichman (2004), 'during the period between 1959 and 1967, 20,000 Tutsi died, and another 300,000 fled Rwanda as refugees with a small number of elite Hutus and Twa into neighbouring countries' and '[i]n 1964, estimates of Rwandan refugees in asylum countries were 40,000 in Burundi, 60,000 in Zaire (now DRC), 35,000 in Uganda, and 15,000 in Tanzania'.

The displacements intensified in many ways since the post-independence period. The UNHCR (1997) reported that in 1993, 700,000 Burundian Hutus fled into Rwanda, Tanzania and the DRC (then Zaire). On 28/29 April 1994, 'nearly a quarter million Rwandans fled across the Rusumo

bridge into Ngara, Tanzania, in 24 hours' in what was described as 'the largest and fastest movement of refugees in modern history' (UNHCR 1997). Earlier in the same month, Rwandan soldiers and Interahamwe (Hutu paramilitary group) had begun house-to-house searches in aid of a 'genocide in which between 500,000 and one million people [were] slaughtered' (UNHCR 1997). On July 14, 1994 over a million Rwandans fled to Goma in the DRC over a period of four days (UNHCR 1997).

Fast forward to 1996: In July, about 15,000 Rwandan refugees in Burundi were forcibly repatriated to Rwanda and by August the United Nations Refugee Agency assisted a further 65,000 to return home (UNHCR 1997). In October, all refugee camps in the DRC were destroyed, generating new population flows in diverse directions. The UN Refugee Agency evacuated Goma in November 1996 but its

staff then return[ed] as refugees [began] to flee Mugunga camp west of the town. In the next few days 600,000 Rwandans [went] home, but many former Rwandan soldiers and Interahamwe head[ed] west, deeper into Zaire. One month later, the first of 500,000 refugees in Tanzania [were] sent home by Tanzanian troops (UNHCR 1997).

The GLR has thus experienced dramatic population flows arising from political conflicts and crises since the late 1950s. These involuntary population flows and transnationalisation of populations have, in turn, exacerbated the conflicts in the region.

According to Erlichman (2004),

[t]hroughout the 1970s and 1980s, Rwandan refugee communities created secret political and military alliances in exile. The Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) was formed from such groups. New directions of displacement began with the RPF invasion of Rwanda from Uganda in October 1990. Internally displaced people (IDPs) within Rwanda, mainly Hutu fleeing RPF attacks, regrouped into camps of hundreds of thousands ....

**Figure 1: Map of the Great Lakes Region<sup>1</sup>**



Source: United Nations (2004).

Although the end of first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw the emergence of relative calm as the GLR states endeavour to address their social and political issues by transforming their conflict environment and working to build peace, the refugee numbers and flows have remained amongst the largest in the world. For instance, by the end of 2010, the six countries of the GLR generated among them 691,780 refugees (UNHCR 2011). The DRC alone generated 476,693 refugees or about 69 per cent of the total number of refugees from the region with Rwanda coming a distant second with 17 per cent or 114,836 refugees. The GLR also plays host to large numbers of

<sup>1</sup> This is based on the definition adopted in this paper.

refugees. In 2010, this stood at 891,091 with the largest concentration of refugees of 402,905 in Kenya. Again, the DRC itself hosts a large concentration of refugees with 166,336 persons in 2010. The majority of refugees from the GLR remain within the region. Thus, the largest concentrations of DRC refugees are in the Republic of Congo and Rwanda. Burundian refugees head mainly to the DRC and Tanzania as those from Rwanda flow into the DRC and Uganda. IDPs and refugees are sheltered in several camps in the GLR.

Refugees within the GLR are susceptible to attacks on their lives and to forceful repatriation to their countries. The fear of murder and forced repatriation from refugee camps is a major reason for the continuous flow of mobility escapees from the GLR (Interview with Matabaro 08.08.2011). Refugees keep running away from the volatile situation in the GLR until they are stopped. As Matabaro (Interview 08.08.2011) puts it, what stopped the continuous run of the GLR refugees are South Africa's ocean boundaries. If the Indian and Atlantic oceans were land areas, the refugees would have continued running so as to be beyond the reach of the fears that compelled them to escape from their countries in the first place. This is how some of the refugees from the GLR found themselves in South Africa: continuous running.

There were 57,899 refugees and 171,702 asylum seekers in South Africa by the end of 2010 (UNHCR 2011). Nearly 13,000 of the approximately 58,000 refugees at the end of 2010 were from the DRC<sup>2</sup>. There are over 2,000 refugees in Pietermaritzburg (Interview with Matabaro 08.08.2011). How did these refugees get to South Africa? This section draws on responses by interviewees' to two of the questions in our instrument on mode(s) of movement to South Africa: (i) 'What means of transportation did you use (land – foot, car, bus, train; sea – canoe, boat, ship; air – plane) to come to South Africa'?; and (ii) 'Did you come directly to South Africa from your country or did you pass through other countries (that is, settle for some time in some other countries to check out how things are before moving on)'?

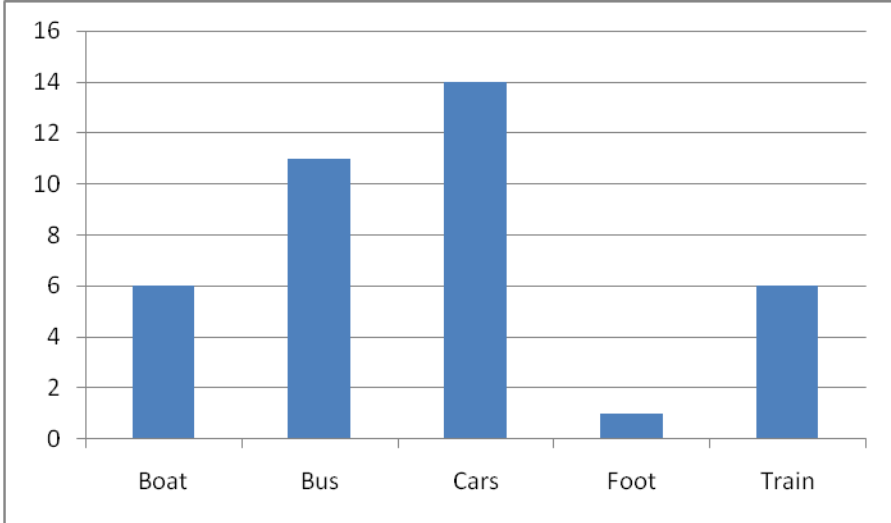
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<sup>2</sup> Estimates of Rwandan and Burundian refugees in South Africa are not available in the 2011 Global Trends Report published by the UNHCR.

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The majority of respondents used a combination of different modes of movement involving foot, cars, buses, trains, and boats. The most dominant mode of movement is land travel. Only six respondents travelled by boat. Figure 2 depicts refugees' modes of movement:

**Figure 2: Refugees' modes of movement from the GLR to South Africa**



Source: compiled by researchers (2011).

With reference to physical mobilities, especially the refugees' migration trajectories, a surprising but interesting finding of this study is that foot travel (walking) is mentioned by only one respondent. This is quite curious as it is inconceivable that many of them did not experience that mode of travel, particularly during parts of their escape from the conflict zones. It is possible to surmise that conflict escapees may be incognisant of walking as a mode of travelling; or, that time and distance have a way of muffling some aspects of the refugee experience. Of course, there is also the possibility that the decision to flee was premeditated and planned by many of the respondents.

In response to the question 'Did you come directly to South Africa from your country or did you pass through other countries (that is, settle for



some time in some other countries to check out how things are before moving on)? 14 respondents, all from the DRC, answered in the affirmative. A total of 11 respondents reported passing through other countries before coming to South Africa. Three DRC refugees moved through Tanzania and Mozambique to get to South Africa; another DRC refugee moved to South Africa after spending four years as a refugee in Tanzania. Two DRC refugees passed through Zambia and Zimbabwe; one through Malawi and Zambia, and one through Malawi-Zambia-Zimbabwe-Tanzania-Mozambique-Kenya-Uganda-Somalia on his way to South Africa. Three Burundian refugees reported passing through other countries but did not specify which.

In some cases, the refugees' migration trajectories were influenced by imageries and information that they obtained about potential destinations. Some respondents were influenced by information presented on the internet, television, in movies, and news reports. Others explained that families and friends informed them via mobile phones about conditions in South Africa. Respondents were also influenced by the experiences of those who returned from South Africa. The perception that South Africa was a safer destination determined the migration trajectories of some respondents. As one interviewee noted,

South Africa is a safe country. DRC is near Zambia and Zimbabwe like you know; both of the country [sic.] are not safe. That's why I decided that South Africa was a suitable destination (26, female, Congolese).

This respondent had obtained information about South Africa from the mass media and the internet. Conflict escapees' articulation of their migration trajectories illustrates facets of both corporeal and real-time mobilities.

## **Transnationalised Lives? Everyday Experiences of Refugees in Pietermaritzburg**

This section focuses on some of the experiences and coping strategies of refugees from the GLR regarding aspects of life in Pietermaritzburg. This section, and the one after it, draws on interviewees' responses to two

questions relating to the extent of their integration into South African society: (i) ‘Are there things that make life difficult for you here in Pietermaritzburg?’; and (ii) ‘How do you cope with these difficulties?’ Respondents mentioned several challenges associated with their status as asylum seekers or refugees. They also articulated the various ways of navigating the ‘foreign spaces’ permeated by a deep sense of anti-foreigner attitudes. In what follows, we highlight the commonalities in the situated experiences of refugees in Pietermaritzburg.

### *Identity Documentation and Exclusion*

Not having the green ID [identity document book] limits you from doing a lot of things ... such as [accessing] opportunities ... it is like a wall (22, female, Congolese).

Virtually all refugees interviewed mentioned the lack of an identity document – the green bar-coded identity book – as a formidable challenge. The Department of Home Affairs issues a Refugee Permit upon successful application for refugee status. In principle, this Permit confers the right to study, work and access government services but respondents’ everyday experiences belie these statutorily-mandated rights. According to Matabaro (Interview 08.08.2011), most street level bureaucrats and certain private service providers (such as bank staff and landlords) do not recognise the Refugee Permit as its presentation by a refugee is often met with equivocal ignorance: ‘what’s this’? In such instances, it is impossible for refugees to secure accommodation or employment or open bank accounts.

The lack of *recognisable* or authoritative identity document prevents or limits refugee access to an assortment of opportunities (Interview with Matabaro 08.08.2011). Sometimes, refugees are denied medical treatment and their children excluded from schooling. This is at variance with Article 27 (g) of the Refugees Act 130 of 1998 which states unequivocally that ‘refugees as well as refugee children are entitled to the same basic health services and basic primary education which the inhabitants of the Republic receive from time to time’. Respondents interpreted actions which preclude

refugees from enjoying the rights mandated by the Constitution of South Africa and the Refugees Act as emblematic of official discrimination. Many of those interviewed felt that 'proper' documentation would attenuate discrimination. For most respondents, the South African ID book is the only 'proper document'. In fact, there is a shared perception amongst most refugees interviewed that the possession of the green bar-coded ID opens doors to opportunities while the lack of it limits access to, or signals outright exclusion from, those opportunities. It is instructive to note that the lack of 'proper identification' makes refugees susceptible to brutality or extortion by police officers who occasionally target migrants as 'mobile ATMs' (Templeton & Maphumulo 2005).

The striking challenge relating to identity documentation generates another corollary. A number of those interviewed (especially those who were able to secure accommodation through the assistance of KMI) explained that they were unable to pay rent due to the lack of employment. Given that there are no refugee camps in South Africa, the lack of shelter or the inability to pay rent (where a refugee finds accommodation) is one of the formidable challenges that refugees face (Interview with Matabaro 08.08.2011). Inability to secure shelter is, in part, a function of unemployment. Almost all respondents mentioned unemployment as a major problem<sup>3</sup>. For instance, as one interviewee noted, 'the fact that I do not have a green ID, it makes life very difficult for one [sic.] to obtain a job, bursaries etc.' (19, male, Congolese). This view is captured in the responses of other refugees: 'I cannot apply for a secure job due to [the] lack of that document' (37, male, Congolese). 'To find a job or to study is difficult as a foreigner. They need only South African ID book but [it] is not easy to get it' (30, female, Congolese). From respondents' perspectives, unemployment was attributable to the lack of proper documentation, non-recognition of their skills/qualifications, and popular and official discrimination.

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that unemployment is not unique to refugees. Therefore, refugees' articulation of the problem should be tempered with the recognition that large numbers of South Africans are also affected by it. South Africa's unemployment rate was 25.7% in the second quarter of 2011 (Statistics South Africa 2011: vi).

### *The Politics of Discrimination*

Interviewees touched on different forms of discrimination that they are subjected to because of being foreigners. Refugees' situated experiences depict a sense in which 'not being from here' increases their vulnerability (and indeed that of other migrants). Many of those interviewed eke out a living through odd jobs in the informal economy: roadside trading or hawking, hair-cutting and gardening. Refugees' precarious everyday experiences in the quest for survival are accentuated by discriminatory practices in the informal economy. Locals sometimes accuse refugees who run businesses by the roadside ('pavement shops') of selling products at cheaper prices or 'snatching our customers'. Occasionally, frustrated locals tell refugees to 'go back home', 'go back to your country'. As a refugee noted, 'locals prevent us from doing business' (36, female, Burundian). Respondents explained that local competitors use threats, intimidation and scare tactics to 'chase away' refugees and to prevent them 'from doing business' within the city. Anti-foreigner utterances and attitudes by locals constitute an aspect of generalised attempts at excluding refugees from the informal economy: either by preventing new entrants or forcing out those inside.

For refugees, discrimination and vulnerability in the informal economy are also closely linked to encounters with municipal workers whose actions are said to have anti-foreigner undertones. One interviewee explained that municipal staff destroyed her husband's 'container' (a metal boxlike shop) which he used for his haircutting business. She emphasized during the interview that the *containers owned by locals in the same vicinity were left intact* (25, female, Congolese). The destruction of her husband's container had ramifications for her own business as she explained that the tent she used as a pavement shop was taken away by municipal staff. She lamented:

until now the tent hasn't been returned ... we tried to make a follow-up to the mayor but we haven't yet get [sic.] any reply ... we see that the government is neglecting the plight of refugees (25, female, Congolese).

Her experience illustrates that refugees' recourse to senior municipal gov-

ernment officials for redress or assistance may not alleviate (the effects of) discrimination.

Refugees' experiences of discrimination in the informal economy are replicated in formal establishments including the Department of Home Affairs and government hospitals. Those interviewed complained that application processes for refugee and permanent residence permits are cumbersome and less than transparent. It appears that refugees are wont to interpret seeming incompetence by officials of the Department of Home Affairs from the prism of discrimination. A number of respondents feel that some Home Affairs staff harbour a disdainful attitude (and are generally lukewarm) towards refugees and their plight. Refugees are sometimes unaware of, or do not appreciate, the reasons why their applications are rejected by staff of the Department of Home Affairs (30, male, Congolese). A refugee who has been living in South Africa for twelve years explained that he has had to lodge two applications for a permanent residence permit after he did not receive any feedback from the Department of Home Affairs regarding the first application. He sums up his frustration: 'My life is on hold. I cannot move forward with my business. I just keep waiting' (42, male, Congolese). In most cases, 'official' discrimination is met with acquiescence and fatalism on the part of refugees. There is a realisation that 'not being South African is a problem because you don't get the same privilege as South Africans' (17, female, Congolese). To these refugees, acquiescence was somewhat necessary, as they will always be foreigners.

Refugees also experience discrimination in the workplace. Some respondents have 'accepted the situation' and are prepared to 'live with it' as illustrated in the case of a professional nurse who complained about discrimination in the work place. She explained that fellow workers give her problems, 'especially when it comes to promotion ... I am often left out ... I do not get promoted. I feel that if I were to be a citizen ... I should be well' (42, female, Rwandan). Respondents' articulation of 'official' discrimination bespeaks the lack of a sense of belonging, which is informed by sentiments such as 'I am not wanted here' or 'the local people don't love me' (36, female, Burundian; 40, female, Congolese). In the view of those interviewed, 'popular' discrimination against (or stigmatisation of) refugees is typified by reference to them (and other foreigners) as '*kwerekwere*' (a derogatory label

for African migrants). Remarkably, '*kwerekwere*' – as a conceptual and descriptive apparatus – became a contrivance for mobilisation, brutality and violence against African migrants in several South African cities in 2008, when there was a groundswell of deadly xenophobic attacks in different parts of the country. The (scale of the) violence directed at the '*kwerekwere*' epitomised 'popular' (and partly 'official') discrimination against foreigners. The basis for discrimination surrounds the identity of refugees, which is defined as 'not being from here'.

A number of those interviewed expressed the desire to be fully integrated into their host communities. However, everyday challenges that refugees face regarding identity documentation, exclusion, discrimination and experiences of violence make it difficult for them to 'fit into society' (25, male, Burundian). At the same time, refugees are unable or unwilling to return home in view of the volatile situation in the GLR. Thus, they have to invent or adopt strategies to navigate difficult terrains or 'foreign spaces' characterised by the politics of exclusion and discrimination. We now turn attention to some of the coping strategies of refugees.

## **Adjusting to 'Foreign Spaces': Coping Strategies of Conflict Escapees**

Narratives of everyday refugee experiences also depict the different ways through which they cope with or attempt to surmount the challenges identified above. For instance, the majority of those interviewed deal with the problem of lack of jobs through a mechanism of self-employment in the forms of roadside trading ('pavement shops'), hair-cutting business, and gardening services. Self-employment enables refugees to acquire basic necessities such as shelter, food and clothing, thus reducing their reliance on humanitarian actors for subsistence.

Moreover, most of those interviewed explained that the recourse to spirituality helps them to cope with an assortment of problems. Some respondents mentioned that they 'trust in God' and/or 'pray to God' to help them deal with everyday challenges. Others referred to the pivotal role that KMI plays in the alleviation of their suffering. The humanitarian assistance that KMI renders mitigates some of the effects that the lack of identity

documentation has on refugees. Respondents mentioned KMI's provision of shelter and food parcels to refugees as a case in point. We deduced from interviewees' articulation of KMI's role in their lives that the organisation provides a space where refugees connect and seek solutions to their everyday problems and challenges. In effect, KMI helps refugees to nurture and feel a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, certain virtues (such as endurance, forbearance, forgiveness, and hope) underpin the attitudes and responses of some refugees towards discrimination and other challenges. This point is borne out in the following responses:

Some of the local people who are educated have manners to live with [other] people and I understand things in this way and making myself able to live with them...I am doing all my best to take it easy and understand that many of them didn't go to school and they don't know about foreigners (31, female, Congolese).

'I try to be good with people of the local community' (23, male, Congolese).

'I accept [discrimination] because I don't have [a] choice. Hopefully things improve back home so I can go back' (24, male, Congolese).

These comments evidently point to the acceptance by mobility escapees of everyday challenges as part of life's lessons. The presumption that locals who discriminate against foreigners are uneducated or otherwise ignorant about foreigners seem to be additional ways that refugees rationalise and explain away what they see as unacceptable attitudes and behaviours towards them. As the last comment shows, refugees may be prepared to endure discrimination in the meantime because it is preferred to the deadly conflict situation from which they have escaped.

It is clear from the interviews that refugees regard faith-based organisations and diasporic associations as important spaces which provide an element of insulation from adverse experiences such as discrimination by

locals. Cases of popular discrimination described by the refugees were situated in the context of everyday interaction with the locals. The logical imperative is to ‘avoid the locals’ (17, female, Congolese). Therefore, minimal contact with locals was thought to obviate discrimination or reduce its likelihood. This form of adjustment mechanism underpins the deep attachment refugees feel and have for diaspora associations in Pietermaritzburg.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined the migration trajectories of refugees through the prism of the ‘mobilities paradigm’. As we have demonstrated in the paper, the paradigm lends itself to the explanation of conflict-induced migration. Two dominant forms of mobilities – corporeal and real-time – were applied to the analysis of human displacement from the Great Lakes Region. Corporeal mobility furnished insights into the actual movement of conflict escapees and their modes of movement from the GLR to South Africa. We drew on the elements of real-time mobility in the analysis of refugees’ perceptions and imageries of South Africa as a safer place of refuge than countries in the GLR and their immediate neighbours. The paper also presented refugees’ articulation of their everyday experiences in Pietermaritzburg: non-recognition of refugee identity documents, lack of access to employment opportunities, as well as popular and official discrimination. The coping strategies of respondents provided insights into the ways that refugees navigate unfamiliar and hostile foreign spaces. As shown in this paper, the ‘foreign spaces’ within which conflict escapees find themselves may not necessarily provide them with the ideals they desire most – peace and safety.

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## **Interviews**

Reverend Samson Matabaro, Pietermaritzburg, August 08, 2011.

Interviews with refugees from GLR (all interviews conducted in July 2011; respondents are identified by age, gender and nationality):

26, female, Congolese.

22, female, Congolese.

19, male, Congolese.

37, male, Congolese.

30, female, Congolese.

36, female, Burundian.

25, female, Congolese.

30, male, Congolese.

42, male, Congolese.

17, female, Congolese.

42, female, Rwandan.

36, female, Burundian;

40, female, Congolese.

25, male, Burundian.

31, female, Congolese.

23, male, Congolese.

24, male, Congolese.

Ufo Okeke Uzodike

Sakiemi A. Idoniboye-Obu

Ayo Whetho

School of Social Sciences

University of KwaZulu-Natal

Uzodike@ukzn.ac.za

Idoniboye-obus@ukzn.ac.za

WhethoA@ukzn.ac.za