

# Briefing

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Protracted displacement in an urban world

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## Policy pointers

**The Government of Ethiopia** should move away from an encampment policy and allow refugees to register in urban centres across the country, so that with support, they can access a range of livelihood opportunities and contribute to the local economy.

**The Government of Ethiopia** and other national and city stakeholders must plan for the social and economic inclusion of urban refugees, given the progressive urbanisation of the refugee population. This is particularly critical in Addis Ababa.

**The Government must** ease restrictions on work permits and business registration, and resettlement applications must be determined swiftly, so that urban refugees can make plans for the future and live dignified, fulfilling lives in towns and cities.

**The national Refugees and Returnees Service** should support local authorities to facilitate dialogue with urban refugees, building on recent experience in Addis Ababa to ensure refugees' voices, capacities and demands are reflected in urban programming.

## Finding urban solutions for Ethiopia's Eritrean refugees

Our research on Eritrean refugees in Ethiopia shows that while towns and cities offer more opportunities for refugee livelihoods than camps, numerous barriers limit urban refugees' opportunities for creating independent livelihoods and integrating into Ethiopian society. In camps, the economy depends mainly on humanitarian aid, and refugees in Aysaita camp struggle with lack of employment and hunger. In the town of Semera Logia, a more flexible approach by local authorities has allowed for some economic inclusion. In Addis Ababa, limited opportunities force refugees into poor-quality employment, and many are unable to use their skills. This situation wastes refugees' economic potential, and we recommend practical steps to improve the economic and social integration of displaced people in Ethiopia.

There are currently over 900,000 refugees in Ethiopia, mainly from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan. Most live within 21 camps in border regions, but an increasing number are moving to towns and cities.

As part of the Protracted Displacement in an Urban World (PDUW) project (see Box 1), IIED and partners led an extensive data collection exercise in Ethiopia. The research aimed to deepen understanding of refugees' experiences of life in the camp and the city.

We developed two main analytical frameworks to draw out findings: wellbeing and displacement economies. We broke down the concept of wellbeing into five components — bodily, social, economic, political and psychosocial — and derived scores for each component for people who participated in a survey.<sup>1</sup> We also developed a displacement economies framework to assess the collective economy created by refugees through their

### Box 1. Out of camp or out of sight?

Protracted Displacement in an Urban World' (PDUW) was a comparative mixed methods research project focusing on the wellbeing and livelihoods of displaced people in camps and urban areas in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Jordan. It had three main aims:

- To build an evidence base on the opportunities and challenges of hosting displaced people in camps compared with urban areas
- To assess current responses to protracted displacement in towns and cities and to raise awareness of unmet needs and economic contributions of refugees and Internally Displaced People (IDPs)
- To support municipal authorities and other local actors to use participatory planning to co-produce innovative and inclusive solutions to forced displacement in cities.

livelihood activities, enterprise, need for services and consumption, and through their mutual support and diaspora inputs.

We gathered qualitative and quantitative data with Eritrean refugees from three sites:

- The capital city, Addis Ababa (specifically in the Gofa Mebrat Haile condominium)
- Semera Logia, the regional capital of the Afar region
- Aysaita, a camp in the Afar region.

## *Establishing refugee camps in isolated locations exacerbates problems*

About 68,400 Eritrean refugees are registered in Addis Ababa and over 57,000 live in the Afar region. We surveyed 365 Eritrean refugees and 153 Ethiopian hosts in

Gofa Mebrat Haile, 372 Eritrean refugees in Semera Logia, and 366 Eritrean refugees in Aysaita camp (50% men and 50% women across all sites). We also carried out in-depth qualitative interviews, exploring issues of wellbeing, livelihoods and enterprises in greater depth, with 150 people across the three sites.

Eritrean refugees are not a homogeneous group, and ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds differ significantly. The two largest ethnic groups in Ethiopia are the Tigrinya and the Afar. Generally speaking, Tigrinya Eritreans are better educated, Christian, and have an urban background, while Afar Eritreans are traditionally pastoralist, Muslim, and those from rural areas have had limited access to education. Tigrinya Eritreans, particularly those living out of camp, tend to be better connected to transnational networks that enable their migration and support them while displaced. We worked with Tigrinya refugees in Addis Ababa, and Afar refugees in Aysaita and Semera Logia.

### **What did we find?**

#### **Camp-based refugees have a very poor quality of life**

Our findings show very low bodily wellbeing for refugees in Aysaita camp compared to the two urban centres in our study. Refugees told us that they leave due to poor sanitation, lack of adequate shelter, and limited access to healthcare. Most refugees in Aysaita are dependent on humanitarian assistance. They are critically food insecure, although food security and underdevelopment are problems across the Afar region, and also affect refugees in Semera Logia (the nearest large

town, 75km away). Approximately half of the residents sampled in both Semera Logia and Aysaita noted that there were times in the last seven days when they did not have enough to eat.

In Aysaita, there was a strong consensus among qualitative interviewees that not enough work was available within the camp and that it was a struggle to earn enough to survive, particularly in combination with rising prices and reduced, unreliable aid disbursements. Fewer than 9% of refugees we surveyed in Aysaita camp were working. Those working were often employed in a quasi-voluntary manner, receiving a stipend from NGOs or local government.

Unlike in other contexts, refugees move freely beyond the camp boundaries and benefit from a shared language and culture with the local Afar population. It is common for people to be registered in the camp but to live elsewhere. We interviewed a number of refugees in Semera Logia who had set up businesses in the town but also regularly travelled to the camp to collect aid. However, transport costs are rising, making it less worthwhile for urban residents to travel to the camp for aid, and less feasible for camp residents to travel to towns for work or other services. The isolation of the camp also impacts the profitability of refugee enterprises there.

Displaced respondents in Aysaita camp had the worst scores for overall life satisfaction, with 31% of survey respondents stating they were somewhat or very dissatisfied with their lives, compared to 18% in Addis Ababa and 21% in Semera Logia.

Establishing refugee camps in isolated locations exacerbates problems of protracted displacement by limiting refugees' potential contributions to the economy and society. Creative urban planning could help camp populations, such as those in Aysaita, to be better integrated into nearby towns.

#### **Urban refugees have huge untapped economic potential but are prevented from working**

Work is an important income source for many refugees in cities, where aid distribution is low compared to camps. However, even in urban centres, the proportion of Eritrean refugees working was small. This is because the out-of-camp policy only grants the right to live in cities to people who can demonstrate independent means to support themselves — often through remittances. There are also

restrictions on the right to work, although recent legislation (the 2019 Refugee Act) should, in theory, ease some of these. Of those not working, around 80% of refugees were willing but unable to work in all three locations, with roughly 65% looking for employment in Addis Ababa and Aysaita camp, and 79% in Semera Logia.

Urban refugees, particularly those in Addis Ababa, have assets and skills which could support increased self-sufficiency and, in turn, promote wider economic development in their host communities. Our research showed that Eritrean refugees in towns and cities were better prepared to access the labour market than those in the camp. Urban refugees are more likely to have pre-displacement work experience and higher levels of literacy and education, particularly in Addis Ababa.

The Addis Ababa data shows that while 71% of men and 40% of women had previously worked in their country of origin, far fewer are working now (38% of men and 7% of women). This could be explained by legal concerns, with 57% saying they were not entitled to work or could only do so with limitations. The overall picture is one of complex regulations and a lack of support for refugee livelihoods and enterprise. The situation is better in Semera Logia, where the local authorities take a more relaxed attitude towards refugee enterprise and work.

In addition, many refugees who had found work in Addis Ababa were in jobs that were exploitative or had poor working conditions: 43% of working refugees reported abuses while at work, notably discrimination (21%) and theft of goods or tools (14%). Only 25% of refugees working in Addis Ababa said they were fairly paid, compared to 54% among host interviewees. Again, the picture was less problematic in Semera Logia, where a greater proportion of refugees expressed satisfaction with their work.

### **Addis Ababa refugees fare less well on measures of social and political wellbeing than refugees in the Afar region**

Refugees in Addis Ababa were at a considerable disadvantage when compared to Aysaita and Semera Logia, with overall lower scores for political wellbeing. They were more likely to judge their access to information about their rights and legal status to be poor, and to consider themselves unfairly treated by local police. Additionally, when asked who, if anyone, represented them in their community, 41% of

survey respondents in Addis Ababa noted that they did not feel represented by anyone, compared to less than 10% of respondents in Aysaita and Semera Logia.

Addis Ababa also appears to be a difficult place for refugees to thrive socially. Displaced respondents in the capital were the least likely to be satisfied with their ability to attend social gatherings, and the least likely to state that displaced and non-displaced people got along well (56%, compared to 93% in Semera Logia and 97% in Aysaita).

Our qualitative interviews paint a more nuanced picture: refugees in the capital told us that they did feel a part of the community where they lived but that language barriers prevented them from socialising with local people. Some interviewees in Addis Ababa described feeling supported by neighbours. Many refugees we spoke to were living in the capital without any immediate family, which made these connections especially important. However, interviewees in the capital also made strong statements about facing discrimination, especially when trying to do business or rent a house.

### **Many refugees in Addis Ababa feel they are living in limbo**

In Addis Ababa, difficulties finding decent work and feelings of discrimination and isolation contribute to low psychosocial wellbeing among refugees. Our interviewees described Ethiopia as a place Eritrean refugees pass through, often getting stuck for long periods while awaiting resettlement or family reunification abroad. Our survey revealed that around 55% of refugees in Addis Ababa and Semera Logia had plans to move abroad in the next 12 months. However, these plans were highly unrealistic since only 0.15% of Ethiopia's refugee population moved abroad with a 'durable solution' in 2022.<sup>2</sup> Many described feeling their lives were on hold during the prolonged waiting period, during which they had to support themselves in a hostile environment. Qualitative interviewees in Addis Ababa mentioned mental health concerns within the refugee community, often related to a feeling of lack of purpose in life.

Given the lack of institutional support and restrictive legal framework, many urban refugee entrepreneurs see their businesses as a stop-gap while awaiting resettlement. Although they are willing to invest in and grow their ventures, the legal and practical limitations make them pessimistic about likely

success. Waiting for resettlement can generate feelings of despair:

**“[T]he main problem is they make the refugees lose hope ... there are many friends of mine who lost hope and stopped everything, and now they are just doing nothing. There are many refugees who want to work, but if you cannot have the business and properties in your name, what guarantee do you have?” — Male refugee entrepreneur (29), Addis Ababa**

The Government of Ethiopia must act urgently to ease restrictions on refugee work and enterprise. At the same time, the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, must recognise and respond to the harms caused by unresolved resettlement and reunification cases.

### Looking forward

Refugees in Aysaita camp experience very low levels of bodily and economic wellbeing and are negatively impacted by the camp's isolation. The situation suggests a need for a paradigm shift in refugee management, progressively dismantling the care and maintenance of an encampment system and transferring international aid budgets to support integration and local development beyond camps, for both refugees and host communities. A first step would be to allow refugees to register in local towns and receive aid there while they establish livelihood strategies.

The Government of Ethiopia, together with UNHCR, should act to improve the social and economic integration of refugees in Addis Ababa. The current situation, where refugees who are willing and able to enter the labour market or establish enterprises are prevented from doing so, is a waste of human potential, a missed opportunity for urban development and likely contributes to poor psychosocial wellbeing.

Recent legislative shifts are likely to see greater numbers of refugees leaving camps to seek more dignified and fulfilling lives in the city. The ongoing urbanisation of displacement has prompted the national agency, the Refugees and Returnees Service, to set up an urban refugee unit to support all cities hosting urban refugees. This is a welcome first step, but capacity and focus are still being developed. Local authorities urgently need clarity on their role in refugee response, along with guidance on how to integrate refugees' voices, capacities and demands into urban planning.

The PDUW project established participatory forums in Addis Ababa, bringing together refugee representatives and local NGOs providing services to refugees with city government officials and international agencies, as a way to generate greater awareness of the challenges facing urban refugees. These forums could evolve into a consolidated space for displaced people to raise issues of concern, and be replicated in other refugee-hosting towns. This would open channels for regular dialogue between displaced people and local authorities, and potentially help refugees to feel less politically isolated. Increased dialogue between different city stakeholders would also help coordinate support to urban refugees by government and NGO partners.

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## Knowledge Products

The International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) promotes sustainable development, linking local priorities to global challenges.

Cardiff University is a member of the UK's elite Russell Group of top universities, ranked 5th in the UK for research quality.

Dilla University is a Public University in Southern Ethiopia. It is engaged in teaching, research, community service and technology transfer.

Samuel Hall is a social enterprise that conducts research in countries affected by issues of migration and displacement.

PDUW is a comparative research project on the wellbeing, livelihoods and enterprises of displaced people in urban areas and camps in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Kenya and Jordan.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed description of the wellbeing framework and metric, see: Barratt, S and Earle, L (2023) Measuring what makes a 'good life' in exile. A new tool to assess refugee wellbeing in protracted displacement. IIED, London. [iied.org/21571iied](https://iied.org/21571iied) / <sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2023) Annual Results Report 2022, Ethiopia. <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2023-06/EHGL%20Ethiopia.pdf>

