

Chapter 3

From Outsider to the Other: Refugee Identity, Citizenship, and Development in Nakivale, Uganda, 1969-2022

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Abstract

This chapter interrogates the dynamics of exclusion through a historical study of Nakivale Refugee Settlement in southwestern Uganda, one of Africa's oldest and largest refugee settlements. The study has been prompted by the fact that Africa's development trajectory has been profoundly shaped by the movement of peoples across political borders, yet refugee populations remain among the continent's most systematically excluded constituencies. Uganda's 2006 Refugee Act is internationally celebrated as a model of progressive humanitarianism, granting refugees rights to work, move freely, and access services. Yet the lived experiences of Nakivale's residents reveal a persistent paradox: formal inclusion coexists with substantive exclusion. Refugees are incorporated into development frameworks as beneficiaries but remain spatially segregated, politically marginalised, and socially "othered" by the very institutional architecture designed to integrate them. Drawing on archival research and oral history interviews, this chapter traces how colonial administrative legacies, post-independence citizenship regimes, and evolving humanitarian architectures have reproduced this paradox. Employing Individual Agency Theory, the study foregrounds refugee agency alongside structural constraint, documenting how displaced populations have challenged dominant identity constructions and negotiated belonging across generations. It contributes to three debates central to the conference theme: historically, it repositions refugee settlement as a constitutive feature of post-colonial state formation; in the present, it demonstrates how development interventions that ignore historical roots of exclusion risk reproducing the inequalities they seek to address; and for the future, it advances recommendations that move beyond formal rights toward genuine citizenship recognition by repositioning refugees not as burdens on development, but as active co-producers of it.

Keywords: Uganda, Refugee identity; citizenship; forced displacement; Nakivale; integration policy