

Protracted refugee situations and the shrinking durable solutions: could there be a ray of hope in local solutions?

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of protracted refugee situations and the conditions of refugees living in the same situation have renewed debates on durable refugee solutions. Despite the international provision for durable refugee solutions, the current trend defies that expectation, as observed in the cumulative number of refugees in protracted situations, while durable solutions are barely implemented, intriguing the question of whether local solutions could be a more feasible replacement for durable solutions. We use theoretical, earlier, and recent empirical literature to assess the status of the execution of durable solutions and the emergence of local solutions to address the challenges of the ever-increasing number of refugees in protracted displacement. This article contends that while local solutions provide refugees with opportunities to become resilient and self-reliant, they only provide a temporary window of survival for a longer period in the absence of durable solutions; it is not a replacement for the three conventional durable refugee solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement. While local solutions are temporarily in place, national governments and the international community should continue working together to protect and empower refugees as they negotiate ways to appropriately implement the ultimate formal durable solutions to curb protracted refugee situations.

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Introduction

The phenomena of protracted displacement and the conditions of refugees living in protracted situations (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2004a) have renewed debates on refugee durable solutions (Agblorti & Grant, 2019, p. 196; Kamara, 2009, pp. 30–31; Long, 2011; Rohwerder, 2015). The durable solutions adopted in the 1951 Refugee Convention are voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement in the third country (Gardi, 2021). Voluntary repatriation means ‘the free and voluntary return to one’s country of origin in safety and dignity’, with ‘core components... being physical safety, legal safety, material safety, and reconciliation’ (UNHCR, 2004c, as cited in Yonekawa & Sugiki, 2020, p. xxi). Local integration is essentially about acquiring new citizenship in the first country of asylum, gaining novel citizenship through naturalization (Hovil et al., 2014). Resettlement in a third country means the resettlement of refugees to second asylum countries (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016).

Of the three durable solutions, third-country resettlement appears to be the favorite of refugees because of the expectations of better socioeconomic opportunities, which is logical when considering years taken in sedentary camps and settlements with minimal economic opportunities (Agblorti & Grant, 2019).

However, despite the international provision for durable refugee solutions, the current trend defies that expectation, as observed in the cumulative numbers of refugees in protracted situations with only

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a token of durable solutions provided. By the end of 2022, 23.3 million refugees and other people who require international protection, a rise of over 7.1 million refugees juxtaposed with the numbers in the preceding year (15.9 million), were living in protracted situations. In total, 'there were 57 protracted situations in 37 different host countries' (UNHCR, 2022, p. 20; 2023, p. 22). These protracted refugees are in a state of limbo and are uncertain of their future, whether they will be repatriated, locally integrated, or resettled in a third country (Agblorti & Grant, 2019). Refugees in protracted situations fear returning to their homeland, because it is not safe for them to do so (Crisp, 2003). However, many are unable to permanently live in their first country of asylum because the host state does not want them to remain in its territory indefinitely, and resettlement to the second country of asylum is possible in only 1% of refugees worldwide (Karooma, 2017; Long, 2011).

Due to continuous dwindling of opportunities for conventional durable solutions as elucidated above yet with increasing numbers of refugees in protracted situations, a new concept known as 'local solutions' – non-permanent responses to refugee displacement – is emerging. This refers to a development style-settlements, introducing the option of 'local solutions', and a policy geared towards concepts such as 'self-reliance' and 'resilience', which all help to confine the mobility of refugees within the African continent (Crisp, 2023, p. 14; Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 256; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 7), typified by long staying refugees in Uganda under Uganda's favorable and open-door refugee policy which was pronounced by the UN Secretary General in 2016 as a model. For example, the attention of academic research by many researchers of countries in the global south, popularly known as the majority world (Alam, 2008; Punch, 2016) has changed in the last decade and a half ago from examining international agencies such as the UNHCR and host countries in establishing and running refugee camps to researching the perspectives of refugees in urban and semi-urban areas (Bloch & Dona, 2018; Landau, 2018).

This study, therefore, assesses whether in the continuous shrinking spaces of traditional durable solutions – voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement – local solutions could be a more applicable alternative. We use both the theoretical and empirical earlier and recent literature on protracted refugee situations and durable solutions in developing countries with more focus on Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa that hosts 25.3 million refugees (UNHCR, 2023, p. 11), exemplified by Uganda, the highest refugee hosting country in Africa and among the top ten in the world (UNHCR, 2024).

In analyzing the potential in local solutions, we made more references to the situations of refugees hosted in Uganda under the Ugandan generous policies – most notably the 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugees Regulations – which espouse the approach of local solutions. Many refugees have lived in Uganda for over twenty or forty years. These refugees are in thousands and principally from South Sudan, DRC and Rwanda. Some have been in Uganda since birth, have brought up families in Uganda and, according to them, Uganda is their home. However, until the present time, they have neither been considered for local integration, nor have they been considered for resettlement in any third country. Refugee status has become incessant limbo for them – 'they are unable or unwilling to return to their home countries because of the persecution suffered there, but not permitted to integrate in their adopted home' (Walker, n.d, p. 1). In spite of the court verdict in 2015 that refugees qualify for naturalization, Ugandan government has not hearkened to the court ruling (Citizenship Rights in Africa Initiative, 2016; International Refugee Rights Initiative [IRRI], 2016); yet the number of refugees have been consistently increasing and Uganda currently hosts over 1.6 million refugees (UNHCR, 2024).

Consequently, this article argues that local solutions provide a temporary relief. While it gives refugees opportunities to become resilient and self-reliant and provides a temporary window of survival for a long period (in the 1st asylum country) in the dearth of durable solutions, it is not a replacement for durable solutions. National governments and the international community, just as they came together in the spirit of international solidarity and produced the Global Compact on Refugees, which emphasizes local solutions (Crisp, 2023; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021); should continue engaging with each other and find ways of sharing responsibility for hosting refugees and how to utilize the three durable solutions in the long run, in order to ultimately tackle the challenge of increasing number of refugees in protracted situations in Africa and other developing countries. In the absence of granting, or minimally granting refugees, the three conventional durable solutions of voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement; local solutions in the first asylum country may temporarily become an alternative for longer refugee survival, but these have to be supported by the national governments and the international community to help

refugees temporarily and comfortably survive beyond the life of encampment and designated settlements. The next section highlights the current protracted refugee situation, followed by the conceptual framework and literature based on the three durable solutions. Subsequently, an emerging approach to local solutions is discussed. The paper concludes by highlighting the implications of the foregoing analysis on refugees in protracted situations.

Protracted refugee situations

The phenomena of protracted refugee situations and the conditions of refugees living in protracted displacement (UNHCR, 2004a) have renewed debates on durable refugee solutions (Agblorti & Grant, 2019, p. 196; Kamara, 2009, pp. 30–31; Long, 2011; Rohwerder, 2015). A protracted refugee situation can be explained by the UNHCR as:

One in which refugees find themselves in a long-lasting and intractable state of limbo. Their lives may not be at risk, but their basic rights and essential economic, social and psychological needs remain unfulfilled after years in exile. A refugee in this situation is often unable to break free from enforced reliance on external assistance. In identifying the major protracted refugee situations in the world, UNHCR uses the crude measure of refugee populations of 25, 000 persons or more who have been in exile for five or more years in developing countries (UNHCR, 2004a).

With regard to the above definition, it appears as if there is no time limit for protracted refugee situations as long as the push factors persist in the country of origin, and refugees are not willingly repatriated or refuse to repatriate, as long as there are very limited opportunities for resettlement in the third country, and refugees remain in the first asylum country for an unforeseeable future due to the absence of opportunities for local integration, renewing the discussion on the workability of the UNHCR durable solutions.

According to international law, bestowing refugee status to asylum seekers is considered temporary up to the time when a refugee returns to their home country or acquires a novel citizenship in the first country of asylum or in a third country. These triple alternative solutions – voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement – embody the official termination of refugees' legal ostracism. However, in reality, millions of refugees continue to live in exile without attaining any of these three durable options. Resettlement numbers are extremely limited, with only a handful of opportunities under the strict qualification requirements. It is usually expected that after the situation normalizes, refugees would remit back to their country of origin; however, conditions for secure return to the country of origin are hardly attained, and refugees are always hesitant to repatriate, even when conditions are favorable to do so. Moreover, local integration remains politically unpleasant, with host countries constantly thwarting the efforts aimed at local integration. Consequently, with minimal prospect for a durable solution, a large number of refugees continue to live in protracted situations (Agblorti & Grant, 2019; Azad & Jasmin, 2013; Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 239) and, by the end of 2022, 23.3 million refugees and other people who require international protection, were living in protracted situations. In total, 'there were 57 protracted situations in 37 different host countries' (UNHCR, 2022, p. 20; 2023, p. 22). This protracted number of refugees and those who require international protection increased to 24.9 million refugees by the end of 2023, which includes 58 protracted situations in 37 host countries, an increase of 1.6 million people compared to the previous year (UNHCR, 2024, p. 21).

In Africa, Uganda is the highest refugee hosting country on the continent and among the top ten in the world, hosting over 1.6 million refugees by December 2023 (UNHCR, 2024), most of whom are from South Sudan (63%) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (29%) (UNHCR, 2022, p. 18). It has been globally applauded as liberal and exemplary with progressive refugee policies and laws, such as the 2006 Refugees Act (which grants refugees the right to work, freedom of movement, right to start businesses, and access to social services such as education and health on the same footings as Ugandan nationals) that are in consonance with the country's national, regional, and international obligations (Ahimbisibwe, 2019; Government of Uganda (GoU), 2006). Most of these refugees flee from adjacent countries and the broader region, including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Eritrea, among others (Office of the Prime Minister [OPM] & UNHCR, 2018).

South Sudan, the country generating the highest numbers of refugees in Africa, its refugee numbers rose from 2.2 million in 2020 to 2.4 million by the closure of 2021, virtually 'hosted by four neighboring countries: Uganda (958,900), Sudan (803,600), Ethiopia (386,800) and Kenya (135,300). Most of the 109,900 newly recognized South Sudanese refugees were recognized by prima facie procedures in Sudan (63,900), Uganda (30,600), and Kenya (9,000)' (UNHCR, 2022, p. 17). Of the nearly one million South Sudanese displaced in Uganda, only 180,400 returned to their country by 2021 and, in 2022, 'the largest groups of returnees (in the world), with 151,300 returning in 2022 primarily from Uganda (75,500)'. 'Returns to South Sudan are difficult to verify, however, as they tend to be self-organized, and access is often constrained in areas of returns' (UNHCR, 2022, p. 36; 2023, p. 38).

In Uganda, domestic refugees and human rights laws exist, including the 2006 Refugees Act, the 2010 Refugees Regulations, the 1995 Constitution, and the 1997 Children's Act. Despite the enactment of 'legal principles and norms on voluntary repatriation, in practice, they have been abused' (Ahimbisibwe, 2020, p. 2). Despite Uganda's refugee hosting generosity, challenges have emerged, including the rising refugee numbers, 'protracted refugee situations, the burden of hosting refugees, limited resources, and little international support threatening Uganda's hospitality' (Ahimbisibwe, 2019, p. 62). As reported by the World Bank (2016, p. 71), 'Uganda is faced with a large number of refugees caught in protracted situations, unable to return to their countries of origin, sometimes for decades'. The report further contends that 'most of the refugees in Uganda are in a situation of protracted displacement with limited prospects for a durable solution' (World Bank, 2016, p. 6). Refugees engulfed in a protracted situation in Uganda are mainly of Congolese origin, South Sudan, and Somalia. Much as refugees from other countries, such as Rwanda, Burundi, Eritrea, and Ethiopia, have lived in Uganda for more than five years, their numbers fall below the threshold of 25,000, the standard UNHCR figure for designating refugees in protracted situations (Ahimbisibwe, 2019, p. 65).

Protracted refugee situations are accompanied by challenges in hosting countries accommodating permanent refugees with an unforeseeable panacea to their problems. In circumstances of minimal international support, host countries find themselves in the dilemma of responding to the necessities of refugees. As such, their responses have been restrictive in nature: constraining their rights, encamping them, limiting their movement, and restricting their employability (Milner, 2009; UNHCR, 2006, pp. 114–115). However, such a restrictive approach infringes on refugee rights and states' self-abrogation of international obligations (Milner, 2009; UNHCR, 2006). Uganda is an exception with policies granting refugees freedom of movement, right to work, right to start businesses, and right to access social services like education and health in the same way citizens do; however, as noted above, the policies have been challenged by the 'protracted refugee situations, the burden of hosting refugees, limited resources, and little international support that threaten Uganda's hospitality' (Ahimbisibwe, 2019, p. 62; 2020, p. 2; Government of Uganda (GoU), 2006). The next section explains the methodology, followed by the conceptual framework of durable solutions as a panacea for protracted refugee situations.

Methodology

Methods and the process of literature search and review

This is a conceptual article based on review of relevant literatures (Alvesson & Skolberg, 2007, p. 21; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 121) about durable refugee solutions. The literatures used in this paper were generated following a detailed search using the search engines on the online library of the University of Antwerp (that the second author is linked to at the Institute of Development Policy) that generated published peer reviewed articles and published books from social science databases and journals that the university has affiliations to. A number of literatures were also retrieved from UNHCR websites which contain a variety of publications on the subject of refugees. Grey literatures, including reports from organizations in the field of refugees, government reports and documents especially by Ugandan government and other policy reports and unpublished works, also formed part of the literature used in this article. These literatures from the variety of sources helped to triangulate discussions on the protracted refugee situations and themes analyzed in this paper, including resettlement, repatriation, local integration and local solutions. This range of literatures also helps to problematize the research gap and

the potential contribution of local solutions to the challenge of protracted refugee situations in the era where the traditional durable solutions are being minimally implemented.

The key concepts that were used during the literature search included protracted refugees, protracted refugee situations, protracted refugees in developing countries, protracted refugees in Africa, refugee durable solutions, repatriation of refugees, resettlement of refugees in the third countries, local integration, and local solutions to refugee problems. These search terminologies generated a plethora of published and unpublished documents that were directly and indirectly related to the topic of this article. The authors ignored and left out reports that only touched the topic superficially or just mentioned it, but instead focused on the publications and documents with substantial discussions on the subject under study. The authors also used literatures that were more focused on the issues of protracted refugees in Africa and the potential of local solutions as a promising panacea to the problem on the continent.

Conceptual framework

Boano et al. (2003) offered a conceptual model depicting refugee movements from the country of origin to a country where permanent solutions are attained. The core principle of the model is to guarantee safety and security for refugees in the course of implementing permanent solutions to their plights. Additional models are about forming decisions to return and centralize what refugees expect to return home (Atfield et al., 2004). Other models and approaches to return migration were described by Husein and Wagner (2023). All of these models and approaches are about refugees' expectations of returning to their home country.

A more comprehensive model that covers all three durable solutions was proposed by Mooney et al. (2007) and comprehensively explained in Addo (2016), and was adopted as a lens to guide the analysis in this article. This conceptual framework simultaneously covers three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation of refugees to their home country, local integration of refugees into the country of their first asylum, and resettlement of refugees to the second asylum countries. Furthermore, it emphasizes the hope of achieving a durable solution as the key element of the framework – a component that is lacking in similar frameworks. The framework contains the socioeconomic and political conditions necessary to successfully achieve durable solutions for refugees. It recognizes the aspect that the refugee situation comes to a close when one of the durable solutions is attained and the needs that arise due to being in refugee status stop. This framework is represented diagrammatically in Figure 1 below.

In underscoring the need for voluntary repatriation, any mechanism used to engineer the voluntary return of refugees to their home countries would first consider the safety and dignity of the returning refugees. They expect not to face 'attacks, harassment, intimidation, persecution, or any form of punitive action when they remit back to their home country. They would expect a decent standard of living that covers accessibility to shelter, healthcare services, quality education, access to vocational training, jobs, employment, and transportation services, in accordance with their needs and vulnerabilities. Others would expect unification with missing family members. Refugees are supposed to be psycho-socially supported through counselling to help them overcome the traumatic memories of brutalities that took place during the conflict period. They expect to be monetarily compensated for the loss of their property during the conflict period. It is expected that a means of follow-up should be put in place to monitor returnees' welfare in their home country after they have remitted back (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016, p. 429).

On local integration, refugees expect equivalent accessibility to be devoid of discrimination against jobs and monetary-generating opportunities. This does not imply that they must be employed to recover their original livelihoods prior to the termination of their refugee status. Instead, the refugee situation comes to a close when there are no obstacles to 'employment, income generating opportunities, and public services' for reasons specific to refugee status. 'Access to protection, skills training, health care, quality education and right to own landed properties in the host country are other expectations about local integration' (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016, p. 429).

Regarding resettlement in a third country, refugees expect to be empowered with basic skills so that they can live independently in the novel country. They are always hopeful that third countries (preferably

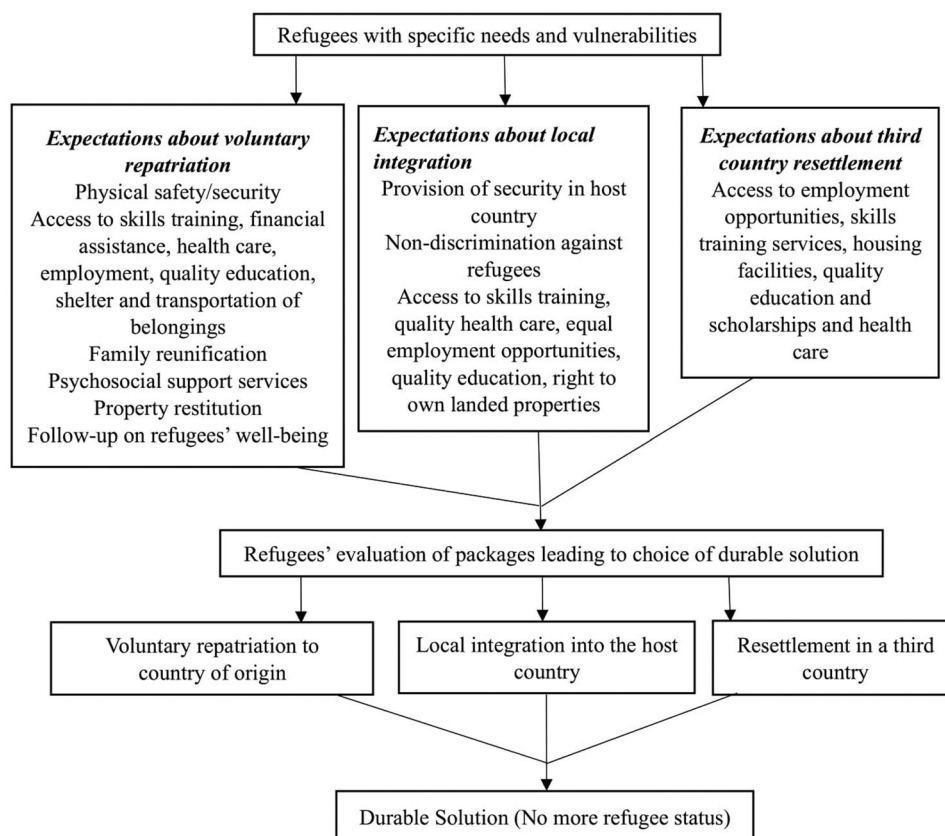


Figure 1. |PartLabel-upper A conceptual framework for refugees' expectations about the durable solutions.
Source: Adapted from Mooney et al. (2007, as cited in Addo, 2016, p. 429).

high-income countries) will provide them with golden opportunities for high standards of living. As such, they are optimistic about enjoying quality healthcare services, quality education, jobs, and accommodation. Depending on how available these magnetic resettlement packages cover the foregoing expectations, protracted refugee situations will probably cease to exist (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016, p. 429).

The authors sought to use the conceptual framework that covers all the elements of durable solutions to refugee problems, hence the motivation and justification to adopt Mooney et al. (2007) that is expounded in Addo (2016), as a lens to guide the analysis in this article. Other conceptual frameworks only cover an aspect of durable refugee solutions or safety of refugees who are on the move. For instance, Boano et al. (2003) provides a conceptual model indicating refugee movements from the country of origin to a country where permanent solutions are attained, and the key principle of the model is to guarantee safety and security for refugees in the course of implementing permanent solutions to their plights; Atfield et al. (2004) offered a model on repatriation, specifically about forming decisions to return and centralize what refugees expect to return home; Husein and Wagner (2023) described other models and approaches to return migration. All of these models and approaches are about refugee safety and refugees' expectations of returning to their home country.

The authors could not adopt any of the above models due to their lack of holistic coverage of the three durable solutions. A more comprehensive model that covers all the three durable solutions (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016), was instead adopted as a lens to guide the analysis all through article. This conceptual framework holistically covers the three durable solutions: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement of refugees in the third countries. The framework provides the socio-economic and political conditions necessary to successfully achieve durable solutions for refugees. It recognizes the argument that the refugee situation comes to a close when one of the durable solutions is attained and the needs that arise due to being in refugee status stop.

It is important to note that the conceptual framework used in this paper does not cover the approach of 'local solutions' – a core element under examination in this article. This could be due to the fact that local solutions is a recent and an emerging concept that is thought to provide a safer transition to any of the above conventional durable solutions (Crisp, 2023; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021). The approach of local solutions and the three conventional durable solutions as major concepts analyzed in this article, implicitly contain the legal and political underpinning of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) – 'a framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing, recognizing that a sustainable solution to refugee situations cannot be achieved without international cooperation' (UNHCR, 2024a). The objectives of the GCR are to: 'ease the pressures on host countries', 'enhance refugee self-reliance', 'expand access to third-country solutions', and 'support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity' (UNHCR, 2024). The first two objectives relate to the notion of local solutions and the latter two relate to durable solutions, namely; resettlement to the third countries and repatriation to the home countries respectively. The following sections will discuss the three durable solutions, the extent to which they have been applied, and their limitations in ameliorating protracted refugee situations, followed by the discussion on the local solutions as the burgeoning approach to protracted refugee problem.

Resettlement

The above conceptual framework of durable refugee solutions explains the expectations of refugees concerning resettlement in the second country of asylum. Refugees are always hopeful of finding golden opportunities for high standards of living in the countries of resettlement, and they expect enjoyment of quality healthcare services, quality education, jobs, and good accommodation (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016, p. 429). To a greater degree, resettlement is akin to local integration with regard to attaining novel nationality. While these solutions are usually framed as a three-pronged solution, in reality, only two dual permanent solutions exist for refugees: reoffering oneself back to the country of origin for national protection (repatriation) and acquiring new citizenship (local integration and resettlement). In other words, local integration and resettlement in minority countries are two versions of the same solution. Therefore, just like decisions taken by the host governments to adopt local integration, it is not surprising that resettlement programs are discretionarily decided upon by third countries as sovereign states. In addition, these decisions are profoundly affected by the concerns and interests of third countries – minority countries in the Global North (Bessa, 1969; OECD, 2020).

Consequently, the global numbers of refugees resettled in third countries remain extremely low, with a mere 22,770 refugees being resettled through UNHCR in 2020 (out of approximately 1.44 million refugees who were in serious need of resettlement) and the lowest resettlement figures in virtually 20 years (UNHCR, 2020). The resettled figure increased in 2022. Out of the 116,500 refugees submitted to states for consideration, 114,300 were resettled twice the previous year (57,500), as depicted in the government statistics (UNHCR, 2023). This figure accounts for less than 1% compared to 35.3 million refugees in need of durable solutions around the world (UNHCR, 2023). This is concurrent with the argument that resettlement in third countries in the global north – countries in the minority world – account merely as a token of solution, considering global displacement as a whole (Schneider, 2021). In fact, only 1% of refugees are resettled (Long, 2011).

Nevertheless, refugees who succeed in securing a place on a resettlement programme attain an official status in the second host country and are generally granted primary rights as provided in the global refugee regime, such as the right to move freely, the right to work, and travel documents following the required registration procedures (Zieck, 2018). By abiding by international norms, these states offer a generous welcome package to resettled refugees (Phillimore, 2012; Martin et al., 2014), which meets refugees' expectations, as described in the conceptual framework of this paper (Mooney et al., 2007). However, resettlement normally targets the most vulnerable refugees (UNHCR, n.d.); therefore, it is a highly selective process (Garnier et al., 2018). Additionally, refugee status and short-range support and training programs accorded to resettled refugees do not automatically translate into integration; research has consistently demonstrated that a significant number of refugees face difficulties in finding a true sense of belonging in their new country (Hovil, 2019).

Furthermore, the approach to resettlement has metamorphosed overtime, with third countries (mostly in Europe) departing from the conventional notion of permanent resettlement programmes and instead adopting complementary routes of admitting refugees through temporary humanitarian admission approaches that usually do not grant permanent residence for the 'resettled' refugees as soon as they arrive in the new country, which is in contrast to UNHCR's notion of resettlement (Hovil, 2019). The hesitance to admit refugees from outside of Europe will most probably grow with the growing and huge rise in Ukrainian refugees since the Russian incursion on Ukraine in February 2022.

In a nutshell, resettlement may be construed as a durable solution for particular refugees who are considered vulnerable. However, the notion that resettlement is an instrument of international solidarity and responsibility sharing remains highly problematic (Schneider, 2021). Undoubtedly, the denial of third countries in the global north to admit more than a token number of refugees from outside Europe remains an obstacle to international solidarity and responsibility sharing. Because of that, only a token of the sum total of refugees globally finds a spot to get into the minority world countries and, in the process incur a high financial, physical and psychological costs (Hovil and Maple (2022, p. 252). As such, resettlement remains a dream for the majority of refugees because of the small number of refugees who succeed in securing this durable solution (Ahimbisibwe, 2015) and, generally, a mere 1% of global refugees succeed in being resettled to the second country of asylum (Long, 2011) and less than 1% in 2022 (UNHCR, 2023). In fact, 'given the narrow quotas, the chances of being resettled is slim, and indeed many people in refugee camps think of resettlement as akin to winning the lottery' (Jacobsen, 2005, p. 55). The small number of refugees (1% or less) accepted by the global north for resettlement leaves 99% to be either repatriated or considered for local integration, albeit with accompanying challenges, as subsequently discussed.

Voluntary repatriation

Of the three officially existing durable solutions, voluntary repatriation is considered the best solution for refugees. This is where refugees are remitted to their home country when conflict ends to participate in the reconstruction process and rebuild their country (Ahimbisibwe, 2019, p. 575). Voluntary repatriation means 'the free and voluntary return to one's country of origin in safety and dignity', with 'core components... being physical safety, legal safety, material safety, and reconciliation' (UNHCR, 2004c, as cited in Yonekawa & Sugiki, 2020, p. xxi). As captured in many earlier studies, repatriation has increasingly been viewed as the most feasible durable solution to refugees' plight and has come to be demarcated by the transnational community and UNHCR as the ideal panacea to the world refugee challenge (Chimni, 2004; Omata, 2012; Ullom, 2001; UNHCR, 2012; 2013). The primary argument for the favorability of repatriation is premised on the presumption that repatriation allows refugees to be reestablished in their own original community (UNHCR, 2012).

In the early 1990s, marked as the termination of Cold War, proxy conflicts in Africa and Asia beefed up the belief that repatriation was the ideal and the sole mechanism to end the refugee situation (Crisp & Long, 2016, p. 144). 'The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Sadako Ogata declared the 1990s as the 'decade of repatriation' (Crisp & Long, 2016, p. 144, as cited in Ahimbisibwe, 2019, p. 575; UNHCR, 1992), after the Executive Committee of the UNHCR made its maiden assessment and recognized that repatriation was the best solution in the 1980. Following this development in 1991, the High Commissioner of the UNHCR Sadako Ogata declared that among the UNHCR's key aims, was to make efforts to voluntarily repatriate and reiterate that refugees' right to return to their own home country should be equally valued and recognized on the same footing as the right to seek asylum in other countries (UNHCR, 1980, 1991). In the same period, over 10 million refugees returned to their original countries, including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Mozambique, and Nicaragua (UNHCR, 1980, 1991). In addition, between 1993 and 2007 over 9.2 million people across Africa were repatriated. A reduction in total refugee numbers was also a result of third-country resettlement, with over 182,500 people resettled in the same period (Kamara, 2009, pp. 30–31).

In the Cold War era, locally settling refugees in the first asylum country and resettlement in the second asylum country were the preferred solutions because repatriation meant remitting refugees back to communist states (Holborn, n.d, as cited in Yonekawa & Sugiki, 2020, p. vii). However, the attitude of the

international community slowly changed with respect to durable solutions, particularly when in the 1980s the nature and character of the refugee movements shifted from East–West to South–North (Betts et al., 2008, p. 35). The increasing number of refugees and changes in destinations meant rising burdens and costs to donors financially, politically, and environmentally. Consequently, both the donor and host countries ran out of tolerance with regard to supporting refugees (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

Similarly, in recent years, the record flow of Syrian refugees has created political, social, and economic challenges for host-countries, creating social tensions following the immense migrations that took place in 2015 (Amaral et al., 2018; UNHCR, 2021). European Union nationals are worried that the rise in refugee numbers has heightened the danger of terrorism, curtailed employment opportunities, and social benefits for citizens (Amaral et al., 2018). Moreover, the apparent threat brought by refugee presence in host communities has been taken advantage of by right-wing populist parties in Europe to secure votes by manipulating the threat of insecurity and fear and sidetracking the electorates from focusing on national matters (Holmes & Castañeda, 2016).

Using the theoretical framework of voluntary returns, Husein and Wagner (2023) explored 577 Syrian refugees in Turkey and Germany to consider returning to their country of origin. The assessment is reported as follows:

Syrian refugees in Turkey were more likely to regard their stay as temporary (76 percent), compared to those in Germany (55 percent, p -value of difference = .000). Similarly, structural factors of the origin- and host-countries, that is, the origin-governorate and the current location, were considerably influencing return intentions. Concerning individual factors, female and highly educated refugees had a lower willingness to return. Those who were married were less inclined to return in the short run, yet refugees who self-identified as poor indicated their desired return in the long run (Husein & Wagner, 2023, p. 1).

The United Nations (UN), other European asylum countries, and the Syrian government view refugees' return to their home country as an ideal remedy to the Syrian conflict (Council of the European Union (EU), 2017; Yahya et al., 2018). However, according to international law, for repatriation to occur, the causes of flight have to be ended; the tripartite agreement between the home country, the country of asylum, and UNHCR has to be signed; repatriation has to be voluntary; refugees are entitled to information about the situation in their home country; the registration of refugees willing to return has to take place; refugees' return has to be devoid of danger and should maintain human dignity; and they have to be received and reintegrated into their home communities (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017; Yonekawa & Sugiki, 2020, p. viii). This is similar to refugee expectations concerning their repatriation, as explained in the conceptual framework (Mooney et al., 2007, as cited in Addo, 2016, p. 429) used in this study.

However, in spite of the ideality, preference for, and expectations of refugees concerning voluntary repatriation, it has remained problematic and refugees have remained in protracted situations in asylum states, protracted conflict in the home country has remained, and sometimes conducive conditions in the asylum society, among other factors. Voluntary repatriation is usually enforced even when conflicts are ongoing, which culminates in security risks and potentially leads to the reoccurrence of conflicts and refugee flights. For example, instead of voluntariness, refugees such as Rwandan refugees in Uganda have been forced to return, and local integration is yet to be considered (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017; Yonekawa & Sugiki, 2020, p. viii).

In other contexts, there have been instances where refugees turn down the option of returning to their home countries (Chimni, 2004), one of which is the development of strong social networks in the country of refuge (UNHCR & IOM, 2011), as has been evidenced by Rwandan refugees living in Uganda with strong local networks that help them navigate asylum communities and survive (Karooma, 2014). Similarly, social networks as a motivation for rejecting repatriation have further been elucidated by Opono and Ahimbisibwe (2023), who found that family ties and success stories of refugees who successfully integrated *de facto* into the host community motivated some South Sudanese to choose to remain in Uganda instead of returning to South Sudan – their home country. They are ethnically connected as they share ethnic backgrounds with members of the host communities and speak the same language and intermarry, so they saw no reason for returning. Some refugees had family members who had long migrated to Uganda, so they felt that they were also home in Uganda and saw no reason for returning to troubled South Sudan. The same study also found that opportunities to access socioeconomic factors, especially livelihood opportunities and social services, most

notably education and health, can motivate refugees to choose to integrate in an asylum country like Uganda and reject the option of returning to their home country like South Sudan (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023). This was due to the fact that Uganda refugee policies captured in the 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugees Regulations grant refugees right to work, right to start businesses, access to social services such as education and health just like nationals (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023).

Additionally, research conducted by Ahimbisibwe et al. (2017, p. 15) on integrating Rwandan refugees in Uganda revealed that Rwandan refugees do not want to return to their country, but long to be locally integrated on account that they are de facto integrated in the Ugandan communities, despite others expressing worry for the loss of their identity, culture and language as they intermarry with people from the host country.

... Rwandan refugees freely interact with the local hosts especially in the trading centers of Juru and Sangano in Nakivale settlement and Kazaho in Oruchinga settlement. The refugees themselves observed that almost all the Rwandan refugees speak the local language, Runyankore. All their children have been born and attend schools in Uganda. They pointed out that their children consider themselves to be Ugandans. They also mentioned intermarriages and other social interactions with the local hosts (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017, p. 15).

Refugees believe that peaceful social interaction provides sufficient evidence for local integration in the host country, not return to their country of origin.

This is similar to the findings of the research we conducted in Pagirinya settlement, where refugees were happy that they shared the same tribe, language and culture. This shows the inclusive nature of Uganda's society influenced by the favorable refugee policies, most notably the 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugees Regulations (GoU, 2006; GoU, 2010) – which underlie the principles of local solutions – which help to facilitate 'the economic, social and cultural inclusion of refugees', fostering 'the peaceful and productive inclusion of refugees and the well-being of local communities', while addressing 'issues such as documentation and residence permits' (UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 6). These influence refugees' interests in favor of local integration, not repatriation.

From the security angle, the research examining the attitudes and responses of Rwandan refugees towards repatriation back to Rwanda in the post-genocide era revealed the hesitance of Rwandan refugees towards repatriation. The reason for their ambivalence to return to their home country despite the nonexistence of genocide which forced them to seek refuge in Uganda, was that they felt insecure to return, and recommendations to implement certain reforms to ensure refugee security were suggested (Karooma, 2017). Several factors that create fear and feelings of unsafety among Rwandan refugees have been documented in previous studies. These include 'persecution and violation of human rights; political repression; Gacaca courts; oppressive laws such as genocide ideology; and property restitution problems' (Amnesty International, 2010; Fahamu Refugee Programme, 2011; Refugee Law Project et al., 2010, as cited in Karooma, 2014, p. 3). These factors have been argued as causes for many Rwandan refugees' reluctance to return to Rwanda, despite the fact that genocide no longer exists. Additionally, the research conducted at the Nakivale and Oruchinga settlements in southwestern Uganda in 2010, 2011, and 2016 by Ahimbisibwe et al. (2017) show that some Rwandan refugees returned to Rwanda and came back to Uganda – the 'recyclers' – because of lack of security guarantee for refugees back in Rwanda, as demonstrated by numerous refugees who forcibly left their country following the 1994 genocide and others were still fleeing the country as confessed by the respondents, and captured in the quote below:

We wonder why UNHCR and OPM have insisted on repatriation yet it has failed. Most of our colleagues who returned to Rwanda have come back to Uganda. Some are here in Nakivale, Oruchinga and Kyaka settlements and the rest have moved to Ugandan villages and towns. Isn't this enough evidence that repatriation has not been successful? For us local integration is the best solution (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017).

Other factors causing this hesitance of Rwandan refugees to repatriate from Uganda include favorable security in Uganda, a long period of time spent in exile, accessibility to land in Uganda, easy accessibility to social services in Uganda, international humanitarian aid, and Uganda's welcoming attitude toward refugees and Ugandan favorable refugee laws, that is, the 2006 Refugees Act, prospects to be naturalized, and individual and family networks, have also contributed to the reluctance of Rwandan refugees to return (Karooma, 2014, pp. 3–4). Security fear in refugees is not an exception in Africa, but in other

regions, generating refugees as well. For example, Syrian refugees in Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon were demotivated to return due to insecurity in Syria (World Bank, 2020).

Similar arguments for refusal to return are found among the South Sudanese refugees in Uganda during our fieldwork in Pagirinya refugee settlement in Uganda (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, forthcoming). There were refugees who had unconditionally decided to remain and integrate in Uganda. They cited refugee fatigue, a more stable rule of law and peace and security in Uganda compared to lawlessness and insecurity in South Sudan as reasons for refusal to return. Additionally, according to Opono and Ahimbisibwe (2023), some refugees were hopeful of fully getting integrated in the Ugandan communities as they compared themselves with refugees who never went back to South Sudan after they ran to refuge in Uganda during the previous war/s. These refugees who never went back were now defacto integrated in the Ugandan society; they had jobs, owned land, their children were studying and some of them even had Ugandan National identity cards (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023, p. 7). Moreover, there were refugees who were well integrated in the Ugandan society and were benefiting from its comparatively better health and education services and a more stable food security compared to South Sudan (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023, p. 4). All these defacto integration in the Ugandan host societies, despite the absence of local integration, mirror the success of the model of local solutions captured in Uganda's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and Uganda's favorable refugee policies, most notably the 2006 Refugee Act and the 2010 Refugee Regulations that grant refugees freedom to move, right to work, right to start businesses and access to social services just like Ugandan nationals. Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees in large numbers since 1940s (Sarr et al., 2022; Solutions Journalism, 2021) and, much as these refugees are not officially locally integrated, they are integrated defacto and enjoying socio-political and economic rights just like citizens – local solutions. Moreover, the implementation of Uganda's open-door policy – the 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugees Regulations – has influenced many refugees to move into urban areas and they seem to be faring well economically and are uninterested in humanitarian aid (Omata & Kaplan, 2013; Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023).

However, irrespective of the risky security situation at home and the relatively better conditions in the host state, some refugees just want to return to their country of origin. One of those reasons for refugees who made up their minds to unconditionally return is patriotism as captured in the responses of South Sudanese refugees (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023). This decision is due to the love they have for their country; that one's country is one's country, irrespective of the situation. Some refugees wanted to return because they had missed their relatives in South Sudan (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023). This is similar to previous research, in which some refugees wanted to return because they were homesick (Angelucci, 2012; Lessem, 2018; Nakajima, 2019).

Alrababa et al. (2021) investigated whether Syrian refugees in Lebanon would want to return to their home country. They discovered that 63% of them were interested in returning one day. Security fears and economic prospects, among other circumstances surrounding the country of origin, have determined their plans. Furthermore, some refugees are incentivized to return, as they compare their deplorable status against the progress registered by their counterparts in the original country, for instance, in post-conflict Burundi (Fransen et al., 2017). For Liberian refugees who fled to Ghana, the availability of safe shelters, education, and opportunities to be employed in Liberia persuaded some to return (Omata, 2013). Relatedly, meagre wages, shortage of decent health services, poor quality education, and unavailability of housing in Eritrea – demoralized Eritrean refugees in the United Kingdom and prevented them from returning to Eritrea (Al-Ali et al., 2001).

Similarly, attachment to property left in the country of origin and frequent visits over time motivate some returnees (Eastmond, 2006), whereas others are motivated by media campaigns. A survey conducted by Turton and Marsden (2002) revealed that Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan were swayed to return to their home countries through robust media campaigns about massive humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan and pledges of peace and security by the transnational community, leading to a return of about 1.7 million refugees in 2002.

Some refugees and immigrants are incentivized to return by signing a tripartite agreement (IRRI, 2010), but some are coerced into returning through tactics deployed by the host-country, for example, creating restrictions, setting deadlines, threats to deportations, and reduction of aid (IRRI, 2010). On the other hand, favorable conditions in the host country can positively influence refugees' intention to

remain. For instance, Uganda's hospitable policy influenced the hesitance of Rwandan refugees to remain in Uganda for a long time (Karoooma, 2014). All in all, irrespective of the reasons and motivations to remain or return, out of the 35.3 million refugees by the end of 2022, 339,300 (0.96%) refugees returned to their home countries (UNHCR, 2023, p. 2). If the resettled refugees 114,300 (0.32%) in 2022 are added to the number of returnees: 339,300 (0.96%), they amount to 453,630 (1.28%), meaning that over 98% of refugees are still living in and others trapped in the protracted situations in the first countries of asylum. Can the option of local integration cater to the remaining 98% or so of refugees?

Local integration

The 1951 Refugee Convention provides for local integration as a durable solution for refugees, enshrined in Article 34, which urges countries to aid in the assimilation and naturalization of refugees. States are called upon to do everything in their power to accelerate processes culminating in the integration of refugees at a lower and affordable cost. Article 34 raises the basic issue of granting rights and freedoms to refugees by the state. States are urged to assimilate or naturalize refugees and accord them with rights similar to those of permanent residents or citizens. Some of these rights are the right to movement, education, property, work, religion, and marriage (D'Orsi, 2013). Harrell-Bond emphasizes that the Convention actually uses the terminology 'assimilation' denoting the blurring of differences between refugees and their hosts (Harrell-Bond, 2000, p. 3). He defines local integration as 'a situation in which host and refugee communities are able to co-exist, sharing the same resources – both economic and social – with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host community' (Harrell-Bond, 1986, p. 7). Other definitions underscore respect for refugee rights (Crisp, 2004; Fielden, 2008; Kibreab, 1989), where refugees are granted rights enshrined in the 1951 Convention and other refugee and human rights instruments, which may culminate in the attainment of permanent residents and eventual citizenship in the country of asylum. The overall goal of local integration is to naturalize refugees who eventually become citizens of asylum countries. This option is usually available for refugees who have stayed in the country of asylum for a good number of years as emphasized: 'strictly speaking, it can be argued that the process of local integration becomes a durable solution only at the point when a refugee becomes a naturalized citizen of his or her asylum country, and consequently is no longer in need of international protection' (Crisp, 2004, p. 2).

Economically, research on the economic dimension of refugee integration imbues a process in which refugees reach the level of acquiring sustainable livelihoods and self-reliance and become progressively less dependent on humanitarian aid. This involves a process in which refugees can participate in local economic activities and enhance their standards of living, similar to those of the host community (Kuhlman, 1991). In addition to the economic dimension, local integration is complemented by a social process whereby refugees can coexist harmoniously with the host population. Social integration is thus synonymous with peaceful coexistence, non-discrimination, acceptance of refugees by the host population, and the capacity to contribute to the social life of the country of asylum (Kuhlman, 1991) as empirically observed:

Rwandan refugees freely interact with the local hosts especially in the trading centers of Juru and Sangano in Nakivale settlement and Kazaho in Oruchinga settlement. The refugees themselves observed that almost all the Rwandan refugees speak the local language, Runyankore. All their children have been born and attend schools in Uganda. They pointed out that their children consider themselves to be Ugandans. They also mentioned intermarriages and other social interactions with the local hosts (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017, p. 15).

Refugees believe that peaceful social interaction provides sufficient evidence for local integration in the host country.

As the above explanations show, local integration comprises processes that are legal, cultural and socio-economic in nature (Kibreab, 1989). Local integration is a process and the realization of the socio-economic and political aspects embedded within it takes time. The success of local integration may be measured against the indicators provided in the integration framework. Ager and Strang (2008) after reviewing different definitions of 'integration', relevant literature in addition to primary data based on the fieldwork conducted in refugee settlements in the UK, developed an integration framework combining

core elements perceived to constitute successful integration. Principal domains of integration are proposed and condensed into four main themes: 'achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment (Ager & Strang, 2008, p. 166).

In conducting a gender analysis of integration outcomes across several areas, including social networks, language proficiency, health, education, employment and housing, that are extremely relevant for social policy in the UK, the authors found 'significant gender differences in language, self-reported health, ability to budget for household expenses and access to formal social networks and quality housing, with women generally faring worse than men and some inequalities enduring or intensifying over time' (Cheung & Phillimore, 2016, p. 11). The research recommended 'the recording of refugee outcomes in institutional monitoring data to enable inequalities to be identified and addressed' (Cheung & Phillimore, 2016).

In evaluating the usefulness of the indicators of integration proposed by Ager and Strang (2004), focusing on the experiences of refugees who started arriving in Birmingham, UK, since 1990s, the authors showed that, functional indicators have their place in aiding the understanding of the situation of refugees compared to the rest of the population; the indicators provide a sense of how refugees are integrating only at a functional level (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008, p. 15). As some authors such as Fyvie et al. (2003), Mestheneos and Ioannidi (2002) and Coussey (2000), cited in Phillimore and Goodson (2008, p. 15) suggested, measures of integration do not stand on their own. Usually, the inter-connectedness of the indicators is more useful and provide the greatest potential in deeply understanding of integration experiences. For instance, incapacity to secure housing or poor health affects the capacity of refugees to achieve other indicators in the integration such as employment and education (Phillimore & Goodson, 2008, p. 15).

Using Ghana and Ethiopia as case studies, Agblorti et al. (2023) examined the nascent international frameworks that emphasize deeper integration of refugees by mainstreaming of refugee service provision into national service provision systems – the structures and arrangements referred to as 'opportunity structures' – investigating how these structures can either foster or hinder integration of refugees into the host society. They found that 'mainstreaming service provision to refugees in camps into national systems does not necessarily lead to better refugee integration outcomes. Differences in the quality-of-service provision between humanitarian actors and hosting countries have the potential to determine integration outcomes' (Agblorti et al., 2023, pp. 134–135).

Achievement of the practical aspects proposed in the integration framework has been emphasized as a reciprocal process, involving the participation of both the host societies and refugees (European Council on Refugees & Exiles [ECRE], 1998: 29). This is similar to the conclusion drawn by Phillimore et al. (2021, p. 1) about resettlement of refugees in the high-income countries, that a more successful resettlement initiatives might have to incorporate a number of actors, including employers, local communities and government, working collectively to support newly arrived refugees.

On the success of local integration, the proponents argue that refugees' countries of first asylum, compared to the country of origin, are at a similar level of socio-economic conditions; therefore, refugees would face less stress integrating in the first asylum country, considering the fact that some of them had already created strong socio-economic connections that only needed formalization of refugees' right to stay. This view goes hand-in-hand with donors' intentions skewed towards promoting regional solution initiatives (Smith, 2004). This supports the argument that local integration is the principal panacea for protracted refugee situations (Bansak et al., 2018; Jacobsen, 2001).

Based on research conducted at the Nakivale and Oruchinga settlements in southwestern Uganda in 2010, 2011, and 2016, Ahimbisibwe et al. (2017) concluded that local integration was the most appropriate option for many Rwandan refugees who were still living in refuge in Uganda. Some Rwandan refugees returned to Rwanda and came back to Uganda – the 'recyclers' – because of lack of guarantee for refugees back in Rwanda, as demonstrated by numerous refugees who forcibly left their country following the 1994 genocide and others were still fleeing the country as confessed by the respondents.

The above finding is in congruence with an earlier finding that refugees fear returning to their country of origin because it is insecure for them to do so (Crisp, 2003). Some are unable to return to their

original country because of the long period spent in exile; therefore, they are not socially connected and lack social capital that could facilitate their decision to return (Karooma, 2014; Massey, 1999). Yet, it is difficult for refugees to get opportunities for resettlement, the same way it is difficult to win a lottery (Jacobsen, 2005, p. 55). Therefore, local integration remains a viable option for engagement by stakeholders to offer refugees in protracted situations as a durable solution. Thus, local integration requires further investigation (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017).

In the 1980s, local integration became less appealing for most African countries due to political unfeasibility and was only considered the last option after repatriation, and camp-based care became impossible (Polzer, 2004). Crisp (2004, p. 3) notes that whereas 'the principle of local integration may be firmly established in international refugee law, its practice has been very limited in the years since the refugee problem became a worldwide phenomenon'.

Concern about insecurity is advanced as among the primary reasons for hindering the naturalization of refugees in the asylum countries. Countries of origin are afraid about the prolonged stay of refugees in the neighboring countries. Barongo (1998, p. 124), opines that granting permanent asylum to refugees harboring political interests in their home country would imply creating permanent conflicts on the political agenda of the neighboring countries of origin and asylum. For example, the refusal to naturalize Rwandan refugees in Uganda is partly due to the security history of the two countries. The government of Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in Rwanda assumed power through a rebellion commenced by Tutsi refugees in Uganda. Being cognizant of this history informs thinking in policy domain in both Uganda and Rwanda and affects local integration of refugees. As one respondent noted: 'local integration of Rwandan refugees does not take away the fears of the Rwandan government that one day these refugees can decide to mobilize themselves (from Uganda) into a force and fight Rwanda' (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2019, pp. 416–417). Therefore, the return of Rwandan refugees to Rwanda is an important foreign policy element for the Rwandan government as noted by the Ugandan official: 'at times we don't agree with them (Rwandan government officials) but we are forced to compromise on our positions and policy regarding Rwandan refugee case load because of the need to maintain good interstate diplomatic relations (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2019, pp. 418).

Furthermore, research has shown other obstacles hindering the process of local integration, sometimes engineered by refugees themselves or by the local communities. Research conducted by Ahimbisibwe et al. (2017:15) on integrating Rwandan refugees in Uganda revealed that while refugees long to be integrated in the Ugandan communities, some Rwandan refugees expressed worry for the loss of their identity, culture and language as they intermarry with people from the host country. On the other hand, Jacobsen (2001:19) states that many host communities develop resentment about the presence of refugees amongst themselves, due to security threats imposed or due to competition for scarce resources, pressuring the local leaders to isolate refugees in camps or discriminate against them in some way. For example, there is always contention over land allocated to refugees; land is extremely a scarce resource but where it exists in abundance, it facilitates the successful integration of refugees in the local communities (Bakewell, 1999; Jacobsen, 2001:16). By extension, in circumstances where arable land is in short supply, integration of refugees is most often problematic. Host countries seek to evade the economic burden of integrating refugees and are afraid of social upheaval. Refugees are thus viewed as a liability to be locally integrated; at best, a situation to be tolerated temporarily and, at worst, a liability to be handled with immediate effect (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017:15).

Further evidence exists where refugee presence lays huge economic, security and environmental burdens on host countries, sometimes refugees are used as scapegoats of the already existing problems in the host societies in delivering services, which has been the situation in many African refugee hosting countries like Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and Guinea. The evidence in Guinea confirms this:

According to anecdotal evidence, many in Guinea believe that the *de facto* integration of Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees that has been permitted is linked to the rise in criminal activity, delinquency, street prostitution, and drug proliferation that has plagued Guinea in recent years. But Guinea had been experiencing rising poverty and the imposition of structural adjustment programs when the refugee influx began. The social dislocations associated with this poverty are probably aggravated by the integration of refugees, but it is not clear that the refugees should be blamed alone (Jacobsen 2005, p. 12).

In Uganda, there is significant pressure on the government to deliver social services and public goods to the citizens. Naturalizing Rwandan (and other) refugees to become Ugandans would exacerbate the problem. Presently, it is a commonplace to witness Ugandans demonstrating against poor service delivery, including poor roads, dirty water, limited access to health services, and lack of jobs, among others (Amnesty International 2014; Golooba-Mutebi & Sjögren, 2017; Mbazira, 2013; Ojambo, 2016). This is worsened by the fact that many Ugandans are increasingly becoming aware of their rights and, therefore, demanding accountability from the government. As such, naturalizing refugees would probably fuel the already fragile situation (Ahimbisibwe et al., 2019, p. 225).

Moreover, over the past twenty years in African countries hosting refugees, reports emerge of rising xenophobia of local communities towards refugees, part of the reason being competition for limited resources like land and employment. Some instances of this xenophobia have been visibly observed in South Africa towards Zimbabweans and nationals from other African countries (Bloch, 2010; Crush, 2001; Crush & Pendleton, 2007; Mcknight, 2008); xenophobic attacks on refugees in Zambia in 2016 (Lusaka Times, 2016); and attacks on Sierra Leonean refugees in Guinea in 2000 (Canada: Immigration & Refugee Board of Canada, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 2001; Milner & Christoffersen-Deb, 2006).

The instances of xenophobia and attacks on refugees confirm that host populations sometimes resist efforts of locally integrating refugees. In fact, research on autochthony in Africa (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005; Côté & Mitchell, 2015; Geschiere, 2009; Jackson, 2006; Lynch, 2011; Marshall-Fratani, 2006; Morten & Kevin, 2013; Prestholdt, 2014) show that in recent past, there has been a rise in conflicts of autochthony in much of African countries. These are conflicts that occur between 'autochthons' denoting two rivals: people that emerged directly from the soil or 'sons of the soil' against 'allochthons' denoting people that are not from the soil or those that do not belong to the soil or 'strangers' (Mitchell, 2014, p. 401). Ceuppens and Geschiere (2005, p. 386, cited in Ahimbisibwe et al., 2017, p. 15) elucidate that autochthony is used in reference to 'self' and 'soil' while 'indigenous' means literally 'born inside'. The two concepts raise the need to protect 'ancestral lands' against 'strangers', and on the right of autochthons to special protection against immigrants that came later (Ceuppens & Geschiere, 2005, p. 386). These demarcations of 'sons of the soil' and strangers or foreigners are not uncommon among the drivers of violent confrontations and conflict in Africa. They unearth the practice of exclusion historically existent in African countries with regards to welcoming the migrant populations (Mitchell, 2014, p. 401). Examples from Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Kenya, the Great Lakes region of Africa indicate evidence of conflicts between autochthons and allochthons which has culminated into exclusion tendencies and violent conflicts. Research on Western Uganda in Espeland (2011) shades light on how violent confrontation between the autochthonous Banyoro and the immigrant Bafuruki ethnic groups transformed into violent conflict and ensuing blood shades and destruction of property. Even though the conflict was linked to 'land wrangles', the analysis further reveals how the indigenous Banyoro mobilized against the Bafuruki (immigrants) in the name of 'sons of the soil' which blistered a violent response from the Bafuruki immigrants, the later defending themselves that they were all Ugandan citizens with equal right to settle anywhere in Uganda without being discriminated against. Cases of this nature are rising in other regions of Uganda. With regards to refugees, news reports previously reported xenophobic attacks on Rwandan refugees with the aim of driving them away from Uganda (IRIN, 2009).

Significantly, the success of local integration relies on the goodwill of important groups in the host society. When this goodwill does not exist, it becomes increasingly hard for refugees to settle in the local communities and get integrated (Jacobsen, 2001). Research shows that 'the success of integration depends as much on the relationship between the local population and the refugees as it does on the host government's position. When refugees are welcomed and accepted by the locals, or at least not resented, they will be better able to pursue livelihoods, hide from authorities who would round them up, and face fewer security threats' Jacobsen (2001:18). It can thus be argued that in communities where the locals refuse to accept refugees, integration becomes challenging.

On a good note, integration as a durable refugee solution has once again turned out to be a primary objective connected to the resettlement of refugees and immigrant communities, and a phenomenon of vital public debate (Ager & Strang, 2008). Nonetheless, it may not be as popular and attractive as in the golden age of the 1960s and 1980s when African states readily opened their doors to refugees and asylum seekers and pursued an open-door policy, locally integrating and lawfully naturalizing many

refugees (Rutinwa, 1999, p. 1); for example, between 1960s and 1980s, Tanzanian government legally naturalized 20,000 Mozambique refugees and 36,000 Rwandan refugees (Kabera, 1988, p. 6).

Based on the foregoing analysis, it can be argued that political dynamics and regional, continental, or even worldwide trends determine policy options on how to handle refugee situations. The choice for local integration is partially predicated on the presumption that after many years in exile, refugees may have lost contact with their countries of origin and are already more assimilated in host countries. Recent instances in Africa emphasize the possibility and feasibility of these policy options. For instance, in 2007, the Tanzanian government expressed its willingness to naturalize 220,000 Burundian refugees who had been living in the country since 1972 (Milner, 2011, p. 6) and Botswana naturalized 2,500 out of 4,000 Angolan refugees (Kabera, 1988, p. 6). In the recent UNHCR refugee trends, 73,400 refugees from 28 countries were locally integrated in 2017. This showed a rise of 217 percent from the 2016 figure, mostly attributed to Turkey's decision to integrate 50,000 Syrian refugees locally. Within the same period, however, very little of the developing world, which presently hosts almost all protracted refugees, witnessed a reasonable number of refugee local integration: 115,200 refugees returned to their home countries and 102,800 had the opportunity to be resettled in a third country (Agblorti & Grant, 2019, p. 196). Furthermore, 'in 2021, an estimated 56,700 refugees from 161 different countries of origin were naturalized in 23 host countries. This represented a two-thirds increase compared with the previous year and a return to pre-pandemic levels (55,000 in 2019). As refugee naturalization data reported to the UNHCR are limited to a small set of countries, European countries were over-represented in the statistics. In 2021, 89 percent of all reported naturalization occurred in European countries' (UNHCR, 2022, p. 41). Similarly, in 2022, much as detailed data on local integration is hard to find, 'at least 50,800 refugees naturalized, slightly fewer than during the previous year (-10 percent from 56,700). A total of 28 countries reported one or more refugees naturalizing or obtaining permanent residence, with the majority occurring in the Kingdom of the Netherlands (23,300). In Canada, 18,700 refugees obtained long-term residence permits in 2022. Refugees who obtained their host country's citizenship or were granted permanent residence in 2022 were primarily from Syria (14,400), Eritrea (4,700), the Islamic Republic of Iran (3,300), Indonesia (2,200), and Nigeria (2,000)' (UNHCR, 2023, p. 41). These figures imply that more refugees in protracted situations remain in refugee camps and settlements in developing countries that host refugees.

Despite some positive signs of local integration, however, research shows that it is not devoid of obstacles hindering the process as discussed earlier. However, the adherents of local integration as a solution to the problems of protracted refugee situations seem to turn a blind eye to the challenges of resource competition and consequent conflicts between refugees and host communities and, in some contexts, the enormous environmental destruction related to accommodating refugees (Barbieri et al., 2017; Berry, 2008; Jacobsen, 2002; Kibreab, 1989; Martin, 2005;), these context-specific matters form the basis for the success of local integration and should be part of the discussion in finding durable solutions to protracted refugee situations (Agblorti & Grant, 2019, p. 197).

Notwithstanding the challenges associated with local integration in the first country of asylum, many refugees remain in protracted situations in these countries for years, especially in Africa. As the figures have shown, by the end of 2022, 23.3 million refugees and other people who require international protection, a rise of over 7.1 million protracted refugees as juxtaposed with the numbers in the preceding year (15.9 million), were living in protracted situations (UNHCR, 2022, p. 20; 2023, p. 22), yet only a token succeed in any durable solution. For example, in 2022, 114,300 refugees were resettled, 339,300 returned, and 50,800 were naturalized (UNHCR, 2023), totaling to 504,400 who acquired any durable solution, compared to 23.3 million refugees (this number increased to 24.9 by the end of 2023) who were in protracted situations in the same period. In 2017, 73,400 refugees in 28 countries were locally integrated, a rise of 217 percent from the 2016 figure, mostly attributed to Turkey's decision to locally integrate 50,000 Syrian refugees. Within the same period, however, very little of the developing world, which presently hosts almost all protracted refugees, witnessed reasonable refugee local integration (Agblorti & Grant, 2019, p. 196). This shows that the majority of refugees remain protracted in developing countries that hosted 76% and 75% of refugees in 2022 and 2023 respectively (UNHCR, 2023, p. 2; UNHCR, 2024, p. 2), especially in poor countries of Africa and particularly Sub-Saharan Africa that hosted 25.3 million refugees by the end of 2022 (UNHCR, 2023, p. 11) where less-developed Uganda is the highest refugee

hosting country, hosting 1.5 million refugees in 2021 (UNHCR, 2022) and over 1.6 million in 2024 (OPM & UNHCR, 2024). The question that remains is, regarding the scantiness of durable solutions, can local solutions substitute durable solutions in developing countries, especially in poor African countries?

Local solutions as the present approaches to protracted displacements in Africa

When states in the Global South resisted international pressure to uphold national policies that support a durable solution based on local integration, an alternative but temporary model of hosting refugees emerged and backed at an international level in the past decades. It has been backed by a compromise between the majority states in the global south and minority states in the global north (Brankamp, 2021; Landau, 2019). These comprised remodeling of development style-settlements, introducing the option of 'local solutions,' and a policy geared towards concepts such as 'self-reliance' and 'resilience.' These all help to confine the mobility of refugees within the African continent (Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 256) and to remain in the first countries of asylum as long as they require protection, with 'fair access to public services and enjoy peaceful and productive relations with the host population' (Crisp, 2023, p. 14). These local solutions for refugees in the first countries of asylum is referred to as a 'transitional solution arrangements aiming to assist and equip refugees on their path towards a durable solution, notably local integration' (UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 6). Local solutions help to facilitate 'the economic, social and cultural inclusion of refugees,' fostering 'the peaceful and productive inclusion of refugees and the well-being of local communities,' while addressing 'issues such as documentation and residence permits' (UNHCR & ICVA, 2021).

Before delving deeper into the concept of local solutions, it is imperative to clarify the difference between local integration and local solutions. Despite the fact that both concepts share similarities such as striving to blur the gap between refugees and the host communities in terms of enjoyment of rights such as right to movement, education, property, work, religion, and marriage, among others; making refugees acquire sustainable livelihoods and self-reliance and become progressively less dependent on humanitarian aid; encouraging peaceful coexistence, non-discrimination, acceptance of refugees by the host population, and the capacity to contribute to the social life of the country of asylum (Harrell-Bond, 2000, p. 3; Kuhlman, 1991); refugees only achieve the durable solution of local integration when they are granted citizenship through naturalization in their first country of asylum and they no longer require international protection (Crisp, 2004, p. 2), while in local solutions, no citizenship is granted to refugees despite being included socially and economically and generally defacto integrated in the asylum country (Crisp, 2023, p. 14; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 6).

Furthermore, it is also important to note that the approach of local solutions is different from humanitarian action. The two concepts should not be confused. Humanitarian action refers to consistent and collective action of compassion, which actively involves provision of relief aid with the purpose of saving lives, pacifying suffering, restoring and enhancing human dignity where disasters and large-scale emergencies are taking place or have occurred (Pringle & Hunt, 2016). Humanitarian action is guided by the principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality and independence, which are endorsed by two UN General Assembly resolutions (46/182 and 58/114) and enshrined in international humanitarian laws that guide the activities of all actors operating in the humanitarian sphere, delivering humanitarian aid which are life-saving assistance to needy people without discrimination, in places where conflict, violence, or natural/man-made disasters are taking place (European Union, 2023; Pringle & Hunt, 2016; UNHCR, 2024b). Humanitarian actions are undertaken by actors such as intergovernmental organizations, international nongovernmental organizations, and other nongovernmental organizations such as International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in Disaster Relief. Humanitarian principles as highlighted above, guide the formation of core code of conduct of humanitarian actors. Humanitarian action is by nature supposed to be complementary and supportive of governments in fulfilling humanitarian responsibilities; humanitarian action should not attempt to undermine nor act to supplement state roles (Pringle & Hunt, 2016; UNHCR, 2024b).

The initial relief items supplied by various humanitarian actors to refugees in the emergency phase of refugee arrival in the first country of asylum can qualify as acts of humanitarian action. On the other hand, the approach of local solutions, much as its actors may be similar or the same as in the case of

humanitarian action, aims to create an inclusive environment in the first country of asylum to empower refugees and make them socially and economically resilient and self-reliant for as long as it takes to benefit from any of the three durable solutions of repatriation, resettlement or local integration (Crisp, 2023, p. 14; Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 256; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 6). The approach of local solutions is further elucidated below.

The conceptualized notion of development style settlements predicated upon the idea of local solutions has been set into motion (Crisp, 2023, pp. 13–14; Jansen & Bruijne, 2020) and has already been adopted in some countries in the global south. For instance, settlements in Uganda and Kenya, where the governments of these host countries have demonstrated the willingness to allow activities inside the settlements that surpass humanitarian aid (exemplified by activities in Nakivale and Kalobeyei settlements in Uganda and Kenya, respectively), have been sites of much focus by academic and policy researchers and analysts (Omata & Kaplan, 2013). These settlements are often illustrated in reports and publications as different entities from known conventional enclosed and restricted refugee camps, such as the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya (Omata & Kaplan, 2013).

There are obvious important benefits in advocating for a more planned and development-style settlement, which also involve heightening interaction and engagement with local communities and recognition that refugees will most probably stay in the settlement for a relatively long time (Crisp, 2023, pp. 13–14; Hovil, 2016). However, despite reasonable freedom and acknowledgement of the above facts, restrictions on refugee mobility are not suspended, and political opportunities and interactions with state structures and the broader community remain restricted (Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 257). Uganda has taken this self-style development approach further in its 2006 Refugees Act and 2010 Refugees Regulations that grant refugees freedom to move, the right to work, the right to start a business, and access to social services such as health and education, just like Ugandan nationals.

States are also aware that these local solutions of refugee resilience and sustainable livelihood are partially or fully funded by international donors or as part of wider policies of containing refugees within the global south and bar them from further mobility to the north (Chimni, 2002). Indeed, whereas Uganda refugee policies are outstanding and a transformative model in this local space/solution, it is still worth noting that most of its decisions have been influenced and adopted partly as a wider strategy of engagement with the international community that is interested in supporting and maintaining Uganda's reputation and ensuring that its government accesses its desired foreign development and humanitarian assistance (Hovil, 2018). Because of that, its 'transformative' policies have effectually consolidated the settlement model approach and beefed up the notion that repatriation is the sole feasible durable solution; while local integration has been continuously obstructed, in spite of the great attention on augmenting *de facto* integration (local solution) of refugee services into the national system.

Furthermore, in relation to this novel advocacy for local solutions, the growing use of policy jargon such as self-reliance and resilience, and the enactment of policies based on these concepts, has emerged as a comfortable replacement for local integration by international donors, UN agencies, and host countries (Crisp, 2023, pp. 13–14; Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 258; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 7). These policies focus on the agency of refugees to mold an environment in which they are able to survive, such as in urban areas, and, at least in policy documents, is an important pathway to local inclusion. It is a fact that international agencies, such as the UNHCR, face challenges that are political and financial in nature in an attempt to execute refugee policy in urban environments. Therefore, it can be argued that these types of inclusionary and integration approaches merely try to get the best from very complicated political environments. 'Yet fundamentally, they also neatly side-step issues relating to both genuine political inclusion of refugees, and state and international agencies' roles in providing international protection for refugees. For example, refugees living in many urban areas in Africa, especially countries that have encampment policies, are still offered little to no assistance by the state or UNHCR' (Crisp, 2023, p. 14; Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 258; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, pp. 6–7). Uganda, however, stands out with its open-door policy – the 2006 Refugees Act and the 2010 Refugees Regulations – and many refugees living in urban areas seem to be faring well economically and are not interested in humanitarian aid (Omata & Kaplan, 2013; Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023).

The justification of these approaches is hinged on the 'resilience' of refugees, with both states and UNHCR embracing the policies of non-interference in urban areas. If refugees choose to do away with

the aid channeled to them in the various refugee camps in Africa and move to towns and cities, they are now on their own, self-integrating and providing for themselves (Hovil, 2016). This understanding of urban refugees shifts the responsibility of acquiring belonging and citizenship away from the host state, UNHCR, and donors as provided for in the 1951 Refugee Convention and places that responsibility onto the refugees themselves (Hovil & Maple, p. 259). In short, local solutions aspire to make refugees economically self-reliant and resilient, independent of humanitarian aid, make refugees stay in the first asylum country for as long as they require protection, de facto integrate into the host communities and away from the camps and settlements, especially in urban areas and rural host communities, such as in Uganda, even if they are not naturalized but with a possible expectation of a durable solution, especially local integration.

The neglect of local integration and the emergence of local solutions

Local integration that is essentially about acquiring new citizenship in the country of asylum (Hovil et al., 2014), has long been globally viewed as a forgotten durable solution to refugees due to the ambivalence of governments throughout the world to grant refugees novel citizenship (Jacobsen, 2001). In examining ways in which governments circumvent local integration, Hovil and Maple (2022) argue that local integration is not simplistically forgotten, but intentionally evaded nationally, regionally, and internationally, and because of that, its reality as a durable solution for many refugees is questionable. They further contend that local integration is not only seemingly forgotten, but appeared to be replaced by options such as 'livelihoods projects' and 'self-reliance' that have continuously been discussed in lieu of 'local integration' both in policy arenas and research agendas (Crisp, 2023, p. 14; Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 239; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 7).

Although local integration as a durable solution might have been unremembered or may be relegated in the background in the dimension of policy, it is not forgotten by refugees: refugees have navigated spaces for integration irrespective of the policy environment and, in some regards, this new integration has brought into oblivion the existence of de facto integration/local solutions (Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 239). For example, the attention of academic research by many researchers of countries in the global south, popularly known as the majority world (Alam, 2008; Punch, 2016) has changed in the last decade and a half ago from examining international agencies such as the UNHCR and host countries in establishing and running refugee camps to researching the perspectives of refugees in urban and semi-urban areas (Bloch & Dona, 2018; Landau, 2018). This significant scholarly work and shift demonstrate a growing acknowledgement of the various mechanisms that refugees devise and forge ways of engaging with host communities and markets so that they can achieve their desired individual and economic goals, generally outside the realm of official state policies and the international refugee regime (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2015; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh & Daley, 2018; Hovil, 2016; Subulwa, 2019). In reality, when academic researchers and policymakers discuss 'local integration', they often allude to these localized forms of self-settlement instead of local integration as a legally recognized global durable solution (Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 239). Researchers have paid more attention to the ways refugees use their agency and mobility to overcome policy challenges and obstacles to be locally accepted – de facto integration (Landau et al., 2014; Porter et al., 2009; Subulwa, 2019; Varsanyi, 2006). Much as de facto integration is critical and should be given importance by directing a focus on it, local integration as an official, global durable solution should not be forgotten in academic and policy research (Hovil & Maple, 2022).

Local integration as a durable solution that is essentially about acquiring new citizenship in the country of asylum – gaining novel citizenship through naturalization – has become increasingly problematic for countries and the global refugee regime (Hovil et al., 2014). A mixture of national and international processes has effectively eroded local integration as a durable solution to the extent that it has virtually disappeared. At its center, this divulges the truth that people hesitate to recognize. First, despite the constant international focus on refugee repatriation, numerous refugees will never return to their home countries (Adelman & Barkan, 2011; Long, 2013) as explained in the earlier voluntary repatriation section of this paper with examples of Rwandan and South Sudanese refugees who are de facto integrated in Uganda and are not willing to return to their countries of origin. Second, states have become increasingly opposed to seeing the majority of international migrants as temporary visitors. In fact, the pattern

reflects a wider global trend of the slow downward trajectory of permanent solutions and a rise in the precarious conditions of numerous international migrants (Bloch & Dona, 2018; Landau et al., 2018; Paret & Gleeson, 2016).

In summary, although the idea of local integration remained embedded in the 1951 Refugee Convention, its practical execution depends on the government and, as such, remains like a south-north game: donor countries merely get financially committed when they are worried about refugee closeness to their territorial borders (even in this situation, they only get committed occasionally and for a short time), and states in the global south hosting most of the refugees have evaded long-range commitment that involves granting citizenship to refugees within the framework of international pledges and pressures from home (Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 264), and other obstacles to rolling out local integration as explained in the 'local integration' section of this article. This political circumvention of local integration as a durable solution (in conjunction with minimal resettlement programs) and adopting short-term interventions that do not seriously consider the reality of protracted refugee situations engenders a lack of stability for all parties. The majority of world states are trying to make a downturn in their responsibilities towards refugees while avoiding being looked at as primary hosting states, yet are involuntarily hosting higher numbers considering the piling impact of different refugee populations without long-lasting solutions, and countries in the global north have to continuously foot exorbitant bills as they intervene in the rising numbers of migrants using risky routes to arrive on the shores of minority world countries. For refugees, the lack of assurance it brings on top of a lack of efficiency and minimal resources is basically a deterioration in their welfare and host communities. Because of this uncertain official commitment from responsible south-north governments, refugees continue to create their own networks and connections in the local host communities (as explained in the 'voluntary repatriation' section of this article), while the hope of being officially and permanently locally integrated within the international framework of durable solutions remains very slim (Hovil & Maple, 2022, pp. 264–265; UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 7).

This volatile situation affirms that local integration remains one of the legally provided durable solutions in the 1951 Refugee Convention, although its practical execution has been avoided by concerned parties. Due to political evasion and refusal to meaningfully apply local integration to address the issue of protracted refugee situations, short-term and temporary interventions – so-called local solutions or *de facto* integration – have been encouraged and adopted to temporarily address the reality of protracted refugee situations. However, the fact remains that the local solution is not local integration, nor is it a permanent or durable solution; it is simply a step towards a possible permanent solution (Crisp, 2023, p. 14). It is a non-permanent and imperfect response to refugee displacement that has apparently turned out to be more acceptable, and most parties seem to be comfortable with it as a workable north-south compromise. Local solutions are generally viewed as a transitional period of hosting refugees in asylum countries, with the hope that refugees will eventually be granted one of the three permanent solutions, most preferably local integration.

Conclusion and the implications for refugees in protracted situations

The conceptual framework (Mooney et al., 2007) that provides refugees' expectations concerning the three durable solutions was used as a guiding lens in this study. The framework emphasizes the hope of achieving a durable solution as the key element for refugees, providing socioeconomic and political conditions that are necessary to successfully achieve durable solutions for refugees, and recognizing the ideal expectation that the refugee situation comes to a close when one of the durable solutions is attained and the needs that arise due to being in refugee status stop. However, as revealed in this article, the number of resettled refugees remains low. Moreover, the majority of refugees do not want to or are unable to return to their country of origin for the reasons discussed in this article; yet, the host countries in the developing world, particularly in Africa, do not want to naturalize refugees.

What then do these complexities mean for refugees in protracted situations? The fact remains that, in the absence of invoking the three durable solutions, refugees have to remain in the asylum country for an unforeseeable future and survive, yet the combination of global, national, and local processes and powers has effectually connived to remove local integration as a durable solution and only remain in name. How does it affect long-staying refugees in the first asylum country who are struggling to make

a living for themselves and their families after displacement? This is reliant on individual refugees because they are heterogeneous.

For some refugees, the option of local integration as a durable solution does not hold much importance. Numerous refugees and forcibly displaced migrants in some areas of the Global South are disinterested in local integration as an option for durable solutions than might be conventionally thought of in Europe (Hovil, 2016; Landau, 2018). Some refugees are not interested in integrating or viewing host states as homes at all, especially urban refugees who live outside formal reception structures like camps and settlements (Landau, 2018). Most of them will never become traditional refugees: some prefer to disregard the global refugee regime altogether and live invisibly, but rather look at their dwelling places – cities or towns – as valuable assets or resources that give them the opportunity to achieve their personal and economic goals. Other refugees feel compelled to remain invisible because of many obstacles, live secretly in towns and cities, and ignore established state structures and the global refugee framework (Frischkorn, 2015; Greyling, 2016; Landau, 2006; 2014).

For some refugees, there are different types of integration or acceptance in different state structures. In other areas, refugees and other forcibly displaced migrants achieve localized forms of acceptance through local networks and relationships within migrant and host communities, usually without any assistance from state structures (Hovil, 2016; Landau, 2018). For example, numerous South Sudanese refugees living outside the official settlements in northern Uganda operate through local kinship networks (Hovil, 2016). They look for ways to navigate around even if they lack national belonging, although using compromises that are always not the best and ineffectual. Others are helped to survive through kinship and ethnic ties in Uganda because of earlier migration and ethnic connections (Opono & Ahimbisibwe, 2023).

However, for many refugees, failure to be documented and being unable to plan long-term in the host society remain deeply problematic. This can be evidenced by observing long lines in the UNHCR offices or host country's refugee reception centers in urban areas to provide an understanding of the significance of being documented and officially protected under international law (Mfubu, 2017). The fact that they are not permanently in a solution affects all areas of their lives – where they can reside, what employment (if it exists) is available to them, where their children can access education, and the attitude of the citizens towards them in their communities (Hovil, 2016).

What can be primarily pointed out is Hobson's choice the situation signifies. Irrespective of the individual goals and intentions of the refugees, these many dimensions of local solutions, acceptance, or struggling to achieve personal and economic goals remain impermanent and, to some extent, not stable. Ultimately, these forms of localized models, which are important and used by numerous individual refugees, are still engulfed within broader geopolitical hierarchies, namely state-prescribed refugee reception policies (Jaworsky et al., 2012).

This instability in refugee hosting, especially in Africa and more generally similar to global trends, implies that refugee policies are prone to maneuvers and pressures in local politics. Therefore, minus the solution of naturalization or long-range national recognition (with supporting legal, political, and social entitlements) within the asylum state, the conditions of refugees continue to be of poor quality. As they move back and forth, sometimes on government orders, between or from camps to towns and vice versa, as evidenced in Zambia, Malawi, and Kenya (Bakewell, 2000; 2014; Frischkorn, 2017; Kateta, 2021; The Sentinel Project, 2021; UNHCR, 2004b).

Conclusively, the shrinking of the three conventional durable solutions of repatriation, resettlement, and local integration generally places refugees in an ongoing process of devising ways of bargaining their own access to goods and job markets within these political maneuvers, but they succeed in this, in contrast to the wider policy environment that is intended to avoid helping refugees to integrate officially (Hovil & Maple, 2022, p. 262). However, this local solution that gives refugees the opportunity to become resilient and self-reliant provides a temporary window of survival for a longer period in the absence of durable solutions. Therefore, national governments and the international community should work together to protect and empower refugees in this regard by guaranteeing their freedom to live, as in Uganda's case, with favorable refugee policies, while being backed by the international community. Although local solutions provide temporary relief to protracted refugee situations, it is not a permanent solution. As member states reaffirmed their commitment to the Global Compact on Refugees, to

facilitate access to the three conventional durable solutions (UNHCR & ICVA, 2021, p. 6), it is important for the international community – the global north states and the global south countries – not to negate their responsibilities, but to keep engaging each other and devise creative ways of supporting refugees and sharing responsibility of hosting refugees, and plan for appropriate mechanisms of applying the formal international durable solutions in the long run, in order to ultimately tackle the challenges of the ever-increasing number of refugees in protracted situations.

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Authors' contributions

Samuel Opono conceived the research idea and designed it, collected secondary data, analyzed and interpreted the data, and came up with the first draft of the paper. Frank Ahimbisibwe collected secondary data, analyzed it and critically revised the draft to ensure academic and intellectual content. The final version was agreed upon by both Samuel and Frank.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [S.O], upon reasonable request.

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