



DMU



AJIDS

## The Social and Political Impacts of Sherkole Camp Refugees to the Host Communities, Benishangul Gumuz Regional State, Western Ethiopia

Adane Mengist Tessema<sup>1,\*</sup>, Ayal Wasie Yalew<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Civic and Ethical Studies, College of Social Science and Humanities, Debre Markos University, Debre Markos, Ethiopia.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Ethiopian Language Studies, College of Social Science and Humanities, Debre Markos University, Ethiopia.

\*Corresponding author email: [adanemengist@gmail.com](mailto:adanemengist@gmail.com)/ [adane\\_mengist@dmu.edu.et](mailto:adane_mengist@dmu.edu.et)

### Abstract

*A nation that accommodates a significant influx of refugees is likely to encounter various socio-economic and political ramifications. Ethiopia has functioned as a refuge for a substantial number of individuals fleeing from various neighboring nations, attributable to its geopolitical positioning within the volatile region of the Horn of Africa. Utilizing a qualitative methodology coupled with a descriptive case study framework, this research scrutinized the social and political ramifications of refugees on the host communities, focusing specifically on the Shrekole Refugee Camp located in the Benishangul Gumuz Region of Western Ethiopia. The implications of the refugee presence on the host populations' access to health services, educational opportunities, security, and governance matters have been meticulously examined. In particular, an effort was made to evaluate the contributions of local administrative bodies and supportive organizations in fostering social cohesion between the host community and the refugees residing at the camp. To achieve this, a combination of primary and secondary data was gathered through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, observational techniques, and document analysis. Both thematic and document analysis methods were employed in the study. The results indicated that refugees exert both beneficial and detrimental socio-political influences on the host communities. The host population gains access to social services and benefits from shared knowledge and experiences as a consequence of the refugee influx. However, the fundamental elements that underpin societal cohesion, such as trust, cooperation, belonging, and inclusivity, have experienced decline. Politically, the presence of refugees has been correlated with heightened insecurity, ethnic strife, and tensions in the study region. Despite the existence of numerous local, national, and international organizations, including NGOs, that are operational in the area to assist refugees, their efforts have been criticized as insufficient and occasionally lacking in responsiveness. Therefore, integrated action is imperative in such vulnerable regions to mitigate the socio-political consequences and promote harmonious coexistence.*

**Keywords:** Refugees, Socio-political impacts, host communities

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Background of the Study

Refugees are individuals who traverse international frontiers in pursuit of safety from armed conflict, violations of human rights, and the imperative for protection against persecution (UNHCR, n.d; Sarah, 2018). The legal and international characterization of refugees is codified in Article 1 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, which was ratified by the General Assembly of the United Nations, along with its 1967 Protocol, as follows:

‘A refugee is a person who, due to a well-founded apprehension of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, affiliation with a specific social group, or political opinion, is situated outside the territory of his nationality and is either incapable of or, as a result of such fear, unwilling to seek the protection of that nation’ (UNHCR, 2015, p.3).

Across the globe, there exists a staggering population of 25.9 million refugees, of which 52% are individuals under the age of 18. The total count of internally displaced persons (IDPs) resulting from violence and conflict has similarly escalated to 41.3 million (IOM, 2020). In this context, Ethiopia emerged as the nation with the highest number of IDPs, totalling 2.9 million in 2018, attributable to a surge in violence and conflict (ibid).

The substantial influx of refugees poses significant challenges not only to developing nations with constrained financial and

administrative resources but also to developed nations (Schneiderheinze and Lucke, 2020). “The majority of the contemporary mass movements of refugees are instigated by ethnic conflict, natural disasters, and the exacerbation of socio-economic disparities” (Birhanu and Desta, 2018).

The scale of the refugee inflow in recent years has elicited urgent global concern, particularly in regions such as the Horn of Africa, South Africa, and more recently in Syria, Iraq, and the Sudan, which are commonly regarded as facing an unprecedented crisis (Kirui and Mwaruvie, 2012). The Horn of Africa is distinguished by its significant number of IDPs and refugees, with numerous countries in the subregion grappling with this issue as of 2018 (IOM, 2020).

According to the findings presented by the International Rescue Committee (2014), from December 2013 to October 2014, approximately five hundred thousand South Sudanese individuals migrated across borders to seek refuge in adjacent nations, including Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, and the Sudan.

The Federal Government of Ethiopia generally adopts a policy of maintaining accessible borders for refugees pursuing asylum within its territory. As a signatory to both the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1969 OAU Convention, the Ethiopian government extends protections to refugees emanating from over thirteen nations, with a predominant proportion originating from

neighboring countries such as South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and the Sudan (UNHCR, 2014).

Despite Ethiopia serving as a host for a significant and progressively increasing influx of refugees, the focus on the socio-economic ramifications within the nation remains markedly insufficient. The limited research conducted is primarily undertaken by funding entities and institutions from developed nations (IMO, 2020). In light of this gap, the present study aims to evaluate the social and political ramifications of the refugee population in the Sherkole area within the host communities.

## **1.2.Statement of the Problem**

Ethiopia possesses a protracted history of accommodating refugees from adjacent nations, similar to the fact that Ethiopian refugees are also received in various other countries (Carver, 2020; Ethiopia Country Refugee Response Plan, 2020-2021). It ranks among the top ten nations globally in terms of refugee reception (IOM, 2020). Following the enactment of its revised refugee legislation in 2019, an open-door policy was instituted, thereby codifying the rights of refugees to gain employment and reside outside of designated camps, access social and financial services, and register significant life events, inclusive of births and marriages (FDRE, 2019).

The circumstances in the neighboring countries to the west of Ethiopia have been deteriorating since 2011 and even prior, attributable to various tribal conflicts, particularly in South Sudan. This scenario renders the Benishangul Gumuz and Gambella regional states particularly

vulnerable to substantial inflows of refugees (IRCS, 2012). Consequently, as of March 2020, Ethiopia ranks second in Africa in terms of the number of refugees hosted. It provides sanctuary to 758,199 refugees, predominantly originating from South Sudan, Somalia, Eritrea, and the Sudan (IOM, 2019; Vemuru et al, 2020).

Approximately 380,000 South Sudanese refugees reside within the borders of Ethiopia (ADB, 2018). “Since the onset of extensive violence in mid-2016, South Sudan has consistently occupied the position of the third-largest country of origin for refugees, with an estimated 2.3 million individuals recorded by the end of 2018” (IOM, 2020; p.39). Consequently, this positions Ethiopia among the top ten nations globally in terms of hosting refugees (ADB, 2018). As of June 2020, the Benishangul Gumuz National Regional State of Ethiopia reported a total of 65,513 persons of concern (POC), of which 33.2% were identified as refugees from South Sudan (UNHCR, n.d). Thus, South Sudanese individuals represent the predominant refugee demographic within Ethiopia (Ethiopia Country Refugee Response Plan, 2020-2021).

The discourse surrounding the ramifications of refugee influx on neighbouring and host communities is well-established within international relations. On a global scale, nations accommodating large populations of refugees encounter a spectrum of socio-economic repercussions (Jacobsen, 2002; Schneiderheinze and Lucke, 2020). These repercussions may manifest as either detrimental or beneficial. A significant body of scholarship posits that refugees exert both negative and positive influences on host

communities. In this context, theorists such as John Rawls, through his justice theory, advocate for the opening of national borders to migrants based on the principle of global egalitarianism. He contended that all individuals, including refugees, should be afforded equal opportunities, perceiving their presence in a favourable light. Conversely, proponents of cultural nationalism assert that refugees pose a threat to the socio-economic and political stability of host nations (Sarah, 2018). For example, existing literature indicates that intragroup tensions between host populations and refugees, as well as among refugees themselves, are pronounced in the Gambella, Benishangul, and Somali regions of Ethiopia (Vemuru et al, 2020). Therefore, this study endeavours to evaluate the various impacts of refugees as evidenced within the study area through empirical research.

Although there exists a substantial body of research pertaining to migration and the affairs of refugees over the past two years, the majority of these research outputs are predominantly associated with institutions located in developed nations, despite the fact that the issue is equally pressing in developing countries (IOM, 2020). The studies conducted in western Ethiopia by UNHCR and related organizations have predominantly concentrated on the conditions within refugee camps and the specific needs and challenges faced by the refugees themselves, while the ramifications, particularly the social and political effects that refugees exert on the host communities, remain inadequately explored. For instance, Alix-Garcia et al. (2017) undertook a study examining the economic implications of hosting refugees

from the perspective of the host community in Turkana, revealing that refugees play a significant economic role and that there exists a dynamic interplay between the two groups. Additionally, another study was carried out in Kenya, entitled "Exploring the Impacts of Refugee Camps on Host Communities," which investigated how diversity impacts host communities and its correlation with the refugee population, specifically focusing on the Kakuma host community in 2013.

Fajth et al. (2019) conducted an investigation into the influence of refugees on the social dynamics within host communities, specifically examining the case of Congolese refugees in Rwanda; Vemuru et al. (2020) analyzed the repercussions of refugee populations on host communities in Ethiopia through a social lens; Getachew (2009) undertook a Master's thesis focused on the effects of refugees on the woodland resources surrounding the Sherkole Refugee Camp; Birhanu and Desta (2018) executed a comprehensive study regarding the socio-economic ramifications of refugees on adjacent nations, specifically addressing the Sherkole Refugee Camp in Western Ethiopia, elucidating both the beneficial and detrimental effects of refugees on the social and economic fabric of host communities. While the latter two studies were centered on the Sherkole Refugee Camp, the former underscores the environmental consequences of refugee presence, whereas the latter exhibits a deficiency in robust theoretical frameworks and is not bolstered by recent empirical findings. Fajth et al. (2019) posited that, in addition to the potential risks posed to social cohesion, the social repercussions of

refugees on host communities remain insufficiently explored. Moreover, the political ramifications of refugee populations on host communities have also not been adequately examined. The temporal disparity further constitutes a significant variable affecting the generation of divergent outcomes. Consequently, this study aims to evaluate the social and political effects of refugees on the host community in the vicinity of the Sherkole Refugee Camp.

This research will hold significant relevance for both national and international partner institutions, scholars, and policy advisors engaged in the discourse surrounding displacement phenomena, and, notably, for the Ethiopian government, given that the Benishangul-Gumuz region houses the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) while concurrently being identified as one of the precarious areas characterized by recurrent incidents of mass violence and forced displacements. For example, OCHA (2018) indicated that there are approximately 70,000 individuals displaced within the confines of the Kamashi Zone in the region.

### **1.3. Objectives of the Study**

The primary aim of this investigation was to evaluate the socio-political ramifications of refugees on the host populations within Benishangul-Gumuz, focusing specifically on the case study of the Sherkole refugee camp in Western Ethiopia. In this context, the implications of the refugee presence on the host community's access to healthcare, education, security, and governance issues have been meticulously examined. Furthermore, a concerted effort was made to analyze the contributions of local

administrative entities and support organizations in fostering social cohesion between the host community and the refugees residing within the camp.

### **1.4. Theoretical Perspectives**

There exist two predominant perspectives regarding the phenomenon of immigration. The initial perspective is pro-immigration, which garners support from global egalitarians and libertarians. John Rawls' Theory of Justice, grounded in egalitarian principles, articulates that immigration should be predicated upon the principle of equality of opportunity for all individuals, irrespective of their citizenship status. Rawls posited that migrants are often unaware of their eventual destination; rather, they tend to gravitate towards nations that uphold fundamental liberties for all, which necessitates the existence of open borders (Sarah, 2018). In this regard, the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2020) documented that migrants consistently express a preference for destinations characterized by superior developmental conditions compared to their countries of origin. Conversely, cultural nationalists adopt an anti-immigration stance, perceiving immigration as a potential threat to their national identity (Sarah, 2018). Marxist scholars, such as Wallerstein (1974) as referenced by Meyers (2000), assert that migration is primarily stimulated by capitalist forces in the context of developmental dynamics, predicting an escalation in labour migration in the foreseeable future. The theory of globalization contends that immigration policies are eroding the sovereignty of nation-states (Meyers, 2000). In a similar vein, the realist perspective advocates for a

stringent approach to immigration, placing considerable emphasis on issues of conflict and security, which are deemed to constitute 'high politics' (Ibid). Cultural nationalists, Marxists, proponents of globalization theories regarding migration, and realists collectively argue that governments tend to impede or reverse immigration flows during periods of economic downturn.

## **2. Research Methodology**

### **2.1. Description of the Study Area**

This investigation was undertaken within the Benishangul-Gumuz Regional State, specifically in the Homosha *Woreda*, situated in the western region of Ethiopia (refer to Map 1). This *Woreda* constitutes one of the 20 administrative divisions within the region and is positioned approximately 40 kilometres from Asossa, the designated regional capital. The geographical boundaries of the *Woreda* intersect with the Kurmuk *Woreda* to the west, Mengie *Woreda* to the northeast, and Assosa *Woreda* to the east. The administrative center of the *woreda* is identified as Homosha Town. The administrative structure of Homosha *Woreda* is delineated into 15 rural *kebeles*, encompassing a total population of 26,268 individuals (comprising 5,280 households), of which 12,871 are male and 13,397 are female.

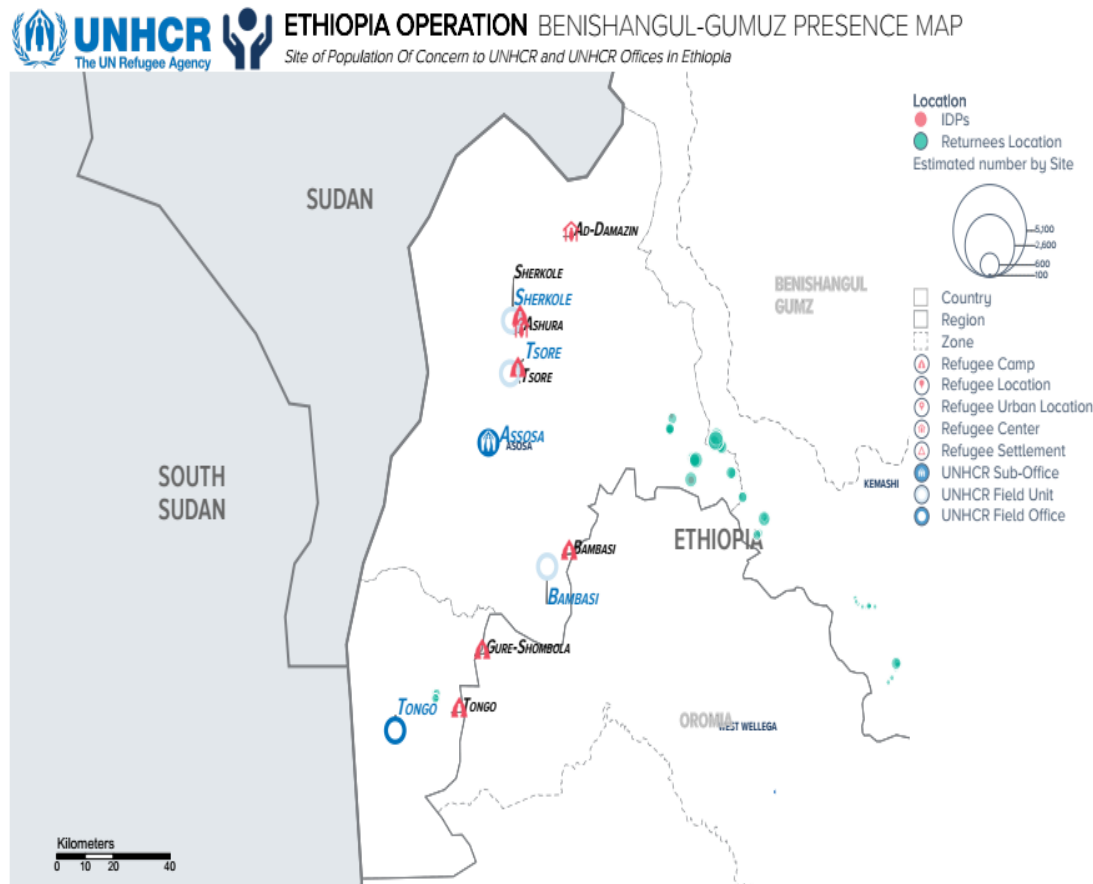
Within this context, there exist Sherkole, Bambasi, Tongo, and Tsore refugee camps, which collectively accommodate a significant influx of emigrants, predominantly originating from the Sudan and South Sudan. The site selected for this study was the Sherkole refugee camp, purposefully chosen due to its accessibility

to transportation and the relative stability which facilitates the data collection process in comparison to alternative locations. According to the report published by the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS) in 2012, the Sherkole refugee camp has been serving as a refuge for Sudanese individuals since 1997. It has continued to operate as additional camps were established, responding to the substantial influx of refugees from both Southern and Northern Sudan, along with some from the Great Lakes region. Due to the persistent absence of peace in Southern and Northern Sudan, the Sherkole camp continues to be home to 11,508 refugees from the Sudan and other nationalities on a regular basis, as documented by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 2018.

### **2.2. Research Approach and Design**

A qualitative methodology employing a descriptive case study framework is deemed suitable for the present investigation. Given that case studies facilitate a comprehensive examination of specific events, as articulated by Yin (2003) and referenced by Baxter and Jack (2010), they provide a holistic and nuanced comprehension of interventions or phenomena within the authentic contexts in which they transpire. Kumar (2011) articulated that a case may encompass an individual, community, institution, event, subgroup of a population, or even a town or city. Consequently, in this instance, the focus is placed on refugees and the adjacent communities residing near the Sherkole camp,

## Map1: Refugee Camps in Benishangul-Gumuz, Western Ethiopia



Source: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/83159>

serving as a pertinent example to elucidate the actual circumstances regarding potential social and political ramifications.

### 2.3. Sources of Data and Sampling Procedures

Both primary and secondary data were meticulously gathered from a variety of sources. Primary data was obtained through the implementation of interviews, key informant consultations, non-participant observations, and focus group discussions (FGD), while secondary data was derived from an extensive review of scholarly articles, books, academic journals, magazines, newspapers, and reports produced by both local and international institutions operating within the research

domain, including entities such as the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS), the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and regional governmental sectors.

A semi-structured interview was conducted with community elders and refugee representatives who were purposefully selected based on their relevant expertise concerning the issue being examined. Consequently, a total of 11 participants (which included three *kebele* administrators, representatives from donor organizations, farmers, civil servants, and refugees) were engaged through a semi-structured interview format. Furthermore, key informants were

utilized, as outlined by G. Egziabher (n.d.), wherein knowledgeable community leaders or administrative personnel at varying levels, along with one or two well-informed members of the target demographic, can serve as key informants. A total of five key informant interviews were conducted.

Two focus group discussions (FGDs), one involving the host community and the other comprising refugees, were organized to gather data on the impact of the refugee influx on the socio-political conditions of the local populace. A cohort of 10 discussants, which represents the optimal number for FGDs as identified by Morgan (1988) and cited by Adams et al. (2012), participated, and efforts were made to ensure the homogeneity of the group.

The secondary data obtained from various sources were subjected to thorough document analysis. The primary data acquired through interviews, key informants, observations, and FGDs were analyzed using descriptive methodologies, where, according to Yin (2003), as referenced by Baxter and Jack (2010), there exists a capacity to observe and articulate the actual phenomena present in the field. Therefore, within the broader context of refugees, the research focused on the social and political ramifications of these individuals on the host community.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

#### **3.1. Short Profile of the Sherkole Refugee Camp**

The camp was instituted in 1997 to provide shelter for both internally displaced persons (IDPs) and foreign refugees from the Sudan who were relocated from the Gambella

region due to the overcrowding resulting from the independence conflict in South Sudan in 2011. As of January 31, 2018, there were 11,826 officially registered refugees residing in the camp, with 56% of this population being individuals under the age of 18. The camp is systematically organized into six distinct zones, which are further subdivided into 45 blocs (UNHCR, 2018). Despite the presence of numerous partner organizations associated with UNHCR (such as ARRA, IOM, IRC, NRC, WFP, SCI, etc.) operating in the area, the insufficient provision of essential social services, including education, food, and domestic energy supply, remains a significant concern (UNHCR, 2018). According to ARRA (2016), as referenced by Vemuru et al. (2020), the current demographic of refugees at Sherkole camp predominantly comprises individuals from South Sudan, the Sudan, Eritrea, Congo, Burundi, Uganda, and Tanzania. This indicates that the camp is characterized by a rich diversity.

#### **3.2. Social Impacts of Refugees to the Host Communities at Sherkole Camp**

Examining the ramifications of refugees on the social dimensions of life presents a formidable challenge, primarily due to the lack of a standardized, theoretically grounded conceptualization of social cohesion (Guay, 2015, as cited in Fajth et al., 2019). The presence of refugees within the Sherkole camp exerts an influence on the social fabric of the host community. These ramifications may manifest in both positive and negative forms. Before elucidating such impacts, it is essential to delineate the components constituting these social



dimensions. Guay (2015), as referenced by Fajth (2019), identified that the principles of inclusivity, cooperation, a sense of belonging, trust, and robust, affirmative relationships epitomize the characteristics of a socially cohesive society. This investigation will assess the contexts in which these elements of the social dimension have emerged, either in a positive or negative manner.

The data gathered from focus group discussions (FGDs) with members of the host communities at Sherkole indicate that the escalating influx of refugees over time exacerbates social challenges, including but not limited to prostitution and alcoholism, and instigates socio-cultural transformations that engender a contested sense of identity, alongside heightened visibility of ethnic, religious, racial, linguistic, and ideological conflicts between refugee populations and host communities. Furthermore, incidents of homicide and the susceptibility of women to sexual abuse and community exploitation due to inflation have intensified. In a parallel manner, the FGDs conducted with refugees reveal that while they have yet to encounter violent confrontations, they do witness social issues such as alcoholism, prostitution, and minor criminal activities like theft. Additionally, they noted that host communities occasionally exhibit a lack of trust toward refugees, albeit this sentiment is not uniformly reflected across the broader population. The research conducted by Vemuru et al. (2020) corroborated the findings from the FGDs, revealing that "South Sudanese are least likely to report positive relationships with hosts" (p.12).

Another investigation conducted by Birhanu and Desta (2018) in conjunction with UNHCR (2018) confirms that refugees have been involved in 'unauthorized movements seeking casual employment,' which includes the appropriation of crops and livestock belonging to host communities, thereby undermining inter-community trust and collaboration. The rationale for this phenomenon, as articulated by UNHCR (2018), lies in the erratic and insufficient provision of food resources. Furthermore, Birhanu and Desta (2018) elucidated that there existed animosity between local populations and refugees concerning the exploitation of natural resources, with refugees reportedly expropriating local assets due to the diminished rations allocated to them. Guyatt et al. (2018), as referenced by Vemuru (2020), identified that the pronounced socioeconomic disparities between refugees and host communities constitute a pivotal factor underlying this hostility. Additionally, he noted that refugees from South Sudan exhibit the highest rates of poverty when compared to other refugee cohorts.

Nevertheless, refugees do not solely exert detrimental effects on their host communities. The social ramifications of migration, according to Vemuru (2020), are variegated across and within the regions that host refugees. These effects are contingent upon 'the region's historical context of displacement, the diversity of communities that have settled, engaged in trade, and interacted; as well as the nature of development and humanitarian responses to the prevailing issues' (p. 11). The subsequent paragraphs will delineate the beneficial impacts of refugees on host

communities, with particular emphasis on the transmission of knowledge and technology, as well as health-related considerations.

### **3.2.1. Refugees as Sources of Knowledge and Technology Transfer**

An interview conducted with a representative from ARRA elucidated the affirmative implications of refugees on local populations in relation to social dynamics. He articulated that "refugees contribute new competencies, knowledge, expertise, and perspectives to the host communities. These competencies may differ, yet those of the more educated refugees, including health professionals and educators, despite their limited numbers; have played a pivotal role in outreach initiatives even in the most remote areas of the local populace" (KI(1), December 2019, Sherkole).

The influx of refugees into Sherkole Camp has been accompanied by significant investments in the Benishangul-Gumuz region (Vemuru et al., 2020). Beyond the refugees' expertise and capabilities, the host communities indirectly benefit from the social services rendered by donors. The UNHCR and its affiliates are endeavouring to deliver fundamental services not solely to the refugee demographic but also to the adjacent local communities (UNHCR, n.d).

### **3.2.2. Health-Related Impacts**

Collier (2003), as referenced in Grace (2013), posited that refugees can represent a potential source of negative public health implications, with detrimental effects on the host nations. Refugee camps frequently exhibit overcrowding and unsanitary

conditions, thereby fostering environments conducive to the proliferation of infectious diseases; the influx of refugees places additional strain on domestic medical resources, diverts health resources from standard care, and introduces specific health requirements stemming from war-related trauma that may surpass the capacity of the host community. Furthermore, various studies have indicated that refugees have played a role in the transmission of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, Malaria, and diarrhoea, among other infectious ailments (p.6). However, the circumstances at Sherkole Camp exhibit notable distinctions. Guyatt et al. (2018), as cited by Vemuru et al. (2020), discovered that although refugees reside in substandard housing conditions relative to the host population, their access to water, sanitation, health, and educational services is comparable to or even superior to that of households within the host community.

A testimonial from a 34-year-old woman belonging to the host community indicated that "we have good access to health facilities, which were not available prior to the arrival of refugees. Every service expansion here is attributable to the presence of refugees" (KI (2), Sherkole; January 2020). The extant literature has also confirmed that the Sherkole region was characterized by exceedingly inadequate service provision prior to the arrival of refugees (Vemuru et al., 2020).

In addition to sharing common infrastructure, refugees and hosts have engaged in interactions during religious ceremonies and various social events such as weddings, funerals, and sporting events (Vemuru et al., 2020). "Women's

associations comprising both refugees and hosts have united to promote awareness regarding the perils of child marriage and early pregnancy within Sherkole" (Ibid, p.55).

As a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic and other emergent diseases, the apprehensions of the host community are manifestly articulated during the focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants expressed their exasperation, noting that their concerns intensified following the initial report of a COVID-19-positive case in the nation. They indicated a pervasive suspicion towards every refugee, fearing the potential transmission of the virus from their countries of origin. Subsequently, however, partner organizations, including the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) and others, provided various training sessions and implemented protective measures regarding sanitation and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs).

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, n.d.) corroborated findings analogous to the aforementioned observations. Given that the Benishangul-Gumuz region is identified as one of the areas particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, comprehensive preparedness and responsive initiatives, including the establishment of quarantine facilities, have been executed across all refugee zones.

### **3.2.3. Political Impacts of Refugees on the Host Communities**

Although the political ramifications of refugees on host communities, as articulated by Madanat (2013), are contingent upon

various factors including the political relations between the country of origin and the host nation, a plethora of studies indicate that the political and security ramifications of refugees are predominantly detrimental, thereby presenting significant political and security challenges for the governments of host nations. For instance, Omeokachie (2013) illustrates that "high-profile political refugees occasionally act in opposition to the interests of host nations, adversely affecting the internal politics of the host country and the diplomatic relations between the two nations" (p.43).

In a similar vein, Salehyan and Gleditsch (2006:340) contended that "refugees can occasionally constitute a security and political threat to the host country, which can consequently exacerbate tensions in bilateral relations among neighbouring nations." A pertinent example in this context is the involvement of Rwandan Tutsi refugees in Uganda in the ousting of the Milton Obote administration (1980-1985). This situation engenders a collusive dynamic between the host countries and the countries of origin of the refugees.

The political consequences of refugees in the studied region, as articulated by focus group discussion participants from both refugee and host communities, are linked to conflicts over shared property resources; a pervasive sense of insecurity within the host community; and the demands of hosting refugees that drain the time and energy of local government officials; as well as instability, extreme violence, and an augmented risk of civil war. This aligns with the theoretical frameworks of Marxism, realism, and globalization concerning

immigration, positing that the influx of a substantial number of refugees poses a threat to the national security and sovereignty of the host nation.

Abbink (2011), as referenced by Vemuru et al. (2020), articulated that the Benishangul-Gumuz region, even without the additional burden of foreign refugees, has a historical context of insecurity and violence, likely stemming from the preferential treatment afforded to the three ethnic groups of Berta, Gumuz, and Shinasha under the federalism framework. In contrast, the Amhara and Oromo ethnic groups, which represent 21.69% and 13.55% respectively, are excluded from such preferential treatment. Washoma (2003) and Vemuru et al. (2020) have echoed similar sentiments regarding the aforementioned focus group discussion data, asserting that the arrival of refugees exerts a considerable influence on local governance, consumes the time and energy of governmental officials, and places additional strain on the police and judicial systems.

Another fear of FGD discussants, the risk of civil war as a political impact of refugees on the host communities has also been postulated by Atim, (2013) and Sealyham and Gleditsch (2006) saying that refugee inflows from neighbouring states significantly increase the risk of civil war.

The fear of insecurity is a pressing issue not only for the hosts but also for the refugees. An interview with a 56-year-old refugee KI (3) at Sherkole stated that;

*I fled to Benishangul-Gumuz in 2011 because of the conflict in my country (South Sudan) as a result of independence. In the meantime, the*

*situation in the refugee camp was a little bit peaceful. Through time, however, as the number of new refugees increased we encountered different ethnic-based conflicts in the nearby host communities. It is very difficult to easily communicate with the nearby community and many crimes have been committed on us while we are out of the camps (KI (3), October 2020).*

The participants in the focus group discussions have similarly articulated concerns regarding the spillover repercussions of conflicts occurring within host communities on the refugee populations. The empirical evidence presented in the literature indicates that recent years have witnessed escalating tensions in the region, particularly concerning land utilization and investment (Vemuru et al, 2020); conflicts have emerged between the Gumuz and highland communities, notably the Oromo in the years 2007, 2009, and 2011, as well as with the Amhara, which possess ramifications that extend beyond the local inhabitants to encompass the entire nation (Labzae, 2019 cited by Vemuru et al, 2020). In a general analysis, Vemuru et al (2020) articulated that "the conflict between various host groups represents a considerable (if not greater) concern than the conflict between refugees and hosts at the refugee camps situated in Benishangul-Gumuz, Somali, and Gambella" (p.39). However, this assertion does not hold true for other refugee camps located in regions such as Tigray, Afar, Gambella, and Somali, which have historically maintained extensive cross-

border interactions and shared cultural ties (ibid).

### **3.3. Measures Taken by Stakeholders to Mitigate the Socio-Political Impacts of Refugees**

This section presents the roles played by the stakeholders like the local, national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations.

The response to the refugee situation in Ethiopia involves approximately 57 noteworthy operational and implementing partners, which include international governmental entities and non-governmental organizations (ECRRP, 2020-2021). The Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA) serves as the principal entity accountable for the management of refugee camps, which encompasses the provision of protection, sustenance, potable water, and essential services; additionally, it directly oversees educational and healthcare facilities. This agency guarantees the security of the camps, which includes the mediation of disputes that may arise among refugees or between refugees and local host communities (Vemuru et al., 2020; p.123).

Notwithstanding the concerted efforts of these partner organizations to provide humanitarian aid, there persist notable limitations and deficiencies attributable to the escalating influx of refugees. Certain key informants, particularly from the host community, have expressed criticisms towards these organizations, indicating that their interventions contribute to inflation and exacerbate living conditions over time.

The assistance rendered by donors in various forms, both financial and in-kind, is deemed

insufficient, and untimely, and fosters a dependency syndrome among refugees. Recipients have resorted to selling the assets received from donors within the host community, subsequently leading to incidents of theft targeting our properties. It is imperative for donors to offer guidance on the prudent utilization of the funds allocated, rather than merely providing a monthly stipend to the refugees (KI (4), member of the host community, Sherkole). The incorporation of refugees into segregated areas predicated on their nation of origin has been proposed as a strategy to mitigate ethnic tensions; nonetheless, this approach has been inadequately addressed and remains largely unfulfilled (Surafel, 2020). Various livelihood initiatives have been launched by non-governmental organizations, encompassing activities such as tailoring, apiculture, poultry farming, and woodworking, among others (Vemuru et al., 2020). This initiative primarily aims to enhance the integration of refugees within the local populace while alleviating their reliance on external assistance. However, the findings derived from the Semi-structured Interview (SSI (1)) indicate that a significant number of refugees are disinclined to participate in these socio-economic endeavours for three distinct reasons. The first reason pertains to bureaucratic impediments, the second involves a prevailing expectation of imminent repatriation to their native countries, and the third relates to concerns that the cessation of aid may occur once they secure employment in such ventures.

The focus group discussion (FGD) with the refugee population elucidated that they have undergone considerable life skills training;

however, the practical application of the 2019 refugee proclamation in Ethiopia presents significant challenges. Participants articulated that their inability to freely move, engage in employment, and interact with the surrounding community constitutes a substantial obstacle. This situation contradicts the expectations of the Ethiopian government, which posited that the new proclamation would foster independence among refugees, enhance their protection, and facilitate improved community interactions. The stipulations for the employment of foreign nationals, which encompass refugees, are exceedingly arduous, not only for these demographic groups but also for local citizens, as they are often required to possess “special expertise,” to secure work permits, among other prerequisites (Surafel, 2020). Furthermore, various national statutes impede refugees from exercising their right to work. For instance, the Ethiopian civil code, particularly Articles 390-393, explicitly prohibits foreign individuals from obtaining ownership rights over immovable property.

#### **4. Conclusion and Recommendations**

##### **4.1. Conclusion**

The findings of the conducted research indicate that the influx of refugees exerts both beneficial and detrimental influences on the socio-political landscape of the host communities. The introduction of new skills, resources, knowledge, and experiences represents some of the potential advantageous consequences that refugees may confer upon their hosts within the studied region. Following the arrival of refugees, host communities gain improved access to essential public services, such as

educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and potable water, which are often facilitated by the contributions of external donors. Conversely, the presence of refugees has also generated adverse effects on the host populations. The fundamental social constructs of inclusivity, cooperation, belonging, and trust, which are vital to the cohesion of a society, have experienced a decline. A range of social issues, including prostitution, substance abuse, criminal activity, and theft, have escalated as a direct consequence of the refugee presence within the camp.

Beyond the sociopolitical challenges, the region under study has also encountered significant political issues, as the area is strategically important due to the location of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) and the presence of a diverse array of ethnic groups, despite the constitutional provisions that extend preferential treatment solely to the Berta, Shinasha, and Gumuz ethnic communities. A contested sense of identity, along with the heightened visibility of ethnic, religious, racial, linguistic, or ideological conflicts between refugee populations and host communities, as well as the heightened vulnerability of women to sexual abuse and exploitation within the community, represent the principal political ramifications that have arisen from the influx of refugees in Sherkole. Numerous efforts have been undertaken by various local, national, and international governmental organizations and non-governmental organizations to provide assistance to refugees; however, these initiatives have faced criticism for being inadequate, inconsistent, and at times misaligned with the national legislation of the host nation.

## 4.2. Recommendations

Based on the findings, the following points are proposed for future consideration by stakeholders including researchers, policymakers, experts and donors.

- Refugee integration with the host community should be given priority to prevent the outbreak of violent conflicts as the area is home to diversity.
- The stakeholders working in the area should enhance the capacity of refugees to produce their income rather than aid dependents.
- All the activities provided by the stakeholders should be in line with the existing national and international refugee laws.
- Creating continuous awareness, support and professional assistance for both the host and refugees about effective ways of ways social interaction is important.
- The refugee population at Sherkole Camp which is the highest in the region must be relocated to other camps since it loads pressure on the socio-political aspect of host communities. In addition to relocation, the government should also halt or reverse immigrant movements since it is posing threats to the national security and sovereignty of the country unlike the liberal theories and that of John Rawls's egalitarian theory.
- Lastly, all stockholders such as local communities, National and regional governments and NGOs are needed to collaboratively work to improve the socio-political and security conditions of both the refugees and the host.

## 5. References

- Abbink, J. (2011). Ethnic-based federalism and ethnicity in Ethiopia: reassessing the experiment after 20 years. *Journal of Eastern African Studies*, 5(4), 596-618.
- Adams, J., Hafiz T.A. Khan, Raeside, R. and White, D. (2012). *Research methods for graduate business and social science students*. SAGE Publications India.
- African Development Bank (ADB) (2018). *The political economy of South Sudan*.
- Alix Garcia, J. Artuc, E. and Onder, H. (2017). *The economics of hosting refugees a host community perspective from Turkana*. Washington, DC: World Bank.
- Atim, G. (2013). The impact of refugees on conflicts in Africa. *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 14(2), 4-9.
- Baxter, P. and Jack, S. (2010). *Qualitative case study methodology: Study design and implementation for novice researchers*. The qualitative report volume 13 Number 4 December 2008 544-559. McMaster University, West Hamilton, Ontario, Canada <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR13-4/baxter.pdf>.
- Berry, L. (2008). *The impact of environmental degradation on refugee-host relations: a case study from tanzania*. UNHCR, Policy Development and Evaluation Service.
- Carver, F. (2020). *Refugee and host communities in Ethiopia 2018–2019 integrated national study*. UNICEF and the Danish Refugee Council.

- Dereje, F. (2014). The spillover effect of South Sudan in Gambella: refugee influx and ethnic conflicts. *Horn of Africa Bulletin*, 4(7), 24-25.
- International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, IFRC (2012). Emergency appeal operation update. Ethiopia: population movements. Available from [www.ifrc.org](http://www.ifrc.org).
- Fajth, V., Bilgili, Ö., Loschmann, C. and Siegel, M. (2019). How do refugees affect social life in host communities? The case of Congolese refugees in Rwanda. *Comparative Migration Studies* (2019) 7:33 <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40878-019-0139-1>.
- ECRRP (2020-2021). Ethiopia Country Refugee Response Plan.
- FDRE (2019). The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, Federal Nagarit Gazetta, Proclamation No. 1110/2019 Refugees Proclamation, page 11.075. 25<sup>th</sup> year, no. 38. Addis Ababa 27<sup>th</sup> February 2019, Ethiopia.
- G. Egziabher, H.Selasie, G. (n.d). Research methods and analysis for business studies: a holistic approach. College of Business and Economics Mekelle University, Mekelle, Ethiopia.
- IOM (2020). International Organization for Migration World Migration Report. [www.iom.int](http://www.iom.int). Geneva.
- IRC (2014). International Rescue Committee. Uprooted by conflict South Sudan's displacement crisis.
- Jacobsen, K. (2002). Livelihoods in conflict: The pursuit of livelihoods by refugees and the impact on the human security of host communities. *International migration*, Vol. 40, Issues. 5.
- Kirui P., Mwaruvie, J. (2012). The dilemma of hosting refugees: A focus on the insecurity in North Eastern Kenya. *International Journal of Business and social science*, vol.3 No. 8. Center for Promoting Ideas, USA.
- Kumar, R. (2011). *Research methodology, a step-by-step guide for beginners*. (3<sup>rd</sup> edition) SAGE publications Ltd.
- Meyers, E. (2000). Theories of international immigration policy, a comparative analysis. *The international migration review*, Vol. 34. No. 4. Sage Publications.
- OCHA (2018). Humanitarian bulletin Ethiopia. Issue 64, 17-30.
- Omeokachie, I. V. (2013). The security implication of the refugee situation in South Africa. Mini-dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Security Studies (MSS) in the department of political sciences, faculty of humanities, university of Pretoria.
- OAU (1969). Organization of African Unity Convention governing the specific aspects of the refugee problem in Africa. UNHCR, Geneva.



- Sarah, S. (2018). Political theories of migration. Annual review of political science. School of Law and Department of Political Science, University of California, Berkeley, California 94720, USA; email: [ssong@law.berkeley.edu](mailto:ssong@law.berkeley.edu).
- Salehyan, I. and Gleditsch, K. S. (2006). *Refugees and the Spread of Civil War*. Cambridge University Press:
- Surafel Dinkalem (2020). Refugee Proclamation No. 1110/2019: The right to work of refugees, is it possible to implement? Available at <https://www.abbyssinialaw.com/>. Accessed date 12 march 2021.
- UNHCR (2012). Submission by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' Compilation Report – Universal Periodic Review: Ethiopia. UNHCR.
- UNHCR (2014-15). United Nation High Commissioner for Refugee Global Appeal: Ethiopia. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee Global Appeal Update. 2015. East and Horn of Africa.
- UNHCR (2015). Ethiopia displacement in Gambella Region. UNHCR the UN refugee agency 2095.
- UNHCR (2015). The crisis for refugees in Eastern Africa.
- UNHCR (2015). United Nation High Commission for Refugee Factsheet: Ethiopia.
- UNHCR (n.d). Benishangul-Gumuz Situational Update. Available from [www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org). (available on May 21, 2021).
- Vemuru, V., Sarkar, A., & Fitri Woodhouse, A. (2020). Impact of refugees on hosting communities in Ethiopia: a social analysis.