

A review of Jensen's *Kakuma Refugee Camp: Humanitarian Urbanism in Kenya's Accidental City*.

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Abstract

In the last few years, the world has witnessed a surge in refugees escaping from violence in one form or another, leading world leaders to adopt a new framework for addressing the crisis. The central idea of this framework is to support hosting countries in integrating refugees into their development plans, moving away from camp-like interventions to an approach that enhances mobility and freedom for refugees. Despite being hosted in camps, displaced populations have found ways of interacting with their humanitarian space through developing socioeconomic relationships amongst themselves and with their host communities, thereby contributing actively to the development of the local economy.

Keywords: refugees, camps, humanitarian urbanism, cities, local economy.

In the book, Bram J. Jansen introduces the idea of Humanitarian Urbanism through an ethnographic and holistic presentation of the Kakuma refugee camp as a spatial arrangement rather than a place of needs and perils. He focuses on the urbanising and social ordering of the lives of the refugees. He presents the camp as an accidental city resulting from humanitarian actions where inhabitants engage in various processes to make sense of their current world. Jansen challenges the conventional ideas of the formation of cities and notes that the Kakuma refugee camp transformed from a camp initially created to host the Lost Boys of Sudan and, later on, other regional refugees to a city of a more permanent nature.

In the first chapter, he conceptualises the idea of humanitarian urbanism and how interactions of the various people that have come to call the camp home, as well as how humanitarian organisations structure the daily lives and environment of the camp. He argues that camps that have existed for a long time have become part of a global network of mobility and economic relation (p.12). Jansen provides a historical account of how the Kakuma refugee camp came to be, the various scholarly views of what camps portray, and the labels used to describe camps, such as "arrests or suspension, frozen transience, permanent temporariness" (p.13).

The author questions some scholarly views of camps and their designation as improper cities. He notes that many social processes in the camps and their effects should be addressed in such arguments and descriptive analyses. He thus argues that rather than dismiss the idea that camps are incomplete urban settlements, we should look at the particular form of urban life that the camp displays, its context and social ordering. He avers that this approach allows us to understand the peculiarities of livelihood in specific camp environment" (p.14).

Chapter 2 provides a vivid explanation of how the camp as a sociological structure is organised and governed by a combination of refugee protection and participation. He presents the hybrid governance set-up, activities and social engineering processes tested at the camp over the years. He explains that refugee protection encompasses activities to support the refugees as rights-holders and beneficiaries of humanitarian assistance (p.43). Thus, the camp becomes an entitlement arena where the humanitarian government provides services, and several actors and stakeholders interact to create a particular life form known as humanitarian urbanism.

Jansen further argues that the humanitarian urban (i.e. the production of space as a result of humanitarian activities) is spatially made visible through various structures in the camp - offices of NGOs, schools, clinics, registration centres, the daily interactions, manoeuvrings and

opportunities that occur in these places. These structures, he states, determine how camp life is organised and negotiated. (p.49).

The third chapter presents the idea of imageries based on past wartime stories and events and how this "warscape" transforms into forms of spatial and social ordering within the Kakuma refugee camp. In this light, he views the camp through the prism of violence. He sees the refugees (particularly the Sudanese, now South Sudanese) as refugee warriors with allegiances to military and political ties in their countries of origin. To this end, he argues that the Kakuma refugee camp is a rear base for rebel elements. Thus, many who claimed to be helpless innocent victims seeking care and protection are refugee warriors. Their influence transforms the humanitarian space into "something much more partisan, biased, and dangerous – in short, political" (p.88), inadvertently shaping the camp's socio and spatial reordering.

To adequately understand the above processes, Jansen introduces the term "capital," which he regards as the combination of financial, social and human capitals which various individuals employ to navigate and manoeuvre the camp environment to their favour. Capital consists of status, wealth, and camp-wise (p.114). Capital is essential for "digging aid" as the camp economy is inextricably tied to transnational networks and the global economy. It is exploited by various sets of individuals within the camp utilising and manipulating the humanitarian aid economy, which is also vital to understanding the socioeconomic stratification in the camp (chapter 4).

Chapter 5 discusses the third-country resettlement of refugees and its impact on the refugee population. Third-country resettlement is part of durable solutions in refugee protection. Others include local integration in places of displacement and return to places of origin. Jansen explains that the idea and desire of refugees for third-country resettlement were nurtured by various organisations and groups that frequently flocked to the camp seeking help. This is in addition to the remittances received and the picture painted by those already resettled, in the West, as an Eldorado of some sort. The unbridled desire for resettlement by the refugees and the processes are riddled with corruption, fabrications, and staged events on the part of humanitarian organisations and the refugees who created, manipulated and escalated insecurities and vulnerabilities to access opportunities for resettlement.

In the last chapter, we are informed of the repatriation of South Sudanese back to their home country, the dilemmas they face or would face in their home country, the seemingly organised resistance to the process, and the impact on the general socio-spatial organisation of the refugee camp. Jansen also exposes the politicisation and arm-twisting of refugees into accepting repatriation by humanitarians. The various forms of contestation and manoeuvring of the process by the refugees thereby opened up the domain of socio-ordering in several states, presenting a test of the notion of humanitarian urbanism (p.166).

The way Jansen presents issues in the book through his extensive ethnographic approach impels us to develop a mental picture of the camp to visualise the realities and relate to the happenings as he presents them. He does this excellently well that one is compelled to contemplate the myriad of internally displaced and refugee camps scattered worldwide going through similar processes. His constant comparison and drawing lessons from the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya also attests to the book's unique insights.

Pieterse (2011) agrees that African cities are marked by profound crises evident through informal and makeshift shantytowns housing over 62% of African urban dwellers. His argument of the camp economy as largely informal and highly mobile in which people engage in income-generating activities is also synonymous with many other sub-Saharan African

countries' economies and, therefore, similar to their urbanism. Similarly, Balbo (2014) insists that it is a mistake to continue looking at cities mainly as the outcome of the industrialised West's political and cultural dominance; instead, cities in the South must be viewed from different historical, economic, social and political conditions.

Furthermore, Jansen's critique of scholarly labelling of camps and his warning against confusing urbanism with industrialisation and the need to recognise the dynamics of informal, non-Western local forms of everyday life without referencing them to Euro-American cities or theoretical constructs is worth commending.

One significant contribution this book makes is how it refocuses critical and analytical minds from the conventional view of cities and urbanisation, which explores the development of cities from a state-centric perspective to socio-spatial processes of refugees interacting within a humanitarian aid-administered space. Whyte, Babiha, Mukyala & Meinert (2014) concord a similar argument within an internally displaced person setting. They note that the former displaced persons camp of Awach in Northern Uganda had various distinguishing features and forms of urbanism, including the different social relations altered and created. Thus, humanitarian services played a vital role in the urbanising processes of these camps. Similarly, Neto (2019) argues that humanitarian activities in the Meheba (Zambia) refugee camp, the subsequent development within the area, and the several kinds of people (refugees and non-refugees) are the factors that attracted the primary actors to the refugee camp principally because facilities and social amenities are non-existent in their villages.

Furthermore, Jansen's ability to gain the confidence of his informants through no predetermined agenda and distancing himself from the bureaucracy of UN and humanitarian agencies (by living in town, for instance) enabled him to understand better the often not visible actions, decisions and choices of the refugees. Furthermore, their everyday interaction with the humanitarian aid space dramatically enriches the book.

Also, having been in South Sudan following the breakout of the 2013 civil war, we concur with Jansen that many South Sudanese who fled the country returned to the Kakuma refugee camp, where they felt they had more excellent security prospects. However, refugees continue to shuttle in and out of the camp, exploring and exploiting humanitarian processes for their benefit (See Akol & Pendle, 2020). In addition, access to humanitarian services – water, food, shelter, and health was grossly inadequate in South Sudan during the war.

Conclusion

We agree with his overall findings and analysis of the development of the Kakuma refugee camp as an accidental city and the camp to have transitioned above humanitarian and political boundaries. However, we are critical of his criticisms against UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and humanitarian organisations. His ethnographic work endeared him to refugees with minimal engagement with humanitarian organisations. Thus, further research and evidence are needed to justify these criticisms. Similarly, his conclusion of the militarisation of the refugee camp with many armed elements (refugee warriors), which he claims makes a mockery of cherished humanitarian principles, is entirely unconvincing and needs further corroborative research.

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