

Self-reliance in action and self-reliance inaction: urban refugee resilience in Addis Ababa

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Abstract: Limitations in assessing the implementation of refugee self-reliance have been problematized. This qualitative study explores the self-reliance and resilience of adult refugee residents in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. It employed the action-inaction dichotomous concept as an analytical lens for gathering data through key-informant interviews, in-depth interviews, group discussions, and participant observation, followed by triangulation and analysis using the framework technique. The study found that Ethiopia's refugee proclamation constrained refugee self-reliance by treating refugees as preferred foreign nationals and recognizing their right to work only in specific scenarios. However, refugees demonstrated resilience by bypassing curtailed work provisions and activating self-reliance through remittances, social ties, and cultural assets. Participants faced challenges such as legal restrictions, limited communal support, financial constraints, scarce resources, emigration fervor, dependency syndrome, and policy-practice gaps. Addressing these gaps may broaden the prospects for refugee self-reliance and resilience in Addis Ababa. Notably, the study illustrates the applicability of the action-inaction framework to contextualize existing self-reliance initiatives.

Keywords: Action-inaction; Addis Ababa; refugee resilience; refugee self-reliance; urban refugees.

Autossuficiência em ação e autossuficiência na inação: resiliência de refugiados urbanos em Addis Ababa

Resumo: Este estudo qualitativo investiga a autossuficiência e a resiliência de refugiados adultos residentes em Addis Ababa, Etiópia. Utilizou-se a dicotomia conceitual ação-inação como lente para a produção dos dados, por meio de entrevistas com informantes-chave, entrevistas em profundidade, discussões em grupo e observação participante, seguidas de triangulação e análise pela técnica de estruturação. O estudo identificou que a proclamação etíope sobre refugiados restringiu a autossuficiência ao tratá-los como estrangeiros preferenciais e reconhecer seu direito ao trabalho apenas em circunstâncias específicas. Contudo, os refugiados demonstraram resiliência ao contornar tais limitações, ativando formas de autossuficiência por meio de remessas, laços sociais e recursos culturais. Os participantes enfrentaram desafios como restrições legais, apoio comunitário limitado, dificuldades financeiras, escassez de recursos, desejo intenso de emigrar, síndrome de dependência e lacunas entre políticas e práticas. Enfrentar essas lacunas pode ampliar as possibilidades de autossuficiência e resiliência de refugiados urbanos em Addis Ababa. O estudo também demonstra a aplicabilidade do referencial ação-inação para compreender iniciativas de autossuficiência em contextos específicos.

Palavras-chave: Ação-inação; Addis Ababa; resiliência de refugiados; autossuficiência de refugiados; refugiados urbanos.

Autosuficiencia en acción y autosuficiencia en inacción: resiliencia de los refugiados urbanos en Addis Abeba

Resumen: Este estudio cualitativo examina la autosuficiencia y la resiliencia de refugiados adultos residentes en Addis Abeba, Etiopía. Se empleó la dicotomía acción-inacción como lente para la recolección de datos, mediante entrevistas con informantes clave, entrevistas en profundidad, discusiones grupales y observación participante, seguidas de triangulación y análisis mediante la técnica de estructuración. El estudio encontró que la proclamación etíope sobre refugiados limitó la autosuficiencia al tratarlos como extranjeros preferenciales y reconocer su derecho al trabajo solo en circunstancias específicas. Sin embargo, los refugiados demostraron resiliencia al sortear estas restricciones y activar formas de autosuficiencia a través de remesas, vínculos sociales y recursos culturales. Los participantes enfrentaron desafíos como restricciones legales, apoyo comunitario limitado, dificultades financieras, escasez de recursos, fervor emigratorio, síndrome de dependencia y brechas entre política y práctica. Abordar estas brechas podría ampliar las posibilidades de autosuficiencia y resiliencia de los refugiados urbanos en Addis Abeba. El estudio también demuestra la aplicabilidad del marco acción-inacción para comprender iniciativas de autosuficiencia en contextos específicos.

Palabras clave: Acción-inacción; Addis Abeba; resiliencia de los refugiados; autosuficiencia de los refugiados; refugiados urbanos.

Introduction

Cross-border displacement is among one of the many shocks inflicting a horrific ordeal on the life of human beings. Overall, the number of the forcibly displaced is not showing any sign of abating; rather, it has been mainly concentrating in the Global South with the vast majority of the world's refugees staying close to their countries of origin (Fransen; De Haas, 2021). In particular, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers is rising in African nations, which are also seeing a rise in urbanization (Fábos; Kibreab, 2007). Basically, urban areas attract forced migrants for a number of reasons, including better chance of accessing services; more opportunity for resettlement due to urban areas proximity to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offices; more international link access, particularly for receiving remittances from overseas relatives and friends; the absence of physical security in certain camps; access to medical treatment that might not be available in camps; opportunity to deceive detection; sense of safety and anonymity urban areas bring; more options for livelihoods including formal and informal aid provided by the UNHCR and Non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and closeness to networks that play vital role for their survival in undesirable environment (Fábos; Kibreab, 2007; Verghis; Balasundram, 2019; Zetter; Deikun, 2010).

Humanitarian actors have been adopting self-reliance as a goal of refugee assistance since the League of Nations (Easton-Calabria; Omata, 2018). The current global refugee regime underscores the significance of self-reliance as a widespread goal in finding a durable solution to the protracted displacement that is haunting our world (Easton-Calabria, 2022). This has been reflected in the global, humanitarian, development and private sector policies, projects and programs that promote the self-reliance and resilience of refugees as well as the extensive coverage it received in various publication and policy papers (Easton-Calabria, 2019). In fact, the concept of self-reliance along with resilience has already become one of the established buzzwords in the literature of forced migration and humanitarianism (Omata, 2023).

The current tendency of fostering self-reliance as an ideal objective for the forcibly displaced and their hosts stems from the conviction that, given the opportunity to utilise national rights such as employment opportunities and education, refugees can enhance their abilities, become self-sufficient, boost local economies, and foster the growth of their new communities (Easton-Calabria, 2019). In addition, the existence of a huge gap in meeting the required resources for responding to the ever rising needs of the global displacement crisis makes the self-reliance initiative an appealing proposition (Easton-Calabria; Omata, 2018). Therefore, different actors are collaborating to enhance refugee self-reliance as a strategy for achieving long-term solutions. Likewise, there is also a widely held assumption that fostering self-reliance among refugees has the potential to enhance their protection, well-being and resilience (Easton-Calabria; Omata, 2018). Hence, this paper attempts to illuminate on refugee resilience by exploring the self-reliance endeavours of refugees in an urban setting.

Under the purview of this study, resilience is defined as “the process of harnessing resources to sustain well-being” (Panter-Brick; Leckman, 2013, p. 335; Southwick et al., 2014). Self-reliance is defined as “the social and economic ability of an individual to meet essential needs (including protection, food,

water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity” (UNHCR, 2005, p. 1). Both definitions emphasise psychological well-being as an outcome indicator (Ryan; Dooley; Benson, 2008) and consider a wider connotation of the terms. In the context of displacement, both terms have a bidirectional relationship as self-reliance can enhance resilience and resilience is necessary to ensure that progress towards self-reliance is not eroded or reversed in the face of sudden-onset shocks and longer-term trends, such as protracted refugee situations (PRS) (ExCom UNHCR, 2017).

One of the many topics that make up the literature on self-reliance and forced displacement is the issue of how to measure it (Skran; Easton-Calabria, 2020). Particularly, limitation of attempts at rigorously measuring the concept has been problematized (Leeson et al., 2020). This paper proposes the use of Sunderrajan and Albarracín’s (2021) conceptualization of action and inaction as an alternative way of thinking and analysing refugee self-reliance. In addition, a review of the ever growing research on refugees in Addis Ababa focuses on other related topics as opposed to refugee self-reliance per se in spite of the timeliness and relevancy of the topic (Abebe, 2018; Adem; Kebede; Kassa, 2023; Adugna; Rudolf; Getachew, 2022; Asabu, 2018; Betts et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Kindie et al., 2023). Besides, Ethiopia’s refugee management model provided restricted access to freedom of movement, work rights, property ownership and citizenship (Assefa, 2020; Belay, 2023; Fassil, 2020; Woldetsadik; Mulatu; Edosa, 2019). Against this backdrop, this paper specifically delved into the resilience of the forcibly displaced immigrants in the city of Addis Ababa by framing the self-reliance attempts of the city’s adult refugee residents in terms of action and inaction. By doing so, the research aimed to come up with an alternative theoretical application of exploring refugee self-reliance and forward possible areas of intervention for improving the existing refugee self-reliance and resilience initiatives in the context of the city. The main purpose of this paper was to explore the occurrence and absence of refugee self-reliance in the city of Addis Ababa in terms of the action-inaction dichotomy. Specifically, it tried to answer the following specific research questions:

- * What agentic and non-agentic facets of self-reliance could be observed in the context of the city?
- * In what ways were the city’s refugee self-reliance initiatives effortful and effortless?
- * In what manner did the status and initiatives of refugee self-reliance in the city showed progress and stasis?

Theoretical perspective

Balancing action and inaction is considered to be significant for health and well-being (Sunderrajan; Albarracín, 2021). In light of this, the dual concept of action-inaction has been used to describe possible objects of attitudes, behaviours, and goals in fields such as psychology, morality, economics, and decision-making (Albarracín; Hepler; Tannenbaum, 2011; Albarracín et al., 2008; Sunderrajan; Albarracín, 2021). In an attempt to capture subjective interpretation of understanding action and inaction, Sunderrajan and Albarracín (2021) suggested a colloquial understanding of the concepts that are applicable in lay situations. Accordingly, this naïve conceptualisation of action and inaction includes the dimensions of occurrence, agency, effort and change. Thus, action is seen as the physical occurrence of the object in

terms of agency (whether the object is initiated willfully), effort (whether the object is pursued with energy), and change (whether the object involves change in state). In contrast, naïve interpretation of inaction revolves around not doing something, and seen as a lack of agency (absence of willful initiation), lack of effort (lack of energy in pursuing the object under consideration) and lack of change (remaining in the same status quo). Thus, judgments of action and inaction can be made in terms of agency, effort and change (Sunderrajan; Albarracín, 2021).

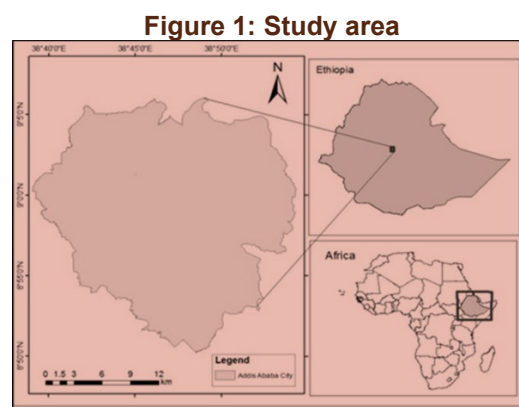
The above representation of action and inaction can be helpful for exploring extant refugee self-reliance initiative in a given environment. Accordingly, the presence of self-reliance in terms of agency, effort and change signifies refugee self-reliance in action and the absence of self-reliance in terms of lack of agency, effort and change demonstrates refugee self-reliance inaction. In other words, refugee self-reliance is projected along the continuum of action – inaction and the more agentic, effortful and changing it becomes signals its activity and the more non-agentic, effortless and static it becomes signals its inactivity, evaluating actions more favourably than inactions as enablers of refugee self-reliance. Hence, this paper proposes the above naïve conceptualization of action and inaction as an alternative and additional lens of looking into the phenomenon of refugee self-reliance and resilience in a given context.

Research methodology

Research setting

Like its African peers, Addis Ababa is also a sanctuary city for refugees fleeing conflict and harsh living conditions from both neighbouring and nearby countries. According to UNHCR (2023), the urban refugees in Addis Ababa are predominantly from neighbouring countries (Eritrea, South Sudan, Somalia, Sudan). Yet, there are noticeable refugee communities from other near-by countries (Yemen, Syria, Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Burundi). There are some *sefers*¹ in the city that have been associated with certain refugee communities for population reasons. In this regard, Bole Michael *sefer* has been linked to Somali refugee residents of the city whereas *Sefers* like Mebrat Hayle and Lafto have been identified with Eritrean refugee communities. This paper investigates the self-reliance efforts of urban refugee residents in Addis Ababa by using Sunderrajan and Albarracín's (2021) concept of action and inaction.

¹ The term “sefer” originally referred to military or other kind of encampments, but as Addis Ababa expanded, it evolved into a term describing specific neighbourhoods and localities within the city (Tola, 2023).



Source: CSA (2017).

Research method

Historically, self-reliance has been touted as a durable solution for protracted displacement (Ferris; Kerwin, 2023). Its recognition as a key objective of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) has further increased its popularity (Easton-Calabria, 2021). Phenomenological ethnography has been recommended for assessing the application of International refugee laws and agreements in local situations (Janmyr, 2022). Thus, this paper applied phenomenological ethnography for its capacity in providing a contextually sensitive and insightful understanding about the state of refugee self-reliance in a given context. Specifically, it used multi-method phenomenological ethnography for its advantage in strengthening the qualitative process of ethnography by combining multiple data sources (Roller, 2021). The self-reliance and resilience endeavours of refugee residents in the city of Addis Ababa is framed through the lens of Sunderrajan and Albarracín's (2021) concept of action and inaction.

Procedures of data collection and analysis

The study relied on qualitative data collected from in-depth interviews (n=47), participant observation, KIIs (n=6), FGDs (n=3), and document analysis. The in-depth interviews are made with Burundians, Congolese, Eritreans, Somalis, South Sudanese, Syrians, Yemenis and Sudanese refugees with the aim of gathering heterogeneous information about their experience of self-reliance and resilience in the city of Addis Ababa. Participant observations, such as repeated transect walks and informal conversation with knowledgeable citizens across different sefers, were also employed. Formal KII data was collected from government employees and NGO representatives to get their views on adult refugee self-reliance and resilience in the city.

The study applied FGD with Eritrean refugees due to their presence in the city in large numbers for its ability to collect data from multiple participants simultaneously (Schuster et al., 2023). Besides, the researcher has knowledge of the Tigrigna language which makes it advantageous to apply FGD with Eritrean refugees as a facilitator that knows the language of the participants is considered an ideal for an effective FGD (Shabina et al, 2024). In contrast, the researcher faced difficulties to apply FGDs for gathering qualitative data from other national research participants. For example, some of the refugees preferred to be interviewed individually as opposed to participating in group discussions. In this regard,

prevailing interethnic tensions has been observed among Somali, Congolese and South Sudanese refugees. The researcher identified this as a deterrent that could make participants uncomfortable to express their individual views in an FGD (Greenwood; Ellmers; Holley, 2014). On top of that, most of the minority refugees were residing dispersed in different sefers of the study and it proved logistically difficult to bring them into a single setting. Therefore, based on these circumstances the researcher faced on the ground, FGD was used to gather information only from Eritrean refugees. In addition, the study utilised documents such as the country's refugee proclamation and various refugee organisations' websites and social media pages to understand refugee resident's endeavours of self-reliance.

Purposive heterogeneous sampling, including convenience, and snow-ball sampling were used to collect qualitative data from various informants. 9 Seferes were selected as study sites due to their high number of refugee residents and the association they have with the refugee population of the city. KIIs were identified using expert sampling. Meanwhile, convenience sampling was used to recruit FGDs participants. Relevant documents were chosen for their significance in understanding the self-reliance and resilience of adult refugees in the city. The study analysed the self-reliance of adult refugees in Addis Ababa using the thematic framework method. The NVivo 9 qualitative data analysis software was used for effective management and analysis of the qualitative data. The data saturation point was applied to determine the number of data sets, where no new ideas or themes emerged.

Ethical considerations

This study is part of a larger research project that was conducted between June 2022 and December 2023 and aimed at investigating the resilience of adult urban refugees in Addis Ababa. Thus, it has secured ethical clearance from the Center for African and Asian Studies at Addis Ababa University prior to data collection. It ensured ethical conduct by adhering to the principles of respect, beneficence, and justice. Interviews were conducted in various languages, including Arabic, Kiswahili, Nuer, and Somali, to accommodate participants who wanted to be interviewed in their mother tongue and the language of their choice. Interpreters were employed to manage and moderate discussions, creating a comfortable interview environment. Eritrean refugees, experienced in humanitarian situations, were enrolled as facilitators in each of the urban refugee FGDs, ensuring they were comfortable and knowledgeable about the study's nature, purpose, and method. The data collection process involved obtaining informed consent from participants and recording the proceedings on an electronic device, with the venues for each data collection being set at the discretion of the research participants.

Addis Ababa's refugee self-reliance in action

As a refugee sanctuary city, Addis Ababa is home to stakeholders that embark on refugee self-reliance initiatives. However, during the time of the study, the willfully initiated form of refugee self-reliance that was supposed to occur inside the city was found in the national refugee proclamation of the country. Article 26 of refugee proclamation number 1110/2019 ensured refugees equal treatment in wage-earning employment and income-generating activities commensurate with the most favourable treatment given to

foreign nationals, which consisted of Djiboutians and foreigners of Ethiopian origin (Assefa, 2020). The only way in which recognized refugees were given equal consideration with Ethiopian nationals was in Ethiopian government and international community owned projects that were intended to benefit both refugees and host communities. A livelihood and economic inclusion officer working at Refugees and Returnees Services (RRS), the Ethiopian government counterpart of the UNHCR, justified the need for cautious approach in allowing refugee employment rights as follows: “It is difficult to allow them [refugees] to access everything in a country that is full of unemployed citizens. For that matter, we need to protect the working space of our citizens. However, the current proclamation provides them preferential work rights which are better than foreigners” (KII-1, *Personal communication*, Sep. 15, 2022).

Nevertheless, there were determined refugees that bypassed the legal restrictions and embarked on their own self-reliance initiatives regardless of the consequences and risks associated with it. In this regard, a number of agentic factors that enabled the engagement of refugees on legally unrecognised initiatives and activities of self-reliance were identified. In the first case, there were refugees who were able to secure financial sponsorship through the ties they had in the diaspora. By circumnavigating the legal restrictions that were in place, these refugees were able to invest their cash into revenue generating activities. The response of a south Sudanese informant when asked about his knowledge of fellow South Sudanese remittance receiving refugees who embarked on personal revenue generating projects was: “There are some South Sudanese that are getting extra financial support from abroad and they engage in cross-regional trade by bringing personal and household items from border proximate towns like Jijjiga and Moyale and selling it here in Addis or taking it to Gambella²” (II-SSD-5, *Personal communication*, Jun. 28, 2022).

An Eritrean interviewee talked about the business areas financially able Eritrean refugees ventured into as follows: “The kind of work that financially able Eritreans do includes ride³ and opening up business establishments like restaurants, shops as well as hair and beauty salons” (II-ER-3, *Personal communication*, Jun. 28, 2022).

According to study participants, refugees were able to launch these business initiatives by securing a work licence through the local ties they were able to establish with members of the host community. This is how Eritrean FG discussants responded when they were asked if they happen to know fellow refugees that secured a work licence in such a manner: “They rent the licence from willing individuals. For example, you may be Ethiopian who have a workplace and licence but are not able or willing to do the business. So, you can rent that to me. There are people who work like that” (FGD-2, *Personal communication*, Oct. 17, 2022).

In fact, the presence of Eritrean owned business establishments in sefers like Mebrat Hayle and Lafto can attest to this fact. Similarly, a Syrian émigré who owned a restaurant in Bole Michael neighbourhood of the city revealed in a conversation he had with one of the researchers that the licence

² An administrative region of Ethiopia that borders South Sudan.

³ Taxi hailing service Platform in Ethiopia.

of his restaurant is under the name of his Ethiopian wife as he was unable to secure the work licence under his name signalling how refugees having marital ties with Ethiopians leverage that into securing a work licence.

The local ties the refugees established also came in handy when they ventured into informal income generation. For Example, in a conversation one of the researchers had with a Syrian refugee, he disclosed how he is making use of his skill of making gypsum board ceiling to generate income and how he often relied on a network he had with locals when looking for customers. Similarly, a woman informant from Sudan described how her friendship with an Ethiopian woman enabled her to reduce the amount of house rent she paid monthly as follows: “I am living in a two room house I rented in a gebbi⁴. It has its own toilet and kitchen inside. There is a Habesha who is living with me as a debal⁵. I pay ten thousand birr monthly and she shares half of the money with me” (II-SUD-2, *Personal communication*, Oct. 19, 2022).

Willing refugees had also been able to explore work options and improve their chances of self-reliance by taking advantage of their cultural assets. In this regard, there were refugees that were able to use their cultural resources for securing paid employment. The following excerpt from the interview with a Congolese shows how immigrants use their skills and knowledge to secure employment:

I have been teaching in different private owned schools for the past six or seven years now. Though we do not have the legal documents that allow us to work, there are some of us who have our educational documents from back home. So, we contact the schools and discuss with the managers. We teach English and sometimes French (II-CON-2, *Personal communication*, Jul. 13, 2022).

The trend of refugees using their cultural resources for establishing small business enterprises like culturally themed restaurants and shops had also been observed in the course of the study. An Eritrean refugee discussed the benefit of these culturally themed refugee owned spaces as follows:

First, the places offer service to city residents. Second, they encourage and inspire fellow refugees like me. Third, a refugee with a language barrier can get services without any problem since service providers can speak their language and they can get the kind of service they want. Fourth, the places provide us a feeling of nostalgia about our past experience and homeland (II-ER-3, *Personal communication*, Jun. 28, 2022).

Refugees also turned to their cultural knowledge for starting up informal jobs. In this regard, Yemenis talked about how fellow compatriots used their artisanal skills of perfume and frankincense making and established an informal network for selling and distributing the produce to the public. Somali refugees reported engaging in translating and teaching the Somali language in part time jobs at schools, language schools, hotels and hospitals. Similarly, Congolese and Burundian refugees revealed how their knowledge of the French and English language helped them to find part time language teaching jobs in private schools and private lessons. The researchers had met Eritrean refugees that managed working as

⁴ In a literal sense, they are compounds where multiple households reside and collectively make up the sefer (Tola, 2023).

⁵ Sub lessee.

electricians, tailors, barbers and hairdressers. When a Sudanese refugee was asked what kind of cultural engagements she undertook while striving to make ends meet, she replied as follows: “There is a Sudanese cultural food that is called weika⁶. Just like you have Shiro⁷, we have weika. It is our culture. Second, there is henna⁸. Both men and women, especially the newly wedded ones, use it in our culture. I get paid doing these kinds of cultural stuff” (II-SUD-2, *Personal communication*, Oct. 19, 2022).

In addition, the study examined refugee self-reliance in Addis Ababa by focusing on the self-reliance building efforts of refugees and relevant stakeholders. The city is home to different organisations involved in initiatives of building the self-reliance and resilience of refugees and host communities particularly in the wake of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). For example, a humanitarian program manager who worked for the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) explained the purpose of her organisation’s resilience programme under the Ethiopian Migration Programme (EMP), which worked on both refugees and host community residents of the city, as follows:

The programme intends to bring behavioural change amongst refugees and improve their future planning ability, personal skills and life whether they remain in Ethiopia or resettle in another country. It also aims to strengthen the socio-economic ties among refugees and Ethiopians by offering them life-long skills. Importantly, the overall aim of the MP is to focus on changing refugees’ and host communities’ decision making. I am specifically referring here to their habit of irregular or outward migration. We highly support them to make a decision that is based on information in the resilience and integration program and in other different departments under the EMP. Thus, we encourage them to make a decision that is based on information. So, these are some of the activities done under the EMP’s resilience program (KII-4, *Personal communication*, Oct. 6, 2022).

Table 1: A summary of organisational refugee self-reliance building programs (initiatives) in Addis Ababa with in the last five years

Organisations	Programs/initiatives	Purpose
EOTC-DICAC	Livelihood projects	Strengthening refugees, IDPs, and host communities self-reliance in Addis Ababa.
	Education programme	Providing secondary education to refugees and asylum seekers and surrounding people.
DRC	Ethiopian migration programme (EMP)	Bringing behavioural change pertaining to irregular migration amongst refugees and host communities. Improving their future planning ability, personal skills and life. Strengthening the socio-economic ties among refugees and Ethiopians through the provision of life-long skills.
The World Bank, MDI and FCDO	Jobs Compact Ethiopia	Linking refugee socioeconomic opportunities with the broader job-focused industrialisation agenda of the Ethiopian government (FCDO, 2021).
GIZ and MoLS	Qualifications and Employment Perspectives for Refugees and Host Communities in Ethiopia Programme (QEP)	Creating inclusive vocational training and employment opportunities for refugees and Ethiopians (GIZ, 2023).
IGAD	Scholarship programme	Providing educational opportunities for refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the IGAD region (IGAD, 2024).

⁶ A traditional Sudanese soup.

⁷ A common Ethio-Eritrean stew served for lunch and dinner.

⁸ A powdered leaves dye of reddish-brown tropical shrub used to colour hair and decorate the body.

JRS	Refugee Community Centre (RCC) projects	Availing places where refugees receive educational and psychosocial support to gain new vocational skills, socialise and build relationships with members of the host community.
RRS	Urban Refugees Program	Ensuring the inclusiveness of urban refugees.
	Education Program	Availing access to schooling and higher education study.
SNV	Refugee Integration and Self-reliance (RISE) project	Increasing decent refugee and host community job opportunities and improving their skills (SNV, 2019).
UNHCR	Technical and vocational training programmes	Helping refugees to build their skills and to enhance their livelihood opportunities (UNHCR, 2023).
	Educational programmes	Providing refugees educational opportunities on par with Ethiopian citizens in primary, secondary and higher education (UNHCR, 2023).
ZOA	Innovative urban refugee program	Supporting refugees, young talents and host-communities to secure employment opportunities in the IT sector.

Note: EOTC-DICAC = Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Development and Inter Church Aid Commission; DRC = Danish Refugee Council; FCDO = Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; MDI = Multi-Donor Initiative; GIZ = German International Cooperation Society; MoLS = Ministry of Labor and Skills; IGAD = Intergovernmental Authority on Development; JRS = Jesuit Refugee Service; RRS = Refugees and Returnees Service; SNV = Netherlands Development Organisation; UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees; ZOA = International Relief and Recovery Organization of the Netherlands.

Source: Research data.

Similarly, refugees also shared their experience of exploring different opportunities with the intention of securing their self-sufficiency. These endeavours ranged from searching jobs in vacancy announcements to launching small business start-ups and engaging in the informal sector. In fact, a handful of the refugee participants succeeded in attaining self-reliance as they were able to meet their own needs and even assist others while managing to change their refugee situation positively. For example, an Eritrean who worked as a barber for about two years before eventually opening up his own men's beauty salon disclosed his economic status as follows: "As far as my work is concerned, I own a men's hair salon as you know it. I cover my cost of living and house rent from the income I generate" (II-ER-9, *Personal communication*, Oct. 17, 2022).

Similarly, a Congolese that managed to secure a teaching job in a private primary school described the benefits of his employment as follows:

The money we get from UNHCR is not that much, you know. So, when you are working, you will add something and you feel a little bit comfortable. If the assistance money was good, there was not that much need to rush into teaching. Since starting the job, I am feeling happy as I was able to cover the gap between my monthly allowance and living expenses (II-CON-2, *Personal communication*, Jul. 13, 2022).

The above glimpses of self-reliance are an embodiment of refugee resilience in the city's context especially in light of the ordeals they went through in the process of cross-border displacement. However, inaction of refugee resilience persisted in the city in terms of lack of agency, effort and change putting a dent on the resilience and well-being of the forcibly displaced as shown below.

Refugee self-reliance inaction in Addis Ababa

Refugee self-reliance in Addis Ababa operated under the constrained functioning space in the refugee proclamation number 1110/29 of the country. According to Article 26 of the refugee proclamation,

refugees were allowed to embark on income generating activities provided that they enrolled in areas allowed for Djiboutians and Ethiopian diaspora and job opportunities that were meant to benefit members of both refugees and host communities. Thus, the law itself offered a limited provision for refugees depriving them the legal agency that is vital for refugee self-reliance and resilience. In fact, the impact of the restricted work rights had been amplified by almost all of the informants in the study. An Eritrean FGD participant explained the trials and tribulations of securing economic self-reliance through employment and income generation within the country's controlled refugee work space in the following manner:

Some [refugees] may find an opportunity to work in a private organisation. But even if you get the opportunity, you cannot ask about your rights like a citizen. Even if you ask, they request you to bring paper from ARRA⁹. When you plan about starting your own business, you would be asked to bring a paper from ARRA. And, when we go there, they tell us we are not allowed to do that. But if they allow us to live here in the city, they should also allow us to do something (II-ER-2, *Personal communication*, Jun. 28, 2022).

In a similar manner, a married South Sudanese mentioned the highly curtailed refugee work rights as one of the reasons that forced her to embark on small-scale informal trading while grappling to secure her economic self-reliance.

We are having a very precarious life here in Addis Ababa. We are almost not allowed to work legally. Besides, UNHCR gives us only a small amount of money. We cannot rent a concrete house like this one. Our house is a mud house, but the UNHCR money is not doing enough to help us live here. We are in a very difficult situation. In the past, I had attempted to work in regional cross border trade where I brought goods from Moyale and sold them here. Eventually, I was caught by the customs authority and all my merchandise was confiscated and I am no longer working. I got my facial scar from the police beatings I got on the job (II-SSD-11, *Personal communication*, Aug. 5, 2022).

The risk of depending on an Ethiopian to get a business licence has also been raised as a detractor of refugee self-reliance in the context of the city. This is how a focus group discussant reflected on the issue: "The problem is that refugees may end up in the clutches of those who have their licence. Possibly, they may ask you to vacate the property or even raise your rent unreasonably. Corrupted government officials may exploit our situation by making reference to our engagement in a work that is prohibited for refugees and demanding bribes from us" (FGD-3, *Personal communication*, Sep. 18, 2022).

The limitation of the law was also a source of frustration among active development organisations that were engaged in improving the life of the city's refugees and host communities. This is how a humanitarian officer working for an urban refugee focusing NGO expressed her frustration:

So far, the law was not able to allow them (refugees) to get a licence for starting their own business and to secure a paying employment that can put them on a payroll. Currently, even if we are offering skill and career development training, it is very difficult to call it a success story as long as they are not allowed to work formally and generate income (KII-4, *Personal communication*, Oct. 6, 2022).

⁹ The RRS was once known as the Administration for Refugee and Returnee Affairs (ARRA).

Actually, the challenge of implementing the refugee work right of the new refugee proclamation of the country was not denied by a government employed humanitarian officer as can be indicated in the following excerpt from his interview:

Recently, there is a new refugee proclamation that has been endorsed by the parliament. However, the directive that enables it to cascade into the lower echelon of the society has not capitalised yet. Hence, refugees still have a very limited legal space for employment and business opportunities. In other words, if they decide to work and engage in self-owned business by renting a licence, they are vulnerable for exploitation (KII-2, *Personal communication*, Sep. 26, 2022).

Besides the legal restriction, research participants also talked about other constraining factors that posed a stumbling block in their will to pursue a pathway of self-reliance in the city of Addis Ababa. One was the limited communal support some refugees had. Let alone engaging in self-reliance initiatives, refugees with limited intra-group support might not even opt to relocate to the city in the first place as the following account of a Congolese refugee explains: “As far as the Banyamulenge¹⁰ people are concerned, it is difficult to survive on our own in the city because we do not have many people from abroad that can support us” (II-CON-3, *Personal communication*, Jul. 28, 2022).

The other obstacle to refugee self-reliance that kept coming up during the investigation was lack of financial support. A number of refugee informants disclosed their interest in starting up their own business if it was not for the lack of start-up capital they were facing. The problem was also evident among refugees who took part in a project that meant to make them self-employed. For example, when a Burundian refugee was asked why she did not open up her own business after taking part in a six month cooking training program she completed, her response was

The idea behind the training was for me to start-up my own business. They even provided me with cooking dishes and pans. However, both myself and others who took the training were not able to open the business partly because of the small start-up capital we were offered. If they offer you 5,000 birr, it means nothing and then you are expected to pay back that 5,000 birr (II-BUR-3, *Personal communication*, Jul. 30, 2022).

The challenge of resource limitation was also a point of concern among the GOs and NGOs that were working to improve the situation of urban refugees and host community residents of the city. This was how an economic livelihood team leader working for the RRS explained the government’s attempt of coping with the shortage of funding it had in handling the refugee situation of the country.

Lack of funding is the biggest challenge we have as our limited resource capacity is not able to provide for refugees. Due to shortage of funding, the government was forced to incorporate refugees in the Urban Productive Safety Net Project (UPSNP) that it is financing in collaboration with the World Bank as we are expected to meet the pledges we made at the GCR. Initially, the project was meant only for Ethiopians, but refugees were also included in the program as of 2021 & 22. The RHISN (Refugee Host Inclusion through

¹⁰ Minority Tutsi ethnic groups from the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Safety Net) is the refugee dedicated component we have in the program (KII-1, *Personal communication*, Sep. 15, 2022).

Similarly, a project director working for an NGO raised the challenge of operating in a resource constrained situation as follows: “If you take our centre as a case in point, the facilities we have are not equivalent with the huge number of people we are servicing. Take a look at our classrooms. They cannot accommodate more than twelve to fifteen people. We do have neither the necessary budget nor the required space to cater for refugees according to their number” (KII-6, *Personal communication*, Oct. 12, 2022).

Certainly, the aforementioned absence of agentic factors that are necessary for the realisation of refugee self-reliance had a knock on effect on the effort of supporting urban refugee self-reliance in Addis Ababa. Participants, including a project manager employee of a refugee focusing NGO, shared their half-hearted effort of ensuring refugee self-reliance: “There is the reduction and diversion of funding due to a number of reasons. As a result, addressing the most necessary issue for the urban refugee becomes less of a priority and you just do what you were doing with increasing numbers or you may work on an issue that is not urgent for that concerned group” (KII-4, *Personal communication*, Oct. 6, 2022).

The lack of effort in the self-reliance improvement of urban refugee residents in the city of Addis Ababa was further evident when a government informant justified why the RHISN project was not implemented in the context of Addis Ababa.

The project is implemented in an urban environment. But it has not been implemented in Addis Ababa at this moment in time. It desires to create socio-economic and local integration among refugees and host communities. Since most refugees in Addis Ababa are Out-of-camp (OCP) refugees, there is a possibility for a self-propelled gradual de facto integration. For that matter, priority has been for regional cities like Jigjiga and woreda cities like Kebribeya where a considerable number of aid recipient refugees reside (KII-1, *Personal communication*, Sep. 15, 2022).

Structural loopholes impeding organisational efforts of refugee self-reliance and resilience building was raised as a concern by a program officer working for a refugee focusing NGO.

Whenever one project commences, its sustainability for the future should always be ensured. A project should not just start and stop somewhere. The sustainability of that project is ensured when you are able to work on the existing structure of the government and such kinds of issues are raised as a challenge most of the time (KII-7, *Personal communication*, Oct. 12, 2022).

The lacklustre to engage in efforts of self-reliance was also exhibited by some of the refugee informants. According to FGD participants, one of the reasons refugees are reluctant to embark on pathways of self-reliance inside the city is because “they consider themselves as they are still on the move. So, they do not want to invest the money they have here (in Addis Ababa)” (FGD-3, *Personal communication*, Sep. 18, 2022). In other words, refugees’ may put all their effort into immigrating out to a desirable destination if they are obsessed with it as has been pointed out below by an Eritrean informant:

“People are willing to put their life at risk while migrating illegally and they believe that their close ones abroad are willing to pay the required expense up on learning the life of the illegal migrant is in danger” (II-ER-6, *Personal communication*, Jul. 2, 2022).

There were also other informants that attributed the refugees’ disinterest of pursuing self-reliance in the city to how the country’s refugee management law is implemented. For example, the impact of interruptions in refugee registration has been discussed by one Eritrean interviewee as follows: “Registration is a big thing. It is even recognized by the government of Ethiopia. Because registration no longer exists at this point in time, people put their effort into illegally migrating to other regional countries like Uganda where they are able to get registered as a refugee” (II-ER-1, *Interview*, Jun. 17, 2022).

Criticism against refugees, who belied their loved ones from abroad to send them money and showed signs of dependency syndrome, losing any interest to improve their situation, was also made.

There are some refugee addicts that have the money to smoke cigarettes, chew khat¹¹ and drink alcohol regularly. But the main body who is responsible is the one who is sending the money from abroad. They accept an idea that is full of lies and they send them the money. And city residents assume that Eritreans have a lot of money and poor immigrants like me are depicted negatively (II-ER-3, *Personal communication*, Jun. 28, 2022).

The inaction of refugee self-reliance in the city of Addis Ababa is further demonstrated by the illusion of change in refugee self-reliance initiatives undertaken by some of the refugee focusing organisations. A Yemeni refugee who took part in a one month workshop on setting up personal business, sponsored and offered by Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), stated “We were provided 10,000 birr at the end of the workshop for us to venture into setting up our own personal business, but the money was nowhere near the required start-up capital. Instead, I used the money to cover my two month rental expense” (II-YEM-7, *Personal communication*, Oct 17, 2022).

Similarly a Congolese refugee recounted his experience of participating in the program as follows:

NRC organised us in a group of sixes and sevens and provided us financial support to venture into a business of our liking. However, it was not applicable in the Ethiopian context because if you are a foreigner, you cannot get a licence. The money was spent on food and it was over soon. How can you open a business when you do not have a licence? How can you pay tax to the government? It was not feasible (II-CON-1, *Personal communication*, Jul. 13, 2022).

Absence of the promises the country made to improve the condition of refugees in its soil with regards to work permit issuance was noted in the context of Addis Ababa as the following excerpt from the interview with a Burundian refugee reveals:

After Hailemariam Dessalegn, the former prime minister, went to New York and signed the pledge that hoped to improve refugees’ work right, I attended meetings in various hotels of Addis, including Elilly hotel, Capital Hotel, Flamingo Hotel, Ramada Hotel and Hilton Hotel, but I can say each of the meeting was fruitless because nothing is yet happening on the ground. The UNHCR claims that ARRA told them they already provided 80 work permits

¹¹ Catha edulis (khat), a plant native to the countries surrounding the Red Sea and eastern Africa, is consumed by locals for its stimulant properties (Cox; Rampes, 2003).

for urban refugees in Addis, but this is not accurate because I am among the people who requested the work permit and didn't get it (II-BUR-1, *Personal communication*, Jul. 29, 2022).

This Lack of change in how the refugee work rights issue is entertained on the ground is also corroborated by an urban project officer that is working for a refugee focusing NGO:

The issuance of work permit and business licence is precluding refugees from working and that is very much related with our organisation. We design a project and it includes employment or market linkage. We do that hoping we would be able to get a work permit for them through ARRA and the government. They take a lot of training but in the end due to the existing condition of the country, the process is delayed or they will not be even issued with the work permit. Getting the work permit is very difficult (KII-6, *Personal communication*, Oct. 12, 2022).

Some of the refugees were depressed about their unchanging situation with regards to receiving financial support from their relatives abroad. When FGD participants were asked about the resources they relied on for daily expenses while living in Addis, this is how one participant summed it up: "To answer the question briefly, our source of income is limena¹². We live off by limena. When I say limena, I am referring to the money we get from our relatives and friends that live abroad. We are living by begging from them. We do not have any other means of income" (FGD-3, *Personal communication*, Sep. 18, 2022).

Another FGD participant was anxious about the uncertainty its unsustainability generates and the feeling of guilt it creates: "I agree. Almost all of us live by begging. It could be your brother or your nephew. You kind of list your whole relatives. Even with all the pleas you make to your relatives, there are some that send you and others that don't. But, that is not meaningful unless you become self-reliant. I wonder. How long can you keep on begging?" (FGD-2, *Personal communication*, Oct. 17, 2022).

Apparently, achieving durable solution through refugee self-reliance in the city of Addis Ababa unfolded amidst numerous extant challenges as the aforementioned gaps in terms of lack of agency, change, and effort indicated a great deal of refugee self-reliance inactivity within the city's setting.

Discussion

This investigation was carried out between June 2022 and December 2023 as a component of a dissertation project. Specifically, it examined how urban refugees in Addis Ababa demonstrated resilience by pursuing self-reliance. The question of how to assess refugee self-reliance is one of the numerous topics that comprise the literature on the subject (Skran; Easton-Calabria, 2020). Particularly, limitation of attempts at rigorously evaluating its implementation has been problematized. As an alternate method of conceptualizing and analysing self-reliance, this study suggests using Sunderrajan and Albarracín's (2021) conception of action and inaction. Accordingly, the presence and absence of self-reliance is viewed in terms of agency that enables willful intention of self-reliance, effort that demonstrates attempts of self-reliance building and change that involves making progress in self-reliance. Hence, it is assumed that self-

¹² Begging.

reliance is in action if there are more agencies, effort and change whereas the lacklustre and absence of these elements signals self-reliance inaction.

Despite being a CRRF pilot country, Ethiopia's refugee work right in its refugee proclamation provided a limited pathway for refugee self-reliance. Namely, treatment as favoured foreign nationals and engagement in joint venture projects were the two scenarios in which refugee self-reliance was recognized by law. The possible motive behind the restricted refugee work right was enabling refugee employment without compromising the work space of unemployed citizens. This is in line with a study on the work rights of refugees in 51 countries by Guerero Ble and Miller (2022) which reported the presence of administrative barriers that refugees face and native-born workers do not.

Nevertheless, refugees demonstrated resilience bypassing the limited work provisions in the refugee law of the country and exploiting their disposable agentic enablers of self-reliance. The fact that restrictions do not prevent refugees and asylum-seekers from finding unconventional economic opportunities at a micro level was echoed, for example, by Bhattacharjee (2013). In line with that, some were able to tap into their diaspora ties and receive remittances that enabled them to venture into self-employment and informal economy. Others managed to establish local ties in the form of marriage, friendship and financial arrangement that played a vital role in their endeavours of self-reliance. There were also instances where refugees turned into exploiting their cultural assets for fostering their prospects of self-reliance.

The action of refugee self-reliance in the city was also visible in the efforts various stakeholders put into building the self-reliance and resilience of the refugees. Conceivably, this is expected to occur in the wake of the CRRF the country signed and started implementing in 2017 as a means of ensuring the self-reliance of refugees and host communities by way of socio-economic integration, voluntary repatriation and resettlement opportunity (Abebe, 2018). In this regard, the city was home to different organizations that were engaged in strengthening the resilience and self-reliance of refugees and host communities. Refugees on their part tried to achieve self-reliance by searching for jobs in vacancy announcements, starting-up small scale businesses and venturing into the informal economy. There were also a handful of refugee informants that flipped their self-reliance status by managing to earn a living and attaining a certain degree of self-reliance.

However, a great deal of refugee self-reliance inaction in the form of lack of agency, effort and change was observed during the course of the study. Importantly, the lack of legal agency that precludes refugees from exploiting work and employment opportunities lawfully was stifling the urban refugees and stakeholders will for self-reliance and resilience within the cityscape. This brought to the fore the lack of political and legal will that often accompanies refugee self-reliance and livelihood initiatives (Easton-Calabria; Omata, 2018). Besides legal restriction, other factors like limited communal support, lack of financial support and resource limitation rendered the self-reliance initiative of the refugees to be non-agentic. The problem of promoting the economic inclusion and self-reliance of refugees without putting the local resource situation into consideration was previously highlighted by Omata (2022) in the context of Uganda.

The lack of crucial self-reliance argentic factors dissuaded refugees and stakeholders to abandon their efforts of self-reliance within the cityscape giving rise to a presence of subdued and effortless self-reliance initiatives inside the cityscape. In this regard, research informants attributed their subdued effort of self-reliance engagement within the cityscape to the lack of legal agency as well as shortage and reduction of funding that exists within the context of the country. The inevitability of such kinds of refugee self-reliance initiatives to fail has been pointed out previously (Kaga, 2021). Some refugees' strong desire to emigrate into a third country also detracted them from engaging in endeavours of self-reliance inside the city, leading them to invest their disposable resources on securing pathways for future emigration rather than on ensuring their self-reliance in Addis Ababa. Furthermore, attitudinal barriers in the form of dependency syndrome and existing practical challenges persuaded some refugees to put a cap on their effort of self-reliance inside the city.

The city's problem of refugee self-reliance inaction was further evidenced by the lack of change in the refugees' self-reliance status, city's refugee self-reliance initiatives and existing legal barriers. Organizationally driven self-reliance initiatives demonstrated failure in achieving the objectives they set out to deliver. Informants of the study highlighted the unlikely scenario of ensuring refugee self-reliance in the absence of offering refugees a dignified right to work. According to the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (2021), refugees' right to work and access to the labour market are vital for ensuring their self-reliance, well-being, dignity and contribution. Similarly, lack of change was also observed in the self-reliance status of refugees who relied on prolonged external financial support for their daily life expenses putting them in a state of dependency and anxiety.

Conclusion

Despite being a CRRF pilot country, Ethiopia had a limited space for self-reliance in its refugee proclamation. Nevertheless, refugees demonstrated resilience bypassing the limited work provisions in the refugee law of the country and exploiting their disposable agentic enablers of self-reliance in the form of remittances, social ties and cultural assets. The action of refugee self-reliance in the city was also visible in the energy put by various stakeholders to build it. In this regard, the city was home to different organizations that were implementing various refugee self-reliance programs. Refugees on their part tried to achieve self-reliance by searching for jobs in vacancy announcements, starting-up small scale businesses and venturing into the informal economy, with a handful of the informants managing to attain certain degree of self-reliance. However, a great deal of refugee self-reliance inaction in the form of lack of agency, effort and change was observed in the city. Notably, the lack of legal agency that precludes refugees from exercising their work and employment rights lawfully was stifling the urban refugees and stakeholders will for self-reliance and resilience within the cityscape. Besides legal restriction, other factors like limited communal support, lack of financial support and resource limitation rendered the self-reliance initiative of the refugees to be non-argentic. Lack of energy and enthusiasm in pursuing pathways of self-reliance inside the city was also observed. According to research participants, the country's highly curtailed refugee work rights, funding shortages and reductions, some refugees' strong desire to emigrate to a third

country, refugee dependency syndrome, and policy-practice gaps were the main causes behind refugees demotivation to engage in pathways of self-reliance inside the city. Inaction of refugee self-reliance inside Addis Ababa was further demonstrated by the lack of change in the self-reliance status of the refugee informants as the city's refugee self-reliance initiatives failed to deliver and the country's legal impediments remained unchanged. Addressing policy, resource, practice and attitudinal gaps could prove vital in broadening the prospect of refugee self-reliance and resilience in the city of Addis Ababa.

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