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# Community infrastructures: shelter, self-reliance and polymorphic borders in urban refugee governance

Elisa Pascucci

## ABSTRACT

Community infrastructures: shelter, self-reliance and polymorphic borders in urban refugee governance. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. Over the last two decades community-based programmes have become important tools of migration and refugee governance. Governmentality approaches have argued that the same technologies of governance applied to advanced liberal societies are being translated onto spaces of forced displacement in the Global South through the notions of ‘community’ and ‘self-reliance’. Other accounts have instead focused on the potentially emancipatory character of migrant and refugee self-organization. This article contributes to this body of work by drawing on ethnographic research on refugee community shelters in Cairo, Egypt. It theorizes community as an informal and precarious infrastructure in which refugees’ social relations are mobilized as substitutes for direct, material humanitarian assistance in a global condition marked by the shrinking of aid budgets. Predicated as it is on the institutionalization of national and ethnic belonging, community-based shelter provision constitutes a relational bordering practice in which the new universal humanitarian values of empowerment and resilience reproduce old exclusions. Refugees in Cairo perceive these policies as inadequate and contest the ethos of self-reliance as practically untenable. Community infrastructures are thus also sites of friction where repoliticization can occur.

## KEYWORDS

urban refugees; Egypt; community; self-reliance; infrastructures; protest camps


## 摘要

社区基础结构：城市难民管理中的庇护，自力更生与多形态边界。 *Territory, Politics, Governance*。过去二十年来，以社区为基础的方案，已成为移民与难民管理的重要工具。治理术的方法主张，管理先进自由社会的相同技术，透过“社区”与“自力更生”的概念，被移植到全球南方的迫迁空间之中。其他论点则聚焦移民与难民的自我管理所拥有的潜在解放特质。本文透过运用在埃及开罗的难民社区庇护所进行的民族志研究，对上述研究文献做出贡献。本文将社区理论化为非正式与不稳定的基础结构，其中难民的社会关系，在救助预算减少的全球境况中，被动员来替代直接的物质人道协助。以社区为基础的庇护提供，取决于国族和族裔归属感的制度化，构成了关系性的边界划定实践，其中培力与恢复力等崭新的普世人道价值，再生产了原先的排除。开罗的难民视这些政策为不充分的，并争论自力更生的精神实际上是站不住脚的。

## 关键词

城市难民；埃及；社区；自力更生；基础结构；抗议营区

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**RÉSUMÉ**

Infrastructures communautaires: abri, autonomie et frontières polymorphes dans la gouvernance des réfugiés urbains. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. Au cours des vingt dernières années, des programmes axés sur la collectivité sont devenus des outils importants pour la gestion de la migration et la gouvernance des réfugiés. Des principes de « gouvernementalité » ont soutenu que les mêmes technologies de gouvernance appliquées à des sociétés libérales évoluées sont déclinées sur des espaces de déplacement forcé dans l'hémisphère sud par le biais des notions de « communauté » et d'« autonomie ». D'autres programmes étaient axés sur le caractère potentiellement émancipatoire de l'auto-organisation de migrant et du réfugié. Le présent article contribue à cet ensemble de travaux en s'inspirant de la recherche ethnographique sur les abris pour la collectivité de réfugiés au Caire, en Égypte. Il théorise la communauté comme une infrastructure informelle et précaire dans laquelle les relations sociales des réfugiés sont mobilisées comme des substituts pour une assistance humanitaire concrète directe dans une situation mondiale marquée par la réduction des budgets de l'aide. Élaborée sur l'institutionnalisation d'une appartenance nationale et ethnique, la fourniture d'abris communautaires constitue une pratique limitrophe relationnelle dans laquelle les nouvelles valeurs humanitaires universelles de l'autonomisation et de la résilience reproduisent d'anciennes exclusions. Des réfugiés au Caire perçoivent ces politiques comme étant inadéquates, et contestent l'éthique de l'autonomie comme une pratique insoutenable. De ce fait, les infrastructures communautaires sont également des sites de friction où une repolitisation peut avoir lieu.

**MOTS-CLÉS**

réfugiés urbains; Égypte; communauté; autosuffisance; infrastructures; camps de protestation

**RESUMEN**

Infraestructuras comunitarias: alojamiento, autosuficiencia y fronteras polimorfos en la gobernanza urbana de los refugiados. *Territory, Politics, Governance*. En las dos últimas décadas los programas comunitarios se han convertido en importantes herramientas para la gestión de emigrantes y refugiados. En los planteamientos sobre gubernamentalidad se ha argumentado que las mismas tecnologías administrativas que se ponen en práctica en sociedades liberales avanzadas se traducen en espacios de desplazamiento forzado en el hemisferio sur a través de nociones de 'comunidad' y 'autosuficiencia'. Sin embargo otros relatos se han centrado en el carácter posiblemente emancipador de la autoorganización de emigrantes y refugiados. Este artículo es una aportación a este campo de trabajo y se basa en estudios etnográficos sobre alojamientos comunitarios para refugiados en El Cairo, Egipto. Desarrolla la teoría de que la comunidad es una infraestructura informal y precaria en la que se movilizan las relaciones sociales de los refugiados como sustitutos de ayuda humanitaria directa y material en una situación internacional marcada por la reducción de los presupuestos de ayuda. Basada en la institucionalización de las pertenencias nacionales y éticas, la prestación de alojamientos comunitarios constituye una práctica fronteriza de las relaciones en la que los nuevos valores humanitarios universales de capacitación y resiliencia reproducen antiguas exclusiones. Los refugiados en El Cairo consideran que estas políticas son inadecuadas y cuestionan el carácter de autosuficiencia como prácticamente insostenible. Las infraestructuras comunitarias se convierten así en lugares de fricción donde puede ocurrir una repolitización.

**PALABRAS CLAVES**

refugiados urbanos; Egipto; comunidad; autosuficiencia; infraestructuras; campamentos de protesta

**HISTORY** Received 4 May 2016; in revised form 19 January 2017

**INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY AND REFUGEE GOVERNANCE**

Comprised of two rooms and a reception area, the apartment hosting the Oromo Sons Community Association offices in Hadayek al Maadi, south of Cairo, was never meant to be a refugee shelter. Until the summer of 2014, the small organization of Ethiopian migrants in Egypt,

belonging to the Oromo ethnic group, had used the premises to hold regular meetings, organize language courses, or simply receive visitors in search of legal and other kinds of advice. When Ahmad and Munir<sup>1</sup> arrived in Cairo in November 2014 after a journey through East Africa that lasted several months, they had assumed that applying for refugee status with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) would mean receiving help in finding somewhere to live. For Munir, who was over 50 years old and had previously been a refugee in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya, the UN refugee agency meant concrete, material assistance. Although he remembered the time spent in the camp as one of hardship, with tent accommodations shared by several families and a scarcity of food, he surely did not expect that he would still be relying on the hospitality of the Oromo community organization over two months after registering with the UNHCR in Cairo. Monem, the youngest of the community leaders who managed the centre hosting the two men, described the room where Munir and Ahmad were lodged as ‘temporary, actually, it is not even a bedroom. It was one of the rooms for group activities in our centre. We arranged a couple of beds there’. It was too cold to sleep in on winter nights, he explained, and despite their many efforts they had not yet managed to find an affordable and safe heater. A couple of weeks after the arrival of Munir and Ahmad, the centre had to host also two other men. According to Munir, this meant that hygiene conditions were starting to deteriorate. For the Oromo community leaders, this situation was the result of the significant increase in the number of requests for help their community received between 2013 and beginning of 2015, but also of UNHCR policies that granted assistance only to selected individuals identified as vulnerable. De facto, Monem summarized, ‘apart from very few people, you are left to the community, or to yourself’.

Ahmad and Munir’s case exemplifies some of the changes in refugee governance in the developing world since the 1990s. These changes are aimed at moving beyond the paradigms of relief and direct assistance, and embracing the advanced liberal developmental ethos of capacity building and the promotion of self-reliance (Duffield, 2007; see also Miller & Rose, 2008). This global trend is epitomized by the shift from the centrality of the refugee camp as a ‘spatial technology of relief and security’ to increasing attention to ‘community’ as a ‘technology of agency’ that enables refugees’ ‘self-empowerment’, reducing their dependency on international aid (Lippert, 1999, p. 313). The community-based approach allows the UNHCR to consider refugees as active partners in their protection (2007). Practically, the UNHCR community approach usually involves two sets of activities: holding consultations with community representatives about the location, timing and logistics of aid delivery, and mobilizing resources and networks within refugee groups in order to implement social and development policies, from legal advice and psychosocial assistance to adult education and micro-finance. References to community, however, are also increasingly found in operational handbooks and policy literature concerned with the material infrastructure of aid, especially in the fields of post-disaster reconstruction and refugee shelter.

Engaging with the growing body of critical literature on community-based governance (Bulley, 2014; Ican & Rygiel, 2015; Joseph, 2002; Williams, Goodwin, & Cloke, 2014) and informed by ethnographic research with refugees settled in the Cairo urban area, this paper sets out to theorize community as a socio-material infrastructure for the promotion of self-reliance. While literature on refugees has mostly interpreted community either through the lens of governmentality or as a socio-ontological category of inherent sharing and resistance (Bulley, 2014), the analysis employs an extended notion of infrastructure akin to the one applied in recent research on African and the Middle Eastern cities (Elyachar, 2010; Fredericks, 2014; Mitchell, 2014; Simone, 2004). In so doing, it looks particularly at the role refugee communities play in providing accommodation to newcomers through networks of hospitality based on shared flats, collective shelters and makeshift encampments. In this context, the infrastructure approach is useful in that it underscores the complex and contested shift towards ‘non-material’ forms of refugee assistance that the promotion of self-reliance through community has facilitated (see Pupavac, 2005). The paper argues that the

rise of community governance has contributed to extend and blur the notions of refugee protection and humanitarian assistance by partially replacing the infrastructure of refugee aid – like camp housing, food rations and direct financial assistance – with socio-material ‘infrastructures of communicative channels’ (Elyachar, 2010). Within them, urban refugees are left to ‘take matters into their own hands’, securing their most immediate material needs by mobilizing their own social connections. Community-based policies institutionalize identities, drawing new – or, more frequently, reinforcing old – lines of inclusion and exclusion in which access to networks of support is determined by ethnic identifications. Coupled with the material scarcity of available humanitarian assistance, these de facto bordering mechanisms cause widespread frustration among refugees. These findings resonate with those of recent studies that have focused on ‘interstitial’ forms of progressive community organizing emerging from neoliberal governance (Williams et al., 2014).

Over the last few years, a growing body of literature across disciplines has focused on theorizing infrastructures, significantly expanding the scope of this ‘fuzzy concept’ (Anand, Bach, Elyachar, & Mains, 2012). This has been done not only by underscoring the social and political life of infrastructural materialities, but also through theorizations of human sociality and ‘communicative and moral ties’ as socio-material infrastructures (Mitchell, 2014, p. 439; see also Elyachar, 2010; Simone, 2004). Empirically, this extended notion of infrastructure has recently found application also in the study of transnational migration and border enforcement (Xiang & Lindquist, 2014). However, despite important attempts at theorizing the spatialities and materialities of humanitarian aid (Duffield, 2010; Hyndman, 2001; Smirl, 2015) and refugee camps (Ramadan, 2013), insights from this body of work have rarely been applied to humanitarianism and refugee governance (see Pascucci, 2016; Scott-Smith, 2016).

This article argues that the infrastructure perspective illuminates three of the main elements that characterize community-based refugee governance. These are a neoliberal developmental ethos based on self-reliance promotion, new bordering practices resulting from the institutionalization of ethnicity, and widespread contestation and resistance by the refugees. By highlighting this nuanced complexity, this perspective has the potential to advance existing debates on refugee communities. Critical political theory influenced by thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Giorgio Agamben has traditionally held the refugee condition as antithetic to ideas and practices of community (Bulley, 2014). However, as Bulley (2014) has highlighted, more recently efforts have been devoted to documenting existing forms of sociality, subversion and political resistance among encamped populations (Millner, 2011; Ramadan, 2010, 2013; Rygiel, 2012; Sanyal, 2011; Sigona, 2015).

This paper shares with this body of work the attention to the materialities and spatialities of refugee governance and their politics. It provides an empirical perspective that furthers recent arguments that see community-based governance not only as a technology of responsabilization, but also as a space where ‘cracks can be opened up’ in ‘the dominant formations of the neoliberal’ (Williams et al., 2014, p. 2810). As a bordering device through which the refugee condition and the right to protection are reframed along the lines of fluid yet highly exclusionary national, ethnic, linguistic and social identifications, community infrastructures are often contested by the refugees. This, as Burrige, Gill, Kocher and Martin (2017) theorize in the introduction to this issue, underscores the provisional and failure-prone character of community governance as a manifestation of what can be defined as emerging, polymorphic humanitarian borders.

This article is based on the analysis of UNHCR operational handbooks on refugee shelter and community-based protection and on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cairo between 2011 and 2015. The fieldwork involved interviews and participant observation with community leaders belonging to Sudanese and Oromo Ethiopian community-based organizations (CBOs), as well as with refugees and asylum seekers of several different nationalities. Additional interviews were conducted with local and international staff from the local UNHCR office and its partner NGOs.

The paper proceeds as follows. The first section introduces the concept of community infrastructures, showing the relevance of some of the recent anthropological and geographical literature on the topic to the analysis of UNHCR community policies. In so doing, it focuses in particular on how the promotion of refugee self-reliance has been extended to the organization of basic services, with particular attention to the question of shelter. The second section outlines how community policies have been implemented among refugees living in urban areas, and provides some background to the Cairo case study. The third and last section uses ethnographic material to analyse the dynamics of shelter provision through community infrastructures in Cairo.

## COMMUNITY AS INFRASTRUCTURE

Attention to the question of community has marked the work of the UNHCR for several decades. Bakewell (2003) points out how, for the UN office, ‘community’ was originally a hybrid term referring to the specific sector of its activity previously known as ‘social services’. This encompassed all the services that went beyond the basic, life-supporting provisions of refugee camps – food, health, water and sanitation – thus including education and culture, psychosocial support and specific, advanced forms of assistance for vulnerable categories. Throughout the 1990s and the early 2000s, however, the term came to assume a much broader and more ambitious scope. Community policies became the pillar of the UNHCR’s efforts to move from direct assistance to what was regarded as a more ‘sustainable’ developmental approach. Moving from an assumption of ‘dependency’ – that is, the belief that the prolonged availability of aid undermines refugees’ resilience and autonomous initiative – the UNHCR set for itself the objective of promoting refugees’ economic and social self-reliance (Bakewell, 2003; Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015). The promotion of self-sufficiency in first countries of asylum became the most viable way of securing durable solutions to displacement in a global condition marked by increasingly protracted conflicts and shrinking quota for resettlement to third countries. The community approach was thus extended to the whole of the UNCHR’s activities, including basic service provision. Although the downsizing of direct assistance has never been as generalized and consistent as envisaged in the agency’s policy formulations (Bakewell, 2003), the setting-up and management of some of the fundamental infrastructures of refugee aid, particularly in urban areas, have been progressively delegated to communities.

These developments have led to increasing attention to the relation between infrastructures and community, or sociality more in general, in humanitarian aid. For Smirl (2008, 2015) post-disaster relief bases itself on the assumption that infrastructural materialities substantially influence the outcomes of humanitarian interventions, particularly with regard to beneficiaries’ capacity to recover community cohesion. The World Bank Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery’s reconstruction handbook *Safer homes, stronger communities*, for instance, pays particular attention to the complex relation between rebuilding and community healing (Jha, Duyn Barenstein, Phelps, Pittet, & Sena, 2010). ‘The distinction between infrastructure and sociality’, the handbook reads, ‘is fluid and pragmatic rather than definitive’, and ‘the relationships that infrastructures are meant to facilitate are never predetermined’ (Lockrem & Lugo, 2012, p. 1).

A similarly fluid and open conceptualization of the relation between infrastructures and society is also found in the third and fourth editions of the UNHCR’s *Emergency handbook*, published in 2007 and 2015, respectively. Although both handbooks have sections specifically concerned with the UNHCR community approach in emergency contexts, the entries on shelter also contain some important observations on the role of community in forced displacement. The 2007 edition identifies three main categories of refugee shelters, namely dispersed settlements, mass shelters (such as community centres, schools and government buildings temporarily converted into reception facilities) and spontaneous and planned camps. The handbook recommends avoiding camps whenever possible, and considers ‘dispersed settlements’ as more desirable. These are defined as arrangements in which ‘refugees find accommodation within the households of families who

already live in the area of refuge' (UNHCR, 2007, p. 207). Among the advantages of this solution, the handbook mentions its quick implementation, few administrative requirements, affordability and capacity for fostering refugees 'self-help and independence' (UNHCR, 2007, p. 207). The priority accorded to 'dispersed settlements' implies the notion that, for self-reliant refugee populations, under certain circumstances community ties can productively be turned into a substitute for emergency infrastructures.

The 2015 edition of the *Emergency handbook* and the *Global Strategy for Settlement and Shelter 2014–2018* are characterized by greater attention to the collection and processing of data on refugee populations, as well as to the role of innovation in refugee housing. As such, they also show increased awareness of the limitations of dispersed settlements and host arrangements. Rental accommodation and collective shelters are regarded as more suitable because they are less overcrowded and stressful. However, host arrangements are still listed among the viable shelter solutions, particularly in urban areas. The 2015 edition of the handbook also specifies that communities' capacity for providing assistance can be supported through Quick Impact Projects. These, however, are conceived to be limited in scope. As in the previous edition, they have the objective of promoting communities' capacity for building 'strong social economic and cultural ties with host communities, and contribute to their economic development' (UNHCR, 2015a). The relation between community and infrastructures is conceptualized as one that needs to be fostered through rapid interventions having the aim of avoiding dependency. The potential of community for complementing, enhancing or even replacing infrastructures of relief that have become unavailable, as well as its centrality in the promotion of refugee self-reliance, remain important principles in UNHCR emergency shelter policies.

According to writers such as Simone (2004, 2012) and Mitchell (2014), acknowledging that infrastructures are 'partly human' requires considering not only the forms of knowledge and labour that sustain them, but also 'the very sociality of those who use them' (Mitchell, 2014, p. 419). Ethnographies of development in Africa and the Middle East have taken this point further by problematizing the distinction between labour and sociality (Elyachar, 2005, 2010; Fredericks, 2014; Simone, 2004). In her study of development initiatives revolving around the notion of economic 'empowerment' of Egyptian women through micro-finance, Elyachar (2005, 2010) argues that such programmes rely on what she names 'social infrastructures of communicative channels' (Elyachar, 2010). These are 'women's everyday, behind-the-scenes communication and movement through Cairo', which Elyachar (2010) theorizes 'as constituting an infrastructure that is as important to economic life as roads and bridges' (Besky, 2016, p. 6). Empowerment policies institutionalize the informal economic activities that characterize Egypt's most destitute urban areas and the communicative infrastructures that sustain them, incorporating them into the market sphere. The 'provisionality' and flexibility of socio-material infrastructures in contexts of urban informality are thus treated as a resource, rather than as an obstacle to development (Elyachar, 2002, 2005; Simone, 2004).

The UNHCR's conceptualization of dispersed refugee settlements through networks of community hospitality works in similar ways. Like in the micro-finance programmes studied by Elyachar (2005, 2010), informality and flexibility are seen as an opportunity. For instance, while the setting-up of refugee camps is regulated by highly specific guidelines as to basic infrastructural standards, these are not mentioned in the case of community-based host arrangements. The flexibility of the networks of support that allow communities to be self-reliant is considered as an advantage that outgrows the need for infrastructural security. 'Non-material' forms of aid aimed at fostering empowerment, participation and self-sufficiency are thus translated into the domain of basic infrastructures of shelter. As the final section of this paper will show, this tension between non-material aid and the need for material infrastructures is central in refugees' grievances against community-based accommodations.

## COMMUNITY AND SELF-RELIANCE IN CAIRO

The need for ‘grounding protection within communities’ (UNHCR, 2013, p. 6) is linked to trends towards self-reliance and self-management in the governance of vulnerable and marginalized populations that are global in scale (Bulley, 2014). In the case of refugee aid this need also responds to the logistical and environmental conditions in which international aid agencies have come to operate in the last two decades. In this regard, two elements in particular are worth highlighting, for they are especially relevant to the Cairo case.

First, the adoption of the community approach to refugee governance has been simultaneous to the recognition by international aid agencies that today a growing percentage of refugees tend to settle autonomously outside of camps. In contemporary displacement crises, people head towards major urban areas where informal economies and social connections afford better chances for work and mobility. While the refugee camp never disappeared (Minca, 2005; see also Ramadan, 2013), the implementation of community-based programmes coincided with the growing centrality of ‘urban policies’ in refugee governance. As stated in the *UNHCR Handbook for Self-Reliance*, community became a tool for ‘integrating refugees within the existing urban environment’, privileging settlements and housing solutions alternative to camps (UNHCR, 2006, p. 26). Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) argue that the current emphasis on refugee self-reliance underscores a global trend to ‘reimagine(ing) camps from temporary spaces for housing refugees as aid recipients to more permanent spaces of settlement aimed at developing a new form of community and more entrepreneurial and responsible populations’ (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015, p. 16). This shift from temporary to long-term governance solutions, captured by the concept of ‘protracted refugee situation’ (Hyndman & Giles, 2011), also characterizes the UNHCR’s emphasis on the local integration of refugees in cities of the Global South. A second important factor that contributed to the UNHCR increasingly relying on the community approach for the delivery of basic services is the downsizing of international aid budgets since the late 1990s and early 2000s. As already mentioned, this led to the re-organization of assistance into interventions that were deemed less viable to induce dependency (Hunter, 2009; Hyndman, 2001).

Home to a large population of urban refugees, Cairo has been an important ‘laboratory’ for UNHCR urban policies since the 1990s. As of 2015, Egypt hosted nearly 260,000 refugees and asylum seekers officially registered with the UN. While the single largest national group were Syrians fleeing the conflict started in 2011–2012, migrants from East Africa and the Horn of Africa were a significant part of the country’s refugee population – a constant trend throughout the history of independent Egypt (UNHCR, 2015b). At the time when research for this paper was conducted, Sudanese, Somali, Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees in Cairo were gathered in associations that often had significant experience in managing relations with local authorities and hosting communities.

The UNCHR community approach prescribes careful mapping of ‘existing agencies, services and community structures’ in order to establish partnerships in the implementation of protection measures (2015a, p. 3). In the context of these policies, UNHCR had recognized as CBOs some of the diaspora associations that had been active in Cairo for several years. As a result, the organizations were receiving limited financial help, in particular to cover the rent of their premises. This process of institutionalization implied the incorporation of the language of humanitarianism and refugee advocacy into these groups’ pre-existing experiences of mobilization, in some cases developed in contact with political groups in countries such as Sudan and Ethiopia (Pascucci, in press). Other refugee-led organizations had emerged precisely as a response to the opportunities for funding and institutional recognition provided by the UNHCR community approach. As of 2011–2012, around 30 officially recognized refugee CBOs were active in Cairo, spanning Evangelical churches attended mostly by Eritrean refugees and small community schools, supplemented



by several other unaffiliated community leaders and ‘refugee initiatives’. This wide variety of partners underscores the global trend towards outsourcing to local actors, informalization and precarization of aid work highlighted by recent studies (Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015).

UNHCR guidelines stress the importance of avoiding operational patterns in which only traditional leaders are empowered (2015a). In the Cairo case however, CBOs were organized primarily around ethnic groups, and were mostly led by male individuals who had often occupied positions of power within pre-existing ethnic, religious or political groups. Community as an instrument for the promotion of refugee self-sufficiency thus de facto contributed to the institutionalization of ethnic identifications. This highlights what anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have defined as the capacity of contemporary ethnicity for ‘unlock(ing) new forms of self-realization, sentiment, entitlement, and enrichment’ in the context of market-based societies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009, p. 139). These new configurations and ‘practical uses’ of ethnicity are an important element in the global trend towards the reconstitution of refugees as ‘entrepreneurial, neoliberal subjects’ through community-based and self-reliance policies (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015, p. 16). As will be shown below, the ethnicization of community infrastructures also results in new dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that operate alongside the traditional legal and administrative ‘sorting mechanisms’ regulating access to humanitarian assistance.

In Cairo, starting from the late 1990s, this increasingly restricted access to aid was heightened by the UNHCR’s budget restructuring mentioned above. The cuts affected not only the number of staff employed in the local operation, but also important voices in refugee households’ economy, such as reimbursements for medical expenses and grants for children’s primary education. A report published by the Cairo Forced Migration and Refugee Studies Centre in 2006 mentions the increase in the number of evictions due to difficulties in paying rent as one of the most serious consequences of these changes (FMRS, 2006; see also Sperl, 2001). Since 2006–2007, and particularly between 2013 and 2015, the budget of the UNHCR Cairo office has ‘steadily increased’ due to the influx of Iraqi refugees first, and then Syrians (2015b). Extra funding, however, has been devoted to the management of major emergencies, and organized through instruments such as the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for the Syrian crisis. For other categories within UNHCR’s ‘population of concern’, little has changed since the early and mid-2000s. Financial assistance continues to be limited to vulnerable cases, like single mothers and unaccompanied and separated minors.

The waves of evictions of the early and mid-2000s have been associated with the proliferation of protests, sit-ins and small informal refugee encampments in the area surrounding the Cairo UNHCR office (FMRS, 2006). Documented for the first time in 2004, this phenomenon has continued until the time of writing, despite the political and social unrest and associated violent repression that have characterized Egypt in recent years.

## INFRASTRUCTURES OF SELF-RELIANCE AS CONTESTED POLYMORPHIC BORDERS

Centres managed by community groups, hospitality within ethnic communities, rent accommodation and unplanned, informal encampments were all forms of refugee shelters commonly found in Cairo at the time when research for this article was conducted. Although these categories correspond to the UNHCR’s *Emergency handbooks*’ classifications (2007, 2015a), in most cases the implementation of these solutions do not involve any form of UNHCR intervention. The majority of the refugees and asylum seekers included in this study had found accommodation in various areas of Cairo without any assistance from aid agencies. When the UNHCR and its partner NGOs were involved, their role was limited to directing new applicants with unmet housing needs towards specific community centres or leaders. In the neighbourhood of Ard El Lewa, in

Giza, most Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees could not even count on CBOs formally recognized by the UN system. Rather, they used an extended network of ethnic shops and cafés, money transfer services, Evangelical churches and microbus stations as spaces in which to exchange information and organize the reception of refugees. Transportation for newcomers from Ramses, the city's main railway and microbus station, to their host accommodations in various areas of Giza was frequently arranged. Their networks of reception services at the same time drew upon and fed into Cairo's informal mobility and housing infrastructures. As such, they were commonly described as unsafe and inadequate.

The widespread sense of frustration this situation caused among Eritreans, as well as other groups in Cairo's asylum seekers' population, is akin to the one engendered by the progressive withdrawal of state institutions from infrastructure provision in post-developmental contexts (Mains, 2012; see also Lockrem & Lugo, 2012). A significant discrepancy existed between the focus on non-material elements found in the UNHCR shelter provision guidelines and the importance refugees in Cairo continued to attribute to the materiality of assistance.

The sense of being 'left to oneself' was pervasive, in particular among refugees living in private host and rental accommodations. Siddigh, a 26-year-old man from Darfur, was hosted by other Darfuran men in a small apartment in the informal neighbourhood of Masaken Osman, around 30 kilometres from central Cairo. He described living in the slum as one of the most difficult experiences of his life in terms of shelter conditions, and stressed that he had often fallen ill due to inadequate heating and sanitation. Siddigh partially blamed his poor living conditions to aid workers' supposed lack of knowledge of shelter conditions on the ground (see Pascucci, 2016). 'The UN people don't really know how we live. Sometimes, I wish the UNHCR could come and see how we live' he commented when asked about his relations with international aid organizations. 'None of those who work at the UN has ever been to a place like Masaken Osman', he concluded, 'they have no idea'. Although he described the situation as dismal, however, Siddigh could count on the support of a solid network of Sudanese in the neighbourhood where he lived. The situation of refugees who, for various reasons, found themselves isolated from their national or ethnic communities was even more complicated.

Amel and Abdallah, a Syrian couple with three small children arrived in Cairo at the end of 2014, lived in a deprived area of central Cairo where there were no other Syrian families. When interviewed, the couple recalled the efforts undertaken in order to furnish the two-room apartment they were renting. They also explicitly asked for help in finding someone who could assist them in transporting to their flat four thick blankets for the winter and a gas tank for the cooker. The ordeal they had to go through last time they had tried to carry such items by themselves, without having a car nor money to rent one, had been particularly distressing and humiliating. Several weeks after our initial encounter in January 2015, they were still experiencing the same difficulties. The family eventually received the help they so urgently needed from a small group of Egyptian volunteers that was not registered as an NGO.

The case of Amel and Abdallah shows how community policies can be highly problematic for those who experience various forms of social isolation or disability. The 'social infrastructures' of shelter found in Cairo's refugee settlements can even be hostile and exploitative, especially towards newcomers, a dynamic frequently described in existing analyses of migrants' informal networks (see Gill & Bialski, 2011). Ethnic communities sometimes use rental accommodation and other kinds of economic transactions as ways to extract money from particularly vulnerable individuals who do not receive financial support from aid agencies. For instance, some of the unaccompanied minors interviewed had been requested to pay a monthly rent higher than the market price once they had started receiving assistance from UNHCR. One of the community leaders described such situations as 'not ideal, but common'. Indebtedness to other members of one's community was also often a cause of tension, in some cases leading to episodes of physical violence.

The policies promoted by the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator Cluster Approach are based on the assumption that refugees' long-term safety is best guaranteed if they adapt to living conditions in displacement and assume full responsibility for their futures (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015). The ways in which community infrastructures are experienced in Cairo, however, suggest that this adaptation is full of frictions. The 'progressive-sounding concepts of empowerment, partnership, building community, participation and self-reliance' (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015, p. 15) through which neoliberal humanitarianism is rationalized conceal a lived reality of infrastructural precarity that people refuse to come to terms with.

The informal 'camps' frequently set up by Sudanese and Ethiopian refugees near the UNHCR premises in Cairo were an important example of how community infrastructures exposed the limits of self-reliance policies. These small encampments had been a constant presence in Cairo for several years, particularly between 2004 and 2005 and 2011 and 2013. One of the UN officers interviewed in Cairo in 2015 defined them as 'something in between a refugee settlement, a squat and a protest camp'. Tents, cardboard beds and communal kitchens were often part of their infrastructure. In these improvised encampments, the need to find a temporary, emergency accommodation for particular individuals and households intersected with the willingness to make refugees' living conditions visible in the public space. As a form of protest against the lack of substantial assistance, the camps underscored the tension between UNHCR non-material reformulation of refugee governance and people's persistent need for a basic physical infrastructure of protection (Pascucci, in press).

In some cases, through the camps the refugees rejected the ethnicized bordering mechanisms that restricted access to humanitarian aid. This was particularly evident in the Mustapha Mahmoud protest camp, held by Sudanese refugees in central Cairo in 2005. During the protests held in that camp, the reaffirmation of refugee rights found expression not only in the contestation of bureaucratic categories such as 'economic migrant' and 'closed file' (rejected asylum seeker), but also in the categorical refusal to distinguish 'between Sudanese refugees according to their ethnic background and/or geographical zones' (Moulin & Nyers, 2007, p. 365). The normalization of ethnicity and the institutionalization of community were clearly identified as conducive to the shrinking and downgrading of assistance. The Mustapha Mahmoud refugees countered the deterioration of protection and aid by reclaiming community through the material infrastructures of the camp, which they built autonomously and shared inclusively (Pascucci, in press).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has looked at the shift towards community-based forms of assistance that characterize contemporary refugee protection in the Global South, focusing in particular on the question of shelter provision. Ethnographic material has been examined in order to explore how networks of hospitality within ethnic groups, rent accommodation and emergency shelter provided by refugee-led community centres work in Cairo. The analysis has highlighted how these policies of 'sheltering' mobilize refugees' pre-existing networks of sociality, subsuming them into aid and development agendas. Institutionalized through policy implementation tools such as the CBOs, refugees social relations thus replace material assistance provided directly by humanitarian agencies. The infrastructures of aid become community infrastructures.

The capacity of contemporary ethnicity for adapting to new markets for services (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009), including humanitarian ones, is central to this process. Refugees' inclusion into networks of shelter provision is determined by their level of integration into institutionalized ethnic and national groups. Ethnically defined community organizations act as polymorphic, ever-shifting bordering mechanisms that, in this context, regulate not the mobility of bodies, but their access to basic aid. This highly flexible, community-based conception of shelter infrastructures is often held in humanitarian literature as empowering and able to restore refugees' social and

economic autonomy. Yet, as this article has demonstrated, it can also reproduce dynamics of exclusion that refugees have often already experienced in their countries of origin. When assistance is delegated to community groups, the position of those who do not fit into institutionalized ethnic and national categories can become even more precarious.

Community-based accommodations mark a shift from the provision of specific kinds of material shelters to complex 'sheltering' processes characterized by a 'fluid topology' 'entwined with a temporal imaginary of transformation' (Fredriksen, 2014, p. 158). The empirical examples provided in the paper illustrate the complex networks of mediators and materialities involved in these topological and temporal processes of sheltering. The concept of infrastructure allows for examining these processes without affording to these processes a degree of systematicity and coherence they do not necessarily have. As Burrige et al. (2017) highlight, following Latour (1997), migration and border studies today require a 'fibrous' and 'wiry' social ontology that accounts for how polymorphic borders 'come into force through disparate, disconnected practices', including 'failures and gaps' through which migrants can exert their agency.

In Cairo, community-based 'sheltering' fail to meet refugees' basic needs for safe and sustainable accommodations. As stressed by some of the Ethiopian asylum seekers interviewed, community self-reliance in urban areas is often synonymous of living conditions that are even more precarious than those of refugee camps are. Despite the global trend towards the urbanization of refugee aid, it is common to hear refugees express their preference for 'confinement in camps, because it is better for them than the alternative – an unpermitted presence where work and mobility come at the cost of extreme vulnerability' (Newhouse, 2015, p. 2295).

Aid and development policies that promote self-reliance through ethnicized community infrastructures are thus also highly contested. In fact, at a global level, such policies are 'emerging at the very time when refugee and migrant protests are growing globally in and around camp spaces' (Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015, p. 16). Community in spaces of refuge thus cannot be reduced to either a pervasive technology of governance, or a de-historicized ontology of co-existence. Rather, as a space where the rarefied infrastructures of neoliberal humanitarianism encounter new polymorphic border regimes, community is a site of friction that may – or may not – open up spaces for refugees' political mobilization.

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## NOTE

1. Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

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