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Encampment, resettlement barriers and the search for 'durable solutions'

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Refugee Policy Amidst Global Shocks: Encampment, Resettlement Barriers and the Search for ‘Durable Solutions’

Samuel J. Spiegel¹  | Johanne Mhlanga²

¹Centre of African Studies, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK

²Department of Social Work, University of Zimbabwe, and Camp Administrator at Tongogara Refugee Camp, Harare, Zimbabwe

Correspondence

Samuel J. Spiegel, Centre of African Studies, School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK
Email: sam.spiegel@ed.ac.uk

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Abstract

Global policy commitments to refugee protection are shaped by ever-growing pressures, from displacements triggered by conflicts, extremism and climate crisis to domestic fear-based politics. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, many governments were increasingly embracing exclusionary policies, defying the rights of asylum-seekers and refugees stalled in protracted camp settlements. While such policies contrast starkly with core principles espoused in the 1951 Refugee Convention and the Global Compact on Refugees, restrictions on refugees intensified further during the pandemic. This article discusses struggles shaped by these trajectories, drawing on policy analysis and experiences articulated in Tongogara Refugee Camp in Zimbabwe, where displaced people have recently endured impacts of climate disasters along with greater constraints on mobility and the hardening of international borders. We highlight divergences between colonial policy orientations and African philosophies such as *Ubuntu* that prioritize communal values and humanity towards others. Analysing concerns around encampment and barriers both to resettlement and local integration, we stress that the talents, contributions and fundamental rights of refugees should not be ignored by policy makers, who also need to be attentive to the social and ecological challenges experienced in refugee spaces. Exploring constraints of the various ‘durable solutions’, we draw attention to how uncertainties facing displaced people need to be critically approached as multi-scalar policy matters, beckoning attention to insufficiently met commitments linked with the Global Compact on Refugees, ways of mobilizing resistance to contemporary colonial bordering and support for refugee-led initiatives.

The Covid-19 pandemic has proven to me beyond any reasonable doubt that if another crisis hits us, be it a pandemic or climate change, resettlement would be a thing of the past.

(Refugee in the Tongogara Refugee Camp in Eastern Zimbabwe, 2021)

1 | REFUGEE POLICY, SHOCKS AND THE CONTEMPORARY COLONIAL ONTOLOGY OF CONTAINMENT

Population displacements triggered by war, conflicts, extremism and human rights abuses have become

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growing concerns over recent years, generating complex challenges for policy making and for re-envisioning ethical commitments towards refugee protection. According to the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), there were more than 20.4 million refugees across the globe, with an additional 4.1 million asylum seekers, in 2019. This layered onto the already growing concerns that refugee situations have increased in scope, scale and complexity. Faced with the complexities of refugee and migratory flows, world leaders displayed what was arguably a highly momentous gesture of unity of purpose, when, on 19 September 2016, governments adopted the New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants with new thinking which was unanimously adopted by members states at the UN General Assembly Summit for Refugees and Migrants. Mlauzi and Small (2019) point to how this action aspired to affirm and uphold 'fundamental freedoms' as contained in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and international human and refugee law. Yet, although consensus-building thereafter resulted in the promulgation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018 to take these commitments forward, critical concerns have arisen regarding its implementation (Aleinikoff, 2018; Betts, 2018) including the obfuscation of structural imperialism through the depoliticization of refugee discourse (Abuya et al., 2021; Achiume, 2022; Chimni, 2018). It has become evident that over the years, governments in many countries have been gravitating towards xenophobic policies (Coen, 2021; Crawley, 2021), hardening borders and constraining – sometimes severely – both local integration and resettlement possibilities for refugees and conspicuously evading responsibilities to asylum seekers (Barnes & Makinda, 2021), in stark contrast with the inclusionary ideals espoused in the GCR.

In principle, the GCR was a watershed moment. It proposed to provide a basis for predictable and equitable sharing of responsibility among all UN member states, together with other relevant stakeholders in the UN system, International Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, as well as other humanitarian and development actors, financial institutions, regional organizations, local authorities, civil society, academics, private sector, media, host communities and refugees themselves. In short, it aimed to harness widespread financial, technical, political, and social support for refugees (Triggs & Wall, 2020), directly involving the participation of refugees and refugee-driven organizations (Alio et al., 2020). Scholars have increasingly recognized that the shocks of COVID-19 were used by state actors to pursue perceived short-term national political interests at the expense of honouring commitments to multilateral strategies (Debre & Dijkstra, 2021; Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). In this article, we draw from critical experiences across multiple levels to examine how the promise of the GCR has been experienced

Policy Implications

- To advance the stated aims of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), specific global measures are needed to further counter xenophobic trends curtailing resettlement of refugees across colonial borders and across continents. Refugee policies globally must be reoriented to embrace decolonial values such as those embedded in African philosophies of *Ubuntu*.
- The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the situation for refugees illustrates the need for stronger international agreements, including ensuring that asylum-seeking is seen as 'essential' travel and that borders remain open for refugee resettlement.
- Recognizing growing impacts of climate change and climate crises as exacerbating shocks, the ecological as well as social, economic, cultural, and political difficulties associated with encampment need to be robustly appreciated.
- More attention needs to be paid to the commitment of the GCR to meaningful refugee participation and support for refugee-led initiatives, with greater awareness drawn to the talents, skills and fundamental rights of refugees.
- The post-COVID world will require new multi-scalar policy commitments towards concurrently addressing challenges to voluntary repatriation, local integration and third country resettlement, informed by situated realities concerning protracted displacement and underlying injustices.

in this current era marked by intensifying xenophobia, right-wing nationalism, climate disasters, and the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss a case study that extends concerns about colonial orientations to refugee policies and the prevailing 'ontology of containment' (Benhabib, 2020) that constricts mobilities in circumstances of protracted displacement and confinement. Our approach challenges policy discourses that obscure the underlying political economy of 'localization' and containment (Brankamp, 2022; Brankamp & Daley, 2020; Brumat et al., 2021; Landau, 2019; Weima & Hyndman, 2019), calling attention to the suppressing of local and Indigenous philosophies of collective responsibility and care (Arat-Koc, 2020; Swanson, 2015) in global refugee policy discourse. In addition to analysis of policy documents and recent literatures, we provide reflections that draw on articulated experiences of

refugees and former refugees in Eastern Zimbabwe, where the first author has been conducting research on displacement since 2005 and where the second author serves as Tongogara Refugee Camp Administrator. We ask: how has the COVID-19 pandemic reconfigured global and localized challenges of *encampment*, layering onto other social and severe ecological shocks? How has the promise of the GCR – particularly around supporting *integration* and *resettlement* – been experienced, and how might we understand ‘durable’ solutions in light of recent trends? By exploring multi-scalar struggles around this case, we seek to nurture critical discussion on values and epistemologies underlying refugee policies.

Zimbabwe's longstanding socio-economic and political crises have made local integration of refugees exceedingly challenging. Given constricted resources, with highly limited capacities for delivering social and health services, national government authorities have had to heavily rely on international organizations such as the UNHCR for the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers who make their way to Zimbabwe (Wamara et al., 2021). Deep economic crises in contemporary Zimbabwe can be traced back in part to the disastrous effects of Economic Structural Adjustment Programme policies from the 1990s but also high degrees of military spending that have crippled public budgets and ongoing governance crises that influence high unemployment rates (Chikanda & Crush, 2016). While Wamara et al. (2021) recently assessed Zimbabwe's refugee encampment policy as a form of repression that denies rights to freedom of movement, this critique needs to be understood, ultimately, as embedded in both a regionally informed lens and a *global* landscape of colonial bordering – in which many governments' responses to global shocks such as climate breakdown and COVID19 have further laid bare a multitude of struggles for mobility justice. Reflection on the nexus for critique also calls for multiple scales of analysis on what it means to decolonise refugee studies in an era marked by ongoing Euro/North centric biases (Arat-Koc, 2020; Daley, 2021; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2021).

Tongogara Refugee Camp is currently home to approximately 15,000 refugees and asylum seekers – 75 per cent of whom are from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), 11 per cent from Mozambique, 5 per cent each from Burundi and from Rwanda, with 4 per cent from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Mali, Ivory Coast, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Uganda, Central Africa Republic, and Kenya among others.¹ In March 2019 the camp was hit hard by Cyclone Idai, considered one of the most devastating and severe climate-induced disasters to ever hit the southern hemisphere (Devi, 2019). After the COVID-19 pandemic struck, new challenges for the residents of the camp multiplied on top of pre-existing difficulties. Both authors were present in the area when the pandemic was declared. Drawing from

the global literature that has emerged around the GCR both before and after COVID-19 struck and informed by experiences of refugees and former refugees from Tongogara Refugee Camp, we seek to bring to the fore values underpinning the Global Compact on Refugees while exploring existential threats to resettlement along with other durable solutions. Section 2 provides some brief background on the GCR as well as African philosophies of *Ubuntu* and outlines our methodological approach. Section 3 shares observations and articulations from Tongogara in the COVID era, presenting data on resettlement from Zimbabwe over the years, and discusses concerns with encampment as unsustainable, despite significant initiatives by refugees and camp administration staff. Section 4 revisits various solutions that have been suggested, situating ‘durable solutions’ discourse within critical analysis about the rise of xenophobic bordering amidst growing social and ecological challenges. We then offer some conclusionary remarks.

2 | POLICY ORIENTATIONS AND VALUES AROUND THE GLOBAL COMPACT ON REFUGEES

Across different policy communities, vast differences exist in interpreting the very notion of refugeehood, shaping perspectives on what is possible, ethical and politically desirable in refugee protection policy. According to Article 1 (2) of the UN Convention relating to the status of refugees (herein referred to as the 1951 Convention), the term refugee applies: ‘To a person owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable to avail himself of the protection of that country, or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it’. The above definition forms the critical mass of refugee protection across the globe (Matseketsika and Mhlanga, 2020) and its use has stood the test of time. However, while African countries adopted the 1951 Convention as a whole, African leaders, concerned that this definition was too Eurocentric, devised a definition more specific to African circumstances, in 1969 adopting the Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of the Refugee Problems in Africa (herein referred to as the 1969 OAU Convention) to complement the 1951 Convention. According to Article 1 (2) of this OAU Convention, the term refugee applies to a person: ‘owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality, is compelled to leave his place of habitual

residence in order to seek refuge in another place outside his country’.

Linked to these differing definitions, debates on refugee encampment and global policy have in recent years pointed to stark differences in values. Notable divergences exist between global policy regimes predicated on colonial bordering and Western xenophobia, on the one hand, and Afrocentric approaches, on the other, that aspire to advance values based on decolonization and *Ujamaa* – a Swahili word for familyhood (Opi, 2021), associated with the term *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* refers to a collection of African values and practices that emphasize being part of a communal and spiritual world of respect, care, dignity and sharing.² The foundational values of *Ubuntu*, which calls for solidarity, are linked to the cardinal principles of refugee protection as expounded in the 1951 Convention: non-discrimination, non-penalization and non-refoulement (non-return policy) (UN Convention, 1951), and advocating for flexible movement of refugees (Mhlanga, 2020). *Ubuntu*-guided philosophies, as Sebola (2019) explains, challenge the ways in which refugee encampment practices reify colonial constructs, defying principles of integration and welcoming, and remain under-appreciated by state policy makers.

With population displacements due to conflicts, wars, human rights abuses and extremism on the rise, it is noteworthy that 86 per cent of the world's 82.4 million people forcibly displaced are hosted in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) (UNHCR, 2020). Indeed, according to Owen (2020) 85 per cent of refugees globally are living in LMICs near those they fled. Yet, despite the diversity of benefits that refugee populations can bring, the global refugee protection regime is underpinned by humanitarian rhetoric in which the dominant narrative assigns supplicatory roles to refugees as docile, helpless, dependent recipients of aid. Critiques in the literature have long taken issue with this demeaning framing of refugees as ‘powerless’ to look after themselves and ‘grateful for whatever help is given’ (Zeus, 2011, p. 268) – with no meaningful contribution to their own welfare. While such a notion and understanding has long defined the structure of refugee protection across the globe, the stereotypes have fuelled an encampment system globally that has left refugee protection as an afterthought or ‘burden’ – rather than as an avenue for enabling multi-talented people fleeing injustice to contribute, economically and culturally, to societies (Betts, 2021a).

The ever-increasing drivers of displacement facing refugees led politicians, academics, researchers, humanitarian organizations and UN agencies to some much-needed critical introspection, particularly as the protracted nature of refugee situations has resulted in donor fatigue. The New York Declaration which gave birth to the Global Compact on Refugees, developed against the backdrop of growing numbers of people

displaced by conflicts, violence, human rights abuses, extremism, and poor governance among other factors (Türk, 2018), ostensibly offered hope for assembling new actors who could share responsibilities; and as noted by Betts (2018), among others, the major distinguishing feature of the GCR is that it embraces a strong ‘whole of society’ approach to refugee protection, establishing much needed broader support and solidarity. Grounded in the foundational values of the international refugee protection regime, the GCR draws inspiration from Article 14 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the UN Charter, reinforcing key principles such as solidarity and international cooperation, promoting regional approaches and ensuring non refoulement. As emphasized by Alio et al. (2020), the GCR not only recognizes the need for urgent action for refugees, but also calls for support of initiatives taken by refugees themselves.

Combining humanitarian aid with development assistance to promote long-term solutions to forced displacement challenges, Abebe et al. (2019) posited that the GCR enables refugees and host communities to thrive together since it seeks to strengthen relations between refugees and host communities, thereby reinforcing peaceful coexistence. Anchored by four interlinked objectives to build a solid, predictable, consistent, sustainable and quality protection approach for refugees and asylum seekers, the GCR, according to the UNHCR, aims to: ‘i. ease pressure on major refugee hosting countries; ii enhance refugee self-reliance; iii expand access to third country solutions; and iv, support conditions for return to countries of origin’. The unprecedented resolve has been widely heralded as a rare convergence of ideas that culminated in worldwide commitments to address an unprecedented refugee crisis. However, while laudable that the GCR attempts to counter the traditional refugee protection regime hindered by the aid mantra which leads to refugees sometimes having better access to services than locals, the GCR is not legally binding; avoids addressing the principal causes of recent refugee flows; dilutes established principles of international refugee law; could weaken protection of children and women; and is short on real mechanisms for sharing responsibilities (Aleinikoff, 2018; Chimni, 2018). Furthermore, with climate change and climate disasters uprooting livelihoods in encampment situations, and the COVID-19 pandemic creating unparalleled barriers to mobility, academic and practitioner communities alike have been expressing sharply rising concern over the constrained space for imagining ‘durable solutions’.

To address this lacuna, our methodology employs a multi-level approach, combining analysis of policy documents and refugee resettlement statistics with what scholars have described as an organic process of being ‘in the place’ and drawing on everyday meetings and ordinary connections (Bird et al., 2021; Mannergren

Selimovic, 2018), including observations of spaces, housing and ecological conditions as well as informal discussions that allow us to present articulations and expressions of refugees resident in the Tongogara Refugee Camp. As stated by Bird et al. (2021, p. 31), being present physically in spaces being researched allows examining ‘vital sensory material, and ephemeral intensities beyond the logic of representation encountered during interviews’. We drew on conversations and observations gathered by both authors in 2019 and early 2020 and by the second author throughout the pandemic, until June 2021, with international organizations as well as current and former refugees themselves. Visual representations of environment and life in the camp were gathered as well, recognizing the importance of visuals in shaping understandings and sensibilities, challenging stereotypes and re-imagining people, places and social networks (Jeffery et al., 2019; Lenette, 2019; Moze & Spiegel, 2022). We contextualized these conversations with longstanding interactions with policy makers, staff, government officials and aid organizations over a 15-year period – at the local, national and international levels. The reflections here draw from long-term research relationships by both authors seeking to better contribute to framings of displacement and policy responses.

3 | IMPACT OF SHOCKS AND RECENT POLICY TRAJECTORIES IN TONGOGARA REFUGEE CAMP

The Tongogara Refugee Camp was established in 1983, designated as state land,³ and is the only legal area where refugees are expected to live in Zimbabwe, as Zimbabwe chose to implement an encampment policy⁴: restricting refugees and asylum seekers from moving outside the camp without authority to breach camp (Mhlanga & Zengeya, 2016).⁵ The location of the camp, which is divided into ten sections with permanent and semi-permanent shelters and related social amenities, limits its ability to expand and makes it vulnerable to flooding, located along the Middle Sabi River, bounded by the Devuli Ranch/ Save Conservancy, and the Middle Sabi Estate to the east.

Although the population of the camp was less than 5000 in the mid-2000s, escalating turmoil in countries such as the DRC, Burundi and Mozambique led to exponential rises in the camp population. Although the need to increase land space for refugee livelihoods and housing has been well-acknowledged, expansion has been difficult to implement, and although repatriation has been the chief goal of Zimbabwe’s authorities, many conflicts are enduring, making repatriation impossible. Meanwhile, scholars have noted that income generation possibilities within the camp have been deeply limited (Taruvunga et al., 2021), such that,

like other refugee camps across Africa, Tongogara is a society where so-called ‘inmates’ are portrayed as relying on the benevolence of well-wishers in order to survive (Mhlanga & Zengeya, 2016). Many who live there are under protracted refugee situations, in limbo since they sought international protection in 1999 and early 2000s, with durable solutions elusive for over 20 years and no solution in sight.

The year before the COVID pandemic began, a refugee resident in Tongogara, Rocky, a highly accomplished artist who escaped conflict in the DRC having lost some of his family members to violence, shared with us drawings he produced of his own history as well as some of the challenges of life in the camp. He had been waiting for years for relocation, having filed paperwork in an effort for resettlement to another country (he cannot go back to his homeland due to ongoing security threats). While appreciative of the camp as a place of safety, he conveyed stories of economic, cultural and climate shocks experienced in the camp. One of his drawings (Figure 1) depicts the climate disaster that ravaged Tongogara Refugee Camp.

Depicting both concrete and metaphorical dimensions of a cyclone disaster, Rocky’s drawing shows tears from trees being cut down, part of a global story of deforestation and ecological relationships, and part of a story of people swept away and displaced again in a refugee camp.

He was one of thousands of refugees here to have lost his home; in Chipinge district, where the camp is situated, over 2000 refugee houses, many constructed

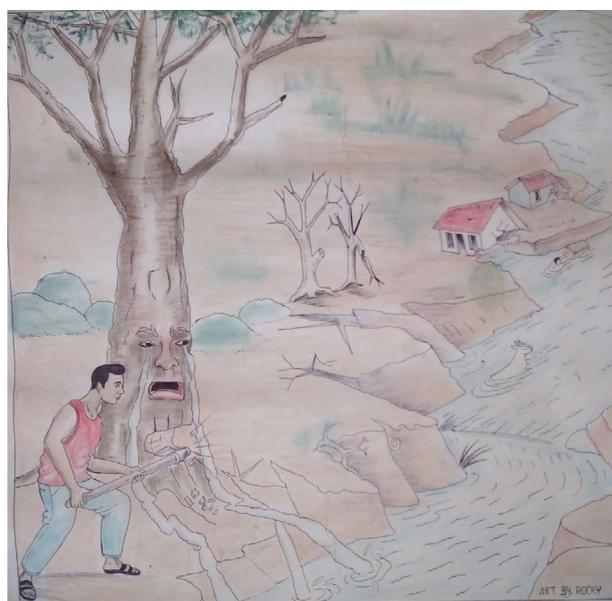


FIGURE 1 Artistic depiction of cyclone Idai from Tongogara refugee camp

with mud bricks, were completely or partially destroyed by Cyclone Idai (over 600 latrines collapsed here as well).

Although the camp is normally exceptionally dry and has an unusually hot microclimate affected by drought, it has seen the impacts of climate disaster multiply to include sudden flooding. Notably, Cyclone Idai in 2019 has not been the only recent cyclone disaster in the region; in 2020 another cyclone hit the camp a year and half later.⁶ Camp authorities, with UNHCR assistance, made efforts to relocate families, source funds for rebuilding overcrowded housing structures, and support families who were housed in tents for protracted periods, all the while dealing with food insecurity and water shortages.

Along with depicting flooding and people being washed away in a danger zone, Rocky's drawing visually shows another complex matter – deforestation – and hints at the social dimensions of deforestation beyond the camp. UNHCR has reduced deforestation in the region by providing firewood to refugees, but the host community nearby, outside the camp, has been cutting down trees to produce charcoal to sell to the refugees. In a context where land access is constricted, overcrowding in the camp a growing concern, and disasters adding to existing traumas, relations with the communities around the camp have taken various forms, often involving trading for firewood and charcoal. Yet, the notion of 'integration' remains far from a reality, due to strict encampment policies. In their analysis of refugee flows to Zimbabwe, Chikanda and Crush (2016) argue that social, economic and political dimensions of refugee movement into Zimbabwe have remained significantly neglected in academic literature for the past two decades. Even though Zimbabwe's refugee policy technically allows for avenues for integration of refugees into villages and town, they contend that Zimbabwe's government prefers to keep refugees settled in camps so that they could continue to receive support from the UNHCR and other humanitarian groups.

In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the camp embraces a developmental orientation, with refugees supported by resources provided by the

Government of Zimbabwe and its partners. As one refugee stated: 'I arrived in Tongogara Refugee Camp in April of 2018 barely with anything but just clothes on my body ... [Here] refugees have access to subsistent activities like farming crops, growing vegetables, livestock rearing, operating businesses outside the camp (when legally granted to do so) or inside the camp'. He also alluded to the dreams created from training: 'Vocational trainings build skills on various human endeavours e.g. IC [information and communication] training or entrepreneurial skills, and many more activities which can improve our lives are prioritized'. Figure 2 below conveys some of the self-reliance initiatives undertaken by refugees at Tongogara Refugee Camp where 50 hectares are under irrigation. Refugees are also engaged in several small enterprises in order to raise income to augment the social protection interventions extended to them by the Government and the donor community.

3.1 | Sugar bean crop currently in the irrigation scheme Fish project

Commenting on their lived experiences, another refugee stated:

When I had just arrived at Tongogara Refugee Camp, I did pose a question to the camp administrator, how come there is no electricity in this house that you have allocated to me as my shelter? He replied to me like a parent talking to a depressed toddler 'I understand living in the house without power might be a new story in your life but I urge you to be strong, forget about the person you used to be and embrace the new one ... Things might be tough and hard for you today but it won't stay like this forever, cheer up brother'. And in the following days, weeks and months he would commit himself to having a day to orient new arrivals about all the services that are given to asylum



FIGURE 2 Self-reliance initiatives in Tongogara refugee camp

seekers /refugees and under this session we would be introduced to all heads of government departments, UNHCR, RED CROSS, TDH and other partners.

This articulation, albeit appreciating the compassion and support ('like a parent talking to a depressed toddler'), gestures to a paternalistic and infantilizing dimension, in keeping with the dynamic critiqued by Taruvinga et al. (2021), who express concerns about unequal partnerships at play between refugees and the aid sector. Other refugees were overtly negative, not only about the local power dynamics, but also about the 'self-reliance-building' orientation itself, with suspicion that the new development approach would result in the suspension of the humanitarian support being extended to them. Worse, some voiced suspicion that global policy emphasis on a development or 'self-sufficiency' approach could add to the problems of suspending *resettlement*. As one refugee explained:

Refugees hope that their current status is temporary and one day there would be a life in a place they can call a permanent home. For that matter, we have known about durable solutions which are in three categories: integration into the country of asylum, repatriation to one's home country, and resettlement abroad. I have no information about integration and repatriation because I haven't seen refugees being repatriated – maybe due to the volatile situation in their many countries. I am also not aware of many refugees so far integrated as Zimbabwean citizens ... Resettlement is a language that almost every refugee needs to hear and embraces here but many have fallen short ... Before thinking about resettlement, one should know the following considerations for one to be resettled: the nature of your case, for instance. It begins with profiling, as certain qualifications are needed by UNHCR protection officers in the country of asylum. When qualified, your name is sent to the third country and the third country has to decide whether you qualify as well, then the procedures continue.

The pessimism in the camp around resettlement chances has certainly been exacerbated by the pandemic. With the shock of COVID-19, governments across the globe adopted containment measures, and as noted by scholars such as Foster et al. (2021), the impact was unprecedented and arguably, in various cases, in conspicuous violation of international refugee and human rights law.

3.2 | Intensified resettlement barriers and other COVID era difficulties

Understanding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic requires attending to the heterogeneous ways in which shocks have been devastating for refugees across the globe, whether in camps, or living in precarious urban settings, or blocked in their tracks by border closings, with refugees denied access to healthcare in some countries, had their informal livelihoods completely shut down in others, or living in cramped conditions, ripe for rapid transmission of disease, sometimes without even adequate sanitation (Alio et al., 2020). Moreover, in some situations, efforts of UN agencies, governments and NGOs have been stymied by public health regulations that constrained their movements, and policy oversights related to funding shortfalls have exacerbated ongoing struggles. High among concerns, ultimately, has been the impact on resettlement. The data we assembled on submissions and resettlement cases from Zimbabwe (Figure 3) confirms the dramatic impact of COVID era changes. That said, the number of resettlements was also problematic – far below desired goals – even before the pandemic.

While resettlement is a clear preference among most refugees, the statistics above underscore the elusiveness of resettlement. In addition to the impact of the pandemic itself, the decline in the number of resettlement submissions and departures can also be attributed to the rise of populist and exclusionary policies adopted by many countries in the Global North, as the COVID-19 pandemic amplified exclusionary policies towards refugees, often with arbitrary measures put in place. One of the countries considered desirable for resettlement for refugees has historically been Canada. Yet, as Mercier and Rehaag (2020) detailed, Canada's Prime Minister used executive powers under Canada's Quarantine Act to turn away refugee claimants. Indeed, UNHCR and the International Organization on Migration (IOM) announced an unprecedented temporary freeze on global resettlement. Foster et al. (2021) note that despite these agencies announcing the resumption of resettlement departures, Australia, the third largest resettlement country, halted its resettlement programme in March 2020 'with no indication as to when it may resume'. Underlying the concern that the pandemic-triggered exclusionary policies is the risk of long-term entrenchment of negative consequences on refugee protection. Enacted ostensibly to protect their citizens from the impact of COVID-19, unprecedented restrictions on global movement and on the ability of refugees to seek asylum has left deep fears of xenophobic nationalistic entrenchment of colonially shaped mobility injustices. Commenting on the dire situation triggered by COVID-19, the UNHCR's



FIGURE 3 Graph showing resettlement cases from refugees hosted in Zimbabwe since 2017

Assistant High Commissioner for Protection stated, ‘the long-term risk posed by Covid-19 is that the adoption of emergency laws and policies may become entrenched or baked in’ (Triggs, 2020).

Specifically, on 11 March 2020, the borders of 57 states were completely closed; 81 had imposed restrictions but made exceptions for asylum seekers; and only 31 states had no COVID-19 restrictions. According to Kenwick and Simmons (2020), 92 countries had fully or partially closed their land borders by 24 March 2020. Despite the intensification of globalization, and in spite of scientific evidence questioning its effectiveness as a major control measure, 186 countries responded to the pandemic with international border restrictions, restricting travel from an average of 163 countries; in contrast, only 127 countries imposed public health measures such as physical distancing. Mercier and Rehaag (2020) pose an intriguing question: ‘Is crossing a border to seek refugee protection “essential travel?”’ According to Foster et al. (2021) crossing of international borders is a well-established element in international law. For refugees and asylum-seekers, mobility is a life-saving act – it is indeed ‘essential’.

While the promulgation of the COVID-19 regulations can certainly be seen as state’s exercising their responsibility under Article 2.1 of the United Nations Charter which gives states unfettered powers to ensure that their citizens are protected, controversial state responses to the pandemic stopped asylum seekers in their tracks as part of border control regimes. As Ghezalbash and Tan (2020) explain, moves to seal borders and suspend asylum procedures symbolized an end to certain fundamental rights, with ‘pandemic control measures’ implemented by states needing to be critically understood as an exacerbation of underlying tendencies towards the *extinguishment* of the right to seek asylum in the Global North as well as of programmes for resettlement for those with accepted refugee status. Hegemonic and racist trends towards evading human rights legal responsibilities and embracing a ‘deterrence’ paradigm – to confine people to certain regions within the global

south – had already been building prior to COVID. Protracted struggles in Tongogara Refugee Camp – as elsewhere – emphatically reinforce the need to call for an end to the practice of using COVID19 as a pretext for closing borders to asylum seekers and refugees, as has become prevalent in wealthier countries such as Australia, the United States, European countries and Canada.

Despite support from Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, legal provisions in the 1951 Convention subsequently adopted by member states, and the GCR itself, the advent of COVID-19 significantly affected refugee protection in a number of ways. One Tongogara refugee noted:

The beginning of the lockdown was challenging for me and for the rest of my fellow community battling the same virus as the rest of the world. But I faced greater challenges with less access to common solutions because of lack of mobility, no access to school, decrease in possibility of self-reliance I previously enjoyed, food and non-food items which were expensive ... After the World Health Organization advised countries to go under lockdown to control the pandemic, all the resettlement programs were affected including my case.

As articulated by another of the refugees, curbing the spread of the pandemic came at a cost:

All children were sent home in a place like Tongogara in which remote learning doesn’t exist because children have no tools to access E-learning on the Internet. Vendors were sent home with their small businesses going bankrupt, while the price of food commodities skyrocketed in the big shops legally permitted to operate in limited hours. Child abuse, domestic violence

especially against women and girls, drugs abuse, teenage pregnancy, psychological impacts like anxiety and stress etcetera were increasing ... The outbreak of the pandemic profoundly changed our way of lives and Tongogara refugees are not exceptional ... COVID-19 pandemic has proven to me beyond any reasonable doubt that if another crisis hits us, be it another pandemic or climate change, resettlement would be a thing of the past.

As Pincock et al. (2021) remind us, while the dominant humanitarian model is premised upon a clearly defined provider-beneficiary relationship, refugees themselves often mobilize to create community-based organizations or informal networks that protect and assist other refugees. Indeed, contrary to the portrayal of refugees as helpless, dependent recipients of aid, a 27-year-old refugee from the DRC who left his home country in 2012 following a tribal war proudly explained some of the work his networks are doing:

I advocated for child rights through my work with the Regional Network of the Children and Young People Trust, a child and youth rights organization that works to ensure that children and young people are active citizens who demand their rights, hold duty bearers to account and mobilize communities for the respect, promotion and fulfilment of children's rights. I have initiated a blog to highlight these activities in the Tongogara Refugee Camp. <https://rncypt.org/youth-take-charge-monthlynewsletter>. I have also been active promoting young refugees' talents by linking artists with media practitioners and through a YouTube Channel called Zimfunny. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0GQRNMKVm8&t=51s>.

As part of my work to address climate change, I have worked locally to promote sustainable food production and management approaches and engaged with Real Food Systems, an advocacy platform committed to promoting sustainable food systems as a solution to climate and related crises. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CDJF3U-H3lg/>. I have put my effort through connecting with funders two farming projects ready to implement in Tongogara. These will be run by Transformation Innovation Hub and the Global Development for Change, both youth-led organizations.

I facilitated the UNHCR Engaging Men and Boys through Accountable Practices project, which seeks to involve men in understanding and combatting the root causes of gender inequality and gender violence in Tongogara. I led a series of intensive training workshops for 110 participants – men and women – on how to build a violence free community. This culminated in a community marathon held in conjunction with the 16 Days of Activism against GBV and a session of yoga.

This young man concluded his remarks 'I am keen to come up with solutions that will help the refugee community to think smart and stop relying only on resettlement'. However, despite the positive impact of skill-building and refugee-led initiatives at Tongogara Refugee Camp as noted here, and despite recognition of the numerous examples of self-reliant refugees and refugee organizations providing information, training, and assistance in accessing medical needs, transportation and basic needs (Alio et al., 2020), encampment is clearly not a durable solution.⁷ New thinking, linking multiple refugee policy terrains, is urgently needed, as discussed below.

4 | DURABLE SOLUTIONS: A REALITY OR RHETORIC? – AND WHICH 'CRISIS' IS BEING TACKLED?

Throughout the world, academics, politicians, refugee experts and others are grappling with sustainable solutions to what is commonly labelled a 'refugee crisis'. We argue that it is a refugee *governance problem* – not a problem with refugeehood itself – that needs to be addressed in a multi-scalar and critical manner, recognizing deep-seated colonial and racist underpinnings to refugee policies (Achieme, 2022); this 'problem' has become protracted due to lengthy ever-more complex conflicts triggering displacements and the vastly unmet quest for international protection.⁸ The situation for refugees has been exacerbated in the current era, to quote Harsha Walia (2021, p. 10) with 'the global COVID-19 pandemic having "blown off the lid on border and rule practices and exposed the fault lines in our societies'. In some senses, the Tongogara Refugee Camp shares common experiences with other camps during the COVID era – overcrowding and more than occasional COVID positive cases that intensify fears, especially where physical distancing requirements have been impossible to implement (Khouzam & Verma, 2020; Nyathi, 2021a, 2021b). But we support the contention that the larger point of concern relates to how borders have been closed

off. While some states in the Global South continue to open their borders to host refugees and asylum seekers within their territories, the opposite appears to be increasingly true in the Global North. This situation has, however, triggered fatigue, resentment and at times negative perceptions towards refugees and asylum seekers in host communities in both the Global South and North. Whereas in the past, many African countries warmly welcomed refugees from neighbouring countries as they were seen as victims of colonization, as Sebola (2019) has contended, many African countries are now *neglecting* Ubuntu principles, with some turning to encampment to reduce conflict between locals and refugees.

According to the UNHCR, a 'durable solution' is one that ends the problems associated with displacement and allows people to resume their normal lives in a safe environment, premised on the philosophical principle of shared responsibility to find lasting and sustainable solutions for the uprooted persons. However, as Swanson (2015, p. 28) contends, humanitarian discourses often comport with a moral liberal response that is 'framed within Western Enlightenment thinking that suggests that the global citizenship reach and outstretched hand to "the other" is necessarily benevolent or of mutual interest' often hiding power relations, cultural imperialism, individualism and self-interestedness, that, as Swanson puts it 'serve to maintain the structural conditions of inequality while claiming to work towards their elimination'. Critiquing the notion of 'localization', Swanson points out that 'the *local* resides invidiously alongside a more dominant and powerful *global*' often rendering Indigenous ways of knowing as irrelevant or obsolete by powerful international bodies. Swanson argues that *Ubuntu* philosophies, with their emphasis on a spiritual way of collective being, provide 'the possibilities for replacing, reinventing and reimagining alternatives to the current destructive path of increasing global injustice, as it also offers opportunities to decolonize recuperative global citizenship discourses and coercive Western epistemologies'. Extending this argument, we contend that, like other forms of Indigenous epistemologies (Arat-Koc, 2020) that resonates with this way thinking, *Ubuntu* offers much-needed decolonizing approaches to refugee protection, emphasizing responsibilities towards a collective well-being, with respect for the ecological and social well-being of all. As such, we conclude that *Ubuntu* offers a contribution to refugee policies, not only in African contexts, but globally. From this perspective, merging the principles of the GCR and *Ubuntu*, critical analysis is warranted of the three main pathways for displaced persons living in protracted encampment: voluntary repatriation, local integration and resettlement – each of which with its own difficulties even before COVID-19 struck.

4.1 | Voluntary repatriation

This has long been considered the most suitable durable solution for refugees (Warner, 1994) and the most preferred. As noted by Mhlanga (2020, p. 44), 'Refugees and asylum seekers are evidence of failure by humanity to address disagreements in a civilised and peaceful manner'. As such, repatriation must meet minimum standards to ensure dignified and safe return of refugees, with binding agreements guaranteeing amnesty to returning refugees, proper reception facilities and effective communication between UNHCR and voluntary organizations in the country of origin to ensure effective monitoring of the repatriation process (Mhlanga & Zengeya, 2016). Our observations, particularly given the potential entrenchment of anti-refugee resettlement policies implemented under the guise of a legitimate COVID-19 response, make it all the more important that formal mechanisms are established to address the many challenges of repatriation, and not make this the only option by default. As noted by others (Nyathi, 2021a, 2021b), and dovetailing with our own research regarding experiences in Tongogara Refugee Camp in 2019 to 2021, certain refugees who are 'officially' due for repatriation (according to UN authorities) feel far from safe with the repatriation option, and protest in favour of waiting for resettlement. That Zimbabwe was singled out for its delay in enforcing the UNHCR cessation clause for Rwandans is noteworthy, defying UN authorities in what was apparently an informal agreement with neighbouring countries to not force these people out of refugee protection to become 'illegal migrants' elsewhere (Sniderman, 2015).

4.2 | Local integration

This is also considered one of the durable solutions to the refugee crisis, although like resettlement, it is elusive to many uprooted individuals. Local integration, which refers to the resettlement of refugees within the host communities, depends on the welcoming of the often cash-strapped host country. Local integration requires co-existence of host and refugee communities in a manner that allows sharing some resources, both economic and social, without any greater mutual conflict than that would otherwise exist within the host community. Local integration, often preferred when voluntary repatriation fails, is itself complex, requiring a gradual process comprising distinct but related legal, economic, social and cultural dimensions that impose considerable demands on both the individual and the receiving society. Allowing the flexible movement of refugees to facilitate interacting with the host communities resonates well with attributes of *Ubuntu* philosophies that call for solidarity (Mhlanga, 2020). Critical work on refugee assistance

has also called for local integration instead of encampment on the grounds of an ‘ethics of care’ that recognizes how power dynamics in camps tend to prevent sustainable solutions (Taruvunga et al., 2021); and even local Zimbabwean Members of Parliament have themselves openly contemplated the integration of refugees into local communities, going so far, in December 2020, as exploring partnerships with the Chipinge Town Council to build refugee houses (NewZimbabwe, 2020). However, these kinds of moves have not gained significant traction with the national government (despite some periodic efforts by parliamentary committees, for example, to address overcrowding in the camp through promoting a five-year permitting basis to live and work outside the camp), and it would be critically problematic to overlook the myriad reasons why both Zimbabwean authorities and many refugees themselves prefer encampment to local integration. For authorities, although encampment critically constricts social and cultural ties between refugees and Zimbabwean citizens near Tongogara Refugee Camp (which are positive in various under-appreciated ways, albeit limited – see Mhlanga & Muchinako, 2017, for discussion on intermarriages, cultural relations, and socio-economic links between refugees and nearby populations), encampment concentrates the responsibility in the hands of international agencies, taking pressure off domestic authorities to provide the needed supports.

One of the results of the status quo situation is, therefore, that economic class inequalities continue to shape unequal experiences *vis-à-vis* confinement; as Wamara et al. (2021) note, only wealthier refugees have been allowed to move away from the camp to other areas (what they call ‘a lucky few’), while most cannot. The larger point is that, for many refugees themselves, the economic benefits of a refugee camp, despite overcrowding and lack of market access and land, are superior to economic life in Zimbabwe. Experiences demonstrate that the local Zimbabwe population near the refugee camp is so poor that it has depended economically on the influx of US dollars associated with the refugee camp; although UN agencies have faced funding shortages, the provision of small amounts of US dollar cash support to encamped refugees have, at times, led to significant interest for local traders, in some cases those travelling to the region of the camp to trade with its residents given the difficulties of obtaining hard currency elsewhere in the country. While this situation contributes to creating peaceful co-existence, it does not create a recipe for dissolving the encampment situation. Hyperinflation, the collapse of many sectors and reliance on informal coping strategies such as artisanal mining have shaped economic struggles in this region of Zimbabwe – and throughout the country, at times with reliance on mobility and informal trade across the border on the Mozambique side (Kachena

& Spiegel, 2019; Mangiza & Joshua Chakawa, 2021; Mkodzongi & Spiegel, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened the focus on ‘localization’ – a term bound up in relegating responsibility for finding solutions back to local actors; with international agencies forced to reduce their operations, even greater local responses for food assistance, information, and community support was required for refugees and asylum-seekers both camps and settlement situations. Pointing to Uganda as having made significant progress in providing land and economic integration for refugees, Wamara et al. (2021) argue that Zimbabwe and many other countries should implement similar policies to provide refugees with more opportunities to produce their own food and reduce dependence on aid. However, as Betts and colleagues (2020) have noted from their studies elsewhere in Africa, donor governments have remained reluctant to directly finance local refugee initiatives relating to concerns about accountability. Notably, though, unlike the case for Uganda, where international donors actively abetted domestically repressive regimes in order to sustain what they touted as a liberal international success story for refugee settlement (Betts, 2021b), international donors have long shunned Zimbabwe for its political opposition to Western capitalism. As such, local settlement of refugees is all the more difficult in Zimbabwe's context.

4.3 | Resettlement

This is a traditional ‘durable’ solution meant to address the refugee plight when prospects of voluntary repatriation and local integration are minimal, sees refugees lawfully admitted to a third safe country where they are granted permanent residency. Many countries mainly from the Western world have been providing resettlement opportunities to refugees, including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Finland, Denmark, Netherlands, Norway, Ireland, New Zealand and Sweden among others. Tongogara Refugee Camp residents articulate what is a common global consternation – interruptions, cancellations and reductions in resettlement avenues characterize the current conjuncture. Resettlement is – in principle – extended to individuals at risk of being refouled and facing physical violence including sexual abuse; survivors of torture; or are women, children and elderly with specific needs. Resettlement is also used as a tool for family reunification. As a durable solution, resettlement resonates well with the principle of *shared responsibility*. As Khan and Sackeyfio (2021, p. 44) argue, ‘ideally resettlement in third countries should be a demonstration of international solidarity such that responsibility for refugeehood is shared among states, thereby reducing the burden on the country of asylum’. While we contend that the very

concept of ‘burden’ sharing is problematic, we concur with these authors that resettlement can be a way for countries to evade receiving asylum-seekers directly or integrating refugees locally, or, as these scholars note, used by states ‘as an alibi for protectionist migration policies and not for humanitarian or solidarity reasons’. While this viewpoint is debatable, from an evidence-based perspective, we argue that resettlement alone is far from a readily-accessible durable solution to refugee struggles, as it is inconsistent, unpredictable, and clearly relies on admission to countries that often have strict considerations on who can be resettled in their countries. Walia (2021) describes the five-country collaboration in which the US, UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand share not only databases of fingerprints and other biometrics and surveillance networks to track asylum-seekers but are committed to a political consensus that refugees from the Global South should seek asylum in their neighbouring countries; this is part of a containment strategy that also is designed to constrict international resettlement of refugees living in camps. The consequence has been a form of ‘carceral humanitarianism’ (Brankamp, 2022) through perpetual camp confinement, imperially serving to block access to wealthier countries. As such, while resettlement is popular among the refugee communities across the globe, as a desired durable solution, it is elusive to millions of refugees around the world. Only 1 per cent of the ever-increasing refugee population is resettled every year – a mere drop in the ocean of the enormous refugee population.

The United States, for example, which accepted over 60,000 refugees in 2008, and almost 85,000 by 2016, dropped dramatically under the Trump era following the promulgation of ‘Executive Order 13 769-Protecting the Nation from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States’ in January 2017, operationalizing the provisions of the 1980 Refugee Act which gives the President power to set limits on annual refugee admissions. The net effect of the executive order was the reduction of resettlement admissions into the US to less than 54,000 in 2017, less than 23,000 in 2018 and to an all-time low figure of 15,000 admissions in its 2020–2021 quota (Congressional Research Service, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has shown how hardening border controls resonates politically to give the impression to domestic audiences that their leaders are implementing prudent measures to protect them from disease without having to overtly disrupt the economy or impact daily life. The fact that 186 countries implemented border restriction while only 127 adopted public health measures such as physical distancing, provides evidence on how the focus on border controls – often with racist and xenophobic rhetoric – is used to externalize problems that would be better served by domestic measures (Kenwick & Simmons, 2020). The shutting off of possibilities for people seeking resettlement while based in African

camps extends not merely a short-term xenophobic impulse but a longstanding racial bordering dynamic that harkens back to the colonial history and narrow intent of policy trends before and after the 1951 Convention itself (focused on providing refuge for *white* people fleeing oppression, see Walia, 2021; Achieme, 2022; Abuya et al., 2021), and hence underlining the importance of African values of ubuntu and other Indigenous worldviews of care.

5 | CONCLUSIONS

While COVID-19 has been blamed for suspension of resettlement programmes and intensified colonial bordering for all refugees and asylum-seekers, the pandemic is but one factor driving exclusionary policies, serving to exacerbate and highlight problematic trends. The emergence and growth of populist politics in the Western world has significantly affected resettlement programmes. As Aitchison (2021, p. 45) states: ‘The recent coronavirus crisis has superimposed itself on a much more prolonged crisis of the liberal order which has seen populist nationalists make headway in a number of established democracies using xenophobic and racist language to drum up fears of immigrants taking jobs, putting pressure on public services, and bringing crime and terrorism’. Reviewing experiences in Tongogara Refugee Camp highlights a range of critical disappointments for those who have been hoping for resettlement – as well as a range of constraints to the other “durable solutions.”

Pandemics and climate disasters will no doubt proliferate in the years to come, exacerbating the need for new approaches to refugees and asylum-seekers – and for embracing efforts to decolonise this field, critically, and with an intent to challenge imperial power with alternative epistemologies (Arat-Koc, 2020; Swanson, 2015). This article, in drawing attention to the lived experiences of curtailing resettlement flows in the face of social and ecological disasters, argues for rethinking policy measures to better incentivize concrete commitments that embrace the values of *Ubuntu* and the Global Compact on Refugees. For Tongogara, given its geographical limits to expansion and extreme vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, a multi-scalar approach (at the camp, national, as well as global levels) is all the more needed – informed at all levels by an *Ubuntu* collectivist philosophy distinct from hegemonic top-down colonial humanitarianism. Even with well-supported encampment policies and programmes by a myriad of UN organizations and NGOs – along with considerable agency, initiatives and contributions by the refugees themselves – host countries need greater support to facilitate local integration and third country commitment to continuing and expanding resettlement programmes in preparation of

shocks to come. In short, to 'implement durable solutions' requires a *multi-scalar* approach that seeks to concurrently address challenges of repatriation, local integration and resettlement, learning from situated realities, root causes of both displacement and underlying mobility injustices, and reversing recent trends that imperil global refugee protection commitments.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data available on request from the authors; the data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

ORCID

Samuel J. Spiegel  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2163-3512>

ENDNOTES

1. In September 2021, UNHCR indicated that the population of refugees, asylum-seekers and other people of concern in Zimbabwe (most at Tongogara Refugee Camp) was 22,600 people (UNHCR, 2021).
2. The term ubuntu is expressed differently in several African communities and languages but all referring to common values. In Angola, it is known as gimuntu, Botswana (muthu), Burkina Faso (maaya), Burundi (ubuntu), Cameroon (bato), Congo (bantu), Congo Democratic Republic (bomoto/bantu), Cote d'Ivoire (maaya), Equatorial Guinea (maaya), Guinea (maaya), Zambia (maaya), Ghana (biako ye), Kenya (utu/munto/mondo), Liberia (maaya), Malawi (umunthu), Mali (maaya/hadama de ya), Mozambique (vumuntu), Namibia (omundu), Nigeria (mutunchi/iwa/agwa), Rwanda (bantu), Sierra Leone (maaya), South Africa (ubuntu/botho), Tanzania (utu/obuntu/bumuntu), Uganda (obuntu), Zambia (umunthu/ubuntu) and Zimbabwe (hunhu/unhu/botho/ubuntu, as well as other Bantu countries (Mhlanga, 2020).
3. General Notice 252 of 1999 refers to subsection (1) of section 12 of the Refugees Act [Chapter 4:03], designating this area in the Chipinge District, in Manicaland, as a place and area where all refugees and members of their families shall live.'
4. Using Statutory Instrument 130 of the 1985 Regulations on Refugees
5. Policy informed by Zimbabwe's ratification and domestication of the 1951 Convention with reservations to Articles 17, 23, 24 and 26
6. In 2020, after COVID hit, another cyclone – Cyclone Chalane, forced another 100 refugee families to move to higher ground (in December 2020).
7. Notably, in 2021, more than 100 Congolese refugees who escaped this camp were detained after being apprehended while heading towards Botswana (Nyathi, 2021c).
8. Noting that 95 per cent of forcibly displaced people remain internal-

ly displaced or in refugee camps in neighbouring countries, Harsha Wallia not only rejects the dichotomies of asylum-seekers and refugees, but even between refugees (2021, p. 62) and migrants, reframing the crisis as a 'dual crisis of displacement and immobility organized through capitalist dispossession and imperialist power'.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Samuel J. Spiegel is a Senior Lecturer in International Development at the University of Edinburgh's Centre of African Studies. Since 2005 his research has explored a variety of issues concerning displacement in Zimbabwe and he has taught on a diverse range of displacement themes. A recipient of an ESRC Future Research Leader Award, Sam has also worked with interdisciplinary teams in cross-cultural research exploring intertwined social, economic, political as well as ecological struggles that shape experiences of mobility and immobility as well as the possibilities of creative methodologies, merging arts-based methods with complementary approaches.

Johanne Mhlanga is a social worker, refugee and humanitarian expert. He is currently working as the Camp Administrator at Tongogara Refugee Camp under the Department of Social Development. He has experience in coordinating humanitarian responses to refugees and asylum seekers and is interested in social policy, migration, social protection and child protection. Johanne is also an avid reader and researcher who has authored and co-authored peer reviewed academic papers on refugee protection, human trafficking and child protection.

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