Introduction

In this chapter, I examine urban refugees’ everyday life, and the associated feelings of insecurity and protection, in the capital city of Uganda, Kampala. My overall aim is to demonstrate the applicability of the idea of ‘right to the city’ (RTC) regarding the investigation of refugee protection in a group setting – a theoretical approach so far lacking in-depth investigation. I commence this chapter by deliberating on the original idea of the RTC and presenting my application of it. This conceptual part is partially based on my article published in the Journal of Eastern African Studies (Lyytinen 2015a). Yet I further develop my conceptual thinking of the RTC by focusing on the scale of the group, and subsequently base my analysis on new empirical data from RWDs.

The concept of the RTC, originally developed by Lefebvre (1996), has been a focus of much academic scholarship (Purcell 2003, Marcuse 2009, Attoh 2011, Butler 2012), and it has been increasingly used in advocacy by different organisations (Kuymulu 2013). Often the attempts to apply it have, however, lacked the radical meaning that was its original characteristic (Purcell 2002, De Souza 2010, Butler 2012, Kuymulu 2013). The RTC is interpreted in this chapter in an open manner as suggested by Iveson (2011: 258), who argues that ‘what “RTC” means simply cannot, indeed should not, be answered in the same way in different times and places’. Rather, the RTC includes multiple, interrelated rights that form a collectivity of rights. These rights are interpreted in this chapter through three overlapping spatial domains: participation, access and appropriation (Lyytinen 2015a).

First, urban inhabitance, for Lefebvre (1996), is characterised by participation in decision-making over the production of urban space at all levels. Effective participation is based on mechanisms that are controlled by the urban inhabitants; not imposed on them. Participation therefore requires self-management, autogestion. In this chapter, disabled refugees’ participation
in decision-making regarding their protection is analysed as a collective right argued for in the support group and pursued through various methods of action to counteract individual and collective exclusion.

Second, for Lefebvre, the RTC in its most basic form is a right not to be expelled from the city centre (Mitchell 2003). The RTC, this ‘transformed and renewed right to urban life’ which is ‘like a cry and a demand’ (Lefebvre 1996: 158), refers to the freedom to physically access, occupy and use urban space. Moreover, the issue of exclusion is central to Lefebvre’s writings, as he refers to the RTC as the right to information, the rights to use of multiple services and the right of users to make known their ideas on the space and time of their activities in urban areas (Lefebvre 1991, cited in Marcuse 2009: 189). In this chapter, I analyse disabled refugees’ struggles to access, occupy and use urban space – both at the city level and at the level of protection institutions and services.

Third, appropriation is presented by Lefebvre as a means of counteracting oppression by complete usage of space (Butler 2012). For him (1996: 147), appropriation refers to the collective attempts to produce city space as a creativity, or ‘oeuvre’. In this chapter, I largely interpret appropriation of space as the collective attempts by the disabled refugees to occupy and transform the insecure spaces of exile into places of protection. Subsequently, I argue, along Lefebvrian lines, that it is necessary to conceive refugees’ right to use space simultaneously as physical, imagined and social, creating the spatial triad (Lefebvre 1974: 1991).

In his later writings, Lefebvre perceives the RTC more as a ‘right to space’, thus opening up the discussion regarding the scale of these rights (Brenner 2000, cited in Butler 2012: 139). In this regard, Parnell and Pieterse (2010: 149) argue for conceptualising the RTC through different scales ranging from the individual, household, neighbourhood or city to the freedom from external risks. Pushing this scalar thinking further, in this chapter I focus on the scale of the group. This is important as in urban contexts refugee protection is increasingly conducted in group or community settings (UNHCR 2009, Lyytinen 2013).

The analytical focus on a support group is associated with my answer to the important question of ‘whose right’. I subscribe to Marcuse’s (2009) interpretation where he distinguishes between the demand of the RTC by those deprived of basic material and legal rights, and the aspiration for the future by those discontented with life and the limitations it imposes for growth and creativity. The RTC is a right based on ethics, justice and morality, and it belongs to:

those deprived of basic material and existing legal rights,… those discontented with life… and those directly in want, directly oppressed, those for whom even their immediate needs are not fulfilled: the homeless, the hungry, the imprisoned and the persecuted on gender, religious, racial grounds.

(Marcuse 2009: 190, emphasis added)

Consequently, my empirical focus is on those refugees who are deprived of and/or discontented/alienated with their exilic life given their particular character not only as the persecuted but also as the disabled (or caretakers of the disabled). The analysis that follows the description of the data and field context focuses on disabled refugees’ RTC as communal rights to participate in the activities of this group, to access and occupy urban space, and to appropriate insecure spaces into spaces of protection.

**Data and field context**

Uganda is a party to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol and is also a signatory to the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects...
of the Refugee Problem in Africa. There have been some positive changes in refugee law and policy in Uganda, namely the implementation of the 2006 Refugee Act and the adoption of the 2009 UNHCR urban refugee policy, both of which recognised cities as legitimate places for refugees to reside. Despite these changes, ‘what exists today – and for the foreseeable future – is a policy that focuses assistance and protection on refugees living in settlements, and not those refugees who chose, for various reasons, to live outside such restrictive spaces’ (Bernstein and Okello 2007: 47). Thus, it can be argued that the protection of urban refugees in Uganda has not improved significantly despite the newly adopted legal frameworks and policies (RLP undated). Yet the number of refugees in Kampala had expanded rapidly in recent years. In July 2011, of the total 150,000 recognised refugees and asylum seekers in Uganda, more than 26 per cent were living in Kampala. Out of the nearly 40,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers in Kampala, 45 per cent were Congolese. Other major nationalities included Somali, Rwandan, Burundian, Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees (UNHCR 2011).

This chapter is limited to a distinct refugee support group, that of the refugees with disabilities (RWDs), which exists in relation to Refugee Law Project’s (RLP) community-based work in Kampala. RLP is a centre for justice and forced migration established in 1999 under the School of Law, Makerere University in Kampala. Over the years, RLP has helped to establish 15 support groups that are directly and indirectly affiliated with it. These include, among others, groups for torture survivors, women, youth, elderly, disabled and male refugees who have experienced sexual violence. The experiences of members and of the RLP staff working with different groups are utilised to contextualise the analysis focused on the RWDs group. Here I use the shorthand of RWDs to refer to this support group for refugees with disabilities. In the official documents this group is, however, referred to as people with disabilities (PWDs), but I wish to emphasise the characteristic of the members as both refugees and as PWDs. It should also be noted that even though some people have been disabled since birth, others were disabled during the violent conflicts in their home countries, or at the time of living in exile. Thus, sometimes people’s refugee background and disability were very much connected.

The qualitative primary data collected in 2011 with the RWDs group include semi-structured interviews (N = 6) and focus group discussions (N = 1) with the leaders and members of this groups. RLP staff, mostly Legal officers and Psychosocial officers, who work closely with the RLP support groups, were also interviewed (N = 6). Additionally, group meetings were observed and secondary data, such as the constitutions, were analysed. Most of the interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed. Transcriptions were coded in NVivo 9 software, and analysed with discourse analysis.

**The RTC as participation**

In various UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) policies there is an explicit link between refugee protection and community, particularly in the urban settings of the Global South (UNHCR 2009). Yet, UNHCR has realised that providing protection through a community-based approach may be challenging as territorially defined community structures are often weakly developed in cities. Therefore, creating and recognising new types of communities is crucial in order to reinforce refugees’ participation in their protection. One of these new community structures is the support groups – the focus of this chapter.

In the context of Kampala, the RLP has also realised the importance of ‘empowering the refugees and giving the refugees an opportunity to participate in the design and implementation of RLP services to their communities’ (RLP 2011a: 5). Furthermore, after recognising that most refugee populations have originated as a result of tribal conflicts, RLP was committed to
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prevent these conflicts from reoccurring in Uganda. One of the attempts to prevent this was the creation of support groups which were open to refugees from all nationalities and ethnicities.

As these groups were formed around the idea of shared experiences and challenges of the deprived and the discontented (Marcuse 2009), participation in them provided means to fight against ethnic conflicts. Refugee groups’ protective nature should not, however, be taken for granted nor should the issues of competition and mistrust in and between these communities be dismissed (Lyytinen 2013, 2015b). Yet, at their best, these groups can provide their members essential spaces of protection and platforms for claiming their RTC as is demonstrated in this chapter.

In Uganda, refugees have a legal right to form associations based on the 2006 Refugee Act. Initiating a refugee support group in association with the RLP typically commenced by forming a core group that mobilised a larger interest group. Often the initiative of forming a new group came from the RLP officers who worked with the clients with similar needs and backgrounds. This was also the case with the RWDs group. Thus, it can be asked to what extent was this participation in the creation of the group imposed from above on the refugees. As according to Lefebvre (1996) participation requires self-management, autogestion, it was clear that in order to function well, the RWDs had to take ownership of the group. Self-management seems to have succeeded if we look into the growth of this group. The group was established in 2010 with just eight core members. In 2011 the RWDs had around 70 members, their own constitution and they had officially been registered as an association with the Kampala Capital City Authorities (KCCA). In 2015 this group already had 200 members. Thus, participation in terms of numbers had increased significantly over time.

Regarding participation, it is also important to discuss the question of ‘participation in what?’ For many RWDs the mere fact that they took part in the monthly meetings held at the RLP was important. Yet, it was participation in fulfilling the core objectives of the group that motivated the members. The objectives were not only agreed collectively, but the actions to achieve them were also conducted jointly. The main objectives of the RWDs included:

- provision of psychosocial support to refugee PWDs [i.e. RWDs] and their families;
- fighting stigma and discrimination against PWDs;
- providing a collective voice to advocate for PWDs’ rights;
- advocacy for mainstreaming of PWD issues in organizational plans;
- promotion of self-reliance through income generating activities.

(RLP 2015, no page)

Thus, participation included tangible activities that the members conducted together to achieve not only basic material and legal rights but also growth and creativity (Marcuse 2009). The strengths of this group regarding participation were twofold. On the one hand, they had been able to shift from the initial participation in meetings into participation in tangible joint activities. On the other hand, they had succeeded in combining the ‘cry and the demand’ (Lefebvre 1996) of both the deprived and the discontented/alienated (Marcuse 2009).

Despite the clear strengths of participation, the RWDs group also faced a number of challenges to function well and to attract new members. Even though the number of members kept growing, the group struggled with finding the most deprived RWDs. There were a number of reasons for this. First, since the majority of the leadership and members were men, their concern was not being able to reach the women, particularly single women with disabled children that often were living in the most precarious situation. Second, the overwhelming majority of the members were Congolese. This was partly due to the fact that the president of the RWDs was a Congolese man, and his personal role in forming the group was paramount. Activating the most
deprived and alienated RWDs (Marcuse 2009) from other nationalities was, however, identified as a challenge to be addressed. Third, the group struggled with the issue of identifying ‘real members’ as their criteria for membership was not necessarily something to be seen – not all disabilities are visible or physical. Given this, self-identification became an important determinant of participation even though it was sometimes questioned by other members.

The RTC as access to city space

The RWDs support group faced challenges regarding their rights to access, occupy and use space (Lefebvre 1996) in Kampala. Thus, their RTC in its most fundamental manner was limited. In this section, I focus on two spatial difficulties expressed by the RWDs: to live and to move in their city of exile, and to access official protection institutions and public services. This analytical take is based on Lefebvre’s writings where he refers to the RTC as the right to information, the right to use services and the right to use the centre (Lefebvre 1991, cited in Marcuse 2009: 189).

First, RWDs expressed challenges in living and moving in their city of exile. According to the RWDs, they were often encouraged by the officials working on their cases to live in the rural refugee settlements. Therefore, their mere existence in the city was questioned, and the officials struggled to know what to do with these ‘undesirables’ in the centre (Mitchell 2003). Yet, shifting spatially to the rural camps would have meant major obstacles for the RWDs, as explained by a female group member:

When you are talking about the settlement, in settlement you are disabled, and the life in the settlement is digging. So how are you going to dig when you are disabled? As disabled, how are you going to survive there apart just from dying?

(Interview 5 August 2011)

Spatial relocation over longer distances was not seen either as a realistic option by many of the Kampala-bound RWDs. They argued that even though they did not receive sufficient medical care in Uganda, they had minimal prospects for resettlement to a third country in the Global North. Some of the RWDs had been accepted as the official ‘case load’ of urban refugees who were financially and materially assisted for up to six months, but this assistance was not perceived by them as a permanent solution to their struggle for ‘transformed and renewed right to urban life’ (Lefebvre 1996: 158). They had hardly any options but to stay put in Kampala – or in other words to live ‘between a rock and a hard place’ (RLP 2011b).

The everyday life for many RWDs in Kampala meant struggles over their ability to spatially navigate the city. One of the objectives of the support group was to reach out to RWDs who were unable to move from their homes. The leadership and the members of the group visited different neighbourhoods of the city to assist and to encourage those who were living in spatial limbo. This meant challenges for refugees with physical disabilities, as moving by foot was sometimes the only option due to lack of money for transportation. RWDs’ mobility could have been enhanced with special equipment, such as crutches or supportive belts, but getting them was difficult. At times RWDs had established arrangements whereby boda boda [motorbike] drivers known to them would provide free or discounted transportation. Without these arrangements or financial means, RWDs could ‘spend even two months without reaching any place’ as suggested by a male group member (interview 20 July 2011). Parents of the disabled children also struggled with the fact that they had become ‘disabled’ because they were so attached to their children: ‘For us who are having children with disabilities, it is very difficult to leave him at home. They have become like a mobile phone; you have to move with him everywhere you
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Second, as the RTC can be interpreted as collective rights ‘to information and the rights to use of multiple services’ (Lefebvre 1991, cited in Marcuse 2009: 189), I examine how the members of the RWDs support group managed to access official protection institutions, such as UNHCR, its implementing partner InterAidUganda (IAU) and public services. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Lyytinen 2013, 2015b), many of the urban refugees, in particular the Congolese, struggled to gain access to the UNHCR services that were implemented in the city by IAU. In addition, RWDs suggest that they were not respected by some of the officers working on refugee protection. RWDs also argued that they had a worse chance of getting an appointment to see a counsellor or a protection officer than able-bodied refugees. This was because they were not capable of going through the physically and mentally tough system of acquiring an appointment: ‘Even to talk to the offices, those different organisations, you have to compete with the people who are physically fit. The staff of those different organisations do not care about people with disabilities’ (interview 5 August 2016). In 2011, getting access to the IAU and UNHCR officers was restricted, and many refugees, particularly the Congolese whose appointment day was on Mondays, had to sleep outside the IAU office and/or bribe people to get an appointment. This was explained by a refugee mother of a disabled child:

I used to go and sleep outside IAU. I go and book on Sunday morning, and in the evening I come and sleep. In the [Monday] morning if I get the chance, I get the appointment now. I go there around 8PM [on Sunday]. I sleep there until the morning. I do not feel safe, I do not feel OK, because I am sick and I do not feel free. I sleep there alone. They bring him [her disabled son] in the Monday morning.

(Interview 4 September 2011)

The RWDs also struggled to access public services, such as schools and hospitals. By the 2006 Refugee Act, refugees in Uganda are entitled to all basic services, such as medical care and primary education. In Kampala there are no parallel services for refugees as they are expected to access the mainstream services meant for all of the urban inhabitants. Like in the case of protection institutions, these difficulties were not only about accessing the physical, material space of these services, but they also had to do with acquiring access to the imagined or social space (Lefebvre 1991) of these services – the attitudes, relations and emotions. Regarding schooling for refugee children with disabilities, their parents struggled to keep their children in school even though schooling was often prescribed as ‘treatment’ by doctors. Challenges had to do with lack of money, requirement to be present in the school to assist the child, and the general discrimination against disabled children in public schools. These challenges were articulated, for instance, by a disabled refugee mother who was unable to educate her children: ‘Because you are disabled, you feel guilty for making other people to suffer… The child was supposed to enjoy the status of the child, but he is now occupying the position of the parent’ (FGD 27 August 2011).

Like with schooling, RWDs faced challenges when trying to access medical services in hospitals. The most common issues had to do with not getting the needed treatment or not having the financial means to access health services. At times, refugees suggested that Ugandan doctors had to be bribed, and a common story was that when refugees needed a surgery, the doctors provided them with painkillers. Subsequently, some of the RWDs argued that they had been physically disabled due to lack of treatment in Kampala. Accessing hospitals often required persistence and time. A mother of a disabled child explained how, during her everyday life in
Kampala, she often spent significant amounts of time in hospitals: ‘Most of the time I spend going up and down looking for livelihood. But since my kid is sick, I spend most of my time at hospitals’ (interview 5 August 2011). Another RWD, deprived of basic material and financial means, explained how her treatment was not adequate due to protection institutions arguing who to pay her medical bills and which hospitals to access:

I am unable to move, walk, sit… I went with the [medical] bill to IAU…. They told that the bill cannot be paid by IAU, but it must be send to UNHCR, so I had to wait until they got that money from UNHCR…. It was OK, I could not resist; do whatever you want to do, because I am the one suffering. They refused to pay that bill, and I continue taking tablets. (Interview 4 August 2011)

As demonstrated by these examples, RWDs faced challenges when trying to promote their RTC as rights to access particular offices, spaces and services (Marcuse 2009). Due to these problems of accessing and occupying not only physical spaces, but also imagined and social, or lived, spaces (Lefebvre 1991), they were often not only deprived of their basic material and social rights but of their rights to use urban space – the fundamentals of the RTC (Lefebvre 1996).

The RTC as appropriation

The RTC does not only manifest in the deprived and discontent (Marcuse 2009) refugees’ participation in the support groups and their access to city space and services, but it also involves an element of appropriation of space. Together participation in the spatial production of the city and appropriation of urban space create a ‘twin element’ of the RTC (Butler 2012). Appropriation refers to the collective attempts to produce city space as a creativity, or ‘oeuvre’ (Lefebvre 1996). Here, I largely interpret appropriation of space as the collective attempts by the RWDs to transform the insecure spaces of exile into places of protection and belonging. In this analysis Lefebvre’s (1974: 1991) idea of lived space is emphasised. Lived or social space for him refers to ‘representational space’ that is produced in everyday social interactions, i.e. it is the ‘lived space of sensations, the imaginations, emotions and meanings incorporated into our everyday lives and practices’ (Harvey 2004: 8).

Refugees who were members of the RWDs support group felt that through their active and meaningful membership in this group they were supported individually and collectively in numerous ways – often the tangible support not being the most important issue. Overall, their aim was to transform the timid and lonely spaces of exile into spaces of protection and collective support. These transformative attempts are interpreted here as appropriation of space (Lefebvre 1996; Butler 2012).

Members of the RWDs expressed value in being able to share their experiences with other refugees with similar backgrounds: ‘When we try to put ourselves together, it brings again strength to us. It will give you more strength’ (FGD 27 August 2011). A female member of the RWDs group explained her sense of belonging in the following words:

The group that I belong here is just PWDs [i.e. RWDs]. When we started our group, it really helped me. This group really helped me, because when I was alone at home, I was thinking that I was the only one suffering with these issues. But when I came to this group, I saw that I was not alone. I saw that there were some who were suffering more than me. (Interview 4 August 2011)
By transforming their everyday urban life that used to be characterised by alienation and distress into meaningful lived spaces (Lefebvre 1974: 1991) of encounters and support with other RWDs, the refugees were enacting their right to appropriate space.

The members also highlighted the inclusiveness of the RWDs group, and how they had found a safe space within this group even if they were discriminated against by others, including different national or ethnic groups. The RWDs perceived that they were, in general, discriminated against because of their condition, and some of them were struggling with feelings of anger and shame. They saw that being able to express their frustration within the group was helpful in order to overcome the feelings of exclusion and rejection:

In the group, when we share experiences, it helps us to move when we are angry... and you get some help in the group, some counseling. It even moves something which could make you angry in life. I have no other communities.

*(FGD 27 August 2011)*

Moreover, by coming together, the members of the RWDs group had been able to increase their agency and potential to act on their own behalf. Members of this group, for instance, suggested that because they were united and organised, they had been able to change the RLP system of seeing clients in their favour. Through their communal action they were able to access the RWDs officer every Wednesday without having to go thought the normal tombola system of getting the appointments. Overall, they were more recognised once they started to advocate for their rights as a collective. This was also acknowledged by the RLP officer:

It is very, very important [for the RWDs to get together]. It has actually proven to be very important. First of all, they kind of feel that they are recognised; that they exist. They feel that they can speak out now that they are part of the group. So, they feel like they can easily approach you and get access to the services. It is kind of empowering to them.

*(Interview 26 August 2011)*

In addition, the RWDs support group had established advocacy campaigns together with the RLP to advocate for their RTC – as access, participation and appropriation of space (Lyytinen 2015a). The RWDs, for instance, celebrated the International Day of Persons with Disabilities the 3rd of December and cooperated on this event with the National Umbrella for Disabled Persons in Uganda (NUDIPU). Through this cooperation, the RWDs advocated for their rights in a broader setting of PWDs in Uganda. Additionally, the group had taken part in the production of short documentaries produced by the RLP’s video advocacy unit. These documents demonstrated visually the RWDs’ everyday struggles for their RTC in Kampala, their city of exile.

Conclusions

In this chapter, the concept of the ‘right to the city’ (RTC) was rethought in relation to urban refugee protection in the context of Kampala, Uganda. Analytically the focus was on the scale of the group. This group-based analysis of refugees’ cry and demand for their RTC was noteworthy, for the examination of the RTC has been lacking sophistication and critical approach regarding the scale of the group or community. Yet, the scalar analysis of the RTC is very much needed, and this article has contributed to the group-based rethinking of the RTC. Analysis focused on the scale of the group was also important in order to enhance our understanding of urban refugee protection. In urban contexts, particularly in the Global South, refugee protection is
increasingly conducted in group or community settings. Thus, new conceptual frameworks, for instance based on rethinking the RTC, are needed.

Empirically the applicability of the RTC was analysed regarding the disabled refugees living in Kampala, Uganda. This chapter is one of the few pieces of research focusing on reapplying the RTC in the sub-Saharan context, particularly in relation to refugees living in urban areas. The focus on RWDs also enabled answering the question of ‘whose right’. The examination paid attention to the most deprived and discontent or alienated refugees with various mental and physical disabilities, and refugees who were caretakers of these RWDs. The RTC was, therefore, analysed with regard to people not only persecuted but also disabled.

The notion of the RTC was applied in this chapter in a threefold manner: as participation, access and appropriation. First, refugees’ participation was analysed as a collective right to be organised and advocate for their rights in the group setting. In the case of the RWDs group, participation was functioning well both in terms of increasing number of members, but also as recognition and meaningful communal action. Second, RWDs’ right to access, occupy and use space – be it the city, the protection institutions or other services – was limited and constantly pushed forward by the refugees. Access to space was analysed through Lefebvre’s spatial triad which sees space simultaneously as physical, imagined and social/lived. In urban refugee studies, perceiving space in this manner has proven helpful. Third, appropriation of space was featured in refugees’ discourses on how to transform their insecure everyday life in urban exile into protective spaces of collective support and belonging. This was achieved through support and sharing that led to an enhanced sense of security. To conclude, the analysis demonstrated the usefulness of applying the RTC, as rethought here, not only regarding the scale of the group, but also in the context of urban refugee protection.

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