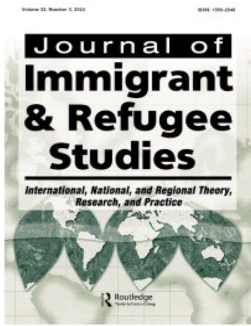

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The *Displacement Economies Framework*

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ABSTRACT
Protracted displacement of refugees and IDPs (internally displaced people) is one of the most critical humanitarian problems today. Legislation often prohibits refugees' rights to work, move beyond camps, or attain citizenship, while IDPs lack access to security and services. New approaches are urgently needed to overcome barriers to economic integration of displaced people's livelihoods and enterprise as a stepping-stone to broader social integration. Drawing on refugee, development and informality literatures, this paper proposes a new Displacement Economies Framework, a theoretical and programming tool that helps bridge the humanitarian-development divide and highlight the agency and collective economic contribution of displaced people.

KEYWORDS
Refugee economies; displacement; forced migration; livelihoods; informal economy

Introduction

Every year millions of people are forced to flee their homes, due to conflict, violence or political persecution. By 2023 more than 117 million people were forcibly displaced, making hazardous journeys across borders or regions to escape violence and protect families (UNHCR, 2024). For decades the humanitarian community has met the immediate needs of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) in camps but, as short-term emergencies turn into protracted displacement, displaced people are seeking anonymity and independence beyond camps; estimates suggest that over 60% of refugees and at least half of IDPs now live in towns and cities, where they often join the ranks of the poor with restricted rights and little humanitarian aid.

Protracted displacement is now one of the most complex and difficult humanitarian problems facing the international community. 'Protracted displacement' refers to displacements of refugees and IDPs which are long-standing, chronic or recurring (Kraler et al., 2020). UNHCR considers a 'protracted refugee situation' to be one where 'refugee populations of 25,000 people or more have been in exile for five or more years' (UNHCR, 2004). For IDPs a common definition is when 'the processes of finding durable solutions have stalled and/or IDPs are marginalized as a consequence of violations or a lack of protection of human rights' (BBP, 2007). For both refugees and IDPs. At the end of 2023, forcibly-displaced people worldwide included 37.6 m refugees, 6.9 m asylum seekers and 68.3 m IDPs. Amongst the total population of concern (refugees, IDPs, asylum seekers and others), 24.9 m people (67%) are in situations of protracted displacement (UNHCR, 2024). Cities are now the main place of refuge, accommodating over 60% of all refugees and IDPs (UNHCR, 2024).

Displacement often lasts many years. The average length of time a refugee is displaced is estimated at between 10 and 26 years (Devictor, 2019; UNHCR, 2017); adults face constraints on mobility and rights to work, while children are born and raised into 'refugeehood'. To address

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this challenge, UNHCR and other agencies promote the idea of *durable solutions*, through resettlement, return or local integration. However, return is often impossible and resettlement a distant dream—in the first half of 2022, only 0.2% of the displaced population were resettled to third countries or returned to their country of origin (UNHCR, 2023). For most, the choice thus lies between establishing a restricted life in their place of arrival and risking the acute dangers of onward migration.

Local integration, the most likely option, should entail a process of legal, economic and social integration whereby refugees gain national protection of the host government (Crisp, 2004), but local legislation often prohibits refugees' rights to work, move, or attain citizenship. As a step toward durable solutions and local integration, donors have promoted livelihood programmes to help displaced people gain dignity and independence through the concept of *self-reliance*. But self-reliance, defined as 'the ability of an individual', household or community to meet its needs in a 'sustainable manner' (RSRI, 2003) is a contested concept, appealing to donors with shrinking budgets and linked to ideological aims of market-based protection (Easton-Calabria, 2022, pp. 11–14), and self-reliance in practice too often means that displaced people live without aid in poverty.

New approaches are thus urgently needed to unpack the concept of local integration to support the livelihoods of refugees and IDPs (internally displaced people), to give them dignity and independence and recognize their potential economic contributions. Studies have often focussed on assessing the burden of IDPs and refugees on labor markets and services, paying less attention to their net contribution as consumers, tax-payers, entrepreneurs, and agents of economic development (Zetter, 2014). In addition, market-based approaches to livelihoods programming are often hampered by government regulations which restrict refugees' rights to work (UNCHR & ILO, 2017). Although there is now some recognition that many refugees and displaced people have the skills and motivation to create their own livelihoods, their collective economic contribution to host communities is largely overlooked. Given the scale and acute challenges of protracted displacement, and prohibitive legal contexts of host countries, understanding and addressing the barriers to economic integration of displaced people's livelihoods and enterprise is a key stepping-stone to local acceptance and broader integration.

Despite extensive research, critical conceptual gaps remain to address this challenge. First, although research on refugee livelihoods is now well established, there has been much less study on enterprises run by refugees and IDPs and the networks and transactions on which these depend. Second, debates on the wider concept of 'refugee economies' and 'displacement economies' have been developed from different starting points and not reconciled into an overarching framework that takes account of the linked nature of livelihoods and enterprise, the temporal aspects of the economic lives of refuges and IDPs, and their economic and social impacts. This paper draws from concepts in refugee and development studies and informal economy literature to propose the Displacement Economies Framework (DEF) to address those gaps, in order to support a more dignified and secure future for some of the most vulnerable populations in the world.

The DEF is a theoretical concept and programming tool, that seeks to understand the interlinked and dynamic elements of displaced people's economic activity, in order to capture the economic potential that refugees and IDPs bring to their new settings. The framework explores the agency and strategies of refugees and IDPs, and how individual livelihoods and enterprise combine to shape local economies. The framework recognizes the political economies and unequal power relations sustaining displacement, how shocks and stresses are navigated, the networked aspects of displacement economies and how these evolve over time, to enable refugees and displaced people to build livelihoods or enterprises in hostile policy settings.

The paper argues that existing approaches are insufficient to analyze the barriers to economic inclusion of refugees and IDPs. Following a discussion of the methodology used for developing the DEF, the paper discusses the distinct nature of displacement economies, and their role in supporting local integration of refugees and IDPs. The paper then draws on refugee livelihoods research and informal economy literature to argue that the focus on individual livelihoods misses

the enterprise of displaced people and the collective nature of their work. Furthermore, recent studies on displacement and refugee economies do not provide a clear framework for analysis. The paper then explains the conceptualization of the DEF, adding temporal and enterprise dimensions to existing frameworks, and draws conclusions on its potential application in research and aid programming.

Methods

The DEF described in this paper has been developed from extensive reviews of refugee, development, and informal economy literatures, focussing on refugee livelihoods, IDP livelihoods, and displacement and refugee economies debates, which arose from a large four-country project on protracted displacement[1]. The reviews also explored methodological strategies and livelihood impacts in the study of forced migration. The approaches emerging from these reviews were field tested with partner teams in four countries hosting large numbers of refugees and IDPs, Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya. Although more research has been undertaken into refugee livelihoods than those of IDPs, the trauma and vulnerability of forced displacement makes it relevant to discuss displacement as a whole. Unlike refugees, IDPs have citizen rights, but these cannot always be realized, for example when identity documents can only be obtained from their place of origin from which IDPs have fled, or bureaucratic procedures create hurdles in accessing services.

The literature reviews explored different elements of displacement economies, summarizing the conceptual insights and limitations of the terms in use. Entry points included literature on *i) livelihoods in displacement,* including the sustainable livelihoods framework and its application to refugee and migration studies; concepts of wellbeing applied to refugees and IDPs; structure, agency and pathways in development processes; strategies, mobilities and right to work, social capital and power relations, and gendered livelihoods in displacement; *ii) displacement enterprise* in urban and camp settings, including labor market and other contributions, refugee camp economies and wider debates on refugee economies; the informal economy and supporting networks; informal cross-border trade, and *iii) policy response* to displacement such the UN's Global Compact on Refugees, and UNHCR's livelihoods, self-reliance and urban programming. The approach in this paper is based on a social science perspective of the structures and relationships that underpin displacement economies, rather than econometric modelling of displacement impacts.

The informal economy literature provided important insights because, while refugee and displacement literature recognizes that refugees often operate in the informal sector (e.g. Altındağ et al., 2020; Betts et al, 2016; Monteith & Lwasa, 2017), theoretical insights from informal economy literature such as the collective and interlinked nature of informal livelihoods, have not been widely applied in refugee studies. The methods literature also highlights the need to consider the temporal dimension in assets profiles (Jacobsen, 2001), and emphasizes that the quantity of assets may be less important than their quality (Levine, 2014).

Following the literature review, emerging concepts for DEF were tested with a global panel of experts and research partners in each country. Concepts were then further developed in each of the four countries of study, first with a panel of in-country experts on displacement, refugees and informality, and then with two focus groups with men and women refugees or IDPs. The focus groups explored conceptions of a 'livelihood' in each cultural context, enablers and barriers to building livelihoods through employment or own-account work, challenges to income-earning activities and gaps in knowledge. The concepts were then brought back to the global panel of experts to finalize the ideas. The approach highlighted the inter-twined links between the livelihoods of individuals and initiatives of refugees and IDPs to set up their own businesses, and the lack of knowledge on the collective impacts of these activities within the wider host community. The framework has been further developed through field application in household surveys, qualitative interviews of refugee-run enterprises and key informant interviews to iterate the framework, which will be explored in future papers.

Defining questions

Two key questions emerged from this process to underpin the rationale for the DEF. First, what is distinct about displacement economies and why is a specific framework required? Second, why have current approaches to both local integration and self-reliance failed?

First, the *economic activities of displaced people* are shaped by their past experiences and immediate needs for survival. Many arrive in contexts where poverty and informal work is the norm but face additional vulnerabilities due to the trauma of displacement, loss of assets, loss of family members, and restrictive regulation. Those living outside camps often join the ranks of the urban or rural poor yet face distinctive barriers of lack of assets and social and legal discrimination, which makes access to employment or self-employment particularly challenging. They also bring assets to their livelihoods which nationals may not possess—building on previous skills, ethnic international networks, or the ingenuity and perseverance which enabled them to survive displacement.

Displaced people include two main groups, refugees and IDPs. The most disadvantaged are refugees and asylum seekers, often without legal rights in their country of arrival. Those without official documentation are amongst the most vulnerable but are often more numerous than documented refugees. Some countries recognize as refugees only those with approved asylum claims, although the definition of a refugee under the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention includes anyone with a well-founded fear of persecution who is unable to return to their country of nationality or residence. IDPs forced to flee as a result of fear, intimidation or killings, may lose access to land, crops and resources, assets and documentation, and also suffer the trauma of displacement, (Ibanez, 2009). IDPs who move from rural to urban areas may meet immediate needs through livelihoods that are inadequate, dangerous or maladapted, but which increase their vulnerabilities in the longer term (Alexion et al., 2021; Young & Jacobsen, 2013).

Refugees and IDPs engage in economic activities in diverse ways, which are often distinct from those of host communities. Although often marginalized, many can also bring new skills to the labor market or build strong links to markets in their area of origin, drawing on kinship networks for supplies, and the demands of displaced communities for specific goods or foodstuff. This often creates new economic specialisms, such as the furniture-making and tourism services introduced by Syrian refugees in Kurdistan (Brown et al., 2021). Displaced people have links with their ethnic diaspora and their place or countries of origin, often providing the basis for cross-border trade which thrives where language and ethnicities span borders (Titeca, 2009). Understanding these nascent economic activities and the barriers to their survival is critical to ensuring the sustainability of the livelihoods and enterprise of refugees and IDPs.

Second, *self-reliance* has been an important humanitarian discourse and objective, underpinning many humanitarian programmes designed to help support the livelihoods of refugees and IDPs. Building refugee self-reliance and access to sustainable livelihoods is a cornerstone of UNHCR's *Policy on Alternatives to Camps* (UNHCR, 2009a; 2009b). The policy seeks 'transformational impact' partly by 'enabling refugees to build sustainable livelihoods and achieve self-reliance' by promoting access to land and agricultural production, and improving access to employment and self-employment (UNHCR, 2014, p. 11).

However, critics argue that the self-reliance discourse implies that refugees and IDPs are responsible for their own self-sufficiency, whereas many structural factors constrain their access to work such as government restrictions on refugee rights to work, recognition of qualifications, securing residents permits and mobility (Buscher, 2011). Others argue that the concept of self-reliance is based on neoliberal principles and shaped by the priorities of international donors to reduce the long-term cost of supporting displaced populations, portraying self-reliance as an individual matter, which underplays communal support and collective aspects of refugees' economic autonomy (Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018). Studies have shown how the 'myth' of self-reliance enables aid agencies to shy away from protecting vulnerable groups living in desperate conditions (Easton-Calabria, 2022, p. 7).

Local integration is also challenged as a failed approach. The concept has a long history—described in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention in terms of 'assimilation and naturalisation', and by Harrell-Bond (1986:7) as a situation where host and refugees 'can co-exist, sharing the same resources … with no greater mutual conflict than that which exists within the host community'. It is a legal process, but also implies economic, social, and cultural integration, which is easier where refugees and hosts share cultural and ethnic identity, and security and instability is not undermined (Jacobsen, 2001). However, as many displaced people come from poor countries, and over 80% of refugees move to neighboring countries which are also poor (UNHCR, 2023), policies must support joint development for both refugees and hosts, recognizing this as the only option for most of the world's refugees (Dryden-Peterson & Hovil, 2004).

Local integration is now seen as the 'forgotten' durable solution, inconvenient for states and avoided to the extent that it has almost disappeared (Hovil & Maple, 2023). Even refugee-hosting nations which ostensibly offer an 'open-door policy' stall when it comes to enhancing refugee rights, and 'the current status quo represents a failure that allows political expedience to dictate the terms of debate and leaves refugees with a level of uncertainty that is neither ethically justifiable nor in the spirit of the global refugee regime'; this necessitates working at local level to identify and remove specific barriers to integration and acceptance in a longer-term journey toward national citizenship (Hovil & Maple, 2023).

Local integration is complex and context-specific, depending on the social and cultural characteristics and size of the displaced population, and the political economy in the country of arrival. The many dimensions to local integration—legal, social, economic and cultural—cannot be addressed at once. While local integration is a useful policy headline, it is flawed and politically charged as an operational tool. More usefully, local integration should be seen as a process, eventually leading to full citizenship rights, but with various stages *en route*, in which *economic inclusion*—providing rights to employment and self-employment—is an important step.

Progress on implementing UNHCR's policy on alternatives to camps has been slow, faced by political opposition to abandoning camps and the difficulties of supporting dispersed urban refugees/IDPs, There are now calls for a complete rethink of response to urban displacement to enable local authorities to provide effectively for their newest residents (Nunez-Ferrera et al. 2020). Brankamp (2022), argues that diagnosing the inadequacies of camps is insufficient without actively pursuing camp abolition and the spatial warehousing of refugees, even as refugees challenge camps as spaces of unfreedoms. The question remains, what to do about existing camps? Some countries propose transforming camps into 'integrated' urban settlements, but the approach is criticised as a grand but unworkable development vision (Fellesson, 2023; Earle, 2023). The sub-text of these debates is the need to move beyond dependence on aid, both to empower displaced people, and avoid reliance on unpredictable aid income. In this context, economic inclusion of displaced people becomes an imperative.

This paper, therefore, explores the components of economic inclusion and barriers to its achievement. Two strands in the literature have been particularly important in developing this approach: first, use of the sustainable livelihoods framework in refugee studies as a way of exploring the assets that displaced people bring to their economic activities, and second, the frameworks provided by refugee economies debates. Each is discussed in more detail below.

Livelihoods in displacement

Until relatively recently, literature on the economic lives of displaced people focused on the humanitarian needs of refugees and IDPs and has not explored forced displacement as a development issue. By the early 2000s, work in both academia and UNHCR began to explore refugee livelihoods drawing on the broader sustainable livelihoods' literature in both rural and urban areas (Chambers & Conway, 1991; Longley & Maxwell, 2003; Rakodi with Lloyd-Jones, 2002), examining the economic agency of refugees to navigate their vulnerable circumstances. This was applied in refugee camps although remote locations hindered success (de Vriese, 2006, p. 31),

and to urban areas (Jacobsen, 2006), although Jacobsen (2014) also argued the need for advancing theory on 'displaced livelihoods'.

Livelihoods research emerged in the late 1980s as a response to structural views on poverty that saw the poor as victims of social, political and economic processes and macroeconomic responses to poverty (Kaag et al., 2003, p. 4). Defined in its simplest terms a livelihood is 'a means of securing a living', and the approach focused on poor people's agency and assets, underlining their capacity to escape poverty by increasing their resilience to shocks and stresses (Chambers & Conway, 1991). Livelihoods were seen as sustainable when people could 'cope with and recover from stress and shocks' and contribute 'net benefits to other livelihoods at the local and global levels and in the short and long-term' (Chambers & Conway, 1991, p. 7). The concept was further developed as the Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF). In the SLF, the livelihood assets (human, natural, financial, social and physical) were represented by a pentagon. The diagram also showed the policy context, vulnerabilities, and strategies to improve livelihood outcomes. The aim of the SLF was, through a people-centred approach to poverty reduction, to strengthen assets and reduce the vulnerabilities of the poor (Carney, 2002; DFID, 1999; Levine, 2014; Rakodi with Lloyd-Jones, 2002). Key findings from this body of research are outlined below.

Livelihoods analyses in cities have highlighted the vulnerabilities of refugees and IDPs. Displaced people are attracted to urban areas by opportunities for work, children's education, and social support, but often lack the assets to establish secure livelihoods (Jacobsen, 2006). Many find it difficult to resume their former livelihoods, and their efforts to become self-sufficient may be hampered by inadequate skills for urban work, restrictions on rights to work, lack of language skills and the loss of former social and business networks. In these settings they often have to construct a 'livelihood', a means of gaining a living, through temporary and poorly paid work, and adopt a variety of economic coping strategies to survive (Buscher, 2011, Crush et al., 2016).

Cities often prove hostile environments, where new refugee and IDP arrivals face social exclusion, restrictive policies or lack the skills for urban work. There, they often join the ranks of the urban poor where, as Moser (1998) highlights, their challenges include the commoditisation of food, shelter and basic services making paid labor a key strategy, environmental hazards due to lack of basic services exposing them to illness, and social fragmentation which weakens their support networks. Forced migrants form subsets of two larger populations, foreign-born migrants and the urban poor, but because of their displacement experience often differ from these populations in significant ways (Jacobsen, 2006). Those who flee quickly may lose assets and property, incur debts from the journey or payments to people traffickers, or have faced acute personal loss (Jacobsen, 2014).

Urban IDPs and refugees seldom rely on a single economic activity, and usually access the labor market through informal waged employment or own-account work. For urban refugees and IDPs, diversifying their livelihood options increases their resilience to fast-changing urban environments where casual and short-term labor predominates (Buscher, 2011; Rakodi, 2002, Mackie et al., 2022). National policy and lack of social acceptance often restrict urban refugees from accessing secure livelihoods, and refugees/IDPs' access to formal labor markets is more difficult than for other groups, even where they have a legal right to work (Schuettler & Caron, 2020).

For refugees, restrictions on their right to work means that their participation in labor markets is often low. Analysis by UNHCR in six countries in Africa and Asia found that on average, only 15% of registered refugees were working; only in Uganda where refugees can settle, move and work, were 44% working (de Bruijn, 2009, p. 43). Brown et al. (2018) establish a typology of rights covering *de jure* (legal) and *de facto* (in practice) rights to work, but argue that even where rights to work exist, endless procedures and arbitrary practices constrain refugees' access to the labor market and decent jobs. A 2022 study on refugees' *de jure* and *de facto* right-to-work in 51 countries, covering 87% of the refugee population, found that at least 55% of refugees faced significant restrictions on rights-to-work (Ginn et al., 2022).

In camps, refugees and IDPs have fewer income-earning opportunities, and research suggests that only better-off residents with more skills or assets can leverage those beyond the camp boundaries (Omata, 2018). The economy within and around camps is often based on providing aid goods, and supplying goods and services which humanitarian assistance does not provide, but which are central to restoring a sense of normalcy and autonomy (Oka, 2011) with refugees as the main economic actors (Werker, 2007). Refugees' livelihood opportunities around camps are often limited to small-scale farming (crops and livestock), trade and services and employment or incentive-work for humanitarian organizations, supplemented by remittances (de Brujin, 2009). Refugees and IDPs within camps face significant barriers to work, such as limited access to local markets or credit; high prices for supplies as they cannot access the external wholesale market; lack of documentation; remoteness and lack of transport, and rejection among host populations (de Brujin, 2009). Legal restrictions on mobility and the right to work restrict the size of the market.

The gender impacts of forced migration can be significant. For example, SLF-based research has demonstrated that displacement can provide opportunities for women, and can result in significant changes to the gender division of labor. Male refugees/IDPs may find it difficult to find work that reflects their skills or to adapt to unskilled work, but women, often driven by the need to provide for their children, may take up employment for the first time or work in traditionally male-dominated sectors (Holloway et al., 2019). There are also negative consequences, as in some societies, women working outside the home may face harassment. Negative strategies for displacement can include early marriage of daughters, prostitution and transactional sex (Holloway et al., 2019). Research on refugees/IDP sex workers is limited but suggests how language barriers and mobility constraints leave them exposed to violence (Rosenberg & Bakomeza, 2017).

However, in cities or camps, refugees and IDPs use agency to survive. Although constrained by structures of hostile regulation, ethnic discrimination, or ongoing insecurity, the agency of refugees and IDPs has distinct characteristics. As Brun (2015) argues, the agency of displaced people is built on hope in the face of protracted uncertainty, as people wait in the present in places they do not want to be, but dream of the past or future elsewhere. This 'agency-in-waiting' shapes their lives through anticipation. Agency is also achieved collectively, as desperate people pursue similar paths in the struggle for improved lives. The sheer volume of this 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary' by refugees, migrants, street vendors or other subaltern groups, transforms their actions into a potential social force (Bayat, 1997). Agency is thus a struggle, rather than a 'given' limited by structural, historic, political and economic factors, but where individuals are constrained agency can be collective.

Despite the undoubted conceptual value of livelihoods research and the SLF in displacement studies, a key limitation is the focus on individuals and households, which misses the collective economic contributions of refugees and IDPs. For refugees and IDPs, as with informal workers, making a living depends on social networks to nurture commercial relationships, establish personal ties and create bonds of trust (Beall, 2005, p. 103). Furthermore, the SLF is also criticized for focussing on relatively stable situations and failing to address issues of violence and conflict (Collinson, 2011). De Bruijn and van Djik (2005, p. 9) use the term *pathways* to describe the iterative way which people construct their livelihoods to address the unpredictable contexts of violence and change (Kaag et al., 2003), a concept also missed in the SLF.

Displacement and refugee economies

A second important strand in the literature on refugees and displacement has explored the economic impacts of refugees, seeing *market-based approaches* as crucial to understanding the wider context of refugee livelihoods. Zetter (2012) argues for a better understanding of the micro- and macro-economic impact of refugees, noting the lack of a comprehensive framework and analytical tools and methodologies to identify winners and losers from refugee situations and to develop appropriate policy responses.

Research on the economic impact of forced displacement on host economies is disparate and theoretical and evidence gaps remain. Several authors have challenged common perceptions of the 'burden' of refugees on the basis that impacts on host populations are unevenly spread (Whitaker, 2002), and that many urban refugees are self-sufficient (Campbell, 2006). One strand of research concentrates on labor market analyses and price variation of services and goods. However, Ruiz and Vargas-Silva (2013) suggests that it is difficult to establish cause and effect, or to isolate the multiple factors that affect evolution of an economy (Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2017). Research on Syrian refugees in Turkey found the impacts were mainly felt by smaller firms, particularly in the informal economy (Altindağ et al., 2020). Meanwhile, the integration of displaced and host enterprises at local level remains largely un-researched (Monteith & Lwasa, 2017). Until relatively recently, the economic impacts of forced displacement have remained marginal in the literature, and there is a lack of theory that could help structure the empirical evidence (Verme, 2017).

Economics literature explores the impact of forced displacement on consumer and labor markets, albeit with a focus on sudden influxes of people rather than protracted displacement. A 2019 World Bank analysis of 59 empirical studies examined the impacts of forced displacement on host consumer and labor markets in terms of household well-being, prices, employment and wages. The meta-analysis of modeling and data indicated mixed results, but were negative in less than 1 in 5 of the crises analyzed. Impacts were mainly felt by vulnerable groups such as young, informal workers (Verme & Schuettler, 2021). In case study research, Fallah et al. (2019) found that Syrian refugees had little impact on the Jordanian labor market, while Alix-Garcia et al. (2017) found that refugees in Kenya's Turkana region had a net positive effect on the economy and welfare of locals, although there were winners and losers. Camp economies can have wider benefits, for example Taylor et al. (2016) found in Rwanda that cash-based interventions in Congolese refugee camps increased per capita income within a 10 km radius, but this approach is essentially aid-dependent and not sustainable.

The economic activities of displaced people can also help diversify local economies, but their activities are often constrained. Refugee economies are nested in local, regional and international networks and value chains (Brown et al., 2018; Brown, García Amado, et al., 2023). Displaced people bring new skills to the labor market, and can build strong links with markets in their area of origin, drawing on kinship networks for supplies, and the demands of displaced communities for specific goods or foodstuff (Brown et al., 2021). For example, Syrian refugees in Lebanon rely heavily on their networks within and outside the country, and Lebanese businesses collaborate with them to expand opportunities (Harb et al., 2019). While the focus of international agencies and donors on self-reliance and support for the 'displaced entrepreneur' has led to calls for local governments to support their needs for basic services, this approach overlooks the quality and type of employment available and has often failed to negotiate access of displaced people to all economic sectors (Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020).

More recently, two substantial bodies of research have advanced debates on the wider economic impacts of displacement. The two literatures draw on different academic disciplines and perspectives, but despite their significance important gaps remain. First, is the work on 'displacement economies' led by Amanda Hammar (2014, 2020). Her analysis emphasizes the problems of *uncertainty* and *dislocation* in displacement, and the paradoxes of displacement economies: order and disorder; confinement and 'stuckness'; creation and destruction, and wealth accumulation and impoverishment. She considers all the actors and networks underpinning displacement, including political parties, state agents, entrepreneurs, gatekeepers, those left behind, the displaced and host communities. This approach focuses on the relational and spatial qualities of displacement, leading to a definition of 'displacement economies' as *"enforced changes in interweaving spatial, social and symbolic conditions and relations"*. Such networks exhibit complex forms of organizing typical of the informal economy (Brown et al., 2010; Lindell, 2008). Yet, despite important insights, the concept is a theoretical and analytical approach but is not an operational framework.

Second is the extensive work on 'refugee economies' at the Oxford Refugee Studies Center led by Alexander Betts. Based on in-depth research in Uganda, Kenya and Ethiopia, Betts (2021, p. 67) argues that although refugees are portrayed as passive victims needing humanitarian assistance, they are also economic actors engaging in all aspects of economic life—consumption, production, exchange, savings, borrowing and lending (Betts, 2021, p. 67). The team argues that refugee economies are a distinct sub-economy, occupying a specific institutional context that shapes refugees' interactions with markets, and define the concept of 'refugee economies' as the "*resource allocation system relating to refugee populations*"(Betts et al., 2014, 2016, p. 47, Betts, 2021, p. 71).

Drawing on a perspective of 'new institutional economics', Betts et al. (2016, pp. 50–54) argue that institutions change the cost of market transactions, the ability to enforce contracts, and the information which shapes decision-making, highlighting three institutional domains which structure the economies of refugees. First is the state/international domain, as international conventions on refugee rights may not be upheld in national law and practice. Second is the formal/informal economy divide; few countries grant refugees the right to work, and even where work permits are granted, quotas and expensive bureaucracy often prohibit refugees' access to formal employment, leaving informal work as their only option. Third is the national/transnational domain; refugees often have extended social and economic networks with their home countries or the diaspora which provide opportunities for trade (Betts et al, 2016, p. 54).

These two bodies of work represent major advances in understanding the wider context of displacement, and its economic and societal impacts, in part addressing the gap in the SLF of a lack of focus on the collective economic contributions of refugees and IDPs. Hammar's work is important in reflecting the historical context and power-relations underpinning displacement and its spatial and temporal aspects, and her interpretation of who is displaced includes, but goes beyond, refugees and IDPs. However, the approach does not provide a clear analytical framework to address barriers to economic inclusion for refugees and IDPs. The work of Betts and the Oxford team is significant and has advanced understandings of refugees as economic actors, underpinning major donor interventions around refugee camps in Kenya and Ethiopia, but focuses on an economic perspective without substantive consideration of the social and collaborative element of refugee economies, or discussion of the links between refugee livelihoods and their enterprise and the temporal aspects of refugee economies.

Developing the *Displacement Economies Framework*

Theoretical foundation for a new approach

To address these three gaps—the lack of a clear analytical framework to examine displacement economies, lack of detailed consideration of the collaborative element of displacement economies and the links between livelihoods and enterprise, and lack of a temporal dimension in analyses—we propose a new theoretical framework in which we define *displacement economies* as:

> the collective economy created over time by refugees and IDPs through their livelihood activities, enterprise, need for services and consumption, and through their mutual support and diaspora inputs.

This concept considers the livelihoods of individual displaced people, the enterprises or economic units they establish or manage, links between them and how they evolve over time. The definition considers the income-earning activities of refugees and IDPs, together with the societal and collaborative elements which create distinct displacement economies. Importantly, the framework differentiates between the resources generated by refugees and IDPs themselves, and the distortions of aid funding witnessed in and around camps (Werker, 2007), as it seeks to identify both the vulnerabilities and potential of displacement economies.

Although in forced migration studies it is widely recognized that displaced people often work informally, the discipline of informal economy research is less often used as a lens to study

refugee and IDP livelihoods. Here, we draw on five key strands in the informal economy literature to help theorize the framework. First, a key attribute of the informal economy is that, by definition, it combines two interlinked concepts: the *informal sector* of unregistered enterprises, and *informal employment* including self-employment and casual waged work (ILO, 2019). Informal workers may move from daily-waged work to own-account work and back, drawing on social networks to construct their livelihoods. Yet despite this well-known linkage, in refugee studies it is not widely recognized, and there is relatively little research on enterprises owned or run by refugees and IDPs, although the few studies that exist suggest that enterprises may capitalize on diaspora links and the demand of displaced communities for products and services (Haysom, 2013, p. 21). However, their economic performance is mixed, dampened by restrictive regulation, limited access to finance, and lack of social and legal rights which leaves them exposed to harassment by local authorities (Campbell, 2006; Harb et al., 2019; Jacobsen & Furst Nichols, 2011).

Second, the informal economy, while previously seen as an individual response to structural problems of restrictive regulation, is now seen collectively as integral to successful economic growth, particularly in lower-income countries where informal employment is the norm, and where positive links to formal and informal value chains help overcome the negative influences of inappropriate or outdated regulation (Anyidoho & Steel, 2016). This central role opens opportunities for international trade, and there is now an emerging literature on informal cross-border trade (Brown, Chakrabarti, et al., 2023; Crisp, 2004; Monsutti, 2008; Titeca, 2009). Informal cross-border trade is thought to have a positive effect on host enterprises, both formal and informal, and contributes to employment (Brees, 2008; Peberdy, 2010, p. 211). For example, Afghan refugees use long standing transit routes and traditional remittance systems based on lineage and trust (*hawaladar*) in transborder trade with Iran and Pakistan (Monsutti, 2008). Furthermore, literature on the 'base of the pyramid' (BoP), which straddles formal and informal economies, has argued that BoP ventures combine the resources and technical capacity of the formal sector with the indigenous knowledge and human face of the informal sector, and that recognition of their heterogeneity and better integration of BoP producers and consumers enables them to share costs and risks (London & Hart, 2011:10). For refugees and IDPs, it is critically important to distinguish the impact of the enterprise of refugees and IDPs from aid-based economies, such as those around camps, so that host communities can assess the benefits as well as the burden of hosting refugees.

Third, social networks are crucial in helping informal workers compensate for lack of security at work. Lindell (2008) found that informal livelihood systems in Guinea-Bissau are shaped by indigenous social and economic relations, transnational trading networks, economic pressures and a predatory state. Some authors see informality as 'invisible, everyday resistance', reflecting practices of reciprocity within urban society (Kamete, 2010; Bayat, 2000). Lindell (2018) argues that the agency of informal workers represents a continuum from individual everyday acts that collectively transform cities, to social networks that facilitate access to income-related resources, and collective associations or organizations advocating for common objectives, although the latter is more difficult for refugees and IDPs to achieve. However, Meagher (2005) cautions against a simple 'social capitalist' perspective which places social relations at the heart of contemporary economies, and argues for an institutional and contextual analysis which shows how networks are shaped by cultural identity, history, and relations with the state.

Fourth, is the extent to which livelihoods are constructed from a range of income-earning activities which are carried on in parallel. Many poor individuals and households use a 'portfolio' of income-earning activities, and many informal workers combine income self-employment, waged work, remittances or small-scale agriculture (DFID, 1999). Conflict exacerbates vulnerability and thus the need to diversify livelihoods as a protection response. In rural Uganda, Rockmore (2012) found diversification both in sources of income and labor market participation, with households shifting from profitable but risky activities toward low-risk but low-return activities as conflict increased.

Finally, the term 'pathways' suggests that people's experiences, perceptions and personal circumstances influence how their livelihoods and enterprise change over time and are affected by the unpredictable experience displacement (Kaag et al., 2003). The pathway is seen as an 'iterative process in which goals, preferences, resources and means are constantly reassessed in view of unstable conditions' (de Bruijn & van Djik, 2005, p. 9), allowing researchers to reflect on non-linear and irregular trajectories (Clapham et al., 2014), on the complex interplay between globalization, institutions and individual livelihoods (Langevang & Gough, 2012), on power and wealth networks and the processes that create, sustain and transform these networks over time, and on the capacity of households to respond to internal and external shocks, stresses, trends.

These five elements drawn from the informal economy literature—the links between informal work and enterprise; the embedded nature of the informal economy; the importance of social networks leveraged for livelihoods; the portfolio of income-earning earning activities assembled by the poor, and the understanding of trajectories over time—apply equally to the economies of displaced people, but with added vulnerabilities that displaced people face resulting from displacement and hostile regulatory and social environments. The DEF outlined below reflects these vulnerabilities, in both camp and non-camp settings.

Introducing the displacement economies framework

The DEF in Figure 1, draws on the SLF but adds the dimension of enterprises and the temporal aspect of displacement economies. Like the SLF, the diagram demonstrates how the context (left column) impacts on displaced people's livelihoods—their assets, strategies and outcomes (top row). The crucial additions to the framework are the enterprise analysis (bottom row), the dynamic links between individual livelihoods and enterprises, and the temporal dimension of pathways. Each component is outlined briefly below.

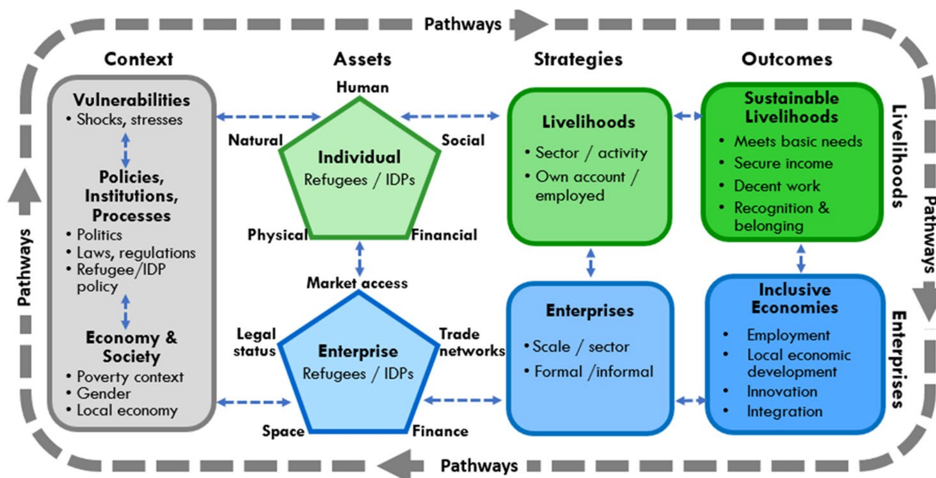

Figure 1. Displacement economies framework.
Source: Developed by the authors, drawing on the SLF and authors' research (DFID, 1999)

The ***Context Analysis*** (left column) explores the fractured socio-cultural and political-economy context of displacement. It considers the *vulnerabilities* of refugees and IDPs to on-going shocks and stresses, including the experience of conflict and displacement, and hostile reception, political repression, economic challenges or conflict in countries of arrival, and the impacts on income-earning potential. Vulnerability is not the same as poverty but involves a predictive quality conceptualizing what may happen to a community facing specific risks and hazards (Buscher, 2011). Analysis of the *policy, institutions and processes* affecting refugees and IDPs

demonstrates how policy and political discourse support or discriminate against displaced communities, for example national policies on encampment, refugee mobility and rights to work. Nuanced insights into everyday *de facto* bureaucracy can foster small changes that improve the rights or conditions of displaced people, which can open the door for 'stealth humanitarianism' (Kihato & Landau, 2016) without head-on confrontation of legislation. The analysis also considers factors within the *economy and society* of host countries, including the structure of the local economy and economic influence of aid; the drivers of poverty; socio-cultural attitudes, and attitudes to gender inclusion. If most of the local population is poor and working informally, then addressing wider poverty reduction objectives must support both hosts and refugees. This context is equally important both for displaced people's livelihoods and their enterprise.

The *Livelihood Analysis* (top row) has three components: the assets pentagon, livelihood strategies and livelihood outcomes, shaped by the context and displaced people's experience, perceptions, and aspirations. As in the SLF, the *assets pentagon* explores the individual or household's livelihood capital/assets: human (education, health, food security), physical (housing, services, transport, productive tools), financial (salaries, remittances, bank services, pool funds, investment), natural (land, livestock, water), and social (social networks and belonging), assessing both their quality and use for productive purposes. However, taken on its own this represents a static picture of livelihoods assets, and does not capture dynamic progression over time. Many refugees and IDPs lose financial assets, and struggle to earn an income on arrival, but over time may benefit from support from friends or family, partnership work, overseas remittances, humanitarian training or cash transfers (Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2015).

Livelihood strategies are shaped by people's past experiences and aspirations. In displacement, people's expectations about durable solutions and prospects for permanence in their current location shape their strategies and pathways. Refugees often undertake multiple economic strategies, which vary significantly by nationality and ethnicity and often depend on community and social networks (Buscher, 2011). These strategies influence the sector of work, types of work undertaken, and its characteristics e.g. self-employment, waged, unpaid family work or care work. These influence *livelihood outcomes*—the extent to which the portfolio of activities adopted by the individual or household provides a sustainable livelihood to meet basic needs and provides a secure income. They also include the social components of work including recognition, wellbeing and belonging, which result from productive engagement in society, and the extent to which 'decent work' principles are applied, e.g. a fair income, security at work, social protection, freedom to organize, and equal opportunity for women and men (ILO, 2023).

The ***Enterprise Analysis*** (bottom row) introduces the *enterprise pentagon* which explores assets needed to establish and operate a business. Crucially, these can highlight the barriers to enterprise growth. Assets include: market access and how this is achieved (enablers and barriers, market information); trade networks which support the business (social support, supply chains, product/market associations, transboundary connections); financial assets (start-up investment, revenues, access to credit, NGO support); space and its access (municipality allocation, *via* middlemen, or informal claim), and legal status (business registration and permits, other regulatory compliance, and the impact of displacement status on business options, e.g. when refugees have no right to own a business). Critically, the pentagon explores the extent to which owners and operators use social and kinship networks to navigate uncertain legal status or circumvent regulatory restrictions which inhibit their business operations.

The *enterprise strategies* of displaced owners and managers again demonstrate their perception of opportunities and knowledge of regulations or the market. The strategies influence the activities and economic sectors of the enterprises and identification of a market niche; the business characteristics (size or employment strategies, levels of formality); partnerships and collective action (agglomeration, bulk buying), and trading links with host communities. While some enterprises operate informally, refugees and IDPs often try to avoid 'illegal' activity that makes them vulnerable to police action. Where refugees have no rights to register a business, they may join with a host partner but partnerships may be insecure or exploitative (García Amado et al., 2023).

These strategies influence *the enterprise outcomes*, the extent to which the enterprise is surviving, managing or thriving and has the potential for strengthening economic relations with host communities, through reciprocal employment (both of hosts and refugees) and supporting the wider economy (e.g. through bulk buying, rental etc) (Brown et al., 2018). Like informal sector businesses, refugee/IDP enterprises may sometimes cluster in similar sectors, so focussing on enterprise outcomes highlights a shift from a humanitarian to a development perspective to demonstrate how such enterprises can contribute to the local economy, cultural diversity and local inclusion.

The DEF also shows the *dynamic* and interlinked nature of the economic activities of displaced people. The arrows suggest the complex and messy links between livelihoods and enterprise, although they cannot capture all the inter-connections. For example, a secure income may help start an enterprise, and a refugee-run enterprise may draw on social networks to trade or provide employment for refugees and hosts, and recognition and belonging may be enhanced through a secure livelihood or the status of employing others. Finally, the **pathways** concept refers to the routes that individuals and enterprises may follow to achieve sustainable livelihoods or productive outcomes. The concept challenges the linear thinking of aid actors, which assumes that 'refugees are generally at their most vulnerable at the onset of displacement and build resilience over time', a perspective that 'does not fit the more complex realities of refugees' experience' (Wake & Barbelet, 2020, p. 136), recognising that the economic activities of displaced people can falter over time, as well as improve. Over time, refugee/IDP pathways may result in more permissive policy or practice, but this is not a 'given' in any context.

Contributions of the displacement economies framework and conclusions

The DEF framework provides a structure through which to consider economic integration of displaced populations as a core element of local integration, addressing the three key gaps identified above. The first gap is the lack of a clear analytical framework to examine displacement economies. The SLF has critiques, but it has provided a structure in which to consider the assets which people bring to their livelihoods, the individual agency they can employ, and the constraints imposed by external shocks and the economic and policy environment. In proposing the DEF, we seek to deepen that analytical frame, and to take a parallel approach which embraces the enterprise of displaced people. In considering the five domains of the 'enterprise pentagon' we draw on literature, but also our own extensive informal economy research in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

The second gap is the lack of consideration of the collaborative element of displacement economies and the links between livelihoods and enterprise. Here we draw on the informal economy literature, which emphasizes that people construct livelihoods from a range of assets, and often combining a portfolio of waged activities with self-employment. We emphasize the need to consider the ingenuity of displaced people in creating livelihoods and enterprises in inauspicious environments. Many humanitarian initiatives use market systems analysis to develop livelihood programmes which involve supply-based strategies such as skills-based interventions or entrepreneurship training, or demand-based strategies such as programmes to employ refugee workers (Schuettler & Caron, 2020; Wake & Barbelet, 2020). These have a place, but miss the collective agency and small-scale innovation which displaced people bring to their own futures, the range of activities they create, and the role social networks in establishing income-generating activities. Many displaced communities will specialize in distinct sectors, building on the experience and information from their ethnic group, with complex links to host economies. Such social support networks are crucial and missed in descriptions which focus on refugees and IDPs as as market actors.

Third, in explicitly addressing the gap of the temporal dimension of displaced people's economic activities, the DEF seeks to challenge two myths: that the livelihoods of refugees and IDPs will gradually improve over time, and that displaced people have limited agency to direct

their income-earning activities. A pathways analysis allows an understanding of the individual and structural factors which over time negatively or positively affect economic outcomes, such as the effects of health or impact of past trauma, or uneven and exclusionary implementation of the regulations. Thus, questions of 'before', 'now' and 'later' are critical to the DEF, together with an analysis of the structural constraints which people face.

Understanding the concept of displacement economies is important, because it supports the case that refugees and IDPs, like other migrants, can contribute to local economies through diversifying economic sectors or provding local employment, and helps provide a transition from humanitarian assistance to development funding. The DEF seeks to identify the assets on which people draw, the individual and collective agency they bring to their livelihood and enterprise strategies, and the linked outcomes which result, as a lens to exploring the potential economic benefits of hosting refugees and IDPs.

The DEF is thus an important theoretical tool, enabling researchers to identify the drivers of vulnerability and understand the entrepreneurial initiatives of refugees and IDPs—how they leverage social networks to enter markets, create a niche for products, access customers, suppliers and labor markets. Also important is the the interaction between displaced and host economies, their competitiveness or complementarity, and their potential to create new investment and employment and diversify local economies as an agents of economic development. This approach shifts the discourse from the 'burden of refugees' to analyze their potential contributions to the wider urban economy.

The DEF can also be used as programming tool, as it challenges some of the received wisdom on routes to self-reliance, and helps bridge humanitarian/development divide. The DEF can identify specific policy and practical barriers that inhibit displacement economies—both people's livelihoods and associated enterprises from fulfilling their economic potential. Rights-to-work and rights to open a business are key regulatory barriers, but there are also more mundane issues such as the operation of municipal policy and lack of recognition of refugee status by local bureaucrats. In humanitarian response, livelihoods programming is increasingly promoted by agencies because it reduces the costs of camps and provides durable solutions (Jacobsen & Fratzke, 2015). Many refugee and IDPs just want the freedom to work and freedom to move without restrictions that make them targets for rent-seeking and extortion. Although rights-to-work are critical to provide people with the dignity, freedom and security to work, so are rights to open a business. One way to bridge the humanitarian/development divide is to develop a better understanding of the barriers faced by refugees and IDPs in their economic lives, so that support can be targetted and longer term, which the DEF strives to achieve.

Finally, the key contribution of this paper is to address the gap between humanitarian and development studies drawing in more depth on the theoretical frame of the informal economy. A central attribute of the informal economy is the interlinked nature of informal employment and informal enterprises, which is equally applicable in displacement. The collective nature and social support inherent to survival through informal economies is also found in displacement, enhanced through social and kinship networks and often supporting trade throughout urban and rural districts and over a considerable geographical area. Furthermore, the diversification of economic activities and portfolio of sources of income which contribute to inormal livelihoods is also relevant to refugees and IDPs. Understanding the agency of refugees and IDPs to draw on disparate assets and networks is fundamental to our approach and essential to support the livelihoods of refugees and IDPs.

Note

1. The project was, *Out of Camp or Out of Sight: Realigning Response to Protracted Displacement in an Urban World*, *https://www.protracteddisplacement.org/home* for all outputs of the project. The authors were livelihoods lead on the project. Partners include Cardiff University, Samuel Hall, Hashemite University, Jordan; Dilla University, Ethiopia; Maseno University, Kenya; Slum Dwellers' International, and the Women's Refugee

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