

***The Wealth of Refugees: How Displaced People Can Build Economies* (Oxford University Press, 2021) by Alexander Betts**

It is hard to believe that it has been six years since Alexander Betts burst onto the world stage by publishing, with economist Paul Collier, *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*. In that book, Betts and Collier set out to address push factors encouraging out-migration, including a lack of jobs in countries of origin. In an effort to address this particular push factor they emphasized the utility of special economic zones. *Refuge*—and Betts himself—was criticized by some in the scholarly community for misrepresenting the history of the refugee system. Yet, I would argue, Betts’s instincts were not wrong. His concern to find practical ways in which to create progressive refugee policies while recognizing the considerable political constraints, should not have been derided and we note that since then international organizations, including the UNHCR have spent much time exploring how to link humanitarian protection to broader development goals more effectively. In *The Wealth of Refugees: How Displaced People Can Build Economies*, we find in Betts a more authoritative scholar who is prepared once again to grapple with the evil of dependency, where refugees are made into victims, and through empirical investigation he showcases how it can be mitigated to create sustainable solutions.

Betts weaves his expert understanding of the refugee system, international structures, and UN mechanisms with comparative political analysis and social science research methods, which he explains with remarkable clarity. Added to this mix is Betts’s knowledge of East Africa. This combination of skills, and his ability to explain his research in simple prose, sets him apart from other refugee scholars. Betts is not afraid to ask big questions, and this book is nothing less than a tour de force. It is not a spoiler to say that Betts’ ultimate aim is to provide a blueprint for how to build effective refugee economies and this book offers a strong defense of this vision based on several economic initiatives in refugee camps.

Focusing on three East African states, Betts argues that to break the structures of dependency that afflict so many refugees. He calls for a model of “sustainability,” and makes no apology for adopting

a realist stance. He argues that normative claims are only as good as they are feasible, and his aim is above all to identify practical solutions. The principal challenges to realizing this model include those identified in *Refuge*: the fact that refugees are overwhelmingly housed in the Global South, and that destination states in the Global North are increasingly reticent to admit them in significant numbers. He swiftly describes and critiques the traditional allocation mechanisms: the arguments for allowing refugees to choose their destination, the use of equitable quotas, and the reception in neighboring countries. Then, he advances his argument, which entails a pragmatic “bargain of inclusion” that embraces the right of refugees to work in host countries and to enjoy freedom of movement. This is an interest-based approach, which relies on the cooperation of engaged national governments, international donors, and the private sector to deliver a model of development-led protection.

The book is structured in four parts, each one addressing a particular question. Regarding ethics—what is right? In terms of politics—what persuades? For economics—what works? Finally, for policy—what is next? These are investigated in chapters on Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda where Betts introduces data from the Refugee Economies Programme, which he led with a team in Oxford and a vast ground crew of field researchers. Additional chapters on policy have been included to look beyond the African context. These explore the challenges facing refugees in Venezuela and displaced Syrians in the Middle East, and examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugees.

The core of the book is built around the findings from Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda. These chapters offer rich insights about development initiatives, including the role of the private sector (Ethiopia), the creation of new settlements (Kenya), and a market-based model, which promotes self-sufficiency (Uganda). The chapter on Kenya stands out particularly. Betts describes how the government and international donors created a new settlement in Turkana County, a sophisticated regional development plan, and a new currency to replace a cash-transfer model, which provides Betts with a basis for comparison against older refugee camps. Using a range of measures for self-sufficiency, he documents how this innovative development has succeeded where so many other interventions have failed. In Uganda, Betts evaluates policies that permit refugees to choose where to live and enjoy the

right to work. These policies did not just occur but emerged from Uganda's colonial legacy which brought with it land allocation programs where free hold estates were distributed to the Kabaka (King of Buganda), regents and principal chiefs, as recorded in the 1900 Uganda agreement. Ever since the Nakivale settlement, Africa's oldest refugee camp, opened in 1958, Uganda has provided refugees with plots of land in rural settlements, allowing them to engage in subsistence farming.

In the concluding chapters, Betts provides an assessment of the various tools and approaches he and his team used, as well as the limitations of development, urbanization, special economic zones, and donor assistance. He balances the success identified in the case studies with repeated cautions against romanticizing the improved plight of refugees in these settings. His research findings offer a window into some potential solutions that have brought certain opportunities, including small-scale entrepreneurship, and greater freedoms to some refugees in the poorest parts of East African host states. He takes pains to note that it is difficult to transpose these findings to other contexts, such as to Venezuela or the Middle East, though there are related questions to explore and similar structural barriers, such as the political will of national governments.

The book covers an incredible amount of ground, providing a rich lesson in refugee studies. Nevertheless, there are noticeable gaps, some of which reflect the paucity of UNHCR data on the socio-economic lives of refugees. As a result, there is a lack of granular detail. For example, we do not get to see who the refugees are at the center of Betts's investigation. This is perhaps explained by the author's emphasis on policy. While health and education are discussed, the state of antenatal health, the prevalence of infectious disease, and the common health indicators for children under five (such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea, HIV, and tuberculosis) are missing. There is limited discussion of gender, for example in the context of firewood projects in Dollo, Ethiopia and household expenditure on alcohol with cash assistance in Kalobeyei, Kenya but, overall, there is no disaggregation of refugees by sex, age, or ethnicity even though we know that these variables significantly influence development outcomes. This is especially important in refugee contexts where female-headed households may be the norm, and where children make up a sizeable portion of the

refugee population. Though he does not discuss it in the book, in each of the countries Betts investigates, there are significant disparities in terms of social discrimination, as recorded in the OECD's SIGI index. Therefore, a cross-comparison by sex and gender might shed more light on who actually wins in this entrepreneurial refugee microcosm. It would also have been interesting to have some data on early marriage and school drop-out age by sex, all of which may affect economic participation and income levels.

The above criticisms notwithstanding, this book sets the bar very high for anyone attempting to conduct a comparative investigation of refugee livelihoods. By any measure, *The Wealth of Refugees* is a bold treatise that advances a compelling argument in favor of self-reliance. Betts has identified a range of incentives and pressure points that could make the lives of refugees measurably better. That is a great achievement. His findings should be studied by refugee agencies, donors, and scholars since, with this important book, Betts has surely earned his place as one of the foremost authorities on refugee matters.

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