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Refugee commodification: the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

Do states in the Global South learn from each other regarding the management of forced migration? Although research has shown that refugees have recently been recast as an economic benefit for non-Western host states, little scholarly work exists on whether and how such a normative change is adopted across regions. In this article, we identify the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking behaviour, namely the use of host states' geopolitical position as leverage to extract revenue from other states in exchange for maintaining refugees within their borders. We identify three types of diffusion – learning, cooperation and emulation – occurring at state, regional and international levels across the Global South. Drawing on a range of primary sources, we demonstrate the working of these three types across a range of empirical examples drawn from the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and South America. Overall, we identify a rising trend in the commodification of forced migration across refugee rentier states, while highlighting the need for further interregional research on policy diffusion outside the Global North.

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Introduction

'We should have blackmailed Europe like Turkey did', lamented one high-ranking Jordanian official discussing Jordan's response to the Syrian refugee crisis (Arar 2017). Meanwhile, in Lebanon, policymakers typically measure their country's evolving strategies in managing forced displacement against Jordanian responses (Tsourapas 2019a). Only a few weeks after Turkey successfully coerced Brussels into an unprecedented €6 billion aid package to tackle the influx of Syrian refugees, Kenyan officials threatened to close the Dadaab refugee camp, in Garissa County, accusing the West of taking advantage of Kenya to host refugees 'on the cheap' (Kibicho 2016). In South America, host-state governments take a less confrontational approach, seeking financial assistance from rich Northern countries by portraying themselves as 'almost equal' partners while tugging on the heartstrings of Northern electorates by lamenting the relative neglect of Venezuelan displacement compared to the Syrian refugee

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crisis.¹ At the same time, regional and international actors spread ideas, norms and policies on the economic payoffs of hosting forcibly displaced populations across the Global South.

Host states have increasingly realised their importance within the global refugee regime in the context of rising migration interdependence. Crucially, they adopt similar strategies of migration diplomacy, taking advantage of their geopolitical positions to extract payments from other state or non-state actors in exchange for maintaining refugees within their borders. In this article, we seek to understand the rising global trend of using refugees as an economic resource. We define *refugee commodification* as the transformation of forcibly displaced populations (and their hosting) into commodities subject to negotiation and trade in the marketplace.² Refugee commodification involves the instrumental use of asylum seekers, refugees and other forcibly displaced people for specific material or non-material payoffs by state and non-state actors at the international or domestic level. Given the degree of normalisation of such market-based logics, we argue that refugee commodification is an emerging norm governing how political actors treat forcibly displaced people and bargain to accrue payoffs, while sidestepping humanitarian and rights-based approaches.

Growing interest in the determinants of refugee policies outside Europe and North America has led scholars to identify how states in the Global South leverage their positions to extract revenue from the international community in exchange for maintaining refugees within their borders via *refugee rent-seeking strategies* (Tsourapas 2019a). However, the relevant literature on forced migration has yet to determine whether and how refugee rent-seeking policies are interdependent. More precisely, how does a state's refugee rent-seeking strategy affect other states, and how are they influenced by regional and international contexts? We address this gap by bringing work on refugee rent-seeking in conversation with the literature on policy diffusion and argue that the diffusion of rent-seeking behaviour at state, regional and international levels affects domestic policymaking.

Policy diffusion occurs via three processes: learning, cooperation and emulation. *Learning* is the process whereby policymakers use other countries' experience to assess the likely consequences of policy shifts on refugee management in their country. *Cooperation*, usually at a regional level, is the process by which groups of states adopt similar forced migration policies. It frequently occurs with the support and encouragement of international organisations. *Emulation* materialises as new norms on refugees emerge, cascade and, ultimately, become internationalised as standard practice. The article is structured as follows: initially, we discuss the relevant literature on the politics of forced migration and the evolution of the concept of refugee rent, while identifying a dearth of research on how refugee rent-seeking strategies may travel across space. We proceed to place this literature in conversation with research on policy diffusion in order to identify and analyse three relevant types of diffusion of refugee rentierism across the Global South, namely learning, cooperation and emulation. We demonstrate how each of these types of policy diffusion operates via a range of empirical examples drawn from three regions: the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and South America. We conclude by discussing how our findings shed light on the international politics of forced migration and argue for further research on the phenomenon of refugee commodification.

The politics of forced migration and refugee rentierism

Refugee management is not traditionally considered a dimension of foreign-policy decision-making within international relations. However, within the subfield of security studies, there is growing interest in explicitly studying the intersection of refugees and foreign policies, particularly in terms of interstate conflict. During the Cold War, refugees were seen as an instrument of destabilisation (Teitelbaum 1984), or a 'weapon' of the West against the Soviet bloc (Zolberg 1988). In fact, forced displacement was considered a strategic tool by the two superpowers (Stedman and Tanner 2004), as well as by middle and small powers in the context of the Arab–Israeli conflict (Brand 1988) and elsewhere in the Global South (Lischer 2003). An analytic focus on refugees as instruments of interstate rivalry has incorporated forced migration into theories of 'weapons of mass migration' (Greenhill 2010), which identify the coercive dimension of host states' strategies. A second research agenda highlights non-coercive approaches to refugee management as an increasing number of Western states seeks to prevent refugees from reaching their territory by offering economic support to host states (Loescher 1993; FitzGerald 2019), although this literature focuses either on strategies adopted in the Global North, or on the failings of the international refugee regime (Betts 2011).

Scholarship that addresses the 'commodification' of refugee protection through market-based quota schemes often raises practical and moral critiques (Schuck 1997; Anker, Fitzpatrick, and Shacknové 1998; Gerver 2013). An emerging research agenda shifts away from normative debates and approaches the intersection of refugees and foreign policy-making in a more holistic way, by identifying how cross-border mobility may constitute a distinct instrument of interstate diplomacy – or *migration diplomacy* (Thiollet 2011; İçduygu and Aksel 2014; Adamson and Tsourapas 2019). In this line of work, refugees are tied to strategic interests of both Western and non-Western states: the United States used its refugee policy to resettle four times more Iraqi refugees than Afghans, strategically pursuing American national interests (Micinski 2018); Moroccan and Turkish policy liberalisation was similarly shaped by migration diplomacy exigencies (Norman 2020). The reluctance of Global North states to accommodate migrants and forcibly displaced populations is still present in this research agenda but approached as an object of diplomatic negotiation between 'neoliberal migration states', which are explicit in their attempts to monetise cross-border migration flows (Adamson and Tsourapas 2020). In fact, socialisation with Western states and international organisations (IOs) may govern Southern states' migration management strategies towards transactional strategies (Fernández-Molina and De Larramendi 2020). At the same time, work on issue-linkage, suasion games and leverage in interstate negotiations on managing cross-border mobility have allowed for a more balanced understanding of migration diplomacy in the Global South (Tsourapas 2018; Hollifield 2012).

Tsourapas pushed this argument further by identifying the concept of the *refugee rentier state* in the Middle East, namely 'states that employ their position as host states of forcibly displaced populations to extract revenue, or refugee rent, from other state or nonstate actors in order to maintain these populations within their borders' (Tsourapas 2019a, 465). He identified how Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon adopted a range of strategies in the post-2011 era to elicit substantial material support from the international community as refugee host states of first asylum. Such patterns of refugee rent-seeking have been observed empirically across the Global South – Manus Island and Nauru adopted such a strategy towards Australia,

as they agreed to host asylum-seekers in return for over US\$5 billion between 2012 and 2018; both Iran and Kenya have used the refugee communities residing within their borders as leverage for additional international aid in the past decade (Tsourapas 2019b). Yet even as scholars have identified a rising global acceptance of the economic logic of refugee commodification, the process through which these ideas, norms and practices are shared and adopted continues to be neglected.

The diffusion of refugee commodification: learning, cooperation and emulation

In order to understand how states in the Global South develop similar strategies of using refugee populations for material purposes, we place work on refugee rentierism in conversation with the literature on policy diffusion. Such diffusion occurs 'when government policy decisions in a given country are systematically conditioned by prior policy choices made in other countries' (Simmons, Dobbin, and Garrett 2006, 787). Since the 1970s, social scientists have identified the factors influencing convergence and divergence across a range of policies (Eyestone 1977; Bennett 1991). In recent years, social science work on policy diffusion has proliferated, as scholars have identified distinct mechanisms through which states may learn from one another (see Gilardi 2010). A sizeable literature has emerged to trace these processes within political economy (Meseguer 2005; Simmons and Elkins 2005), comparative politics (Weyland 2010) and international studies (Ambrosio 2010).

Although mutual adjustments made by countries of emigration and immigration characterise the international policy regime (Zolberg 2006), the relevant migration studies literature on policy diffusion remains small and tends to focus predominantly on states of the Global North, primarily the European Union (Flynn 2014; Lavenex 2016). Research on the Global South typically emphasises the cultural dissemination of norms via 'social remittances' (Levitt 1998). As far as the diffusion of state practices on cross-border mobility across the Global South is concerned, the scholarship is primarily concerned either with the management of immigration (Acosta and Geddes 2014; FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014) or the adoption of diaspora policies (Délano 2014), leaving a lacuna in terms of the diffusion of forced migration policies – particularly those regarding refugee commodification.

The diffusion of refugee rent-seeking in the Global South occurs through at least three processes: learning, cooperation and emulation. Firstly, *learning* from the experience of others occurs on the state level, 'whereby policy makers use the experience of other countries to estimate the likely consequences of policy change' (Gilardi 2012, 463). The literature suggests that elites are more likely to adopt a policy that was successful elsewhere (Bennett 1991, 221), thereby learning from the behaviour of others (Meseguer 2005). At this level, policies are diffused through bilateral exchanges between border and security agencies, discourse mimicking by the executive and diplomats in foreign ministries, and state bureaucrats' absorbing the policy successes and failures of other states. Secondly, *cooperation* entails regional responses to forced migration, and refers to three or more states' adoption of similar practices, which may lead to a kind of 'negotiated transfer' of policies (Dolowitz and Marsh 2000, 15). The policy is passed on through multilateral initiatives between states, usually in the form of an international organisation promoting a certain policy strategy. At this level, regional institutions and international organisations exert influence by 'teaching' states to adopt new policies (Oestreich 2012; Betts 2012). Both the EU and Mercosur, for instance,

offer new settings within which responses to migration are re-considered and within which novel approaches have developed (Acosta and Geddes 2014). Finally, *emulation* occurs at a global level, as 'policies diffuse because of their normative and socially constructed properties instead of their objective characteristics' (Gilardi 2012, 458). For Finnemore and Sikkink, norm dynamics follow a three-stage process, namely norm emergence, cascade and internalisation (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). At this level, global networks of experts as well as transnational epistemic communities become the source of policy diffusion. These three processes – learning, cooperation and emulation – are not mutually exclusive and have often worked in combination to diffuse refugee rent-seeking policymaking throughout the Global South.

Methodology

There is a pressing need for interregional comparative research to better understand migration and refugee politics across the Global South (Sadiq and Tsourapas 2021). This article offers an exploratory analysis of how refugee rent-seeking is diffused across three regions – the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa and South America. It seeks to identify similar practices while providing variation in our cases with different contexts of international forced displacement, regional institutions and intra-regional politics. Research on cross-border mobility outside Western contexts presents unique challenges (Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015), while work on refugee rent-seeking in the Global South is further complicated by the lack of comprehensive, publicly available data on refugee flows and bilateral aid.³ Migration management is often handled at the highest levels of the executive and with little transparency, especially in autocratic or authoritarian regimes (Tsourapas 2019). Furthermore, in many cases, such as countries across Latin America, governments tend to mistake confidentiality in the refugee system with secrecy about their refugee policies (Reed Hurtado 2013). While there is evidence of refugee rent-seeking, most data on government strategies are neither available in public documents nor captured in on-the-record interviews.

To overcome these issues, we developed a multi-method approach that relied on qualitative research focussing on the analysis of policy documents, aid packages, public statements by government officials and interviews with policymakers. We analysed declarations from the Jordan Compact and Ethiopia Jobs Compact; the tripartite agreement between Kenya, Somalia and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the Quito Process; and the Lima Group. At the same time, we triangulated these findings using semi-structured elite interviews. In our approach, policy documents – official declarations, white papers, grant proposals, reports and tripartite agreements – suggest the tools by which refugee rentierism is agreed and executed, while elite interviews with policymakers, correspondence previously uncovered through Freedom of Information Act requests, and leaked memos can provide the motivating and contextual logic of such strategies. We conducted a total of 80 elite and expert semi-structured interviews with officials in Colombia, Ecuador, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Peru, as well as EU, UN, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) officials between 2015 and 2021 via snowball sampling. Interviewees were asked about the motivation for different packages of refugee aid, how funding decisions were made, and the major factors in receiving refugee aid. Interview transcripts were subsequently analysed for specific patterns around processes of diffusion on refugee rent-seeking behaviour. Finally, we identified examples of threats in media reports, leaked memos from WikiLeaks and reports released via Freedom of Information Act requests. Overall, using

multi-method data collection and analysis, we were able to document and contextualise cases across the three regions to show how refugee rent-seeking works and spreads across countries.

State learning about refugee rent-seeking behaviour

One way that states in the Global South adopt refugee rent-seeking behaviour is through learning from other states that were successful at leveraging their refugee populations for foreign aid. States learn both the practice of demanding refugee rent and the rhetorical strategies that were successful at extracting rent. While states seldom explicitly reveal that government policy is based on other countries' strategies, evidence of policy diffusion via learning surfaces in two processes: discourse mimicking and policy timing. Elites and government officials employ similar discursive strategies in their migration diplomacy that portray the host state as overwhelmed, treated unfairly or facing impending collapse. These statements, which specifically target the international community, occur either before donor conferences or during negotiations over aid. Referring to the Syrian refugee crisis, for example, Jordan's King Abdullah highlighted to 'the international community, we've always stood shoulder to shoulder by your side We're now asking for your help. You can't say no this time' (BBC 2016). Abdullah stressed the plight of Jordan, rather than raising threats against other states. He argued that 'unemployment is skyrocketing. Our health sector is saturated. Our schools are really going through difficult times. It's extremely, extremely difficult. And Jordanians just have had it up to here. I mean we just can't take it anymore' (CBS 2016). Ahead of a donor conference on Syria in February 2016, Abdullah became blunter: 'I think it's gotten to a boiling point ... sooner or later, I think, the dam is going to burst', he warned. 'We can't do it anymore' (BBC 2016).

Mirroring this discursive approach, Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri has repeatedly stated how he intends 'to make sure that the world understands that Lebanon is on the verge of a breaking point' (Reuters 2017). At an April 2017 conference on Syria, Hariri argued for the international community to commit US\$10,000 to \$12,000 per refugee in Lebanon over a span of five to seven years, while ensuring that this 'would equally benefit Lebanese citizens and displaced Syrians' (Al-Jazeera 2017). Nohad Machnouk, Lebanon's Interior Minister, declared that 'we have enough There's no capacity any more to host more displaced [persons]' (Associated Press 2015). According to Lebanon's Minister of Social Affairs, Rashid Derbas, 'the glass cannot fit one more drop ... now we have 1.2 million [refugees]. I think this is a very exceptional proportion' (Al-Jazeera 2015). In the context of the two countries' international bargaining for refugee rent, the Jordanian and Lebanese negotiating teams frequently interacted and coordinated strategies; in fact, there have also been instances of Jordanian delegations negotiating on behalf of both states.⁴ Beyond the Levant, similar rhetorical processes are picked up by states across the Middle East. Writing in English for the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs blog, Ambassador Naela Gabr reported how

International support might not be enough to help ease the burden several countries bear to accommodate the growing number of migrants. We stand ready to enhance our engagement with international donors and financial institutions to mobilize additional resources for developmental projects with immediate bearing on youth susceptible to illegal migration in Egypt and elsewhere. (Gabr 2016)

In South America, the Colombian government has been most successful at extracting funds from the international community to address the displacement of Venezuelans, who qualify as refugees under the Cartagena definition of refugee (Freier, Berganza, and Blouin 2020), by mimicking a similar discourse.⁵ In 2018–2019, Colombia received US\$270 million for displaced Venezuelans, which represents almost 45% of the total \$580 million the region had received four years into the crisis (Bahar and Dooley 2019). In August 2019, the Colombian Foreign Minister, Carlos Holmes Trujillo, argued that ‘the international community has been much more generous in other cases. We are grateful for the cooperation that we have received, but as the number of migrants keeps growing, so will the demand for services and resources’ (Al-Jazeera 2019). Trujillo complained that states hosting Venezuelans had received only US\$68 per person each year, compared to states hosting refugees from Syria, Myanmar or South Sudan who had received \$500–900 per person. Following the same logic, in February 2020, Colombia’s President Ivan Duque published an opinion piece in the *Washington Post*, in which he pointed out the underfunding of the Venezuelan displacement crisis and further argued that

Colombia is on the front lines of the most serious humanitarian challenge the Western Hemisphere has seen in the modern era: the Venezuelan refugee crisis. This ongoing crisis on America’s doorstep must be met with greater urgency before the situation spirals out of control. We need a stronger commitment for more funds and resources from the international community. Colombia cannot do it alone (Duque 2020)

Duque’s rhetorical strategy was to present Colombia as part of the western hemisphere, as a partner of the Global North, but to also assert that Colombia ‘cannot do it alone’. His column also adopts a geopolitically threatening tone when emphasising that South America lies ‘on America’s doorstep’ and that the Venezuelan displacement crisis might ‘spiral out of control’, affecting not only the US but the ‘fate of the Western Hemisphere’. Duque warned that a ‘surge of destitute migrants’ could travel to the United States unless the international community provided more aid to Colombia, and even evoked the threat of ‘terrorism’ that Colombia, thus far, contained in region of its border with Venezuela (Duque 2000), feeding into Donald Trump’s rhetoric of treating Venezuela as a (narco-)terrorist state (Reuters 2020). Duque used messaging of an overwhelmed capacity, potential state collapse and the threat to the West as a strategy for extracting refugee rent – reminiscent of similar rhetoric in Jordan and Lebanon.

When Duque announced the historic decision to grant complementary protection and legal status for a decade to approximately 1 million irregular Venezuelan migrants in the country, in February 2021, he was accompanied by the UNHCR and the resident coordinator of the UN, as well as the US and EU ambassadors. Stressing Colombia’s leadership role in the region, but also the costs of its ‘fraternal’ approach to Venezuelan displacement, Duque asked for the support of the international community (Nación 2021). In response, his diplomatic guests not only called Colombia’s decision ‘historic’ and ‘brave’, but assured Duque of the ongoing support of UNHCR and the international community (Nación 2021). Duque’s press conference exemplifies the strategy of South American countries to seek refugee rent as ‘buddies’ or ‘almost equal’ partners of rich Northern countries.⁶

Following the Colombian example, representatives of Ecuador’s Foreign Ministry adopted a public discourse depicting the costs as outweighing the benefits of Venezuelan immigration.⁷ Previous discourses on hosting Colombian refugees had also mentioned costs (El

Comercio 2012), but only implied the need for financial support by the international community.⁸ Regarding Venezuelan forced displacement, this discourse intensified when Ecuador assumed the presidency of the Global Forum on Migration and Development in 2019, intertwining rent-seeking with narratives on migration and development.⁹ In the case of Peru, political actors responsible for the country's immigration policy in the Foreign Ministry asked for a closed-door meeting with Colombia's migration department in February 2021 to learn from their experience regarding both migrant regularisation and refugee commodification.¹⁰

Beyond mimicking discursive strategies, we identify policy diffusion via learning in terms of the timing of specific refugee-related initiatives. Less than two months after the Turkish government received a multi-billion aid package through the March 2016 EU–Turkey Deal – elicited through Turkish President's Erdogan's coercive behaviour that threatened to flood Europe with millions of refugees – Kenya threatened to close the Dadaab refugee camps and deport all Somali refugees. The Kenyan Ministry of Interior announced that 'having taken into consideration its national security interests, the [Government of Kenya] has decided that hosting of refugees has to come to an end ... the international community must collectively take responsibility on humanitarian needs' (Government of Kenya 2016). Karanja Kibicho, Kenya's minister of national security, argued that the West was underfunding the Somali refugee crisis and getting away with it 'on the cheap' (Kibicho 2016).

Similarly, in February 2020, Erdogan linked Turkey's management of Syrian refugees to its foreign policy goals and declared that 'Turkey [is] no longer able to face [the] new refugee flow alone', if Western states do not agree to a 'safe zone' in northern Syria (Republic of Turkey 2019). In the same month, Kenyan authorities sent yet another note to the UNHCR about plans to close Dadaab refugee camp if international aid to Kenya was not increased (Human Rights Watch 2019). Two months later, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi declared that, if American sanctions continue to put economic pressure on his country, 'it is possible that we ask our Afghan brothers and sisters to leave Iran' (Voice of America 2019). The close monitoring of Turkish politics by Iranian policymakers strongly suggests that domestic elites were able to learn from Erdogan's rent-seeking and issue-linkage strategies in raising demands to the West.

Regional cooperation and refugee rentierism

A second mechanism of policy diffusion is regional interstate cooperation that leads to either tripartite agreements or regional fundraising drives, both of which rely on refugee rent-seeking. UNHCR negotiates tripartite agreements between two or more countries in order to establish the legal framework for refugee repatriation.¹¹ Tripartite agreements often function as a form of trust building to demonstrate that returns are voluntary, that governments are taking their responsibilities seriously, and to lay the foundation for joint fundraising. For example, Kenya, Somalia and UNHCR signed a tripartite agreement in 2013 to establish a framework for the voluntary return of Somali refugees (UNHCR 2013a). The agreement emphasised that the choice must be voluntary, that refugees have the freedom to choose where in Somalia they return to, and that governments should not charge fees or customs on returning refugees. At the signing of the tripartite agreement, the UNHCR representative in Kenya stated:

we see the presence of the three parties here today as a call to the rest of the international community to commit more vigorously for viable and sustainable solutions for the victims of a conflict that has lasted too long A few days ago, as food rations for the month of November were reduced due to lack of financial resources, the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR have had to launch an appeal to the international community. Inadequate assistance should not be used as a way of pushing refugees to return. (UNHCR 2013b)

The Tripartite Commission was created with four representatives from each government, while the UNHCR served as the supporting secretary to facilitate the voluntary repatriation and reintegration of refugees. The commission organised 'go and see' visits to build confidence in the security situation for returnees, and it also designed an 'integrated action plan' detailing how returns and reintegration would take place (UNHCR 2015a). This action plan was used to fundraise from the international community by demonstrating that the repatriation operations would be well coordinated and accountable. In October 2015, the UNHCR and the EU hosted the Ministerial Pledging Conference on Somali Refugees in Brussels. The conference raised US\$105 million from donor countries to support the tripartite agreement and the integrated action plan – part of which was earmarked for supporting Somali refugees in Kenya and for assisting the Kenyan government to help refugees (UNHCR 2015c). In this way, the UNHCR helped to diffuse the tripartite agreement as a strategy for institutionalised refugee rent and to organise regional fundraising. Similar initiatives were developed for the Syrian refugee crisis,¹² with the UNHCR facilitating the creation of the Regional Refugee & Resilience Plan (3RP) covering Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey and Iraq in order to 'to ensure consistency in response planning and implementation, to promote common tools, standards and innovation, and to enhance advocacy efforts at global and regional levels.'¹³ International organisations coordinate multilateral negotiations and draw lessons from previous agreements (sometimes even re-using wording from a sample tripartite agreement) in order to teach states in other regions how to collect higher refugee rents.

Beyond such regional agreements, cooperation may allow for the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking strategies via regional fundraising. This occurs when groups of states come together, sometimes with the help of international organisations, to demand more aid for refugees.¹⁴ One example of regional fundraising is the Solution Strategy for Afghan Refugees (SSAR) that grew out of the 2007 quadripartite agreement among Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan and the UNHCR, which laid the framework for repatriation of Afghan refugees. In September 2013, the SSAR steering committee adopted a 'joint resource mobilisation strategy', led by the UNHCR, and produced progress reports showing the outcomes achieved, the total funding required and the gap in funds (UNHCR Pakistan 2013). In bureaucratic lingo, 'joint resource mobilisation' has become a euphemism for refugee rent-seeking, as groups of states utilise similar rhetorical threats and emphasise overwhelmed institutions and fears of state collapse in order to 'mobilise' more aid from the international community.¹⁵ In 2014, the UNHCR reported the funding gap was US\$178 million, leaving the regional strategy only 37% funded (UNHCR 2015b, 18). Building on the success of the SSAR, the UNHCR has developed regional refugee and migrant response plans (RMRPs) in Europe, Central African Republic, DR Congo, Nigeria, Burundi, South Sudan, Syria, Yemen and Venezuela.¹⁶

Similarly, in South America, the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform for Refugees and Migrants from Venezuela (R4V) has been crucial in coordinating refugee rent-seeking strategies in the region. Led by the IOM and the UNHCR, the R4V coordinates the delivery of aid to Venezuelans through over 130 organisations and produces a regional summary of

funding needs and shortfalls. These funding reports are instrumental in refugee rent-seeking because they provide host states with the information to make the case to the international community that the situation is dire and that funding has not been sufficient.¹⁷ The R4V also builds trust with donors because the outcomes and indicators can be tracked across all the countries in the region. The platform provides regular support to governments and strengthens the capacities of national service providers to incorporate Venezuelans into general services for the general population (R4V 2019). At the national level, Colombia founded the Interagency Group on Mixed Migratory Flows (*Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos*, GIFMM) in 2016 to coordinate the response to Venezuelan displacement by the government, IOs and civil society organisations.¹⁸ While coordination platforms are not direct strategies for refugee rent-seeking, the platforms are led by international organisations (usually the UNHCR or IOM) that teach states how to make the best case for additional aid for refugees. Experts within international organisations and coordination platforms share information and strategies for ‘joint resource mobilisation’ – ie refugee rent.¹⁹

Other examples of regional cooperation in refugee rent-seeking in South America include the Lima Group and Quito Process. The Lima Group was formed in August 2017 under the leadership of Peru to find a peaceful solution to the crisis in Venezuela. While fundraising was not its main purpose, it issued a declaration in May 2018 highlighting the importance of ‘making financial contributions to the competent international organizations to strengthen the institutional capacities of countries in the region, especially neighboring countries, to address the migratory flow of Venezuelans.’²⁰ Later, in April and November 2019, the Lima Group made their refugee rent-seeking more explicit by urging the UN and international donors to ‘strengthen financial assistance for host countries of Venezuelan migrants’ (Chile 2019, Article 2; Argentina 2019, Article 20). In contrast, the Quito Process – initiated by Ecuador as a less politicised way to coordinate the responses to Venezuelan displacement – promoted rent-seeking behaviour from the start. Its founding declaration urges states to ‘recognize the importance of the technical and financial cooperation provided by the cooperating States and/or the specialized International Organizations’ and committed them to establish regional information exchange to provide humanitarian aid to Venezuelans with the support of the UN and the Organization of American States.²¹

Both the Lima Group and the Quito Process welcomed more institutionalised rent-seeking in the form of the ‘International Solidarity Conference on the Venezuelan Refugee and Migrant crisis’, an initiative that originated within the World Bank.²² UNHCR, the EU and IOM hosted the conference in October 2019 in Brussels, aiming to raise awareness about the Venezuelan refugee crisis. The conference confirmed support for a coordinated regional response and called for burden sharing within international community, particularly the need for increased financial support for host countries. The conference raised €120 million in refugee aid and secured a commitment by the organisers to mobilise additional funding through a future pledging conference (Chadwick 2019). A second, virtual international donors’ conference in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin American countries was hosted by the EU and the Spanish government on 26 May 2020, raising US\$2.79 billion, including \$653 million in grants (UNHCR 2020). A third conference took place under the auspices of Canada on 17 June 2021, raising a

total of US\$1.5 billion in funding, including \$954 million in grants and \$600 million in loans (Reliefweb 2021).

Emulating refugee rent-seeking behaviour globally

Finally, a third way of refugee rent-seeking diffusion beyond state- and regional-level actions is policy emulation, as refugee rentierism becomes an international norm. In contrast to regional cooperation, emulation is policy transfer based on the normative construction of policy responses, typically through epistemic communities and policy networks. For example, one way these processes are diffused internationally is through norms based in concessional loans to refugee host states. In 2016, the UN, the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank created the Global Concessional Financing Facility (GCF) to provide concessional loans to Jordan and Lebanon to assist both refugees and the host communities (Global Concessional Financing Facility 2019). With Jordan and Lebanon being middle-income countries, access to concessional loans was impossible without the GCF process that arguably generated a form of refugee rentierism. Colombia was approved in January 2019 as another eligible country – as the most important host country of Venezuelan migrants and refugees. By the end of 2019, the GCF had disbursed US\$584 million from donors, which was leveraged to \$3 billion in concessional loans for projects in Jordan, Lebanon and Colombia (Global Concessional Financing Facility 2019). After three years of close collaboration regarding Colombia's immigration policy, the World Bank approved a \$500 million Programmatic Development Policy Loan (DPL) on migrant integration to Colombia in March 2021.²³ Similarly, the Interamerican Development Bank (IADB) raised more than \$3 billion in 2020 for helping refugee hosting countries from the EU, Finland, Germany, Japan, South Korea, Spain, Switzerland and the US (IADB 2020). The IADB planned to disperse \$700 million in grants and \$1.8 billion in investment loans to migrant and refugee receiving countries throughout Central and South America and the Caribbean (Global Concessional Financing Facility 2019).

These projects aim to support both refugee and host communities by improving infrastructure like building roads and wastewater treatment facilities, or improving basic services like health systems and transportation, and job creation. This form of institutionalised rent-seeking was diffused through multilateralism in the steering committee and elite policy networks, particularly the GCF coordination unit housed in the World Bank that helps recipient countries prepare funding proposals, and the IADB high-level dialogue on migration.²⁴ The institutionalised structure of the GCF and IADB loans helps to normalise the logic of refugee rent-seeking – that states can leverage refugee populations for additional aid and concessional loans and that funding should benefit the host communities and the refugees.

UNHCR-led consultations have also contributed to the institutionalisation of refugee rent-seeking as an emerging norm. The Jordan and Lebanon compacts further evidence this process. In 2016, Jordanian negotiations with international donors culminated in the Jordan Compact, an agreement drafted in February 2016 within the context of a London Pledging Summit. The 2016 Jordan Compact linked refugees to development funding over multiple years with specific commitments: in exchange for lowered trade barriers with the EU, US\$700 million in grants and nearly \$2 billion in loans, the Jordanian government agreed to create

special economic zones and issue 200,000 work permits for Syrian refugees. Jordan also agreed to lower fees for work permits for those seeking low-skilled work, from 700 Jordanian dinars to 10 Jordanian dinars (roughly US\$500 and \$7, respectively). The broader aim of the Jordan Compact was to turn ‘the Syrian refugee crisis into a development opportunity that attracts new investments and opens up the EU market with simplified rules of origin, creating jobs for Jordanians and Syrian refugees while supporting the post-conflict Syrian economy’ (Government of Jordan 2016). A similar investment logic underpinned the Lebanon Compact, signed in the same year, in which international donors pledged a minimum of €400 million (US\$455 million) for 2016–2017, over and above existing pledges. The EU framed the Lebanon Compact as aiming ‘to turn the situation into an opportunity to improve the socioeconomic prospects, security, stability, and resilience of the whole Lebanon’ (Council of EU 2016).

In North Africa, Ethiopia negotiated its own Jobs Compact in 2016 in which, in exchange for greater access to the labour market, the international community committed to investing in the Ethiopian economy. In Ethiopia, the government committed to liberalise its refugee policies by allowing some refugees to leave camps and by issuing work permits to refugees. The Jobs Compact aimed to grow the Ethiopian economy by creating new industrial parks and 100,000 new jobs (with 30% going to refugees); in return, the World Bank, European Investment Bank, and the UK Department for International Development pledged over US\$500 million in grants and loans (World Bank 2018; The Reporter 2018; Getachew 2019). This was a significant investment considering that UNHCR’s 2016 budget for their Ethiopian operations was only 58% funded (\$162 million; UNHCR 2017). Ethiopia built on the international community’s enthusiasm for the Jordan Compact’s innovative components (economic zones and work permits) to emulate their strategy for extracting additional rent. The lessons from the Jordan Compact were transferred to Ethiopia’s Jobs Compact through elite policy networks: for example, the World Bank’s official project document states that the Ethiopia Jobs Compact builds on

the positive experience of the Economic Opportunities for Jordanians and Syrian Refugees Project (on which the [Ethiopian] Jobs Compact is modeled) in using the PforR (Program for Results) instrument to manage the complexity of the refugee and jobs agenda, while maintaining maximum adaptability and solutions orientation. (Fanuel 2017, 6–7)

DIFD funding documents also cite the Jordan Compact as an inspiration and a source for lessons learned (DFID 2018).

Most ambitiously, emulation of refugee rent-seeking at the international level is evident in the UNHCR-led consultations and the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees in December 2018. A wide consensus was established on the need to ensure the economic support of refugee host states through ‘responsibility-sharing’ in ways that would ‘ease the pressures on host countries’ and ‘enhance refugee self-reliance’ (Micinski 2021). The Global Compact proposes solidary platforms and donor conferences to raise funds early in a refugee crisis, implying Western financial solidarity in exchange for maintaining forcibly displaced communities within the Global South. This approach is slowly cascading through international research groups and think tanks; in February 2019, Brookings argued for the need to adopt a ‘refugee compact for Turkey’ that would expand the preferential trade agreement with the EU and involve business actors: ‘these sorts of arrangements’, the document argued, ‘are among the most interesting and innovative ideas that the new Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), adopted at the UN late last year, advances’ (Brandt and Kirişci 2019). The Center for

Global Development similarly argues for a refugee compact for Bangladesh: it identifies the benefits of the Jordan and Lebanon Compacts, as well as the GCFE process, and argues for the need to 'transform crisis into an opportunity for refugees and their hosts' (Huang 2018).

Conclusion

This article has examined how states across the Global South (Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, Iran, Pakistan, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru), as well as regional groups, use their geopolitical position as refugee host-states to extract refugee rents. We demonstrated how refugee rent-seeking strategies are disseminated across the Global South through three mechanisms: *learning* at the national level, *cooperation* at the regional level and *emulation* at the global level. At the national level, state officials learned to use rhetorical threats to make their warnings more distinct and effective at extracting aid, describing overwhelming numbers of refugees and emphasising their fears of potential state collapse. At the regional level, states adopted refugee rentierism through international cooperation by signing tripartite agreements to build trust with donors and by organising regional or joint fundraising with UNHCR and IOM. At the global level, the norm of refugee rent-seeking has become increasingly institutionalised through support platforms and donor conferences in the Global Compact on Refugees; jobs compacts in Jordan, Lebanon and Ethiopia; and concessional loans through the GCFE and the IADB. States adopt innovative strategies of refugee rentierism that are promoted through UN expert networks, the World Bank and the EU. These diffusion mechanisms demonstrate how refugee rentierism is becoming the main strategy for states hosting large refugee communities outside the Global North.

This article paves the way for further research on the diffusion of refugee rent-seeking in the Global South. It is likely that other countries will use their geopolitical position as host states of refugees to extract refugee rents. Having established that refugee rent-seeking strategies influence actors across state borders, it is important to understand what drives policy diffusion. What political factors – such as regime type, political parties, interstate cooperation or state capacity – facilitate or impede diffusion of refugee rent-seeking? Do these mechanisms complement or reinforce each other? In what ways do processes of learning, cooperation and emulation work separately or together? Which role is played by other types of policy diffusion, such as competition, amongst receiving countries in similar contexts? Another important question is: under what conditions might states in the Global North adopt similar refugee rent-seeking strategies? In the context of the European migrant crisis, for instance, Hungary adopted a 'Hungary first' approach that sought material payoffs from Brussels (Csehi and Zgut 2021), while Greece attempted to leverage the crisis to secure additional EU funding and more lenient terms in the third bailout package negotiations (Tsourapas and Zartaloudis 2021). Finally, how does refugee commodification operate on host states' domestic level? The extent to which Lebanese municipalities or individual Jordanian citizens sought to secure economic payoffs tied to their treatment of Syrian refugees suggests that the instrumentalisation of forced migration also occurs across the sub-state level.

As we conclude, it is important to point out that our research explores the empirical phenomenon of refugee commodification and rent-seeking, and does not address its moral, legal or humanitarian implications. Refugees – like all human beings – should not

be treated as commodities that can be bought or sold. Nevertheless, states find ways of negotiating and bargaining about the very policies on which lives depend. Our research takes seriously the geopolitical and realist politics embedded in refugee rent-seeking. This approach promises new understandings of international politics of forced migration through the lens of refugee rentier states, and allows for a reappraisal of national, regional and global responses to displacement. Our research raises the broader question of why refugee rentierism has become a pressing global issue. Does refugee rent-seeking occur as a result of the failure of global governance or the failure of the global refugee regime, or a failure of both? Given the West's growing unwillingness to host refugee communities, a focus on the Global South identifies novel strategies that developing states adopt in order to cope with forced displacement. Refugee rentierism has gained prominence largely because the global refugee regime has not adequately addressed burden sharing. At the same time, countries in the Global South pursue refugee rent based on active encouragement from countries in the Global North and the organisations representing them.

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Notes

1. Author interview (Lima, Peru; November 2019).
2. Here we draw on Polanyi (1944, 75–79): ‘But labor, land, and money are obviously *not* commodities; the postulate that anything that is bought and sold must have been produced for sale is emphatically untrue in regard to them. In other words, according to the empirical definition of a commodity they are not commodities ... labor, land, and money had to be transformed into commodities in order to keep production going. They could, of course, not be really transformed into commodities, as actually they were not produced for sale on the market. But the fiction of their being so produced became the organizing principle of society’. Similarly, refugees are ‘obviously *not* commodities’, but the current structure of the refugee regime forces states to negotiate in a market *as if* refugees were a commodity.
3. We agree with Crawley and Skleparis (2018) that existing legal categories often do not reflect the blurred line between refugees and migrants on the ground. We refer to ‘migrants’ in the most general sense, as people who have moved across international borders, while ‘refugees’ refers to those forcibly displaced; the latter category includes asylum seekers and other vulnerable migrants who have not been granted legal refugee status (yet).
4. Author interview (Amman, Jordan; March 2017).
5. Author interview (Bogota, Colombia; February 2020).
6. Author interview (Lima, Peru; November 2019).
7. Author interview (Quito, Ecuador; March 2021).
8. Author interview (Quito, Ecuador; April 2021).
9. Author interview (Quito, Ecuador; March 2021).
10. Author interview (Lima, Peru; April 2021).
11. UNHCR has signed more than 20 tripartite agreements since the 1980s. See UNHCR’s database of agreements, accessible at <https://www.refworld.org>.
12. Author interview (Beirut, Lebanon; March 2017).
13. See <http://www.3rpsyriacrisis.org>, accessed 8 April 2021.
14. This, of course, is not to underplay the importance of such resources or the claims by states that the conditions for refugees are dire. Our analysis focuses on the strategies that states use to extract refugee rent, not on whether this is justified.
15. Author interview (Brussels, Belgium; June 2016).
16. See UNHCR, ‘Operations Portal – Refugee Situations’, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations>, accessed 8 April 2021.
17. Author interviews (Lima, Peru; November 2019, and Bogota, Colombia; February 2020).
18. Author interview (Bogota, Colombia; February 2020).
19. Author interview (Brussels, Belgium; June 2016).
20. Art. 5 II of the Declaración del Grupo de Lima of 21 May 2018, available at <https://www.peruoea.org/declaracion-del-grupo-de-lima/>, accessed 8 April 2021.
21. Art. 3 of the Action Plan of the Quito Process, available at <https://r4v.info/es/documents/details/68101>; Arts. 4, 6, and 10 of the III Quito Declaration, available at <https://www.refworld.org/es/pdfid/5cec7e4e4.pdf>, accessed 8 April 2021.
22. Author interview (Washington, DC, USA; July 2020).
23. Author interview (Bogota, Colombia; March 2021).
24. Author interview (Washington, DC, USA; September 2020).

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