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“Because we are refugees”: utilizing a legal label

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Institutional analysis in refugee camps*

The 'refugee' is a figure at the core of the international refugee regime,¹ its point of reference for actions and reasoning. Consequently, the regime offers codified definitions of the term 'refugee.'² They are formulated in a number of documents, namely the 1950 Statute of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations' 1951 'Convention relating to the Status of Refugees' and its 1967 Protocol, the 1969 Convention of the Organisation of African Unity, as well as other international treaties and the national law of individual states (Goodwin-Gill 1998: 3-31).³

Legal concepts that are institutionalized on a global macro-level have consequences on the lower levels of an institutional regime. The codified definitions of the 'refugee' in international and national law have considerable impact on opportunities, actions, and interpretations within the international refugee regime, for states, organizations, and the people classified as refugees – or excluded from the status by these definitions. They are not merely paper, but highly relevant on the level of refugee situations (see Bakewell 2002a: 46; Zolberg/Suhrke/Aguayo 1989: 2-4, 29-33). Here, a legal label institutionalized on a macro-level meets the micro-level of action and interpretation. This contribution looks at the ways in which the concept 'refugee' is perceived and used on the micro-level of refugee camps, and it explores the consequences of the findings for institutional theory.

Legal definitions never coincide fully with an actor's understanding of the respective terms. This rather trivial observation also applies to the refugee label (see Bakewell 2002b: 235). In addition, there is no homogeneous understanding of the concept 'refugee' among the different actors in the international refugee regime. They use the label differently, with the interpretation also depending on specific situations. These emic perspectives on the term 'refugee' are not identical with, but nevertheless connected to its legal definitions.⁴ In order to acquire a better understanding of the

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¹ Here, 'international refugee regime' denotes an institutionalized system comprising, firstly, rules and norms referring to refugee-related actions of organizational, individual and state actors, secondly, organizations specifically engaged in these refugee-related actions, and thirdly, operational practices of dealing with refugees. This definition of the widely and often vaguely used term 'international refugee regime' is a modified version of the one used by Laura Barnett (2002: 1).

² These legal definitions have been the subject of manifold reasoning and critique by social scientists; see, for example, Melander 1988; Hathaway 1991; Chimni (ed.) 2000: 1-81; Nicholson/Twomey (eds.) 1999: 13-150; Zolberg/Suhrke/Aguayo 1989: 33.

³ The legal documents relevant for defining refugees' rights and obligations stem from different legal domains, which also causes systematic problems, as for example tensions between refugee law and human rights law (see Marx 1999; Noll 2003). This differentiation is not followed up in the contribution at hand, since it is not decisive for its line of argumentation.

⁴ The 'emic' level of interpretation is that of the actors, as opposed to the 'etic' accounts of outside observers. The terms are derived from the linguistic distinction between 'phonemic' and 'phonetic' (Pike 1967).

consequences of certain codified definitions, as well as the patterns of interaction in concrete refugee situations, it is necessary to analyze the actors' understanding of the term refugee and the ways in which it is employed. This article aims to take one step in that direction. It is asked how those living as 'refugees' understand and use this humanitarian label, which is imposed upon them in the institutional context of a refugee camp. The analysis retraces ways in which they culturally adopt and modify the label. Thereby, one can reconstruct relevances of institutionalized definitions for the interactions on the level of the refugee situation itself.

Theoretically, this line of exploration is based on – and at the same time challenges – the sociological neo-institutionalism, and more specifically, studies on 'world polity' or 'world culture.' This approach, developed mainly by John W. Meyer and his collaborators, aims at explaining the development of "similar structures, programs, and policies that concern a wide variety of issues and domains" in very different countries (Berkovitch 1999: 5). Among the empirical cases that have been analyzed as instances of an emerging 'world polity' are, for example, education, the environmental regime, or gender equality (see Meyer 2005; Berkovitch 1999). As in each of these fields, the 'world polity' approach generally sees international governmental and non-governmental organizations, especially the United Nations, as important carriers of the emerging world polity (see Meyer et al. 2005: 113). The international refugee regime obviously fits in as one of these domains. International organizations, first of all UNHCR, play a crucial role in the refugee regime. UNHCR features as the main vehicle for the extensive spreading of structures like those of refugee camps, of programs like accommodating, protecting, educating and repatriating refugees in standardized manners, and of national or regional refugee policies.⁵

There is an additional reason why refugee camps are of particular interest for institutional analysis. They represent the rare case of a long-term collaboration of institutionally, organizationally and culturally heterogeneous elements within one social and administrative unit, which also is perceived as such by all actors involved. These elements – organizational branches of the host government, UNHCR, other UN organizations and NGOs, and the refugees – are all part of the international refugee regime. They differ, however, in their specific organizational, institutional, and cultural connections, which extend far beyond the borders of the camp. These include, for example, political influence (e.g., concerning important donor governments), church affiliations (also on the organizational level), or cultural ties from the different countries of origin. Thus, there is coherence in the field of refugee aid and administration, but it is limited by differences between the respective backgrounds with which each actor is interwoven. Differing organizational interests and structures of competition, which also exist between refugee aid agencies (see Inhetveen 2006a), can additionally increase these discrepancies (see DiMaggio 1988). The question that arises here is: What becomes of institutional isomorphism in such a heterogeneous setting that at the same time is entirely part of a 'world polity' domain, the international refugee regime?

⁵ Also several other international organizations are important parts of the refugee regime, among them the World Food Programme, UNICEF, or, outside the UN system and in a rather controversial manner, the International Organization for Migration (IOM). In addition, several international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can be seen as relevant in the process of increasing similarities in the ways refugee situations are dealt with.

In its theoretical reasoning as well as its empirical research, the ‘world polity’ approach in neo-institutionalism is decidedly macro-oriented. The respective studies deal with highly aggregated quantitative data, look at the policy level of organizational and state action, and exclude the micro-level from their empirical and theoretical interest (see Hasse/Krücken 1999: 38). Using the concept of ‘decoupling,’ it is claimed that institutional rules and scripts on the macro-level exist without a necessary correspondence with lower levels. The coupling between the micro-level and the isomorphic institutions of the ‘world polity’ is seen as extremely loose.⁶ Other founding scholars of the New Institutionalism, especially Lynne G. Zucker (see, for example, 1991), have emphasized the importance of the micro-foundations of institutionalization. One of the difficulties with ignoring the micro-level is that it undermines a basic tenet of institutional theory, namely, that institutions generate and shape social action (see Klatetzki Forthcoming). If the institutionalized rules of a ‘world polity’ are not accompanied by related patterns of action, but remain limited to the level of policy and program formulations, one can indeed ask if the term ‘isomorphism’ catches the phenomenon. Likewise, it is possible that similar patterns of action are interpreted differently in different cultural contexts, which leads to the question of how much variation in an institution’s “taken for granted rationales, that is (...) some common social ‘account’ of their existence and purpose” (Jepperson 1991: 147) still permits one to talk about isomorphism (see Inhetveen 2002: 241-42). The concept of ‘decoupling’ rather bypasses than answers these questions.

As a point of departure, this contribution takes the observation of institutionalized and universalized concepts and rules, which is made by the ‘world polity’ approach. From there, it considers the micro-level where actors – in one way or another – deal with these cultural presettings. Hence, the approach is in line with the demand of Roger Friedland and Robert Alford (1991: 256) for a “combination of multiple levels of analysis and contradictory institutional logics.” Proceeding in this manner, the article may contribute to refining institutionalist theory especially with regard to the varieties of actions and interpretations on the micro-level.⁷ Thereby, it targets an explanatory gap of the ‘world polity’ approach that is also emphasized by Georg Krücken (2005: 315-16). He consequently notes that to fill it, one would have to abandon the coupling of theoretical macro-orientation and quantitative methods (see also Hasse/Krücken 1999: 38).

For the present case, there is no reason to assume that rules that are formulated as legal norms function as such on the micro-level. To work as ‘law,’ these rules have to be interpreted as such. As will be demonstrated, the corresponding, legalistic interpretation and practice of the refugee regime’s statutory norms is only one of several possibilities. Thus, it cannot be taken for granted that these rules – proliferated as ‘world polity’ – become operative on the level of interaction, nor is it possible to predict the ways in which this may occur. These questions are to be taken up in the following analysis.

⁶ The concept of loose coupling or decoupling is prominent already in one of the founding contributions of the sociological neo-institutionalism, originally published in 1977, by John W. Meyer and Brian Rowan (1991). While this article refers mostly to the organizational level, the concept is now used for discrepancies between manifold structural elements (see also Meyer/Boli/Thomas 1987: 19-20).

⁷ As far as ‘world polity’ studies look at variations, they do so on the regional level, looking at policies and formal structures of different states or organizations, rather than modes of implementation (or deviation) on the micro-level (for cases in point, see Hasse/Krücken 1999: 33-38).

This study employs neo-institutionalism as its theoretical basis and aims at refining institutional theory. As a consequence of this choice, several other theories have not been employed which would have also offered possible approaches for analyzing the phenomena discussed here. Some of these may be briefly mentioned. In connection with the debate on globalization, there are contributions on the interrelationship between the local and the global (for example, Probst/Spittler (eds.) 2004; Loimeier/Neubert/Weißköppel (eds.) 2005), on globalization and local law (see Wanitzek/Woodman 2004), and on the globalization of law (see Albert 1999/2000). Alternative paths of analysis would have been offered within the realm of the ‘theory of world society,’ which encompasses a number of other approaches in addition to neo-institutionalism (for an overview see Greve/Heintz 2005). Within the sociology and anthropology of law, the instrumentalization of law has been analyzed especially in connection with legal pluralism (see, for example, Benda-Beckmann 1981; Hanser/Trotha 2002: 152-53; and, with regard to micro-macro relations, Benda-Beckmann 2001: 128-29). Although, in the course of the argument, singular cues are taken up from these different theories, they would not be able to offer the emphasis that neo-institutionalism places on the proliferation of institutional concepts and the role of organizations in the respective processes. In addition, it is in particular institutional theory that considers the relevance of taken for granted accounts as a basis for interactions. These aspects are highly relevant for the following analysis. Thus, even though it adopts relevant points from other theoretical approaches, neo-institutionalism persists as its theoretical focus.

Notes on methods

The analysis is based on results of a sociological research project on the political order of refugee camps, funded by the ‘Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft’ and conducted at the University of Siegen, Germany. Most of the empiric material was collected during my field research between May and November 2003 in Meheba Refugee Settlement and Nangweshi Refugee Camp in Zambia. The material includes qualitative interviews with refugees and staff members of the agencies present in the field, observations and informal conversations, and documents of various kinds. Further conversations took place in Lusaka and Geneva with agency staff and embassy personnel of the major donor countries for refugee aid in Zambia. Where interviewees are quoted in this article, names are depersonalized. Several quotes are translated from Luvale, Umbundu, and Portuguese. Although I am fluent enough in Portuguese to conduct interviews, this is not the case for the African languages that were used during field research. In each camp, a local research assistant accompanied me to most interviews with refugees and translated when interviewees spoke Luvale, Umbundu or other African languages.⁸ This was the case in most interviews in Meheba. In Nangweshi, most interviews were entirely in Portuguese, conducted by me with only occasional involvement of the research assistant. Most interactions between refugees and administration were in English, often with the help of a

⁸ While Luvale and Umbundu were the most frequent indigenous languages, some interviewees spoke Chokwe, Lunda, Luchazi, or Swahili. Both research assistants were refugees from the respective camps and spoke all languages necessary in the field study, as well as some Zambian languages, in addition to English and Portuguese. In case of translations from African languages, they extensively discussed with me key words, expressions, and semantic fields. Meanwhile, their help went far beyond translations, and my sincere thanks go to the two of them. Ndapandula!

translator belonging to or employed by the administration. Mostly, I followed these encounters without additional translation. As for conversations and interactions between refugees, I could only directly follow those that were in Portuguese. In all other instances the research assistants translated for me, either during or after the conversation. However, my mere presence as an outsider influenced these encounters. Thus, they were not what could be called an internal situation, even though in many instances like group interviews or occasional meetings, an obvious dynamic between the participating refugees did develop. Thus, interactions and conversations within the refugee population are, for me as a researcher, only accessible via representations in the explanations and stories of refugees.⁹ While this is clearly a methodical impairment, the resulting difficulties are abated by the problem addressed in this article, which mainly aims at examining the uses of the 'refugee' label in interactions between refugees and the agencies running the camps.

For a study conducted at two research sites, the wide range of refugee camps worldwide clearly limits plain generalizations. It has to be expected that the uses of the refugee label vary, for example, according to the social background of camp inhabitants, to the length of time a camp has existed, or to the relative prominence of caring versus coercion in the running of a specific camp.¹⁰ However, due to the development of an international refugee regime with specific actors and patterns of action, there are certain typical features of refugee camps, which can be observed at least in most countries of the 'South' (see Voutira/Harrell-Bond 1995: 209-211). Even though results from a qualitative research in two camps cannot be assumed to apply for any settlement, they are relevant in a wider range insofar as they refer to isomorphic elements that refugee camps do share due to their embeddedness in the international refugee regime. In order to specify the origin of the material analyzed here, the two refugee camps where the research was conducted will be briefly introduced.

Meheba Refugee Settlement is situated 70 km from Solwezi in Zambia's North Western Province. The settlement was founded in 1971 to accommodate refugees fleeing the anti-colonial war in Angola. It was successively expanded and covered an area of more than 800 square kilometers at the time of the field research. The refugees are assigned plots for farming as well as housing; they are expected to achieve self-sufficiency after two years (see Agier 2003; Barrett 1998). They grow maize and sweet potatoes for their own use and for the Zambian market, as well as cassava, fruits like lemons and bananas, vegetables such as different types of cabbage, tomatoes, onions, and other field and garden crops. During the field research, over 41,000 refugees, mostly from Angola, lived in Meheba (LWF 2003). Besides the Zambian Government (represented by a Refugee Officer), UNHCR and WPF, there were six NGOs permanently working in Meheba during the field research. The refugee

⁹ This also leads to the question how I was perceived by the refugees. It can only be addressed very briefly here with regard to some points relevant for the analysis. The interpretation of my presence was clearly not homogeneous among the refugees I encountered. However, from their reactions and answers in interviews, it was obvious that most people did not associate me with the agencies working in the camps, at least not with their branches at camp level. At the same time, it was repeatedly assumed that I might have some influence on the camp administration, even though I always tried to explain that this was not the case. To which extent the interviewees could imagine what a university is, depended on their own background. In any case, I was seen as a wealthy person – as white persons usually and plausibly are.

¹⁰ On the relation between these two aspects of refugee camps, see Turner 2006.

population is administratively organized according to their housing plots, in 105 “roads” and eight “zones.” On these levels, they elect refugee representatives or “leaders,” who function as an intermediary link between camp inhabitants and administration and who also solve disputes in the neighborhood. Choosing refugee representatives complies with UNHCR guidelines (see, for example, UNHCR 2000: 61-62); the elections are organized by the administration.¹¹

Nangweshi Refugee Camp is located in Zambia’s Western Province, Shangombo District, close to the Zambezi River. The camp was founded in the beginning of 2000 for a large group of refugees fleeing from Jamba, UNITA’s former headquarters in Angola’s Cuando-Cubango province (Bakewell 2002c).¹² At the time of the field research, 17,225 refugees were living in the main camp and 9,757 in the new extension camp (figures given for 31.07.03 by CARE office Nangweshi). Farmland is not easily available, and the sandy soil in the region is not very fertile. Thus, Nangweshi is organized as a classical ‘camp’ (as opposed to a ‘settlement’ like Meheba), where the families live on plots of 10 x 20 meters and everybody receives food assistance. Compared to Meheba, distances are short, which makes the administration easier to reach and privacy within the community harder to achieve. In addition to the host government and UNHCR, five NGOs were working permanently in Nangweshi at the time of the field research. Refugee representatives are elected on the level of blocks (comprising 50 household plots each) and sections (mostly comprising five blocks). In addition, and unlike Meheba, Nangweshi has a third, top-level refugee representation, which is a council consisting of five persons.

These specific refugee camps were chosen as research sites for theoretical as well as practical reasons: UNHCR and NGOs, as relevant actors of the international refugee regime, are present in both camps. At the time of the field research, they have existed for at least several years, thus patterns of interaction and structures of authority can be expected to have emerged. In addition, the Zambian camps are not ‘over-researched,’ as in the case of some East-African camps. With regard to practical reasons, the refugee camps in Zambia are accessible, I speak at least the administrative language (English), and the country and its camps can be considered as being quite safe for a European researcher.

Meheba and Nangweshi also offer opportunities for comparisons. Both being situated in Zambia, the two camps share the same conditions in terms of national (refugee) law, refugee policies, economic conditions and international relations of the host state. Also, Meheba has a mostly, Nangweshi an almost completely Angolan refugee population. The refugees came to Zambia from different regions and at different times, but for reasons connected to the same conflict.¹³ The camps themselves differ

¹¹ For quotations of refugees in this article, it is stated whether they are refugee leaders or refugees without a formal position, since refugee leaders have more contact with the administration, which clearly can affect their understanding and use of the refugee label.

¹² UNITA (União Nacional para a Independência Total de Angola) was a rebel movement in the liberation war against Portuguese colonial rule and later in the civil war. It was the main military force fighting the MPLA government until UNITA leader Jonas Savimbi was killed in February 2002. Today, UNITA is active as a political party in Angola (for a concise overview over the wars in Angolan, see Hodges 2004: 6-19).

¹³ By far most refugees fled in connection with the civil war between forces of the MPLA government and forces of the rebel party UNITA. A few inhabitants of Meheba, however, left Angola fleeing from the anti-colonial war between 1961 and 1975 (see Hodges 2004: 7-8).

in their spatial lay-out, were established in different decades, and their inhabitants come from different backgrounds. This combination of constant and diverging attributes allows for tracing back different findings to possibly relevant camp characteristics – or excluding them as explanatory factors.

Self-definitions of refugees: “We are sufferers”

Refugee camps are institutions generated by the international refugee regime. As such, they obviously depend on the definition of certain people as ‘refugees.’ The term is crucial on camp level, for formal structures as well as informal patterns of action and interpretation among the agencies and their staff. ‘Refugees’ are the reference point of the agencies’ official and legitimate activities in the camps. On the side of those labeled as ‘refugees,’ however, it cannot be taken for granted that they adopt this administrative category¹⁴ – and if they do, one has to ask what being ‘refugees’ means to them.

In some interviews, there is a clear acknowledgement of the labeling process, for example, when a refugee refers to the term ‘refugee’ as “a title we are given,” which indicates that “we are not at home” (Domingos Kapalo, Meheba, translated from Luvale). Even though such an explicit reference to being affixed a “title” is not the rule, the term is perceivable as an imposed label in linguistic practices during conversations: Within the stories and comments related by the Angolan camp population in, for example, the languages Luvale or Umbundu, people frequently use the English word “refugee” or the Portuguese word “refugiado” when talking about themselves, especially in relation to the camp administration and in comparison to Zambians or to their former life in Angola. The words that their indigenous languages offer for ‘runaways’¹⁵ have negative connotations and the disadvantage of only being understood among speakers of these languages. More importantly, they do not convey the association of ‘being labeled,’ the specific administrative status of being a ‘refugee.’¹⁶

Connected to the label ‘refugee’ is the association of suffering and vulnerability – the former also in terms of the African languages, the latter as an element of the “humanitarian speak” (Harrell-Bond 1999: 159; see Bankoff 2001), which camp inhabitants have come to use as well.

Suffering

‘Suffering’ is the predominant notion when people describe their life as refugees (see also Barrett 1998: 27-35). As an example representing a clear pattern, a group of refugees describes how they would explain life in Meheba Refugee Settlement to friends who have not been there:

¹⁴ See Bakewell (2002a: 50-56), who also shows how the adoption of the refugee label can vary over time. On the refugees’ ambivalent attitude towards the label, see Horst 2006: 14-16.

¹⁵ In Luvale, it is ‘vakakuchina,’ in Umbundu ‘vakwakutila.’

¹⁶ This last distinction also applies to other Luvale and Umbundu terms that can be used for ‘refugees,’ such as ‘olongende’ (Umbundu for people who are on a journey or pilgrims) or ‘matunduke’ (Luvale for people who are not able to reason – in the camp mostly used as a sarcastic word for refugees).

“We shall tell them about life in Meheba, about suffering, about lack of clothing, about hunger, about lack of enough food, enough proteins (...) then we shall also explain to them how difficult it is to go to the clinics because you need to pay for everything (...). Even in this country where we ran to, we are people without dignity. (...) We don’t have our value. (...) Our movement has to do with gate passes, and it’s like we’re in prison” (José Musole, refugee without formal position, Meheba, translated from Luvale).

In this quotation, several dimensions of suffering are mentioned that come up regularly in a great part of the interviews and conversations. Firstly, *food* is considered as insufficient, both in quantity and in quality, especially compared with the food available in Angola (see also Powles 2005). The refugees receiving food rations especially complain about getting nothing but peas as relish,¹⁷ because “nobody is able to eat peas in the morning, at noon, in the evening, the whole week peas, peas, peas, *every* day, no, it is not possible” (Nelito Songwi, refugee leader, Nangweshi, originally in Portuguese).¹⁸ Stomach problems as a result of always eating peas are recurrently mentioned. Secondly, *health services* are repeatedly criticized as being inaccessible or expensive, often related to corruption – normally, basic health care should be free. Apart from material shortcomings, these and other refugees also complain about non-material dimensions of suffering. One is the *feeling of being disrespected* in comparison to nationals, mostly by Zambian, sometimes also by other agency staff. Another crucial point in the experience of suffering is the *limitation of movement*, especially since it reduces the possibilities to earn money or food outside the settlement. All in all, suffering as a refugee is about poverty, about the restriction of movement and about a lack of dignity. Being a refugee is often given as a reason for all kinds of deprivation.¹⁹ As Pastor Mateus, an Angolan refugee in Nangweshi, emphasizes: “As refugee, nothing is sufficient” (originally in Portuguese).

When accounting for the reasons behind that suffering, refugees often refer to their complete powerlessness. They express that they do not have the resources to offer resistance, no matter how they are treated:

“Some of these things are just being done to make us suffer because we are refugees. Being in a foreign country, we don’t have power to argue and talk so much even when things don’t seem to be so good for us” (Edward Chinyemba, refugee leader, Meheba, translated from Luvale).

¹⁷ In Zambian English, ‘relish’ is the part of the meal that contains the taste and mostly, as in this case, also the proteins. In the refugee camps, and elsewhere in Zambia, it is usually served with ‘nshima’, a solid maize porridge, which is the main component of the meal.

¹⁸ The food rations in Nangweshi normally include 400 g maize meal (in Meheba: 450 g maize), 120 g pulses (mostly peas), 10 g salt, and 20 g cooking oil per person per day.

¹⁹ For example, being a refugee is repeatedly given as a sufficient explanation of not having money, among others by Chief Toh Muzala Likonge (refugee without formal position, Meheba, translated from Luvale): “There are some, they are part of the office and they say first pay money before we give you a [repatriation; KI] form. Now we are refugees, then that money, where shall we get it from? It is being heard like that from many who are going there” (here, Chief Likonge is referring to corruption, the repatriation forms are not supposed to be paid for).

In this perspective, suffering is inescapably linked with being a refugee, and it includes the lack of resources with which the deprivation could be resisted. The lack of material, legal, social, physical, and other resources is connected to the term of vulnerability, which is again connected to the refugee experience.

Vulnerability

In a formal sense, the ‘vulnerables’ constitute a specific administrative category of refugees, which entitles them to extra consideration in terms of food, non-food items such as blankets, and attention. These ‘vulnerables’ include, for example, orphans, disabled people, and unaccompanied minors or elderly people (see, for example, UNHCR 2000: 100-106). At the same time, both staff and camp inhabitants describe refugees generally as a vulnerable group. Some agency staff members explicitly see them as being more vulnerable than poor Zambians. Similarly, many refugees characterize themselves as ‘vulnerable,’ adopting the administrative category and using it to describe refugees in general. As Zezito Kaloke, a refugee leader in Nangweshi, expresses it: “As we are refugees, all of us are vulnerable” (originally in Portuguese).

Even though several interviewees describe inequalities between different groups of camp inhabitants, ‘refugee’ is represented as an equalizing category, as a primary identity or “master status” (E. C. Hughes [1945], in: Trotha 1983: 32-33). This use of the label ‘refugee’ as “a description of the whole person leaving no room for other identities” (Bakewell 2002a: 46) is not without controversy, both among refugees and agencies. However, the refugee master status is frequently referred to in a number of situations, often in the context of complaints about unequal treatment of different camp inhabitants. In this interpretation, being a refugee also erases many hierarchies and roles that existed before people fled the war. No matter if a person was for example a soldier or a general in Angola, “once they cross the border, they are just refugees,” as a refugee leader in Nangweshi states. Likewise, traditional Angolan chiefs are subjected to the same suffering as other refugees. Chiefs as well as other refugees give this description:

“Even the Chief, even us, his subjects, are all suffering together, here as refugees, there’s nothing we can do” (José Musole, Meheba, translated from Luvale).

In these examples, all refugees are conceptualized as equal. On the one hand, this happens in the form of *perceiving* an equalized living situation of every refugee in the camp, as expressed in the latter quotation. On the other hand, refugees also *utilize* the idea of equality in complaints regarding special treatment of specific refugees, be it for their advantage (as in the case of ‘vulnerables’ receiving extra support) or their disadvantage (as in the separation of ‘ex-combatants’ from ‘civilians’). It can be noted that the idea of equality, on which the respective comments and demands are based, is a central part of the Western values proliferated within the ‘world polity’ (see Berkovitch 1999: 12).

All in all, the people living as refugees in Zambian camps experience themselves as suffering and powerless. Part of the suffering is exactly the lack of resources, including those means that could help them overcome the state of suffering. However,

in their interactions with the camp administration and in their own biographical explanations, they do utilize the notion of suffering, which is so closely associated with being a refugee in their own as well as the agencies' perspectives.

Utilizing the refugee label

On the one hand, the suffering refugee is a highly institutionalized figure (see Malkki 1995: 8-17). It is taken for granted rather than discussed, and in the everyday life of a refugee camp, the concept is anything but permanently reflected upon. Brought to the site mainly by the agencies of the international refugee regime, everybody in a refugee camp is familiar with the figure of the suffering and vulnerable refugee, without an explicit account being necessary. On the other hand, the camp population employs the concept, in a purposive way. People use it not only for interpreting their own experiences, but also to influence the decision-making processes among the very agencies that stand for the labeling of people as 'refugees.'

Suffering as experience and resource

In a way of framing their own experiences, the camp population links the notion of 'suffering as a refugee' to events prior to becoming registered as refugees. This applies especially to war and fleeing. In many conversations, leaving one's own place is generally associated with suffering. As the Angolan Chief Likonge in Meheba puts it (translated from Luvale): "In running away, there is suffering, not life." While suffering is often ascribed to poverty and powerlessness, many people emphasize that forced migration itself brings suffering. Even if life in a foreign country might be good and "you pass your time swimming in milk ... it is still foreign" (Pastor Mateus, refugee, Nangweshi, originally in Portuguese). In contrast, pre-war life in Angola is depicted as devoid of suffering.²⁰

Overall, suffering is used for interpreting own experiences not only in connection with being a UN-administered refugee camp inhabitant, but also generally in relation to war, internal displacement, and fleeing to Zambia.

However, the adoption of the concept of the 'suffering refugee' does not stop at this point of biographical reflection. The camp population is well aware that the figure of the refugee is at the core of administrative and humanitarian action by the agencies running the camp. These relate to the refugees basically as vulnerable and suffering (see also Turner 2006: 40) and, more specifically, can be expected to view them as bearers of rights and as being entitled to compassion.

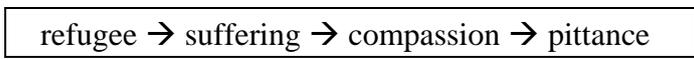
²⁰ According to some narrations, life in Angola meant less suffering even during the war, because it was one's own country: "Life in Angola, when we were in Angola because we had relatives, we didn't see much suffering. As for me, my husband died in the war. He died there. The very children who bore these little ones, I have raised them alone as a widow. But because we were in our country, I did not see any suffering. The suffering I didn't see because we were in our country. I was able to do my business and the body was still well. (...) They were seven male children, but there are two remaining. They all died in the war, not of any sickness. The three female ones, I was with them in the misery of the war. But because we were in our country, we didn't see the suffering. We did not see it. So that is it" (Amelia Kwaha, refugee without formal position, Meheba, translated from Umbundu).

Consequently, the label ‘refugee’ can be adopted as a self-description and, as such, be employed as a resource in the interaction with the camp administration. In the adoption and use of this humanitarian label, two interpretative frames can be distinguished. One is the frame of ‘legalism,’ and the other is the frame of ‘compassionism,’ as I call it.

The suffering refugee in compassionism

When doing research in a refugee camp, the compassionist utilization of being a refugee, and thereby suffering and vulnerable, is likely to be the first one the researcher will encounter – especially if she is a *chindele*, a white person (see also Bakewell 2000: 368).

For instance, when my local research assistant and I were cycling through the settlement shortly after my arrival in Meheba, we met two young men. My assistant knew them, we stopped, and the three of them talked a while in Umbundu. Without understanding anything, I listened to what seemed like an ordinary communication. Then, the two men addressed me, in accented French, and the intonation changed completely. They started squirming, pointing at their stomachs and clothes, literally whining: “Madam, we are suffering, we are hungry, we are refugees, we are starving,” and so on (originally in French). I was surprised, since I had just heard them talk in very normal voices – and they knew I had heard them. But obviously they thought presenting themselves as suffering refugees had to evoke my compassion, from which they could benefit in some form. This presentation of the ‘suffering refugee’ was so clearly of a staged character that the purposive use of the label ‘refugee’ could be observed in an almost distilled way. It was, however, just one of countless similar incidents in the interactions between refugees and visitors or camp administration. Within the frame of compassionism, the refugee label is employed on the basis of the highly institutionalized connection that associates the figure of the refugee with a state of suffering and being in need. This linkage is not based on the ‘refugee’ label as a statutory definition. Compassionism does not draw on the legal status of refugees. The ‘suffering refugee’ appears as a cultural rather than a legal figure. This cultural figure can be expected as an interpreting scheme among virtually all agency staff and visitors in a refugee camp. Thus, refugees intend to trigger the almost reflex sequence:



In this chain of implications, being a refugee holds the notion of suffering, and thus evokes compassion, which results in an urge to give the suffering refugee a pittance. This sequence matches patterns of interpretation among the staff members in the camps. Especially for expatriates, the wish to help vulnerable human beings is among the most recurrent motives to go “on mission” (as one says in humanitarian speak) in a refugee camp. However, the overwhelming number of suffering people in the camps reduces the chances that an individual receives support from staff on the basis of compassion or pity. In addition, distrust towards the stories told by refugees makes staff members less willing to give informal material support out of compassion. Among the few exceptions to be observed during the field study were two mentally handicapped young men in Meheba, who were known to beg only when they were hungry and, most importantly, who were seen as intellectually unable to *utilize* their

vulnerability in a tactical way. These two received food and other items from staff members quite regularly, partly from the staff's private money.

Confronted with tens of thousands of refugees, staff members mostly withdraw to legalistic arguments declining requests for help out of compassion. For example, they would explain that yes, they have seen that an applicant is an amputee, and hence vulnerable, since he just took off his prosthesis in the office, unbiddenly showing the stump of his leg – but no, unfortunately they just cannot give him a blanket because the blankets are earmarked by the donors and to be given only to returnees to Angola. In other words, they would like to help, but they are not allowed to.

The suffering refugee in legalism

This legalistic reasoning is, of course, no monopoly of the administration. Rather, it must be assumed that the staff's legalistic use of the refugee label contributes to the same utilization by the refugees, just as the concept of 'refugee' is reproduced and spread by the administrative practices in the camps. From the refugees' point of view, on the one hand, having no rights is part of the suffering many people describe. The succinct formulation by Janete Aswelela represents many similar statements: "Because us, we are refugees, we have no rights" (refugee without formal position, Nangweshi, translated from Umbundu). On the other hand, during years or decades of interaction with the administration, the camp populations have understood that the humanitarian label 'refugee' is connected with legal rights.

The following, more extended quotation from a group of refugees in Meheba can serve to explicate how camp inhabitants use the frame of legalism. The refugees cited here were in a dispute with the administration because they had worked on a road within the settlement and were not being paid for that. While the administration stated that it had been agreed that the work was to be voluntary and unpaid, the refugees had expected to be given something in return. When the refugees requested to meet with UNHCR and government representatives, and the staff members did not show up, a group of refugees blocked the gate of the office compound. From there, the situation escalated, refugees smashed office windows while paramilitary police fired tear gas against the crowd – the chronological order remaining unclear. On the same day in the afternoon, some of the refugees involved explain how they see the situation.²¹

- | | |
|----|--|
| 01 | Because we are refugees, we ran away from our country, we will not do any work for free. |
| 02 | We are sufferers. |
| 03 | As you can see. |
| 04 | What are we wearing. (...) |

²¹ Originally, the quotation is in Luvale, the local research assistant translated it into English during the conversation. To avoid misunderstandings, the word "freely", which he used in the meaning of "without payment," was replaced by "for free." For the same reason, the word "tropicals" was replaced by "flip-flops." This specific interview developed an almost manifesto-like character, with the refugees bringing, after a while, their own tape recorder to record their statements and explanations of the events. During the field research, it was the only time this happened.

- 05 And we said [to the administration; KI] (...) If you insisted and clearly told us that you were to do this work voluntarily, we wouldn't have done it.
- 06 And no refugee is allowed to do any work for free. (...)
- 07 Did you make us work on the road as slaves would, just because we left our countries and came here.
- 08 (Like?) in Egypt where the Israelites were made to work for free.
- 09 We are also very surprised.
- 10 The Government making people work for free. (...)
- 11 [We said] call the [Refugee Officer] and [the UNHCR Field Officer], we want to talk to them.
- 12 If it is allowed that a refugee should be asked to do work for free.
- 13 If not, then give us access to the telephone so that we communicate to Geneva.
- 14 So that if Geneva responds that yes it is allowed to ask a refugee to do work for free, then we will stop and end here. (...)
- 15 We said well, we ran away from war. We ran away from bullets. And that's why we are here as refugees. Now coming here, we are coming to claim our money, we are still being threatened with bullets. Now is it that the war, the bullets we ran away from our country, are still with us here?
- 16 Then there was no reason for us to run away from our country.
- 17 We thought of coming to Zambia so that we are safeguarded.
- 18 Meanwhile it's the same thing. (...)
- 19 We are very angry; we are very annoyed; even as at now, we are not happy. (...)
- 20 Now the question is are the paramilitary here so that they guard us or are they here to shoot at us or kill us. (...)
- 21 Because in their country, they have no regard for us as refugees, they look at us as foolish people. (...)
- 22 We are suffering very much. There are many things that are coming for us that we are not being given.
- 23 Look at our feet. What are we wearing, we are wearing flip-flops. (...)
- 24 We have seen that there is nobody who is taking care of us.
- 25 We are not being guarded. They are just making us suffer.

In line 1 of this quotation, the speaker refers to their being refugees as the reason why they will not work without payment. In the same line, 'refugees' are defined as those who ran away from their country. Immediately, in line 2, the speaker identifies the group as "sufferers," and he refers to their clothing as visible proof (line 3/4). The reference to suffering might be either a characteristic of being a refugee or a reason for not working without payment. The next two lines show that it is probably the former, because they state another reason for not wanting to work without payment: they would have refused it because "no refugee is allowed to do any work for free." This argument, and the legalistic frame of interpretation it accompanies, proves to be crucial in the refugees' perspectives on the situation, as the following passages show.

In line 7 and 8, the speakers compare their situation to that of the biblical Israelites, who were treated like slaves in Egypt. In the following lines, the refugees express the

opinion that their legal rights forbid the government to enslave them, in terms of making them work without payment – and they link these rights explicitly to “Geneva.” The counterpart with whom they want to communicate there is, without much doubt, the headquarters of UNHCR. Perceived as the guardian of international refugee law, UNHCR Geneva is to decide if “it is allowed to ask a refugee to do work for free” – and if it is, the road workers will obey and concede. This shows that the refugees are aware that the legal concept of ‘refugee’ is only transmitted, but not invented by the agencies at camp or national level; the suzerainty of its interpretation is seen as lying with UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, this is, at the center of an international organization.

In the following lines of the quotation, the legal rights of refugees, which they feel were violated, are further elaborated with regard to the shooting of tear gas.²² Having run away from bullets is what made them refugees – here, they revive the definition given in line 1. They supposed Zambia to be a country of refuge where their lives would be safeguarded. In line 20 they pose a question about the mandate of the paramilitary police in the camp: Is it to guard the refugees or to shoot them? With regard to the legal basis for the paramilitary’s presence, the question is rhetorical: The speaker claims the right to be guarded. However, he elaborates that the actions of the paramilitary police differ from their legal mandate. Because of having “no regard for us as refugees” (line 21), neither the police nor anybody else is taking care of the refugees. “They” are just making them suffer – the encompassing pronoun “they” is typical for denoting the whole refugee administration, as unfathomable as it is for many refugees. While the context makes clear that this suffering also refers to being shot at, the speaker again points out their poverty, this time evidenced by the flip-flops they wear instead of proper shoes.

In a short remark in line 22, the speaker brings up an issue that is repeatedly mentioned in the interviews: there are “things coming for” the refugees that they “are not being given.” This refers to another perceived violation of the refugees’ legal rights: the administration is accused of embezzling donations meant for the refugees, and this corruption contributes to the poverty suffered by the refugees. Just as the shooting, the misappropriation of goods is a way of ‘not taking care’ of the refugees. However, they are legally entitled to be taken care of.

Finally, allow me to return to line 19 to emphasize the difference between compassionism and legalism as frames of interpretation. The speaker verbalizes something that was very obvious in the tone the unpaid road workers used to express themselves: “We are very angry; we are very annoyed; (...) we are not happy.” Within the frame of legalism, help when in a situation of suffering is an entitlement, which the refugee administration is obliged to fulfill. The open anger and the demanding attitude of the disappointed road workers contrasts sharply with the precatory moaning shown by the two refugees described earlier. Since these were relating to the interpretational frame of compassionism, help to alleviate their suffering would have represented unsolicited magnanimity. In legalism, support is demanded. In compassionism, it is begged for.

²² One day after the riot, the complaining group of road workers had found a rifle cartridge and claimed that the police had shot at the crowd with live bullets. This, however, remains arguable; at least to me, the cartridge looked definitely older than one day. In addition, the type of ammunition in question is also used for game hunting and it is possible that it was left behind by poachers.

Thus, while the assumed reaction sequence in the frame of compassionism links refugee, suffering, compassion, and pittance, in the frame of legalism it is:

refugee → vulnerability → legal rights → fulfillment of
claims

The institutionalized figure of the refugee, as the administrative and legal point of reference for the international refugee regime and its agencies in the camps, is associated with a specific vulnerability. This vulnerability, which is derived from the situation of not being protected by the home country, is the justification for the legal rights connected to being a refugee. When people advance their refugee status to enforce the fulfillment of these rights, they expect to receive the benefits they are entitled to. Here, suffering appears as a failure of the camp administration's legal obligations.

The frame of legalism refers directly to the international refugee regime, its codified norms, institutionalized rules and legitimating values. Hence, one should think that this frame could provide a common ground for refugees and agency staff members alike and thus allow for regulating decisions in a refugee camp to mutual satisfaction. To a certain degree, this is actually the case. However, there are some obstacles, only one of which is to be addressed here. The accusation of corruption in line 22 of the quotation is a symptom of the general, floating distrust that characterizes refugee camps as institutions (see also Daniel/Knudsen (eds.) 1995; Turner 2004; Lammers 2005). In the quotation, a widespread distrust on the side of the refugees towards the administration becomes manifest in the allegation that the administration cheats the refugees out of the support that they are legally entitled to. On the part of the agency staff, however, there is a distrust towards the refugees that is at least as profound (see Horst 2006: 14). They are commonly accused of gifting material advantages utilizing formal rights. These alleged – and certainly also practiced (see Kibreab 2004; Harrell-Bond 2004) – ways of exploiting legal regulations for personal or the family's benefit include, for example, organizing an additional 'temporary card,' which is the basis for obtaining food rations, or passing off a family's grandmother as an unaccompanied elderly person, who is administratively considered as 'vulnerable' and thus entitled to additional material support.

The refugees' use of legalistic interpretations as a resource is further limited by the allocation of specific knowledge in the camps. Often, camp inhabitants do know that they have legal rights *as* refugees, but they are not sure about the exact content of these rights.²³

Beyond suffering

In retracing how the figure of the suffering refugee is utilized in the frames of compassionism and legalism, it becomes obvious that also refugees, as an epitome of powerlessness, adopt and use humanitarian labels such as that of the 'refugee.'

²³ Repeatedly, refugees asked during interviews how a certain problem was to be interpreted legally, whom they could ask about their rights, and where they could turn to in order to enforce them. Also in the situation described above, the road workers asked me if I thought it was right, if it was legitimate that refugees worked without being paid.

However, this utilization of the refugee label as a resource, which is focused on in this article, should not suggest that there are no other ways in which camp inhabitants interpret their own situation. At least two other patterns of meaning shall be outlined briefly, which go beyond suffering.

In your friend's womb

The place of refuge is not always depicted as a place of distress. In many conversations, refugees emphasize their thankfulness to Zambia for receiving them when they fled from war. Thus, the place of refuge is “an area where one can suffer but where one does not die of bullets,” as refugee Hilario Sania from Nangweshi puts it (originally in Portuguese).

This thankfulness seems to be related to a feeling of being a guest.²⁴ In Umbundu as well as in Luvale culture, a guest encountering hospitality is supposed to be grateful and not to complain about limitations. As a guest, one does not demand benefits as if they were one's unquestionable rights – on the contrary, as a guest one is modest, low key, grateful, and content with what one is offered.

This interpretation of the refugee situation seems to be more prominent in the *internal* discourse among camp inhabitants, when compared to interactions with the administration. It becomes manifest in an Umbundu proverb, which is often used in communications between refugees, for example when they talk among themselves about having to accept camp rules, such as the prohibition of cutting trees in the surrounding bush. This proverb says:

“When you are in your friend's womb, don't stretch your legs.”

This interpretation of the living situation in a refugee camp is accompanied by an acceptance of limitations. At the same time, the proverb definitely refers to a visit and applies only to that period of time. Sooner or later, one has to stretch one's legs again. When the saying is applied to being a refugee, this state is also seen as temporary – which corresponds with the way the international refugee regime views refugee situations. In the interpretation of being guest, the restrictions associated with this condition can be tolerated during this undetermined, but limited length of time.

Moreover, in the way the interpretation is connected to the culturally appropriate behavior as a guest, limitations and suffering can be accepted *without* feeling disrespected. As they are related to being a guest, they do not have to be traced back to a lack of respect. This is a possibility that the frame of legalism hardly allows for. The remark of the road workers that the Zambian police have no regard for them and look at them as foolish people (line 21) shows how suffering in a legalistic interpretation, seen as a denial of rights, is accompanied by a feeling of being disrespected.

²⁴ One of the above mentioned Umbundu words used for refugee, ‘olongende’ (see footnote 16), is also connected to being a guest. During a journey, the traveler will pass through communities where people live and has to expect being a guest somewhere, more specifically an unexpected guest for an unknown amount of time – just as refugees mostly are.

Being at home

Finally, some refugees, especially those who have been in Zambia for a long time, no longer experience life in the camp as an exceptional state. It is no limbo, no wait mode.²⁵ As Domingos Kapalo, who fled from Angola in 1966, expresses it: “Life in Meheba has become part of us, so it’s like, it’s a home, it’s life no longer in an alien land, but life at home” (translated from Luvale). Also Nene Muswema, an old woman living in Meheba since the early seventies, sees Zambia as her home:

“I am here in Zambia. Zambia is my country because it is where God has safeguarded my life, which was about to be taken away by the soldiers who invaded my home with guns in the vehicle wanting to shoot at me and kill me” (translated from Chokwe).

She even insists that she would not find the place where she lived in Angola. This definitely disqualifies it as ‘home,’ since intimate knowledge and belonging are closely connected:

“Thinking of going back, I will not know the place. I will not know even a bit of that place. If I went looking for the place (...), I would not know it.”

With the perception of the place of refuge as home, life there becomes normality. Difficulties are no longer seen as an exceptional suffering attributed to the exceptional state of being a refugee. Consequently, problems are then perceived as something one has to deal with independently, rather than begging for compassion or insisting on legal rights *as* refugees. This linkage between being a refugee and expecting help becomes obvious in the way Justina Kuwaha describes how life will be when she is back in Angola, no longer a refugee:

“[T]here you have already reached your home. Who will you complain to? Nobody. You will complain to your own hand only with your heart, so that I work, so that I find a living” (refugee without formal position, Meheba, translated from Luvale).

Accordingly, the interpretation of the camp as a home does not allow for using ‘refugeeness’ as a resource in interactions with the camp administration – be it within legalism or within compassionism as a frame of reference. However, perceiving the place of refuge as a home possibly allows for something else. Alfredo Chasanya emphasizes that only when you are at home, “the heart and the brain will be settled” (refugee without formal position, Nangweshi, translated from Umbundu).²⁶ Hence, if

²⁵ Cases like these should be kept in mind when refugee camps are associated with a state of limbo, as in some contributions to refugee studies (see Bousquet 1987). However, the refugee regime indeed conceptualizes camps as preliminary places and refugee situations as temporary, to be superseded by “durable solutions” (Chimni (ed.) 2000: 330-389). This holds true even though, more often than not, refugee situations last many years (see Crisp 2005). When an idea of temporariness is maintained through decades, the concept of limbo is certainly plausible.

²⁶ Analyzing the case of an Angolan refugee in Meheba, Julia Powles (2002) sheds light on how ‘home’ can be constructed differently and how the perception where one is ‘at home’ can change in the course of a biography.

camp inhabitants abandon legalism and compassionism as interpretational frames for being a 'refugee,' they will lose a resource in camp politics. This, however, is not to say that they are necessarily at an overall disadvantage. It is not the task of a sociological analysis to identify *one* correct or most profitable interpretation. Rather, it must be emphasized that while the 'refugee' label can be utilized in different ways, there are also definitions of the situation as a camp inhabitant other than defining oneself, and acting as, a 'refugee.'

While people classified as refugees practice different options of how to define their situation, one has to keep in mind that these possibilities are not equally available in all cases. Especially the definition of the refuge as a new 'home' is limited by the readiness of host societies to allow them to settle there. John Stoessinger (1956: 6) noted accordingly: "The characteristic of the refugee, loss of home, has ample precedent. What distinguishes the refugee of the twentieth century is the immense difficulty, and often impossibility, of finding a new home." The development of international refugee policies since this statement was made five decades ago has further increased these difficulties (see Chimni 2004; Crisp 2006).

Legalism and compassionism in a statutory regime: refugees of the world polity?

This contribution analyzed the emic uses of the label 'refugee' by the inhabitants of refugee camps. The legal label is the core of the comprehensive institutional regime that is dealing with 'refugee' situations worldwide. To understand the processes of diffusion, cultural adoptions, changes and bypasses of such institutional concepts, it is crucial to study their varying interpretations and uses on the micro-level. The article contributed towards this aim by examining how people who are administratively defined as 'refugees' understand and employ that label.

Acknowledging the worldwide proliferation of similar codified norms, concepts, and rules, institutionalist studies on 'world polity' claim to observe what they call institutional isomorphism. This diagnosis does not, however, refer to the micro-level. When one considers variations in the ways institutional rules are enacted, ignored or used tactically, 'world polity' research leaves a desideratum. On the one hand, it helps to explain where the institutionalized legal and cultural figures employed on the micro-level come from and how they are proliferated via national states and organizations (see also Hasse/Krücken 2005: 192-95). Thus, institutional theory sheds light on how international organizations, in particular UNHCR and NGOs, contribute to transmitting cognitive elements of the international refugee regime to the micro-level (see, more generally, Zucker 1988). On the other hand, the analysis above shows that the ways in which institutionalized concepts and rules are employed feature great variations. On the micro-level, one clearly cannot speak of institutional isomorphism, even in a narrow empirical case like the one at hand.

Thus, the article investigates the impact and uses of the legal label 'refugee' on the micro-level, in interactions and interpretations in refugee situations. As it was shown, the use of the refugee label as a legal concept embedded in a wider statutory regime, which equips the label with specific rights, is only one way of employing the concept. In this case, it is interpreted in the frame of 'legalism,' with the reasoning that being a refugee implies vulnerability, which again implies having certain rights, the fulfillment of which is then claimed. In other instances, however, camp inhabitants

utilize the refugee label in the interpretative frame of ‘compassionism.’ By doing this, they appeal to the well-established connection between being a refugee and suffering. They expect that suffering will evoke the compassion of the persons encountered, which should be followed by receiving a pittance from them. While these different utilizations of being a ‘refugee’ are encountered in many situations in daily camp life, there are also inhabitants who, in their self-definitions, do not relate to this institutional label offered by the international refugee regime. In one perspective, the situation of encampment in a refugee settlement is seen as being a guest, which allows for a temporary acceptance of limitations. In another interpretation, some inhabitants eventually cease to define themselves as ‘refugees’ and the camp as a temporary refuge, even though the legal categorization, as well as the accordant administrative activities, might continue. This part of the camp population sees its living space in the country of refuge as their permanent home; the ‘refugee’ label takes a back seat, apart from specific situations where it becomes administratively relevant.

These four modes of interpretation can all be found frequently among camp refugees. However, on the basis of the research material at hand, it is not possible to link each interpretational frame to specific categories of refugees which are distinguished by structural properties or positions. Even for the last perspective described, a longer period of time spent in the camp seems to be a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for regarding it as home. As likely as not, the different interpretational frames are employed due to specific contexts, with specific persons using different perspectives in different situations. The question of what conditions this choice has to remain open at this point, even though the compassionist and the legalistic frames are apparently more prominent in interactions with the administration than in internal discourses, while the interpretations of being a guest or being at home become more prominent among camp inhabitants themselves.

The different modes of interpreting and employing the ‘refugee’ label – or of discarding it – show that institutionalized rules do not simply determine the micro-level top-down. If one does not retrench behind the notion of ‘decoupling,’ one can study how actors actively employ and modify concepts offered by an institutional regime. In this respect, the conclusions of this analysis dissent from the view of John W. Meyer and his colleagues, according to whom action on the micro-level is an “enactment of broad institutional scripts rather than a matter of internally generated and autonomous choice, motivation, and purpose” (Meyer/Boli/Thomas 1987: 13). In the perspective adopted here, actors actively mobilize and manipulate institutional rules and symbols as resources to influence administrative decisions and camp politics, as well as to interpret their own experiences. This approach is also proposed by institutional scholars like Roger Friedland and Robert Alford (1991: 254). Without a doubt, the choices and understandings involved are not “autonomous” in the sense of being independent from the institutional regime in which they take place. The construction of identities like the ‘refugee,’ however, is obviously not entirely determined by a ‘world polity’ on the macro-level or its carriers, such as the United Nations. Their potency of controlling the micro-level is limited.²⁷ Hence, rather than conceptualizing the functioning of institutional regimes as a top-down process, interactions and mutual influences between different levels should be taken into consideration. As Zucker puts it:

²⁷ This might be especially true for refugee camps with their structurally heterogeneous allocation of knowledge, which is typical for ‘bush bureaucracies’ (see Inhetveen 2006b).

“Institutional regularities arise on the macrolevel (...), with some replication at the microlevel (qualified at least by loose-coupling, at most by actual resistance to the change); institutional regularities arise on the microlevel, with some generalizing to the macrolevel” (Zucker 1988: 42).

Phenomena on the micro-level do not only depart from institutional scripts because of being flawed or incomplete reproductions. Rather, there are specific generative processes on the micro-level. As Zucker (1988: 41) notes, “many aspects of microorder undermines (sic) the macroorder”. In particular, this can be expected to apply to social settings featuring high cultural, organizational, and institutional heterogeneity, like refugee camps. Here, the plurality of interpretations and utilizations of the ‘refugee’ label indicates an active and refractory functioning of the micro-level, rather than a mere enactment of ‘world culture.’²⁸

Accordingly, interpreting the ‘refugee’ label in the frame of ‘legalism’ appears as one way of dealing with a legal categorization offered by macro-level institutions, but this does by no means come about in a taken-for-granted manner. This mode of interpretation draws upon one dimension of the label ‘refugee,’ which is its juristic character, whereas the frame of ‘compassionism’ relies on another characteristic, its cultural connection with suffering. Thus, the legal character of codified definitions in international law will possibly, but not necessarily, resurface on the micro-level and be employed in self-definitions and strategies of social actors.

²⁸ The question of an independent role of the micro-level is also addressed, in a different manner, in the debate about the relation between global and local; for a concise statement, see Trotha 2005.

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