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## Ali Wyne on The Economic Life of Refugees by Karen Jacobsen. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005. 131pp.

Ali Wyne  
*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

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**Abstract**

A review of:

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**Keywords**

Human rights, Refugees, Economics

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**The Economic Life of Refugees by Karen Jacobsen. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2005. 131pp.**

Karen Jacobsen advances the novel (and heartening) thesis that refugees can be and often are independent economic actors notwithstanding the exceptionally difficult circumstances in which they find themselves. Her first chapter, while not directly relevant to the book's argument, is of great importance insofar as it illuminates the subtleties and the principal characteristics of protracted refugee situations. For example, she discusses the numerous categories of displaced persons, including those that cross borders, namely refugees. The core of her text (Chapters 2 – 6) addresses the economic livelihoods of many types of refugees: those who settle in camps; those who move to cities within the country of first asylum; and those who end up relocating far away from their home country. How do they adapt? What factors facilitate and constrain their adjustment? What effect do they command on their host community, and vice versa? How is it that many are able to become entrepreneurs? The remainder of Jacobsen's book explores how international and local nongovernmental organizations can provision humanitarian assistance in the service of the settlement and advancement of refugees.

Jacobsen properly notes that the refugee's hardship does not end once he or she has found a place to resettle; in many ways, it begins at that point. She duly offers the reader a comprehensive story of displacement, beginning with the events that serve as the initial stimulus for individuals to leave their homelands, and concludes with accounts of their attempts to rebuild their lives.

However, The Economic Life of Refugees is deficient on several counts, three of which merit particular attention.

First, Jacobsen focuses disproportionately on African refugees, with countries such as Côte D'Ivoire, Zambia, and South Africa each eliciting detailed discussion. While this emphasis is understandable, one questions the applicability of her conclusions to other countries or regions. The United Nations has recognized that the international community's focus on high-profile emergencies like those in the Balkans and Sudan, for example, have detracted from attention to the majority of the world's refugees that are found elsewhere (on this topic see Ron Redmond's article, part of the UN's "[Ten Stories the World Should Hear More About](#)" series.).

Second, it is unclear why she chooses to not address the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs), who, by her own admission, represent a "larger problem" and have far less access to community safeguards or humanitarian assistance (17, 91).

Third, Jacobsen's model of refugee assistance is problematic. She asserts, quite reasonably, that "host countries should designate a zone of legal residence for asylum-seekers" and that "all asylum-seekers should be accorded the economic and social rights assigned to them in the relevant international charters and laws" (93-94). Such idealistic precepts will not convince most readers of her proposals, especially given the gravity of the problem that Jacobsen seeks to mitigate. Even though she admits that few governments have implemented these policy prescriptions, she concludes that her model is "feasible and politically viable" (100, 105). This conspicuous contradiction leaves her reassurance of the model's efficacy suspect.

An expanded edition of her book (should one be forthcoming) would have to address these concerns. Ideally it would also discuss two recent events: (1) the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia in December 2004, creating two million refugees, and (2) the ongoing crisis in Iraq, where sectarian strife has displaced four million individuals ([almost half of whom are IDPs](#)). While natural disasters and military intervention are admittedly uncommon sources of large-scale displacement, they are of critical importance, as the above figures suggest.

To be sure, Jacobsen's account requires considerable strengthening. Nonetheless, she is to be commended for writing a scholarly book that aims to reach “non-experts,” including undergraduate and graduate students taking courses or doing research on forced migration” (vii). It is too often the case that activists are uninformed and scholars cynical. As with any global issue, improving the welfare of the world's refugees will require a marriage of the two communities' insights.

Ali Wyne, Undergraduate Student  
*Massachusetts Institute of Technology*  
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