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PROGRESSIVE LEGAL FRAMEWORKS AND SOCIAL VALIDATION: NEGOTIATING SUSTAINABLE REFUGEE INTEGRATION

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ABSTRACT

Uganda's refugee policies are widely recognized as among the most progressive in the world, granting refugees rights to work, move freely, and access services. Yet, the lived experience of integration reveals a persistent gap between legal entitlement and social acceptance. This article examines how institutional frameworks and host community perceptions jointly shape refugee belonging. While laws provide formal inclusion, integration ultimately depends on social validation, trust, and recognition within host societies. Using Uganda as a case, the study highlights how progressive legal frameworks alone cannot secure legitimacy if host narratives remain sceptical or exclusionary. The analysis advances a conceptual reframing of refugee integration, positioning it as a negotiated process between institutional guarantees and community acceptance. By foregrounding the interplay of law and social validation, the article contributes to theory building on refugee belonging and offers insights for policymakers seeking durable solutions to displacement.

Keywords: Refugee integration, Legal frameworks, Social validation, Belonging, integration

INTRODUCTION

Refugee integration has often been framed as a matter of rights and entitlement. International conventions and national policy frameworks have expanded the legal recognition of refugees, granting access to employment, education, and freedom of movement (Government of Uganda, 2006; UNHCR, 2024). Yet exclusionary outcomes persist, raising a central question: why does legal generosity fail to secure meaningful belonging?

Uganda illustrates this contradiction clearly. Its Refugees Act and Regulations are widely celebrated as among the most supportive globally (World Bank & UNHCR, 2023), guaranteeing rights that should enable full participation. Yet refugees continue to encounter barriers to labor market inclusion and social legitimacy (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2023; Bjørkhaug et al., 2025). This disconnection between entitlement and lived exclusion exposes what may

be termed the Policy Perception Contradiction: expansive legal rights coexist with restrictive host attitudes that undermine their realization.

Existing literature has emphasized institutional design, macroeconomic impact, and policy reform as primary determinants of integration (Koopmans et al., 2022; Saleh, 2021). While valuable, these approaches often assume that statutory recognition translates directly into social acceptance. They overlook the informal regulatory role of host community perceptions, narratives of competition, mistrust, burden, and contingent acceptance that mediate the boundaries of inclusion (Adepoju, 2022; Crush & Ramachandran, 2023; Simiyu, 2024).

This article advances a conceptual response by introducing Negotiated Belonging Theory, a framework that reconceptualizes refugee

integration as a socially mediated process in which belonging is continuously negotiated between refugees and host populations. Rather than treating inclusion as the automatic outcome of legal entitlement, the theory foregrounds perception, trust, and relational validation as structural variables shaping integration outcomes (Heath & Cheung, 2021; Brücker et al., 2021; Yuval Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2006).

By articulating the Policy Perception Contradiction and developing Negotiated Belonging Theory, this work reframes refugee integration beyond legalism. It argues that legal frameworks, while necessary, are insufficient to guarantee belonging. Integration must be understood as contingent and negotiated, operating at the intersection of law, perception, and social legitimacy.

Refugee integration and the limits of legal inclusion

Legal integration approaches

Legal frameworks have long been treated as the cornerstone of refugee protection. Rights based models assume that statutory recognition of employment, education, and mobility will translate into substantive inclusion (Government of Uganda, 2006; UNHCR, 2024). This legalist paradigm reflects a normative belief that law is both a guarantor and equalizer. Yet comparative evidence demonstrates that rights often coexist with exclusionary practices, revealing the insufficiency of legal reform alone (World Bank & UNHCR, 2023; Strang & Ager, 2010). The Ugandan case illustrates this tension: expansive entitlements exist on paper, but refugees remain confined to informal labor markets and peripheral social spaces (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2023). This disconnect underscores that law establishes eligibility but does not secure legitimacy. Legal generosity, therefore, is necessary but not sufficient; it provides the framework of entitlement without resolving the relational dynamics that determine belonging.

Social capital and relational embeddedness

Beyond law, integration has been theorized through social capital and relational embeddedness. Scholars argue that networks, trust, and reciprocity mediate access to opportunity (Koopmans et al., 2022; Heath & Cheung, 2021). These perspectives highlight the importance of interpersonal ties, but they often understate the structural role of host perceptions as gatekeeping mechanisms. Trust deficits and relational distance drawing bold lines of “we” and “them”, are not incidental but function as informal regulatory systems shaping belonging (Brücker et al., 2021; Anthias, 2006). In contexts of scarcity, host communities may perceive refugee networks as competitive rather than complementary, reinforcing exclusionary boundaries. Thus, social capital is not neutral; it is mediated by perception, and its capacity to generate inclusion depends on whether host communities validate refugee participation.

Recognition, boundaries, and contingent acceptance

Recognition theory emphasizes the symbolic dimension of integration, arguing that legitimacy depends on acknowledgment by others (Honneth, 1995; Yuval Davis, 2011). Refugees are frequently positioned as outsiders whose membership is contingent upon host acceptance (Adepoju, 2022; Crush & Ramachandran, 2023). Contingent acceptance emerges when humanitarian sympathy coexists with restrictive boundaries, producing partial inclusion rather than full membership (Bjørkhaug et al., 2025; Pfaff Czarnecka, 2013). This dynamic reveals that belonging is not automatically conferred by law but negotiated through moral and cultural validation. Host perceptions of refugees as burdens or rivals shape the symbolic boundaries of inclusion, determining whether rights are recognized in practice. Recognition, therefore, is not merely symbolic; it produces material consequences by shaping access to employment, services, and mobility.

The unresolved puzzle of belonging

Despite these insights, a conceptual gap remains. Existing approaches either privilege legal entitlement or emphasize social capital without systematically theorizing the interaction between law and perception. The unresolved puzzle is how refugee legal frameworks designed to guarantee inclusion continue to produce exclusionary outcomes. This contradiction points to the need for a new framework that explains belonging as a negotiated process shaped simultaneously by institutional recognition and host community perceptions. By situating perception as a structural variable alongside law, we can move beyond legalist and network-based paradigms to capture the contingent and relational nature of refugee integration.

The policy perception contradiction

Rights on paper, exclusion in practice

Uganda's refugee laws grant rights to work, study, and move freely (Government of Uganda, 2006; World Bank & UNHCR, 2023). In principle, these rights should allow refugees to participate fully in society. Yet many remain in informal jobs and face resistance from host communities (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2023; Bjørkhaug et al., 2025). This shows that rights written into law do not automatically lead to belonging. Similar findings in Europe and Asia confirm that even strong legal protections fail when host attitudes remain negative (Anthias, 2006; Yuval Davis, 2011; Wimmer, 2013). The contradiction is clear: law provides entitlement, but social acceptance determines whether those entitlements are realized.

Host perceptions as everyday regulation

Host perceptions act as an informal system of control. They determine whether legal rights are respected or undermined in practice. These perceptions are not surface attitudes but deeply rooted narratives that shape everyday interactions. Competition narratives portray refugees as rivals for scarce jobs. Even when legally entitled to work, refugees are often confined to insecure or low

paying occupations because employers fear community backlash or displacement of nationals (Simiyu, 2024; Owusu, 2023). This perception transforms legal rights into restricted opportunities, reinforcing economic vulnerability.

Mistrust undermines the credibility of refugee documentation and identity. Valid permits are frequently doubted, leading to reluctance to formalize contracts or recognize qualifications (Brücker et al., 2021). This skepticism pushes refugees into informal labor, not because of legal prohibition but because their legitimacy is questioned. Mistrust thus functions as a gatekeeping mechanism, eroding the value of legal entitlements.

Burden discourses frame refugees as drains on services such as schools and health care. Even when refugees contribute economically, these perceptions persist, casting them as dependents rather than contributors (Crush & Ramachandran, 2023). This narrative delegitimizes their participation in broader social and economic life, showing how perception can override material reality.

Contingent acceptance tolerates refugees only within boundaries defined by hosts. They may be welcomed as aid recipients but face rejection when they move into urban areas, compete in formal markets, or assert political agency (Bjørkhaug et al., 2025; Pfaff Czarnecka, 2013). This produces a fragile form of belonging that can be withdrawn at any moment.

Together, these narratives operate as parallel systems of regulation. They constitute a shadow regime of integration, one that functions alongside and often in tension with formal policy frameworks. Legal rights may establish eligibility, but host perceptions determine legitimacy. The result is a dual system in which refugees are formally included yet substantively excluded, producing the contradiction at the center of refugee integration in policy frameworks that appear generous on paper but remain restrictive in practice.

Why rights alone do not secure belonging

Uganda's case demonstrates that legal rights are necessary but not enough. Rights provide the framework of entitlement, but they do not guarantee that refugees will be accepted as legitimate members of society. Belonging depends on recognition by host communities, and without this recognition, rights remain symbolic rather than practical.

This gap between entitlement and lived reality is not unique to Uganda. Studies across Europe, Asia, and Africa show that even strong legal protections fail when host perceptions remain negative (Yuval Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2006; Wimmer, 2013). Legal frameworks can open doors, but host communities often decide whether those doors remain accessible. Employers may refuse to hire, schools may hesitate to enroll, and neighbors may resist social interaction, even when the law permits all of these. In this way, perception becomes a structural force that regulates inclusion.

The failure of rights to secure belonging challenges models that focus only on institutions or economic outcomes (Koopmans et al., 2022; Saleh, 2021). It shows that exclusion is not simply the result of weak enforcement or bureaucratic inefficiency. Instead, exclusion is actively produced through boundary making by host communities. Narratives of competition, mistrust, burden, and contingent acceptance operate as informal systems of regulation, shaping everyday interactions and determining whether refugees are seen as legitimate participants.

Negotiated belonging theory (NBT)

The persistence of exclusion within generous refugee laws requires a framework that moves beyond assumptions that rights alone secure integration. The idea of negotiated belonging has been widely discussed in sociology, migration studies, identity studies, and cultural studies. Scholars such as Anthias (2006), Yuval Davis (2011), Pfaff Czarnecka (2013), and May (2013) have shown that belonging is not fixed but constantly shaped by

social boundaries, recognition, and identity politics. Their work emphasizes that membership in any community is relational, contested, and dependent on ongoing negotiation.

Building on this broader concept, Negotiated Belonging Theory is advanced here as a specific framework for understanding refugee integration. It argues that belonging is not the automatic outcome of statutory rights, but a dynamic process mediated by host perceptions. At its core, the theory explains that integration depends on two dimensions: institutional authorization and social validation. Institutional authorization refers to the legal rights and policy frameworks that establish eligibility. Social validation refers to the recognition, trust, and acceptance granted by host communities.

Legal entitlement, while necessary, does not guarantee inclusion. Uganda's Refugees Act and Regulations provide rights to employment, education, and mobility (Government of Uganda, 2006; World Bank & UNHCR, 2023). Yet these rights often remain unrealized because they lack the social validation required to be operationalized. Belonging, therefore, cannot be reduced to law; it is relational and dynamic, co constructed through ongoing negotiation between refugees and hosts. This relational dimension means that integration is never static but evolves with changing social, cultural, and economic contexts, echoing recognition theory's insight that legitimacy is always dependent on the gaze of the other (Adepoju, 2022; Crush & Ramachandran, 2023).

Host community perceptions function as informal regulatory systems. Narratives of competition, mistrust, burden, and contingent acceptance are not incidental attitudes but mechanisms of boundary making that shape the scope of refugee participation. When refugees are framed as economic rivals, their access to employment is curtailed through selective hiring and occupational confinement (Simiyu, 2024; Owusu, 2023). When mistrust dominates, documentation and

permanence are questioned, producing informalization of labor and relegating refugees to precarious work despite legal rights (Brücker et al., 2021). Burden discourses construct refugees as claimants on scarce services, delegitimizing their economic participation and reinforcing exclusionary practices (Crush & Ramachandran, 2023). Contingent acceptance tolerates refugees within humanitarian boundaries but restricts their mobility and agency when perceived as encroaching on host resources (Bjørkhaug et al., 2025; Pfaff Czarnecka, 2013). These narratives operate as shadow regimes of regulation, parallel to and often in tension with formal law, demonstrating that integration outcomes are mediated as much by perception as by policy.

From this conceptual foundation, Negotiated Belonging Theory advances a set of propositions that reconfigure the study of refugee integration.

Legal entitlement establishes necessary but insufficient conditions for belonging.

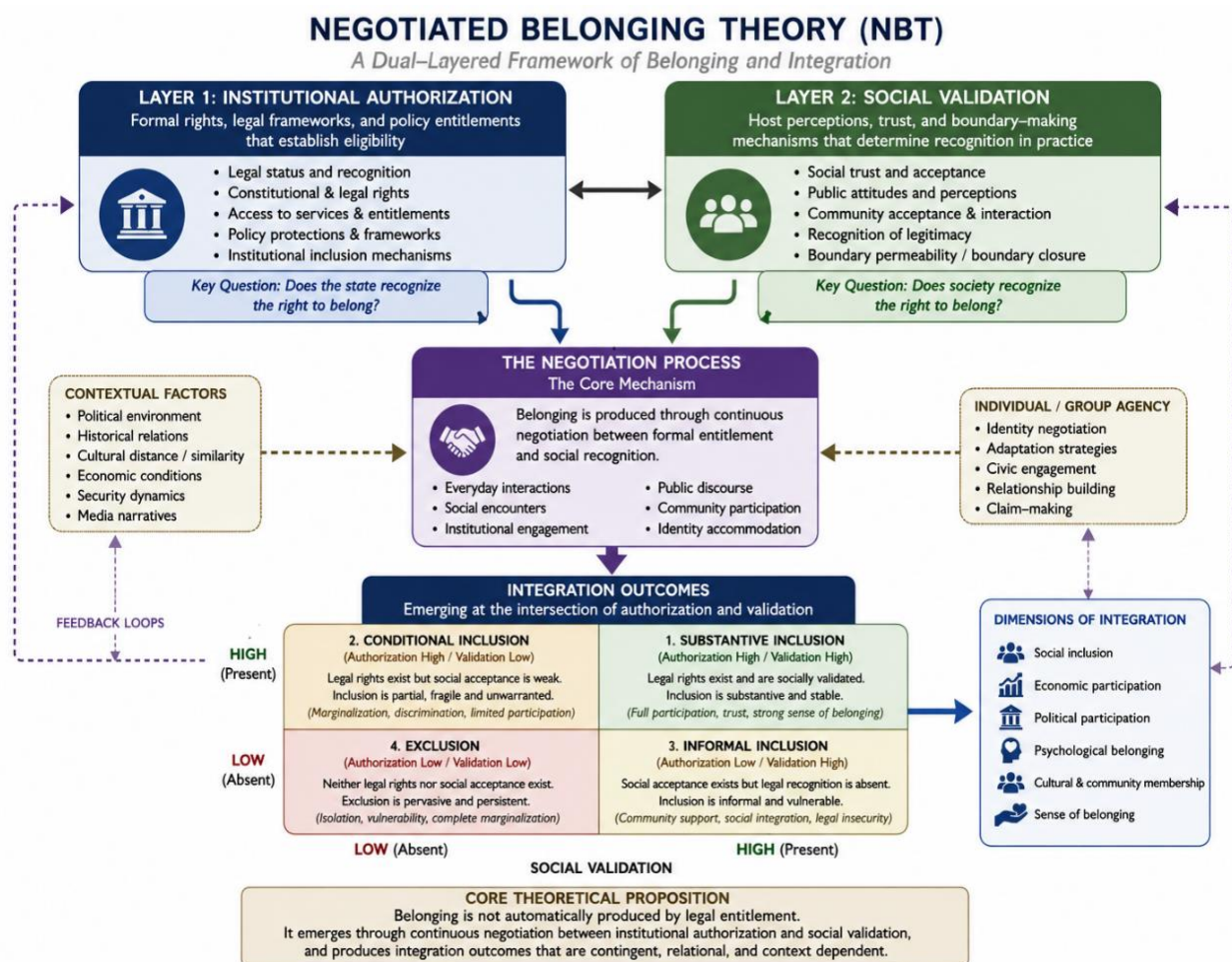
Social legitimacy is co constructed through everyday interaction and cannot be assumed from policy alone.

Perception driven narratives mediate access to opportunity, shaping both economic participation and relational inclusion.

The absence of host validation produces partial inclusion despite formal rights, while interventions that target trust, perception, and cultural negotiation expand the scope of belonging.

These propositions articulate the explanatory logic of the theory and provide a basis for future empirical testing. The primary contribution lies in reframing integration as a socially negotiated practice rather than a legal or economic outcome. In doing so, Negotiated Belonging Theory distinguishes itself from the broader concept of negotiated belonging by applying it directly to refugee integration and specifying the mechanisms through which host perceptions regulate the translation of rights into lived inclusion. economic outcome.

Theoretical conceptual framework



The conceptual framework of Negotiated Belonging Theory (NBT) conceptualizes belonging as a relational and contingent outcome produced through the interaction of two interdependent dimensions: institutional authorization and social validation. The framework challenges conventional legalist approaches to refugee integration by arguing that formal recognition alone is insufficient to generate meaningful inclusion. Instead, belonging emerges through a continuous process of negotiation between legally conferred entitlements and socially mediated recognition.

At the first level, institutional authorization refers to the formal structures through which states establish eligibility for membership and participation. These include legal status,

constitutional protections, policy frameworks, access to services, and institutional mechanisms of inclusion. Institutional authorization provides the normative and legal basis upon which claims to belonging are advanced. It addresses the question of whether the state recognizes an individual's right to belong.

The second level, social validation, captures the informal social processes through which host communities assess, accept, or contest such claims. Social validation encompasses public attitudes, interpersonal trust, perceptions of legitimacy, community acceptance, and the permeability of social boundaries. It addresses the question of whether society recognizes and affirms an individual's right to belong in practice. The

bidirectional relationship between institutional authorization and social validation reflects their mutual influence. Formal policies may shape public perceptions, while prevailing social attitudes may influence both the implementation and effectiveness of legal frameworks.

The framework positions the negotiation process as the central theoretical mechanism linking these two dimensions. Belonging is neither automatically granted by legal entitlement nor solely determined by social acceptance. Rather, it is continuously produced and reproduced through everyday interactions, institutional engagement, public discourse, identity accommodation, and participation in community life. Through these processes, individuals and groups negotiate their legitimacy, membership, and recognition within the broader social order.

The negotiation process is further conditioned by two sets of intervening factors. The first comprises contextual factors, including political environments, historical relations, cultural proximity, economic conditions, security dynamics, and media narratives. These structural conditions shape the opportunities and constraints within which negotiations of belonging occur. The second comprises individual and collective agency, reflected in adaptation strategies, civic engagement, relationship building, identity negotiation, and claim making. This dimension recognizes refugees and other marginalized groups as active participants in the construction of belonging rather than passive recipients of inclusion.

The interaction between institutional authorization and social validation generates four distinct integration outcomes. Where both authorization and validation are present, substantive inclusion emerges, characterized by meaningful participation, mutual trust, and a strong sense of belonging. Where institutional authorization exists but social validation remains weak, conditional inclusion occurs. In such circumstances, individuals

possess formal rights yet continue to experience social marginalization, discrimination, and limited acceptance. This condition represents the central paradox that Negotiated Belonging Theory seeks to explain. Where social validation exists in the absence of institutional authorization, informal inclusion emerges, allowing social acceptance despite limited legal recognition. Finally, where both authorization and validation are absent, exclusion prevails, resulting in persistent marginalization and vulnerability.

These outcomes directly shape multiple dimensions of integration, including social inclusion, economic participation, political engagement, psychological attachment, community membership, and subjective senses of belonging. Importantly, the framework incorporates feedback mechanisms through which integration outcomes influence subsequent negotiations. Positive experiences of inclusion can strengthen trust, reinforce social validation, and deepen belonging over time, whereas experiences of exclusion may generate mistrust, reinforce social boundaries, and perpetuate marginalization.

The central theoretical proposition of Negotiated Belonging Theory is therefore that belonging is not an automatic consequence of legal entitlement but a negotiated social achievement emerging from the intersection of institutional authorization and social validation. By foregrounding the mediating role of trust, legitimacy, and recognition, the framework provides an explanation for why progressive legal regimes frequently fail to produce substantive integration outcomes. In doing so, it shifts analytical attention from formal rights alone to the broader social processes through which belonging is continuously negotiated, contested, and affirmed.

Implications for refugee integration

Negotiated Belonging Theory reshapes how refugee integration is understood by showing that rights alone do not secure belonging. Host perceptions act as informal systems of regulation,

and this has wide ranging implications for both research and practice.

One implication is the need to move beyond legalist assumptions. Uganda's strong refugee laws demonstrate that rights can exist on paper yet remain unrealized in practice (Government of Uganda, 2006; World Bank & UNHCR, 2023). This mirrors findings in Europe, where expansive entitlements coexist with exclusionary outcomes when host attitudes remain negative (Yuval Davis, 2011; Wimmer, 2013). Legal frameworks provide eligibility but not legitimacy. Integration strategies must therefore address the social dynamics that determine whether rights are respected. Without this, law risks producing only symbolic inclusion.

A second implication concerns the role of host communities. Narratives of competition, mistrust, and burden are not abstract ideas but lived perceptions that shape everyday interactions. Recognition theory has long argued that belonging depends on acknowledgment by others (Honneth, 1995; Anthias, 2006). Negotiated Belonging Theory extends this by showing how these perceptions function as informal regulatory systems. Policies that ignore host attitudes leave this shadow regime intact. Effective strategies must therefore engage directly with host narratives, building trust and reshaping perceptions. Initiatives that emphasize shared benefits, joint participation in community projects, and recognition of refugee contributions can weaken exclusionary narratives and expand the scope of belonging (Pfaff Czarnecka, 2013; Strang & Ager, 2010).

A third implication is that trust must be treated as a structural condition. Mistrust of refugee documentation and permanence functions as a barrier to formal employment and recognition (Brücker et al., 2021). This resonates with broader studies of social capital, which show that trust is central to access and reciprocity (Heath & Cheung, 2021). Policies must therefore prioritize mechanisms that build confidence, such as transparent documentation systems, recognition of

qualifications, and accountability frameworks. Trust is not a soft variable; it is decisive whether rights are translated into practice.

A fourth implication relates to urban integration. Cities intensify perceptions of competition and burden because scarcity and visibility are concentrated. Comparative studies show that urban contexts often magnify exclusionary narratives, even where refugees contribute economically (Crush & Ramachandran, 2023; May, 2013). Policies that extend services and infrastructure to both refugees and nationals can reduce tensions and foster reciprocity. Integration must be designed as a shared project, not as redistribution that benefits one group at the expense of another.

Finally, Negotiated Belonging Theory reframes refugee policy as a dual project: securing rights and cultivating legitimacy. Legal authorization provides the framework, but social validation determines whether that framework is effective. This duality echoes broader debates in migration and identity studies, where belonging is understood as both institutional and relational (Yuval Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2006). Only by bridging these dimensions can integration move from symbolic inclusion to substantive belonging.

Policy implications

Understanding refugee integration as negotiated belonging has significant consequences for policy design and governance. Uganda's experience demonstrates that strong legal frameworks, while necessary, do not secure belonging unless accompanied by deliberate strategies that address host perceptions. This insight resonates with comparative studies across Europe, Asia, and Africa, which show that rights alone fail when host communities resist recognition (Yuval Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2006; Wimmer, 2013).

One implication is the limit of legal reform in isolation. Uganda's Refugees Act and Regulations provide expansive rights (Government of Uganda,

2006; World Bank & UNHCR, 2023), yet exclusion persists. This reflects findings in other contexts where legal generosity coexists with exclusionary practices (Pfaff Czarnecka, 2013; Strang & Ager, 2010). Policymakers must therefore recognize that rights are only one dimension of integration. Without strategies to cultivate social legitimacy, legal frameworks risk producing partial inclusion rather than substantive belonging.

A second implication is the need for direct engagement with host communities. Narratives of competition, mistrust, and burden are not abstract discourses but lived perceptions that shape everyday interactions. Recognition theory emphasizes that belonging depends on acknowledgment by others (Honneth, 1995; Yuval Davis, 2011). Negotiated Belonging Theory specifies how these perceptions function as informal regulatory systems. Policies that ignore host attitudes inadvertently reinforce exclusion. Engagement strategies must therefore transform host narratives, not simply extend refugee entitlements. Initiatives that emphasize shared economic benefit, co production of services, and joint participation in community development can weaken exclusionary narratives and expand the scope of belonging (Crush & Ramachandran, 2023; May, 2013).

A third implication is the centrality of trust. Mistrust of refugee documentation and permanence functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that confines refugees to informal labor (Brücker et al., 2021). This aligns with broader studies of social capital, which show that trust is essential for reciprocity and access (Heath & Cheung, 2021). Policy interventions must therefore prioritize trust building mechanisms. Transparent documentation systems, recognition of qualifications, and accountability frameworks can reduce uncertainty and foster confidence among employers and communities. Trust is not a secondary variable; it is a structural condition for the translation of rights into practice.

A fourth implication concerns urban integration. Cities intensify perceptions of competition and burden because scarcity and visibility are concentrated. Comparative studies show that urban contexts often magnify exclusionary narratives, even where refugees contribute economically (Ajambo & Onyancha, 2023; Crush & Ramachandran, 2023). Policies that extend services and infrastructure to both refugees and nationals can reduce tensions and foster reciprocity. Integration must be designed as a shared project, embedding reciprocity into policy design to mitigate perceptions of redistribution and foster a sense of shared development.

Finally, Negotiated Belonging Theory reframes refugee policy as a dual project: securing rights and cultivating legitimacy. Legal authorization provides the framework, but social validation determines whether that framework is effective. This duality echoes broader debates in migration and identity studies, where belonging is understood as both institutional and relational (Yuval Davis, 2011; Anthias, 2006). Only by bridging these dimensions can refugee policy move from symbolic inclusion to substantive belonging.

Conclusion

Refugee integration within rights-based frameworks remains limited because law alone cannot secure belonging. Uganda's case shows that legal entitlement, though essential, does not translate into lived acceptance. This reflects wider findings in migration and identity studies, where belonging is understood as relational and contested (Anthias, 2006; Yuval Davis, 2011; Pfaff Czarnecka, 2013). Building on this scholarship, Negotiated Belonging Theory explains integration as a dual process of legal authorization and social validation. Host perceptions of competition, mistrust, burden, and contingent acceptance act as informal systems of regulation, defining who is recognized and who remains excluded despite formal rights.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest

The author declares that he has no financial, professional, institutional, or personal conflicts of interest related to this manuscript.

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