

Outsiders or Active Citizens? The Role of Oral and Mediated Communication in African Refugee Camps

Mari Maasilta¹

¹University of Helsinki, Swedish School of Social Science, Helsinki, Finland

maasilta@mappi.helsinki.fi

Refugee camps are supposed to be temporary settlements providing displaced persons with shelter, food, and protection until they can safely return to their homes or get a permanent settlement in a third country. In practice, many camps have become a permanent living place for hundreds of thousands people in Eastern Africa. The inhabitants of the camps are often seen by the outside world as non-persons in non-places (Augé 1995), whose location is not even worthy of recognition on a local map. People live for years in an uncertain situation, in which their basic human rights are limited, they are unable to work, move freely or have any political voice. Only approximately three per cent of refugees will finally be settled in industrialized countries.

My paper deals with the right for communication of displaced persons in African refugee camps and the influence and interrelationships of informal and formal media in remembering the past, participating in the decision making in the camps and imagining the future. The displaced persons' access to and use of different media is analyzed from the point of view of participation and active citizen theories.

The analysis is based on interviews of 24 women of various ages in eight focus groups living in the refugee camps of Kiziba and Nyabiheke in Rwanda. Their main ways of communication are oral communications with people traveling in and out of the camp, occasional listening to Radio BBC and mobile phones. In general, access to mediated communication is quite limited and oral communication is flourishing due to lack of official news media. Possibilities to get information from the actual situation at home are quite good due to back and forth mobility between Congo and Rwanda but instead, the refugees lack relevant information about their possibilities to get out of the camp, about conditions in possible third countries and especially about possibilities to influence on their future.