

## Human Rights and Refugees: Building a Social Geography of Bare Life in Africa

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### **ABSTRACT:**

Refugees navigate complicated legal systems in order to claim protection. This, in addition to xenophobia and violence, can make accommodation within host nations difficult. Nowhere is this more relevant than in Africa where there are over four million refugees. In order to fulfill their humanitarian obligations, NGOs and community based organizations have increasingly aligned themselves with the human rights movement, thus creating an obligation to act out of universal human rights norms and not out of charity. This paper will explore the value of a rights-based approach as it pertains to refugees and asylum seekers in Africa and how such an approach may be applied within a geographic context. Using the political theories of Giorgio Agamben, and in particular his notions around “bare life,” refugees and the rights-based approach will be positioned within a larger discussion about the limitations of human rights, the sovereign authority of the nation-state as well as the unique position occupied by community and non-profit organizations.

**Key words:** Human rights, refugees, rights-based approach, Africa

### **INTRODUCTION**

I began this anniversary year by reaffirming the universality of human rights, and by arguing that human rights are foreign to no culture and native to all nations. Throughout this year, from the streets of Asia to the towns of Africa to the courts of Europe, justice has been done and freedom has been won. Human rights have been proven—beyond any doubt—to be universal.

—Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General (UN 1998)