

# BARRIERS TO REFUGEE INTEGRATION IN KAKUMA AND KALOBEYEI, NORTH- WEST KENYA

Nyariel Udier Bol



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Nyariel is dedicated to driving change in her community and is passionate about sexual and reproductive health rights and other essential issues affecting women and girls.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why are the majority of refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi refugee camps in north-west Kenya resistant to the Kenyan government's new official policy of integration with the local community? This paper explores this question through personal interviews and focus group discussions with a selection of refugees in the two settlement complexes and through a review of secondary literature. The paper argues that resistance among refugees to integration is not simply a reaction to external pressure but is deeply rooted in their lived experiences and fears of losing support from humanitarian agencies. It is also rooted in their concerns about the social and economic implications of assimilation into Kenyan society. Contrary to the general perception that refugees should be grateful for opportunities to integrate, many view the loss of their refugee status as a threat to their survival and identity. This perspective is crucial to understanding the dynamics of refugee-host relations, particularly in settlements such as Kakuma and Kalobeyi where competition for scarce resources is exacerbated by climate change, further complicating the integration process. Overall, the findings in this paper suggest that integration is a complex process shaped by social and environmental factors, rather than a one-off process that occurs on the whim of external actors and their imagined preferences for 'helpless' refugee populations.

# INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary landscape of forced migration, the plight of refugees remains a pressing humanitarian concern, with millions of people displaced across the globe. Among these populations, Kakuma refugee camp in north-west Kenya has become emblematic of the complexities surrounding refugee integration and local-host community dynamics.<sup>1</sup>

Established in 1992, Kakuma refugee camp has sheltered thousands fleeing conflict and persecution, while Kalobeyi settlement has emerged as a pilot initiative aimed at facilitating local integration under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF).<sup>2</sup> However, this ambitious integration agenda raises critical questions about the actual desires of refugees themselves. Are they willing to relinquish their refugee status and embrace a new identity as Kenyan citizens, or do they resist integration for a myriad of reasons?

In the context of forced migration, there are three durable solutions for refugees: 1) returning to their home country,<sup>3</sup> 2) integrating into the local community, or 3) resettling in a different country. Achieving these solutions in Africa is challenging due to various social and economic issues. Many African countries face limited resources and ongoing conflicts, making it hard to support large groups of refugees effectively. While Kenya has policies that facilitate local integration, practical challenges such as competition for scarce resources, high poverty rates, and public resistance make this option difficult to implement effectively.

For example, in Kenya, while there are laws and policies that support refugees' integration, their actual implementation often faces obstacles, including a lack of funding and negative public attitudes.<sup>4</sup> Integration means that refugees become part of the host community, gaining the same rights and opportunities as local citizens, such as access to education, healthcare and

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1 'Forced Displacement: Refugees, Internally Displaced and Host Communities', World Bank. Accessed 15 September 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/forced-displacement>.

2 Randall Hansen, 'The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework: A Commentary', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31/2 (2018): 131–151.

3 'Durable Solutions', Asylum Insights. Accessed 15 September 2024, <https://www.asyluminsight.com/durable-solutions-1>.

4 Abdullahi Boru Halakhe and Samson Omondi, 'Lessons and Recommendations for Implementing Kenya's New Refugee Law', Report, Refugee International and Kenya National Commission for Human Rights (KNCHR), 2024. Accessed 18 September 2024, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/lessons-and-recommendations-for-implementing-kenyas-new-refugee-law/>.

jobs.<sup>5</sup> Many Kenyans and state authorities view the idea of refugees enjoying rights similar to citizens with caution.

Additionally, the high poverty and unemployment rates in Kenya make it challenging for the public to accept policies that could potentially increase competition for essential services. This perspective is often reinforced by the pressure that large refugee populations place on local infrastructure and natural resources, especially in areas such as Turkana County, where both local and refugee communities face resource scarcity.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has tried to resolve the refugee situation in Kakuma through resettlement programmes.<sup>6</sup> However, such programmes settle only a small number of refugees, leaving most in difficult circumstances.<sup>7</sup> At the end of June 2024, Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyi settlement together had a population of almost 290,000<sup>8</sup> refugees and asylum seekers, according to the UNHCR. Founded on land handed over by the Kenyan government in 2015, Kalobeyi, which is 30 km west of Kakuma, was officially launched as a pilot project at the end of 2018 under the CRRF.<sup>9</sup> While the CRRF hopes to encourage social and economic development, many refugees in Kalobeyi still struggle with limited job opportunities and resources, leading to questions about whether the model is fit for purpose.<sup>10</sup>

The existing literature on refugee integration often highlights barriers, such as socio-economic challenges, cultural differences and limited access to resources.<sup>11</sup> While these factors provide valuable insights, there remains a significant gap in understanding the refugees' own perspectives and motivations regarding integration. This paper aims to fill this gap by focusing explicitly on the reasons behind the opposition among refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi to integration, challenging the prevailing narrative, which assumes a universal desire among refugees to be integrated into their host societies.

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5 International Rescue Committee, 'Kenya: Citizens' Perceptions on Refugees', Report, 2018. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/2857/irckenya.pdf>.

6 'Resettlement', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/resettlement>.

7 Benedict Solf and Katherine Rehberg, 'The Resettlement Gap: A Record Number of Global Refugees, But Few Are Resettled', Migration Policy Institute, Report, October 2021. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/refugee-resettlement-gap>.

8 'Kenya: Registered Refugees and Asylum seekers', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/07/Kenya-Statistics-Package-June-2024.pdf>.

9 'Kalobeyi Settlement', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kalobeyi-settlement>.

10 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Kalobeyi Settlement'.

11 Eun Su Lee et al., 'Unveiling the Canvas Ceiling: A Multidisciplinary Literature Review of Refugee Employment and Workforce Integration', *International Journal of Management Reviews* 22/2 (2020): 193–216.

Thus, the central organizing question in this paper is: Why do refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi exhibit resistance to integration into the local Turkana community? To explore this question, the author investigated the multifaceted factors contributing to this resistance, including historical grievances, economic anxieties and cultural concerns.

Consequently, this paper argues that the resistance to integration among refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi refugee complexes is not simply a reaction to external pressures but is deeply rooted in their lived experiences, fears of losing support from humanitarian agencies, and concerns about the social and economic implications of assimilating into Kenyan society. Hence, the refugees' resistance to integration can be understood through a nuanced analysis of their historical context, socio-economic realities and psychological factors.

Unlike the general perception that refugees should be grateful for opportunities to integrate, many refugees view the loss of their status as a threat to their survival and identity. This perspective is crucial in understanding the dynamics of refugee–host relations, particularly in Kakuma and Kalobeyi, where competition for scarce resources is exacerbated by climate change, thus further complicating the integration process.

Life for refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi is extremely challenging. Most rely heavily on aid, as employment opportunities are scarce. In Kalobeyi, each person used to receive 2,000 Kenya shillings (KES) a month, about USD 15, from the UN's World Food Programme (WFP). This amount has been reduced to roughly half, or 1,050 KES, making it difficult for families to meet their basic needs. In Kakuma, food rations are distributed based on family size, with a single-person ration valued at about 650 Kenya shillings (USD 5) a month. While some refugees earn a small amount in incentives by working for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), this is not an option for everyone. Housing conditions also differ between the camps. In Kalobeyi, families live in permanent structures, but in Kakuma, they must build homes from clay and plastic sheets, which are not durable.<sup>12</sup>

Insecurity adds to these hardships. Refugees face attacks, often involving firearms, from host communities at night, and resistance can result in death. Intra-community conflicts are also common, particularly disputes along ethnic lines. A violent conflict in June 2024 resulted in multiple deaths, as well as displacement and the loss of property. The author's family was among those affected, and they lost everything. These harsh conditions explain why many refugees are hesitant to integrate or resettle within Kenya, especially in a remote and resource-scarce area such as Kakuma.

By exploring the resistance to integration among refugees in Kalobeyi and Kakuma, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on forced migration and integration policies. Understanding the sentiments of refugees not only highlights their agency in the face of

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12 'Dadaab Voices: Despair as Refugee Food rations in Kenya Slashed by 60%', *The New Humanitarian*. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/06/13/dadaab-voices-despair-refugee-food-rations-kenya-cut-60>.

displacement but also underscores the need for policymakers to engage in meaningful dialogue that respects the voices of those directly affected. Ultimately, this paper aspires to provoke a re-examination of integration efforts in protracted refugee situations, advocating more inclusive approaches that consider the complex realities faced by refugees and the dynamics of their relationships with host communities.

The phenomenon of resistance to integration is not unique to Kakuma and Kalobeyi but it can be observed in various refugee contexts globally. Studies have shown that refugees often prefer to maintain their status, as it provides them with certain protections and resources that may not be guaranteed if they assimilate into the local population.<sup>13</sup> This resistance can also be seen as a form of agency, where refugees actively choose to navigate their circumstances in a way that preserves their identity and community ties. Such dynamics challenge the simplistic narrative that all refugees yearn for integration, emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of their experiences and desires.

This paper employs qualitative research methods to capture the voices of refugees and local community members on the intended integration of refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi. In so doing, the author conducted two focus group discussions and 15 interviews with a section of the refugee community in Kakuma and Kalobeyi between 8 and 30 August 2024. The focus group discussions were held separately in Kalobeyi and Kakuma, with eight participants in each group, representing a mix of community members from the refugee population. The author conducted an additional five interviews with members of the Turkana host community, including youths, leaders and elders.

With the participants' consent, all the interviews were recorded, thus ensuring the preservation of the exact words, tones and emotional nuances expressed during their conversation. In addition to the recordings, the author took detailed field notes in order to capture the body language and non-verbal cues that could not be fully captured by audio alone. This combination provided a more complete and nuanced understanding of the participants' responses.

Beyond the formal interviews and discussions, the author conducted non-participant observation throughout the study. This allowed the author to observe how refugees and the host community interacted with each other in everyday settings. These observations provided critical context to the verbal responses, highlighting social behaviours and interactions that informed the broader understanding of integration issues.

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13 Emmaleena Käkelä et al., 'From Acts of Care to Practice-based Resistance: Refugee-sector Service Provision and its Impact (s) on Integration', *Social Sciences* 12/1 (2023): 1–18.

This introduction is followed by a discussion of the discourse on refugee integration, after which the paper turns to the context of the Kakuma and Kalobeyi refugee complexes. Following this, the paper turns to a discussion of barriers to refugee integration, including socio-economic concerns, the need for preserving culture and identity and aspirations for alternative durable solutions. The paper then concludes with the implications of these findings for policy.

# DISCOURSE ON REFUGEE INTEGRATION

The discourse surrounding refugee integration has garnered considerable attention in recent years, particularly in the context of protracted refugee situations, such as Kakuma and Kalobyei in north-west Kenya. Various studies<sup>14</sup> have examined the barriers to integration and the basic rights of refugees as outlined in the 1951 Refugee Convention.<sup>15</sup> When refugees arrive in their host country, they can experience barriers to integration, such as insecure legal status, poor housing conditions, a lack of access to education and employment opportunities, and prejudice.<sup>16</sup> These barriers often lead to feelings of disenfranchisement and dependency, as many refugees rely on aid for basic survival.<sup>17</sup> Socio-cultural factors, including language barriers and differing cultural norms, can exacerbate the challenges faced by refugees in integrating into local societies.

Furthermore, the uncertainty faced by refugees regarding legal rights, as highlighted in various studies, remains a significant challenge. This uncertainty is further exacerbated by climate change, which disproportionately affects both refugee and host communities.<sup>18</sup> For example, in Kenya, refugee integration is being implemented under the *Shirika* Plan, which aims to transform the approach to refugee assistance from mere humanitarian aid to promoting self-reliance and integration within local communities.<sup>19</sup> It envisions the establishment of refugee municipalities, where individuals can access essential services, participate in the local economy

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- 14 Lucy Hovil and Nicholas Maple, 'Local Integration: A Durable Solution in Need of Restoration?' *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 41/2 (2022): 238–266.
  - 15 Alice Beste, 'The Contributions of Refugees: Lifting Barriers to Inclusion', Article, United Nations University, 2018. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://gcm.unu.edu/publications/articles/the-contributions-of-refugees-lifting-barriers-to-inclusion.html#:~:text=In%20general%2C%20refugees%20are%20able,entry%20into%20their%20original%20profession.>
  - 16 Gülşah Kurt et al., 'Socio-cultural Integration of Afghan Refugees in Türkiye: The Role of Traumatic Events, Post-Displacement Stressors and Mental Health', *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences* 32 (2023): 1–8.
  - 17 Felix Maas et al., 'The Politics of Uncertainty: Producing, Reinforcing, and Mediating (Legal) Uncertainty in Local Refugee Reception—Introduction to the Special Issue', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 34/4 (2021): 3559–3569.
  - 18 Ko-AutorInnen et al., 'Beyond Hype and Hope: Unpacking the Uncertainties About Kenya's *Shirika* Plan for Hosting Refugees', Blog, Netzwerk Fluchtforschung, 2024. Accessed 24 September 2024, <https://fluchtforschung.net/beyond-hype-and-hope-unpacking-the-uncertainties-about-kenyas-shirika-plan-for-hosting-refugees/>.
  - 19 'Shirika Plan', Republic of Kenya. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://refugee.go.ke/kenya-shirika-plan-overview-and-action-plan>.

and develop sustainable livelihoods.<sup>20</sup>

However, the implementation of the *Shirika* Plan faces significant challenges. One major hurdle is the uncertainty around legal rights, which can restrict refugees' ability to seek employment or access education and healthcare.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, the impact of climate change in the region, particularly in arid and semi-arid areas, exacerbates resource competition between refugees and host communities, creating tension and complicating integration efforts.<sup>22</sup>

In the three refugee camps that comprise Dadaab in northeast Kenya, hosting refugees for a long time has caused problems between the local community and the refugees. The UNHCR calculated the population of Dadaab as approaching 383,000 in June 2024, bringing the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya to around 777,000 that month. According to some authors,<sup>23</sup> some local people feel as if refugees are better off than they are because they receive help from aid organizations and run businesses, creating competition in the area for resources that are already limited. This has led to frustration and 'hosting fatigue', as locals grow tired of having refugees around for so long. Some local people are also said to blame refugees for insecurity in the region.

The isolation that arises from challenges to refugees' integration can deepen divides, making it difficult for refugees to engage meaningfully with their host communities. Other studies<sup>24</sup> discuss the importance of social networks and community ties in facilitating integration. Refugees often rely on existing networks for emotional and practical support, yet when these networks are weak or fragmented, integration efforts can falter.

While existing studies contribute valuable insights into the barriers to integration, they often overlook the voices of refugees in articulating their experiences and desires regarding integration. This gap is critical because it implies that the existing literature may not fully capture the complexities of refugees' lived experiences and the reasons behind their resistance to integration.

The relationship between local communities and refugees is another area of focus in the

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20 Ko-AutorInnen-Ko et al., 'Beyond Hype and Hope'.

21 'New Study: Refugees Restricted from Working in At Least 32 Countries, Limiting their Ability to Support Themselves and Contribute to Host Country', Refugees International. Accessed 25 September 2024, <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/statements-and-news/new-study-refugees-restricted-from-working-in-at-least-32-countries-limiting-their-ability-to-support-themselves-and-contribute-to-host-country/#:~:text=A%20refugee's%20right%20to%20work,up%20in%20>.

22 'Climate Change and Displacement', United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Accessed 20 September 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/what-we-do/build-better-futures/climate-change-and-displacement>.

23 Fred Ikanda, 'Deteriorating Conditions of Hosting Refugees: A Case study of the Dadaab Complex in Kenya', *African Study Monographs* 29/1 (2008): 29–49.

24 Eileen M. Crimmins et al., 'The Role of Social Networks and Social Integration', in *Explaining Divergent Levels of Longevity in High-Income Countries*, Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2011.

literature. Several studies document the mixed reactions of host communities toward refugee populations. For instance, Verme<sup>25</sup> notes that while some local residents view refugees as burdening resources, others recognize the potential benefits of a refugee presence, such as cultural exchange and economic contributions.<sup>26</sup> This duality of perception reflects the complexities of social interactions, wherein local and refugee communities may simultaneously compete for resources while also finding ways to collaborate.

Despite acknowledging local-refugee dynamics, much of the literature tends to generalize the perspectives of host communities and refugees, without delving into the specific experiences and viewpoints of individuals within these groups. This oversight creates a gap in understanding the reasons behind refugees' resistance to integration efforts, as well as the implications for local communities facing competition for limited resources. For example, a study by Darzin<sup>27</sup> outlines the importance of social acceptance for successful integration but does not explore how host community perceptions can impact refugees' willingness to integrate.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature on refugee integration by focusing on a key gap: The perspectives of refugees themselves on why they resist integration efforts. While much of the literature has explored the barriers to integration, such as legal, economic, and socio-cultural challenges, few studies have investigated the motivations behind refugees' resistance to efforts at integrating them, particularly in protracted situations, such as those in Kakuma and Kalobeyi.

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- 25 Paolo Verme, 'Theory and Evidence on the Impact of Refugees on Host Communities', Blog, World Bank, 2023. Accessed 24 September 2024, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/theory-and-evidence-impact-refugees-host-communities>.
- 26 Yang-Yang Zhou, Guy Grossman and Shuning Ge, 'Inclusive Refugee-hosting Can Improve Local Development and Prevent Public Backlash', *World Development* 166 (2023): 1-13.
- 27 Allison Darzin, 'What Is Social Acceptance and Does It Really Matter?', Blog, Simply Stakeholders, 2024. Accessed 28 September 2024, <https://simplystakeholders.com/social-acceptance/>.

# THE CONTEXT OF KAKUMA AND KALOBEYEI

Kakuma refugee camp is located in Turkana County, north-west Kenya, near the borders with South Sudan and Uganda. Turkana County is a semi-arid region known for its extremely hot climate, with temperatures often exceeding 40°C (104°F).<sup>28</sup> This harsh weather, combined with periodic droughts, creates a challenging environment for both the refugee and local populations.<sup>29</sup>

Kakuma refugee camp was established in 1992 to accommodate people fleeing the civil war in Southern Sudan.<sup>30</sup> Originally designed to host around 40,000 people, the camp and Kalobeyei now together accommodate almost 290,000 refugees and asylum seekers from multiple nationalities, including South Sudanese, Somalis, Ethiopians, Congolese, Burundians and Sudanese.<sup>31</sup> The largest group comprises South Sudanese refugees, who have fled a series of civil conflict in their home country.<sup>32</sup> The diverse populations of Kakuma and Kalobeyei have created a vibrant cultural environment, yet also introduced complexities in managing social interactions between different refugee groups and with the local Turkana community.<sup>33</sup>

The Turkana have historically had a tense relationship with the refugees, primarily due to competition over scarce natural resources, such as water, firewood and grazing land.<sup>34</sup> These

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28 'Weather and Climate in Turkana', Turkana Investment Portal. Accessed 20 October 2024, <https://invest.turkana.go.ke/weather-and-climate>.

29 UN HABITAT, 'Kakuma and Kalobeyei Spatial Profile', Report, June 2021. Accessed 20 October 2024, [https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/06/210618\\_kakuma\\_kalobeyei\\_profile\\_single\\_page.pdf](https://unhabitat.org/sites/default/files/2021/06/210618_kakuma_kalobeyei_profile_single_page.pdf).

30 'About Kakuma Refugee Camp', Kanere org. Accessed 20 October 2024, <https://kanere.org/about-kakuma-refugee-camp/>.

31 'Kenya: Joint Market Monitoring Initiative (JMMI) Market Overview, Q2 (April – June, 2024)', REACH. Accessed 20 October 2024, [https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/impact/512776fd/KCWG\\_KEN\\_JMMI-Q2-ASAL-Counties-JUNE2024.pdf](https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/impact/512776fd/KCWG_KEN_JMMI-Q2-ASAL-Counties-JUNE2024.pdf).

32 'Geography and People', Kakuma Kalobeyei Challenge Fund (KKCF). Accessed 20 October 2024, <https://kkcfke.org/geography-and-people/>.

33 Varalakshmi Vemuru et.al., 'Refugee Impacts on Turkana Hosts', Report, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank Group, 2016. Accessed 20 October 2024, <https://kkcfke.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Turkana-Social-Impact-Analysis-December-2016-1.pdf>.

34 Marc-Antoine Perouse de Montclos and Peter Mwangi Kagwanja, 'Refugee Camps or Cities? The Socio-economic Dynamics of the Dadaab and Kakuma Camps in Northern Kenya', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 13/2 (2000):205–222.

tensions have been exacerbated by the growing population in the camp, straining the already limited resources. Although some improvement has been observed in recent years, with the Turkana engaging in trade and labour exchanges with refugees, resentment still lingers, particularly as refugees are seen to receive support from international organizations while many locals continue to struggle economically.<sup>35</sup>

For refugees, one of the primary challenges is the lack of economic opportunities. Employment options within the camp are minimal, with most refugees relying heavily on humanitarian aid, provided by the UNHCR and other humanitarian agencies. This aid is often insufficient: Many refugees report that food rations do not meet their nutritional needs and frequent shortages of them lead to severe food insecurity.<sup>36</sup> Limited access to education, healthcare and adequate shelter further complicates refugees' situation.<sup>37</sup>

The combination of environmental hardship and economic instability leaves many refugees feeling trapped, with few pathways to improve their living conditions. In terms of treatment by the local community, some Turkana have begun to recognize the economic contributions refugees make, especially in areas such as trade and small-scale labour.<sup>38</sup> However, this shift in perception is slow, and not all locals are supportive of refugee integration. Many still view refugees with suspicion, and as competitors for limited resources, reinforcing social divides that make full integration difficult.<sup>39</sup>

The Kalobeyei integrated settlement was first established as part of Kenya's evolving refugee policy under the CRRF.<sup>40</sup> The main goal of Kalobeyei was to shift the focus from traditional refugee camps, that are heavily reliant on humanitarian aid, toward promoting self-reliance and local integration for refugees.<sup>41</sup>

Kalobeyei was designed to foster economic collaboration between refugees and the local

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35 Alexander Betts, Naohiko Omata and Olivier Sterck, 'The Kalobeyei Settlement: A Self-reliance Model for Refugees', *Journal of Refugee Studies* 33/1 (2020): 189–223.

36 'Ration Cuts: Taking from the Hungry to Feed the Starving', Reliefweb. Accessed 29 September 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/ration-cuts-taking-hungry-feed-starving>.

37 Fiona Leh Hoon Chuah et al., 'The Health Needs and Access bBarriers Among Refugees and Asylum-seekers in Malaysia: A Qualitative Study', *International Journal for Equity inHhealth* 17 (2018): 1–15.

38 Zara Sarzin, 'The Impact of Forced Migration on the Labour Market Outcomes and Welfare of Host Communities', Reference Paper for the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention, World Bank, 2021. Accessed 29 September 2024, [https://www.unhcr.org/people-forced-to-fee-book/wp-content/uploads/sites/137/2021/10/Zara-Sarzin\\_The-impact-of-forced-migration-on-the-labor-market-outcomes-and-welfare-of-host-communities.pdf](https://www.unhcr.org/people-forced-to-fee-book/wp-content/uploads/sites/137/2021/10/Zara-Sarzin_The-impact-of-forced-migration-on-the-labor-market-outcomes-and-welfare-of-host-communities.pdf).

39 Varalakshmi Vemuru, 'Understanding the Nuanced Social Impact of Kakuma Refugees on Their Turkana Hosts', Blog, World Bank, 2017. Accessed 28 September 2024, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/dev4peace/understanding-nuanced-social-impact-kakuma-refugees-their-turkana-hosts>.

40 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Kalobeyei Settlement'.

41 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 'Kalobeyei Settlement'.

Turkana community, in the hope this would lead to sustainable development for both groups.<sup>42</sup> The implementation of Kalobeyi has faced a series of challenges, however, and many refugees feel the settlement was developed without enough consultation with their communities, leading to resistance toward integration efforts.<sup>43</sup>

Additionally, the lack of meaningful economic opportunities and ongoing dependency on aid has left refugees frustrated with the promises of self-reliance. The local Turkana community, whose economy is largely based on pastoralism and small-scale agriculture, also struggles with the integration process.<sup>44</sup> Many locals rely on the UNHCR for community development initiatives, further straining the resources meant to foster collaboration between the two groups.

In practice, the objectives of Kalobeyi have not fully materialized, and the settlement remains a place where both refugees and the local population face overlapping challenges, including economic vulnerability and limited access to essential services. While the vision for Kalobeyi was one of shared development, the reality on the ground has revealed deep-seated issues that must be addressed in order to achieve the goal of integration and self-reliance for refugees and locals alike.

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42 Walter Kälin, 'The Global Compact on Migration: A Ray of Hope for Disaster-Displaced Persons', *International Journal of Refugee Law* 30/4 (2018): 664-667.

43 Betts, Omata and Sterck, 'The Kalobeyi Settlement'.

44 Dany Bahar, Rebecca J. Brough and Giovanni Peri, 'Forced Migration and Refugees: Policies for Successful Economic and Social Integration', Working Paper, Center for Global Development, 2024. Accessed 29 September 2024, <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/forced-migration-and-refugees-policies-successful-economic-and-social-integration.pdf>.

# BARRIERS TO INTEGRATION AMONG REFUGEES IN KAKUMA AND KALOBYEI

Many barriers make it difficult for refugees to integrate smoothly into host communities. These include legal limitations that can restrict access to jobs, education and healthcare, as well as social challenges, such as discrimination and prejudice. Economic obstacles, such as high unemployment rates and limited financial resources, further complicate the process, leaving many refugees dependent on aid. Language differences, cultural misunderstandings and competition for basic resources can create additional tensions between refugees and host communities. Addressing these barriers requires not just policy support but practical action that addresses the needs of refugees and concerns within the host community.

## SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONCERNS

One of the most significant factors contributing to the Kakuma and Kalobeyi refugees' resistance to integration is the fear of losing the socio-economic support provided by humanitarian agencies. Refugees have consistently expressed concerns that becoming integrated into the local community would result in a loss of access to essential services and assistance.

For instance, several participants from the focus group discussions in Kakuma and Kalobeyi highlighted their reliance on the UNHCR support for basic needs such as food, healthcare and education. As one refugee articulated in Kalobeyi: 'Here, we have food, medical care and education for our children. If we become Kenyans, what will happen to that support?'<sup>45</sup> The resistance to refugee integration, associated with economic concerns, is shaped by various factors, including age, socio-economic status and individual experiences with humanitarian aid. This complexity was highlighted in both formal focus group discussions and in informal conversations in refugee camps.

Older refugees tended to express stronger opposition to integration due to their longstanding reliance on humanitarian assistance. Their concerns primarily revolve around the fear of losing access to basic services, such as food and healthcare. During one focus group discussion, an elderly female participant shared her anxiety, stating: 'We have lived in these camps for decades,

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45 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyi settlement, 22 August 2024.

where we entirely depend on the UNHCR for food and medical services. If we are told to be Kenyans, how will we survive without this help?<sup>46</sup> This highlights a deep fear that integration might strip away their only reliable means of survival. The elderly often believe that becoming Kenyan citizens might not guarantee access to the same level of support they currently receive from the UNHCR.

Younger refugees, though more open to integration, still harbour concerns about the economic realities of life as Kenyan citizens. Many fear that integration might not improve their circumstances. For younger refugees, the fear is more about the lack of employment opportunities. While they recognize the potential benefits of integration, they also worry that, without economic support, they might end up worse off than they are under the current system. A young male refugee voiced his scepticism: ‘The jobs are few, even for Kenyans. How will we find work if we are integrated? Right now, we at least get rations, but as Kenyans, we might lose that and still have no work.’<sup>47</sup>

In casual discussions around the settlements, refugees frequently debate the pros and cons of integration. The fear of losing humanitarian support often dominates these conversations. This reflects the uncertainty many feel about whether the Kenyan government would provide the same level of assistance refugees currently rely on. One man expressed these concerns in the following terms: ‘At least here we know we will get food every month. What happens if that stops? Will the Kenyan government help us?’<sup>48</sup> Another man added:

They say we will be part of this country, but does that mean we will be able to own land? To work freely? Or will we just be poor Kenyans with no help? Or are we going to suffer more like the way locals are suffering?<sup>49</sup>

These remarks encapsulate the broader anxiety felt by refugees about integration. While some see it as a potential pathway to self-reliance, most fear it might lead to further vulnerability without guaranteed rights or resources. This diversity of perspectives shows that, while integration is viewed with scepticism across age groups, the reasons vary depending on individual needs and experiences. Many refugees fear that integration will mean the end of their support system, placing them in a vulnerable position within a potentially unfriendly local economy. The prospect of having to navigate a job market rife with competition and limited opportunities raises anxiety about the refugees’ abilities to provide for their families.

The above sentiments were repeated in informal settings, where refugees said that uncertainty surrounding their survival in a competitive local economy deepens their rejection of integration. For instance, a young father voiced his resistance during an interview, noting: ‘We don’t want

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46 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyi settlement, 22 August 2024.

47 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyi settlement, 22 August 2024.

48 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyi settlement, 22 August 2024.

49 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyi settlement, 22 August 2024.

integration. The support we receive here is what helps us survive. If we integrate, there will be no more food, no healthcare, nothing for our children.<sup>50</sup> Similarly, a group of elders in a community meeting discussed their concerns, noting: ‘We would rather stay as refugees because we know at least we are taken care of. Integration means losing everything.’<sup>51</sup>

As Karen Jacobsen notes, effective integration requires not only a welcoming host community but also economic opportunities that can absorb both refugees and locals alike.<sup>52</sup> Thus, without the necessary infrastructure and resources in place, integration efforts are likely to falter, leaving refugees feeling insecure and unsupported.

Refugees often encounter discrimination and social exclusion in the labour market, further complicating their integration process. As one refugee in Kalobeyei settlement noted during an interview, ‘integration sounds good, but it’s not safe. Many of us have heard stories of refugees who faced discrimination when trying to find jobs. Why would we risk that?’<sup>53</sup>

Many refugees fear that integration will lead to increased vulnerability and marginalization, which pushes them to resist efforts that threaten their current support systems. In the focus group discussions conducted in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, several participants articulated their fears about integration, citing concerns about discrimination and the risk of increased hostility from the local community. During one of the focus group discussions in Kalobeyei, one young male refugee stated: ‘If we integrate, what guarantee do we have that locals won’t see us as a burden? There are already stories of attacks, and we worry that becoming part of this community will make us targets.’<sup>54</sup> Similarly, an elderly female study participant shared her anxiety, noting ‘We have witnessed refugees being attacked at night. The thought of losing our support from UNHCR while facing such dangers is terrifying. What if they take everything from us?’<sup>55</sup> Another refugee in Kalobeyei settlement shared:

Integration sounds good in theory, but it feels like we are being asked to step into a fight we cannot win. We are afraid of how locals perceive us. Many think we are stealing their jobs or resources.’<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, another Kalobeyei refugee community member recounted:

50 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

51 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024

52 Karen Jacobsen, ‘The Forgotten Solution: Local Integration for Refugees in Developing Countries’, Working Paper, Fletcher School of Law & Diplomacy and Feinstein International Famine Center, 2021. Accessed 30 September 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/media/for-gotten-solution-local-integration-refugees-developing-countries-karen-jacobsen>

53 Interview with refugee, Kalobeyei Settlement, 24 August 2024.

54 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyei settlement, 22 August 2024.

55 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyei settlement, 22 August 2024.

56 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyei settlement, 22 August 2024.

There are nights when you can witness gunshots. Locals fear us, and we fear them. Integration means trusting that we will be safe, but how can we when so many are angry at us for being here?<sup>57</sup>

Such personal accounts align with broader literature, which indicates that discrimination and violence against refugees can increase as they seek to integrate into local communities. Studies show that refugees often experience social exclusion, complicating their integration process and leading to heightened anxiety about their safety.<sup>58</sup>

## CULTURE AND IDENTITY PRESERVATION

Another critical factor influencing resistance to integration among the Kakuma and Kalobeyi refugees is the desire for cultural preservation and the protection of their identities. Many refugees expressed concerns about losing their cultural heritage and community bonds, if they were to assimilate into Kenyan society.

Generally, the literature underscores that refugees often view their cultural heritage as a source of strength and resilience.<sup>59</sup> Hence, integrating into a new society may not only challenge their traditional practices but also create feelings of isolation and disconnection from their community. Participants in the focus group discussions in Kakuma and Kalobeyi noted that their unique customs, traditions and languages were integral to their identity as communities. Accordingly, they described their fear of cultural erasure in the face of integration efforts. As one elder in Kakuma 1 said, ‘We are proud of who we are— becoming Kenyans means forgetting our past and our way of life.’<sup>60</sup> On the same note, a young female study participant expressed that, ‘When I think about becoming part of Kenya, I worry that my children will not speak our language or know our traditions. How will they remember who we are?’<sup>61</sup> A community leader similarly remarked that ‘We have a rich culture that defines us. If we lose that, we lose our purpose. Integration feels like a threat, not a solution.’<sup>62</sup>

This perspective of cultural preservation is supported by the literature, which indicates that maintaining cultural practices can serve as a source of strength and resilience in the face of

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57 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kalobeyi settlement, 22 August 2024.

58 John Liu et al., ‘Strengths-based Inquiry of Resiliency Factors Among Refugees in Metro Vancouver: A Comparison of Newly-arrived and Settled Refugees’, *Social Science & Medicine* 263 (2020): 1-9.

59 Liisa H. Malkki, ‘Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization’, in *Siting culture*, eds. Karen Fog Olwig and Kirsten Hastrup, London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

60 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

61 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

62 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

adversity.<sup>63</sup> Cultural identity plays a critical role in the psychological well-being of refugees, offering them a sense of belonging and continuity in a world marked by displacement and upheaval. In the context of Kakuma and Kalobeyi, this desire for cultural preservation is compounded by the lack of recognition and respect for refugees' identities by the host community. In the absence of such recognition, refugees may perceive integration as an assimilation process that threatens their cultural distinctiveness.

Additionally, the concept of identity is fluid and multifaceted, encompassing various dimensions, including ethnicity, nationality and personal history. Many refugees in Kalobeyi and Kakuma navigate these identities, oscillating between their cultural heritage and pressures to conform to local norms. This dynamic contributes to resisting integration initiatives as refugees grapple with the fear of losing their cultural identities and the possibility of becoming marginalized within a new social context.

According to Liisa Malkki, refugees often engage in 'cultural nostalgia', where they cling to their past identities as a means of coping with displacement.<sup>64</sup> During one focus group discussion in Kakuma, a middle-aged male participant shared his experience: 'Sometimes, I feel like I am living in two worlds. I want to keep my culture alive, but I also see how the locals live. It's confusing.'<sup>65</sup> This sentiment was echoed by a young woman, who remarked that, 'If we integrate, will we still have our customs? Will our children learn our language, or will they only speak Swahili?'<sup>66</sup>

As an elder pointed out during a group session, 'Integration is not just about living together, it is about what we give up. Our culture is our strength and losing it means losing ourselves.'<sup>67</sup> In a community meeting, a local leader acknowledged these sentiments, stating, 'We need to find a balance. Refugees bring their culture here and we should respect that. But it's important that we all find common ground.'<sup>68</sup>

## ASPIRATIONS FOR ALTERNATIVE DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Many refugees express a strong preference for alternative durable solutions over local integration, particularly third-country resettlement. This preference stems from their aspirations for a more stable and prosperous future. Towards these ends, some study participants shared stories of their relatives who had successfully resettled in countries, such as Canada or the United States, depicting these destinations as gateways to opportunity and security.

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63 Mark Eggerman and Catherine Panter-Brick, 'Suffering, Hope, and Entrapment: Resilience and Cultural Values in Afghanistan', *Social Science & Medicine* 71/1 (2010): 71–83.

64 Malkki, 'Speechless Emissaries'.

65 Interview, Kakuma 3, 30 August 2024

66 Interview, Kakuma 3, 30 August 2024.

67 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

68 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

In one focus group discussion in Kakuma 1, a young mother articulated her hopes, stating: ‘I dream of giving my children a better life. In a new country, they can have opportunities we don’t have here.’<sup>69</sup> In this vein, a leader questioned integration plans while there are still alternatives for resettlement in third countries: ‘Why should we settle for less when we can aim for a better future elsewhere? Resettlement is our hope.’<sup>70</sup> These narratives illustrate a broader trend among refugees, who are wary of the uncertain benefits of integration.

This preference for third-country resettlement over local integration has been documented in various studies. For example, Jacobsen<sup>71</sup> highlights how the uncertainties associated with local integration, including potential social exclusion and economic challenges, drive refugees to seek alternatives. Similarly, Walter Kälin argues that refugees often perceive resettlement as the most viable solution to their plight.<sup>72</sup>

The perceived uncertainty and challenges of integration within Kenya contribute to this preference for third country resettlement. Refugees may fear that they will become indistinguishable from the local population, facing the same socio-economic struggles and vulnerabilities that characterize the Turkana community. This hesitation is compounded by the lack of meaningful consultation and engagement from humanitarian actors regarding the integration process, leading to feelings of distrust and disillusionment among refugees.

Furthermore, many refugees have developed a narrative around resettlement as an aspirational goal that promises stability and security. As such, in a focus group discussion in Kakuma 1, a middle-aged man revealed he has family in the USA, who tell him about job opportunities and schools over there,<sup>73</sup> hence nourishing his hopes of relocation. This speaks to a general trend within the refugee community, whereby the desire for third country resettlement is often fuelled by stories of success from those who have navigated the resettlement process.

However, the realities of resettlement are often far more complex and challenging than anticipated. For instance, the Global Compact on Refugees emphasizes that, while resettlement may offer new opportunities, it can also entail significant hardships, including cultural adjustment and socio-economic challenges.<sup>74</sup> This dichotomy adds to the complexity of refugees’ aspirations and their resistance to integration.

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69 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

70 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

71 Jacobsen, ‘The Forgotten Solution’.

72 Kälin, ‘The Global Compact on Migration’.

73 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

74 Global Compact on Refugees, ‘Third Country Solutions for Refugees: Roadmap 2030’, Report, June 2022. Accessed 20 October 2024, <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2022-08/Third%20Country%20Solutions%20for%20Refugees%20-%20Roadmap%202030.pdf>.

While many refugees express a strong desire for third-country resettlement, it is crucial to recognize that not all see this option as viable. Significant barriers hinder their pathways to resettlement, including stringent eligibility criteria and limited slots available in host countries. These barriers to resettlement reflect a broader frustration among refugees, who feel caught between the challenges of local integration and the unattainable prospect of resettlement.

The desire for resettlement becomes intertwined with fears associated with local integration. As Jacobsen<sup>75</sup> observes, refugees face barriers to resettlement and also the anxiety that stems from uncertainty. One elderly man noted during a focus group discussion in Kakuma 1, ‘I hear stories about resettlement, but it feels like a dream for most of us. They say you must have special skills or be in danger. What about us who are just trying to survive?’<sup>76</sup> A young woman stated, ‘We are tired of waiting for a better life that never comes. We have to deal with problems here while hoping for something that may never happen.’<sup>77</sup>

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75 Jacobsen, ‘The Forgotten Solution’.

76 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

77 Participant in a focus group discussion, Kakuma 1, 28 August 2024.

# CONCLUSION

The insights gleaned from this paper illuminate the intricate dynamics of resistance to integration among refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyi, emphasizing how socio-economic concerns, cultural preservation, and aspirations for alternative durable solutions contribute to their reluctance. By integrating primary data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews with established literature, the thesis is supported: Refugees are not merely passive recipients of integration policies, they are active participants in shaping their futures based on their lived experiences and aspirations.

One of the most significant findings is the pervasive fear among refugees of losing vital humanitarian support. Many study participants expressed anxiety that integration could mean relinquishing the assistance, crucial for their daily survival, which they currently receive from humanitarian organizations such as the UNHCR. This fear resonates with existing literature of how economic insecurity often leads refugees to view integration as a gamble rather than a pathway to stability. The precariousness of their situation as refugees shapes their perceptions and decisions, indicating that integration should not only be framed as a policy goal but also as a lived reality that significantly impacts their lives.

Cultural identity plays a crucial role in the resistance to integration, as many refugees are deeply committed to preserving their cultural heritage and community ties. This highlights the significance of cultural identity as a foundation for resilience in the face of displacement. For many refugees, resisting integration is not merely a rejection of the host society but a protective measure against the potential erosion of their cultural values and practices. This aspect of their experience underscores that integration strategies should be sensitive to cultural dynamics and promote inclusivity rather than assimilation.

Moreover, the longing for alternative durable solutions, such as third-country resettlement, complicates the narrative around local integration. Many refugees expressed a preference for resettlement over integration, reflecting the findings of Kälín<sup>78</sup> that the prospect of a better life in another country often outweighs the uncertain benefits of local integration. The tension between these aspirations and the reality of their current situation creates a complex backdrop against which their resistance can be understood.

These insights from Kakuma and Kalobeyi can be generalized to other protracted refugee

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78 Kälín, 'The Global Compact on Migration'.

situations, which emphasize that socio-economic stability, cultural preservation and viable durable solutions are essential for successful integration. Similar dynamics are observed in refugee contexts in Lebanon and Greece, where refugees grapple with the challenges of assimilation and the desire to maintain their cultural identities.<sup>79</sup> Recognizing these commonalities can help inform more effective policies that empower refugees and foster collaboration between them and local communities.

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on forced migration by highlighting the complex motivations behind refugees' resistance to integration. Understanding these motivations is crucial for developing more inclusive integration policies that not only address the immediate needs of refugees but also respect and support their aspirations and identities. By acknowledging the multifaceted nature of integration, policymakers can work towards creating environments that promote social cohesion and mutual understanding, ultimately benefiting both refugees and host communities alike. Future research should further explore these dynamics and the broader implications for protracted refugee situations globally.

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79 Estella Carpi et al., 'From Livelihoods to Leisure and Back: Refugee 'Self-reliance' As Collective Practices in Lebanon, India and Greece', *Third World Quarterly* 42/2 (2021): 421-440.

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