

LIVELIHOODS AND PROSPERITY: EXPLORING SELF-RELIANCE BEYOND ECONOMICS IN KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP

Mulki Mohamed



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THE AUTHOR

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper explores how agency and livelihoods are articulated and shaped in the overall picture of refugee life as a whole, specifically in Kakuma refugee camp in north-western Kenya. It digs into the details of how refugees exercise self-reliance, resilience and identity, questioning conceptualizations of livelihoods framed purely in economic terms. It explores livelihoods as phenomena pursued by means of diverse economic, social and cultural activities, shaping identities and mindsets just as much as they shape financial success. The author draws on interviews and focus group discussions to examine the various factors influencing livelihood choices and goals. The author uses qualitative approaches to critically interact with key concepts that shape understandings of refugee agency and resilience. Overall, the paper argues that agency in refugee circumstances goes beyond financial activity, comprising complicated choices based on personal beliefs and social networks. It emphasizes that a richer understanding of self-reliance in refugee contexts involves considerations of dignity, resilience and resourcefulness. Articulating wider discussions about civic engagement, the paper explores refugees as active citizens, eager to shape their own lives not only for the sake of achieving financial independence but also to prosper on multiple other non-financial fronts.

INTRODUCTION

Discussions about refugee livelihoods tend to focus on economic considerations, particularly those exploring the theme of self-reliance. Many humanitarian organizations and policies exist to support refugees to foster financial independence, with livelihoods understood mainly in terms of income generation and employment. While economic factors are undeniably important, this paper argues that they alone do not fully capture the scope of refugee agency. Refugees, like all people, seek more than just economic survival: They strive for dignity, purpose, a sense of belonging and meaningful connections to their community and environment.

Recently, key literature exploring refugee issues has focused on income generation, employment opportunities and resource distribution.¹ While these factors are significant, they provide an incomplete picture of refugees' experiences. Refugee livelihoods extend beyond economics and can only be fully understood via a broader exploration of the features of agency, identity and dignity that emerge from community networks and cultural practices. These connections are central to creating a meaningful life in the camp.

As part of this general trend in understandings of refugee livelihoods, self-reliance itself tends to be examined not beyond financial outcomes, leading to very limited notions of what it means for refugees to thrive. In challenging and expanding such understandings, this paper conceptualizes prosperity as something that encompasses much more than just economic self-sufficiency. It envisages true prosperity as something that includes well-being, identity, relationships and a sense of place within a community. These elements are essential to understanding how refugees perceive their lives and their futures, yet they are often sidelined in development discourse.

In doing so, this paper builds on Henrietta Moore's recent work, which has explored prosperity as something that includes one's relationship to one's history, community and sense of purpose.² Moore asks whether the current focus on economic outcomes in refugee support programmes overlooks these crucial factors, and how refugees imagine prosperity in contexts such as Kakuma. Through this lens, the author seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of agency in refugee livelihoods, one that goes beyond economic measures to encompass the full breadth of human experience.

1 Alexander Betts et al., *Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

2 Henrietta L. Moore, 'Prosperity in Crisis and the Longue Durée in Africa', *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 45/7 (2018):1501–1517.

Kakuma refugee camp is situated in semi-arid Turkana County, north-western Kenya. It is one of the most diverse camps in the world, a home to approximately 300,000 refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan, Burundi, Rwanda and Eritrea.³ Each refugee in Kakuma faces struggles that are both unique and shared as they navigate their new lives. Most of them have fled war, conflict, persecution, political instability and ethnic violence, and are seeking a place where they can live in peace. However, when they arrive at the camp, they experience hardship due to the harsh climate and unwelcoming environment.

Considering the challenging and traumatic pasts of many refugees, it is important to understand how they make sense of their current situation and how they construct a sense of daily purpose and agency within the confines of Kakuma. It is also important to understand how they encounter issues of community integration, identity preservation and the emotional toll of displacement. As noted earlier, this paper explores these perspectives in order to contribute to a more holistic understanding of refugee agency, one encompassing social, cultural and psychological measurements. In so doing, the paper provides more information and knowledge about agency, moving beyond the economic focus to encompass the ability to create a sense of meaning, value, dignity and identity while living in a refugee camp. It provides insights that could influence policymakers and humanitarian organizations to improve policy frameworks that, at present, are failing refugees on multiple fronts.

The author deployed a qualitative research design to explore the detailed experiences of refugees in Kakuma refugee camp. Specifically, the author engaged refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Burundi, Uganda and Sudan, currently residing in Kakuma. A total of 41 study participants were purposively and opportunistically selected, coming from a range of backgrounds, including business owners, employees, volunteers, jobless youth, community leaders and other forms of leaders. This diverse mix of people in Kakuma offers a rich context for understanding how refugees navigate their lives within the camp. All the participants were fully informed about the study and consented to participate in this research.

The author also conducted participant observation, where she observed daily camp activities. This allowed the author to explore complex issues, such as agency, identity and dignity, which cannot be fully understood through quantitative measures alone. This method provided valuable insights into the social and cultural dynamics of life in Kakuma, helping the author to comprehend how livelihoods are shaped not only by economic factors but also by social connection, cultural practices and collective agency. Observations made during the course of the research enabled the author to see how refugees negotiate their circumstances in real time, beyond what they might share in the interviews. The combination of in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and literature review enabled a rich, multi-faceted understanding of how refugees navigate their livelihoods in Kakuma. The flexibility of this method allowed an

3 As mentioned by the camp manager in a meeting in June 2024.

in-depth exploration of the social, cultural and emotional dimensions of well-being beyond economic considerations.

This introduction is followed by discussions of the economic focus in refugee livelihoods in the dominant literature and in humanitarian interventions. Next is a discussion of rethinking prosperity, followed by discussions of incentive labour and how it engenders refugees' precarity in Kakuma. The paper then turns to discussions of broader perspectives of refugee livelihoods that include the full range of human experiences, and the connections between work, livelihoods and a sense of agency among refugees in Kakuma. The paper finally concludes with implications of the findings for policy and provides some recommendations in this regard.

ECONOMIC FOCUS IN REFUGEE LIVELIHOODS

The dominant literature on refugee welfare frames refugee livelihoods around economic self-sufficiency. Policy frameworks and humanitarian interventions have reinforced this approach to providing refugees with income-generation and employment tools. According to Betts et al., financial independence is crucial for survival in resource-constrained settings, such as Kakuma refugee camp.⁴

Humanitarian organizations in Kakuma focus on creating more livelihood opportunities, arguing this can reduce refugee dependency on aid. There is a general assumption that self-reliance is straightforwardly empowering, but such an assumption overlooks the more important aspect of refugee lives beyond survival. There are important similarities to be noted between this perspective and recent work undertaken by Young et al. that explores how acute malnutrition is not just an individual or household issue but is deeply rooted in social, political and economic systems.⁵ The article's political ecology perspective and relational approach resonates with this paper's argument of moving beyond economic factors and exploring systemic influences on livelihoods, resilience and well-being in challenging contexts, such as Kakuma.

While it may very well be true that refugees must achieve economic self-sufficiency, we need to remember that their ambitions are often far more expansive than merely financial independence. By relying solely on economic factors, we risk overlooking the social, cultural and emotional aspects of their lives that are essential to their well-being. It is very important to consider all these aspects when deciding how best to support livelihood strategies.

RETHINKING PROSPERITY

Moore et al.'s recent work, *Prosperity in the 21st Century: Concepts, Models and Metrics*, criticizes this enduring and limited focus on the economic indicators used to measure human prosperity.⁶ They argue that prosperity should not be examined purely by income or materialistic happiness but must be viewed rather as a complex perception that relies on the circumstances in which

4 Betts et al., *Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

5 Helen Young et al., 'A Relational Approach to the Drivers of Child Acute Malnutrition', *Food and Nutrition Bulletin* 44/2 (2023): S9-S22.

6 Henrietta L. Moore et al., *Prosperity in the 21st Century: Concepts, Models and Metrics*. London: UCL Press, 2023.

it is understood.⁷ They describe prosperity as a sense of well-being and pride, rooted in social, cultural and environmental circumstances as much as it is rooted in the economy.⁸ This is what they mean when they say that something is prosperous.

Such a viewpoint is extremely valuable when it comes to understanding the lived reality of refugees in Kakuma, where standard measures of prosperity, such as financial achievement, may not entirely coincide with refugees' goals. Perhaps fundamentally, this paper highlights the fact that refugees often pursue definitions of prosperity that include the capacity to sustain cultural customs, to build a feeling of community, and to restore normality to disturbed lives, and also that their ambitions incorporate emotional and social satisfaction, agency and a sense of belonging.

This point contains important implications. In a setting where financial opportunities are quite limited, due to structural obstacles that hamper financial achievement, it becomes important to understand how cultural values and community connections are maintained and how daily obstacles influence people's perceptions of a meaningful life. Moore's analysis of prosperity encourages us to reconsider what we think about what it means to flourish in times of dislocation.⁹

THE ROLE OF AGENCY AND IDENTITY

To successfully re-imagine refugee livelihoods, we must begin with the topic of agency. Agency refers to the capacity of individuals to act independently and make decisions that suit their needs.¹⁰ In the case of refugees, it is composed of how they navigate their circumstances to build a meaningful life. Refugees are mostly portrayed as passive recipients of aid. Recent studies have highlighted different ways in which refugees actively engage with their environment, however, making decisions that reflect their desires for dignity, identity and autonomy. Naohiko Omata's work on rethinking self-reliance and the economic inclusion of refugees in Uganda has questioned the cultural idea of self-reliance, suggesting that refugees use various techniques to achieve economic inclusion while navigating inconsistent relations of power. Such processes allow refugees to adjust to their situation while maintaining their dignity and identity.¹¹

This focus on the maintenance of dignity, and indeed identity, sits close to the findings set out in this paper, which highlight how these are inextricably entangled in culture, community networks and responsibility. Stephanie Berry and Isilay Taban examine the significance of cultural identity for minority refugees, noting how cultural practices and social networks serve

7 Moore et al., *Prosperity in the 21st Century*.

8 Moore et al., *Prosperity in the 21st Century*.

9 Moore, 'Prosperity in Crisis'.

10 Ulrike Krause, 'Reframing Refugees' Livelihoods: Agency, Rights and the Politics of Protection', *Refugee Studies Quarterly* 35/1 (2016): 58-75.

11 Naohiko Omata, 'Rethinking Self-reliance and Economic Inclusion of Refugees Through a Distributive Lens: A Case Study from Uganda', *African Affairs* 121/485 (2022): 649-674.

as vital sources of self-worth and as resistance to the erasure of identity during displacement.¹² Their work emphasizes how the maintenance of cultural identity is a form of agency that refugees actively employ to navigate precarious and difficult circumstances. Once again, the findings presented in this paper build on such concepts to provide a richer picture of the aspirations shaping refugee lives in Kakuma.

12 Stephanie Eleanor Berry and Isilay Taban, 'The Right of Minority-refugees to Preserve their Cultural Identity: An Intersectional Analysis', *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 39/3 (2021): 198-219.

INCENTIVE LABOUR IN KAKUMA

Incentive labour was a subject that emerged as important during multiple interviews and focus group discussions. Incentive labour is a kind of remuneration for work that aims to recognize refugee labour while navigating fraught legal restrictions. Incentive labour programmes aim to offer refugees a means of support in a legally constrained environment, but the actual outcome (that is, how this manifests itself in people's lives) often tells a different story about the aid sector. Many refugees' experiences entail frustration, rejection and a deep sense of dissatisfaction with these opportunities, revealing the limitations of relying solely on economic models to understand refugee livelihoods.

INCENTIVE LABOUR: THE REALITY

To a large extent, incentive labour programmes are seen as humanitarian interventions designed to promote self-reliance. Typically, they are run by international humanitarian organizations providing different services and offering refugees temporary work. The sorts of positions on offer tend to include teaching, interpretation, attending to patients, dance or community outreach. Refugees receive a small stipend in return for their work, called an incentive. In theory, the programmes allow refugees to earn an income, gain work experience and contribute to their community, creating a semblance of self-reliance in an environment where opportunities of formal employment are extremely limited.

Many study participants feel that the incentive labour system is unfair, not only because the services they provide are similar to those provided by members of the host community, who are paid more, but also because the payments they received were hardly enough for the work they did. A 26-year-old study participant who works in Kakuma as a teacher, explained:

Look at the workload of the teacher, the national teacher, and the refugee teacher. They are just the same. I sometimes wonder why we are given 9,000 Kenya shillings (KES) [a month] and below while the nationals are given KES 50,000 and above. So, for me, it is a bit unfair.¹³

For much of 2024, the Kenya shilling was worth roughly 130 to USD 1, making refugee salary about USD 70 against national salary of about KES 50,000 or USD 385 a month. Their dissatisfaction highlights the emotional toll incentive labour places on refugees, despite its framing by

13 Interview with incentive labourer, Kakuma, Kenya, 30 August 2024.

humanitarian organizations as a way to help. Refugee workers find themselves trapped in low-paying, unstable jobs that do not offer advancement. There is a need to reform wage structures to ensure refugees are compensated more equitably. This could nurture economic stability and, perhaps more importantly, a sense of dignity.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF INCENTIVE LABOUR

Beyond economic factors, the incentive labour system affects refugees' sense of dignity, identity and belonging in profound and negative ways. Several study participants described their sense of identity and dignity as closely linked to their work. Study participants frequently expressed the sense of being viewed as 'second-class' in their work, as well as the sense of isolation, accentuated by the legal and financial barriers that limit their access to formal employment, leaving them dependent on incentive labour despite its inherent unfairness.

A second study participant, who is paid KES 8,000 a month for her work as a coordinator, explained:

It is not about the different payment alone; we are treated in the workplace differently. For example, the nationals have allowances, they have the house allowances, they have water allowances, they have transport, they are sent for training, and the refugees are not given allowances of all [these] kinds.¹⁴

Another study participant said:

We are challenged psychologically. You know, when you see someone is treated well and you are not treated the same. For example, when it reaches 12 o'clock at lunchtime, the vehicle comes to pick up national staff, they are then going for lunch, and you are left there. And later they come back in the afternoon to go on with work with you. Whether you eat or not, no one cares, and then you have that feeling in your mind, seeing, 'Oh, I am a refugee. I am not a national staff like others.' And, of course, you will work, but your heart will not feel good.¹⁵

Clearly, these words reflect extremely broad issues in which incentive labour has come to be entangled, highlighting how, despite its promise of empowerment, it has come to be emblematic of the marginalization it seeks to address. It is time to ask whether incentive labour is actively undermining refugees' sense of purpose, and whether their work achieves a kind of economic self-reliance that is not sufficient to create a meaningful life.

14 Focus group discussion participants, Kakuma, Kenya, 26 August 2024.

15 Interview with community leader, Kakuma, Kenya, 25 August 2024.

EMBRACING A BROADER PERSPECTIVE OF LIVELIHOOD

In temporary places of shelter, such as Kakuma, refugees encounter different challenges. Building on the work of Moore et al. and the above example, this paper has demonstrated how focusing only on economic indicators, such as employment and income, leads to an insufficient understanding of refugee livelihoods. Here, it is worth considering Tim Ingold's notion of livelihoods as dynamic processes linked to social, cultural and natural factors.¹⁶ Ingold emphasizes that livelihoods are more about how individuals 'carry on' in life and how they are connected to their communities, wider relationships and, indeed, their cultural landscapes.

With regards to the evidence presented in this paper, such an idea is essential, because 'carrying on' is much more valuable than making money. For refugees, it involves regaining a sense of control, rebuilding lost social networks and maintaining one's cultural heritage to provide a sense of belonging.

Importantly, incentive labour is not oriented towards nurturing these diverse elements, due to its focus on short-term economic outcomes and, generally, its failure to account for well-being. Its entanglement with agency is deeply fraught, leading participants to feel obliged to accept unequal terms while feeling undervalued and dis-empowered.

In light of Moore et al.'s work, these points perhaps require us to ask how we might imagine refugee livelihoods beyond economic survival, and how assistance programmes might better cater to the kinds of deeper emotional and psychological fulfillment people seek in their lives.¹⁷ For refugees, this would potentially mean forms of assistance that honour their hopes of being treated with dignity, with their identity respected.

By embracing a broader perspective of livelihoods, one that takes into account the full range of human experience, we can move towards interventions that foster not just economic resilience but social and emotional well-being. This shift is critical for refugee policy and assistance programmes, which too often focus on economic metrics at the expense of a more

16 Tim Ingold, 'The Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology* 25/2 (1993): 152–174.

17 Moore et al., *Prosperity in the 21st Century*.

comprehensive vision of what it means to thrive. Expanding our view of prosperity, as Moore suggests, helps align policy with refugees' own pursuit of agency, ensuring that interventions address both their material needs and their quest for a meaningful life.¹⁸

18 Moore, 'Prosperity in Crisis'.

DIVERSIFICATION OF LIVELIHOODS

This section delves into the connections between work, livelihoods and a sense of agency among refugees in Kakuma, emphasizing their desire to be seen as individuals with potential rather than as the recipients of aid. It explores how refugees navigate their circumstances, using work and community involvement as means to regain control of their lives and construct meaningful identities.

The broader narrative in humanitarian discourse paints refugees as recipients of aid, often implicitly, but the reality is that many refugees aspire to be seen as individuals with potential and talents. In Kakuma, refugees actively seek opportunities to develop their skills, pursue education and contribute to the social and economic life of the camp. Their desire to be recognized as capable individuals underlines the need for a shift in how we perceive refugee livelihoods, from a narrow focus on survival and economic self-reliance to a more holistic understanding of what it means to thrive.

In Kakuma, opportunities of work and livelihoods are very often limited, but for many refugees, they are more than just a source of income. This is why many refugees, and particularly those who participated in the research behind this paper, see it as a pathway to reclaim a sense of purpose and control over their lives, which have been disrupted by displacement. By engaging in work, whether through formal employment, informal trade or volunteering, refugees express their desire to contribute to their community, take ownership of their future and challenge the stereotypes of dependency that are all too often associated with displaced populations. Several study participants shared that before taking on any other employment in humanitarian organizations or other businesses, they have felt the need to give back to their communities via volunteering roles.

Through initiatives, such as vocational training and community-based projects, refugees in Kakuma are transforming the way they are perceived. These programmes not only equip them with practical skills but also help them to reclaim their agency and create a narrative of hope and resilience.

One example of this might be traced in a story shared by Zainab, a refugee who has twice suffered setbacks during her life in the camp but who has continued to struggle nonetheless, to the point where she has regained her agency and sense of purpose. After working as a community mobilizer for KES 6,000 a month, she realized that incentive work would not

lead her to a promising future on its own. Her stipend was small and she was never offered a promotion. Many refugees find this lack of professional growth, even after years with the same humanitarian organization, frustrating. She left the work to follow her heart and turned her skills into a source of empowerment. Not only did her new business, creating traditional garments, provide an income but it also became a way for her to reconnect with her identity and contribute to her community's cultural fabric. Zainab's story highlights meaningful work's role in restoring agency and fostering a sense of self-worth.

ZAINAB'S STORY

Zainab, a 34-year-old Somali refugee, arrived at Kakuma refugee camp with her mother and father 15 years ago, after fleeing war in Somalia. Tragically, her mother died shortly after their arrival, leaving her vulnerable. She was fortunate to have her father by her side. They relied on humanitarian aid to survive. Her father's tailoring talents proved beneficial, and their lives improved when he applied for a loan from a humanitarian organization that trains refugees to create small businesses. His ability to use a sewing machine qualified him for a loan of equipment and some money to buy fabric and thread. He then opened a tiny store in one of the markets and began making Somali clothing. Before her mother died in 2010, they would spend an hour at her father's workplace after school each day. Now, it is what Zainab thinks of as a normal part of her routine.

When she was 22 years old and had completed secondary school, she felt compelled to do something other than sit at home all day. She began working as an interpreter for a humanitarian group in the camp. Her father was overjoyed to see his daughter doing something she was enthusiastic about. She had accompanied him to one of the group's offices to help with translation and was asked to help interpret for three other Somalis while her father waited. 'When I got home, I told my father I wanted to be the bridge to help my community find their voice. When I was interpreting, I realized how much they struggle to communicate with the service providers. A big gap exists when it comes to language,' Zainab said.¹⁹ When her father died in 2016, some saw in it an opportunity to purchase the sewing machine. She refused to sell. She lived alone. After doing the same job for three years, she realized she would be in the same place five years from now, earning little money and with no promotion. She followed her father's footsteps and revived his tailoring business, enrolling in a community-based initiative tailoring class. She believes it was this that allowed her to regain a sense of normality and control.

Her tailoring business became a hive of activity. She catered to the fashion demands of other refugees and used her abilities to design outfits for particular occasions, thereby contributing to the preservation of culture and customs inside the camp. It also helped her rediscover her identity and gave her pride and purpose. Her tailoring business was more than simply a source of money; it was a means for her to reclaim control of her life after being displaced. Zainab began coaching girls who were interested in pursuing tailoring as more than a business. It is her way of giving back to her community and instilling a feeling of empowerment in others. Zainab

19 Interview with Zainab, Kakuma, Kenya, 28 August 2024.

shared:

Teaching these girls isn't just about sewing; it's more about showing them other ways crafting using the skills they learned can help them create a meaningful life that one can be proud of. You can see me evolving and living a life that I never expected to have when I was starting this. It gives me a sense of belonging, sanctification, and achievement in giving back to the community.²⁰

Throughout this paper, the author has argued for the various ways in which it is important to conceptualise refugee livelihoods beyond economic factors. Zainab's tale encapsulates this need to challenge limiting visions. Her tailoring business offered a more extensive definition of success, one that includes emotional and social well-being, community relationships, and cultural heritage. Zainab defines genuine prosperity as the opportunity to live with dignity, express her individuality, and contribute to the lives of others around her, rather than merely financial freedom.

20 Interview with Zainab, Kakuma, Kenya, 28 August 2024.

CONCLUSION

Placing this study within the broader setting of jobs in Kenya, the complicated and multi-dimensional nature of refugee experiences is thrown into relief. This paper has sought to articulate the urgent need to move beyond simplistic understanding of refugee livelihoods. It has shed light on how identity, dignity and purpose shape refugees' decisions and behaviours. Refugees in Kakuma, like many others in ongoing relocation situations, negotiate their surroundings via unseen forms of resilience. By analysing how social, cultural and emotional aspects interweave with economic tactics, this paper explains agency within refugee lives as an expansive, socially constituted phenomenon, impossible to construe in monolithic terms.

In many respects, the paper disputes conventional wisdom, noting how, while financial stability is still essential, refugees' perceptions of their power and professional aspirations are also greatly influenced by their sense of belonging, the preservation of their identity, and various forms of interpersonal respect. In fully accounting for these non-financial factors, it advocates for more all-encompassing, human centred approaches to refugee policy and initiatives.

Overall, the paper adds to the broader debate on refugee agency and self-reliance, asking stakeholders including politicians, humanitarian organizations and host communities to identify and support the ways that refugees exercise their agency. When refugee livelihoods are seen in this way, it becomes easier to provide inclusive, contextualized solutions that consider the reality refugees face. Promoting an environment that supports economic opportunities and preserving human dignity is essential for enabling refugees to actualize their agency and flourish in their host communities.

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