



Refugee Integration: Perspectives from Kakuma Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement in Kenya

Dr. Michael Owiso, Maseno University

Abstract

Integration is envisaged and enshrined in global, regional, national and local refugee regimes as evidenced in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, as well as in the Kenya Refugee Act of 2021. It implies a complex, gradual and interwoven process that brings together legal, economic, social, cultural and political components, ultimately leading to the successful inclusion of refugees as members of the host societies in which they live. While studies have explored the concept of integration and engaged in debates around it, there remains insufficiency in exploring the lived experiences of refugees and host communities so as to attain deeper understanding and inform intervention frameworks and strategies. This working paper explores integration from the perspectives of refugees and hosts by focusing on individual and social level experiences in Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei Settlement in Kenya. The paper benefited from a series of interviews and focus group discussions conducted in the months of November and December 2022. The findings reveal five distinct, yet interrelated, dimensions of refugee integration: economic and wellbeing, social, cultural, legal-citizenship, and psychological. This helps to provide an alternative understanding of lived experiences by revealing both converging and diverging perspectives on the nature and process of integration that are complex and dynamic. The findings also suggest that there exist barriers to the meaningful integration of refugees in Kenya that require attention by stakeholders.

Introduction

Kenya is home to a protracted refugee situation. As of March 31, 2025, Kenya hosted a total of 843,165 refugees and asylum seekers. The majority of these came from Somalia (497,197) followed by South Sudanese (196,474). Other nationalities include the Democratic Republic of Congo (64,105), Ethiopia (43,233), Burundi (33,165), Sudan (12,729), Uganda (4,087), Eritrea (4,305), Rwanda (3,055) and other groups (1,575) (UNHCRa). The majority of refugees in Kenya reside in designated camps in Turkana and Garissa counties, respectively situated in the western and eastern parts of the country.

Almost 90 percent of the world's refugees come from developing countries and will stay in developing countries, either by settling in their first country of asylum or through repatriation to their homelands. Voluntary repatriation has become significantly more difficult to achieve (Stein, 1996). In this sense, refugees will continue to remain in limbo: because they are unable to return to their country of origin, as it is not safe for them to do so; and because they do not have the option of resettlement, as no third country agrees to admit them and provide them with permanent residence rights (Crisp, 2003). The situation requires reconsidering the option of integration as a durable solution.

Owing to the prevalence of protracted refugee situations, refugee integration has emerged as a pressing agenda in forced migration policy, practice and academic discourse (UNHCR, 2002; UNHCR, 2013; UNHCR 2014; Degler & Liegig, 2017). While literature on refugee integration is budding and attempts at the definition and redefinition of the concept (Grillo, 2011; Rytter, 2019), and while frameworks for implementation and evaluation by implementing agencies exist (Streitwieser et al., 2019; Barraket, 2019), the extent and volume of this research is still growing and yet to be further synthesised. In particular, there is a significant dearth of comprehensive empirical analysis of refugee and host community perspectives on integration. This paper draws on thirteen semi-structured interviews and seven focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted over a one-month period in Kakuma and Kalobeyei camps in the months of November and December 2022 and wants to contribute to this debate. The findings are presented along five thematic dimensions of integration: economic and wellbeing, social, cultural, legal, and psychological.

Experiences along the Economic and Wellbeing dimension

Data from this study reveal that refugees and hosts have become interdependent and are also doing business together. An example is that: *“there is this one who does his own businesses. He sells cars. He is not ready to go elsewhere. He says he came to Kenya and Kenya is like home”* (Interview with Local Chief on 23/11/2022). The

refugees hire Turkana locals as porters, shopkeepers, security guards, or casual labour (to help with housework). On the other hand, Kakuma town residents sell livestock and charcoal to refugees who do not have easy access to resources (IFC, 2018). There is a supply chain structure in the business empire of Kakuma-Kalobeyei that relies significantly on refugee-host interactions. Refugee traders source seventy percent of their goods from Kenyan Somali wholesalers and the rest from Turkana suppliers (Betts et al., 2019).

Experiences along the Social dimension

Hosts and refugees attend the same schools (Interview with Area Committee Member on 23/11/2022). Hosts indicate that integration is happening as both refugee and host children attend schools on both sides: *“....we opened five schools around the camp for host communities. What happened was that refugees were now moving into the schools out of the camp, inside the host communities”* (Interview with Local Chief on 23/11/2022). The protracted situation means that some refugees were born more than twenty years ago and have lived together and interacted for long. In some cases, people even speak the language of other communities, *“especially those that have grown together from young age”* (Interview with Local Chief on 23/11/2022). Participants in the focus group discussion with refugee leaders in Kalobeyei indicated that they eat, celebrate and mourn together when, for example, a child is born or when death befalls (FGD with refugee leaders in Kalobeyei Settlement on 3/11/2022).

Positive social relations also take a gendered dimension where refugee and host women seem to relate more with each other. The refugee women in Kalobeyei Settlement reported that they relate very well with women from the host community.

“We relate so well with those women. I have friends, we do visit each other and be together, we don’t abuse each other. We even have each other’s phone number. I can give them food sometimes when they don’t have, they equally give me firewood, whenever I don’t have”.

Turkana women provide labour to the refugees in terms of housework; fetching water and food; and ferrying goods such as charcoal, firewood and agricultural crops such as sorghum. In return, they receive food and cash that enables them to feed their children and families. Host women have lasting friendships and support networks with the refugees (Vemuru, 2016).

Refugee presence is viewed by the hosts as a blessing because their presence comes along with certain interventions that benefit both communities. These projects are in the form of schools, health centres, water services and markets, and they serve as points of convergence where healthy interactions take place. The hosts indicate that

there is a symbiotic relationship with the refugee community. Refugees and hosts belong to self-help groups, community-based organisations, and savings and credit cooperation organisations (Interview with Area Committee Member on 23/11/2022; FGD with refugee leaders in Kalobeyei Settlement on 31/11/2022; Interview with Area Committee Member on 24/11/2022).

The local refugee leaders indicate that the hosts visit the camp as they bring firewood and charcoal for sale and in the process become friends with the refugees. From there, *“later they can also come and visit the refugee friends in the camp”* (FGD conducted with refugee leaders on 23/11/2022). These findings are in consonance with Gengo et al. (2017) who aver that the protracted encampment has shifted the social relations among refugees and between refugees, hosts and humanitarian NGOs. Refugees and hosts are also intermarrying.

Experiences along the Cultural dimension

Some members of the Turkana community have moved into Kalobeyei where they are married to members of the refugee community (FGD with refugee leaders in Kalobeyei Settlement on 3-/11/2022). Although drawing definite causal links between intermarriage and social integration is difficult (Putnam, 2007), it is an important way of determining how a society is structured in a way that exposes the social boundaries (Davis, 1941; Rodriguez-Garcia, 2015) as well as a signal of genuine social acceptance of ‘others’ as equals. Intermarriage also helps to reduce prejudice towards minority groups and reduces social distancing and barriers to social interaction, serving as an indicator of social acceptance (Song, 2009; Quian, 1997).

There are cases of refugee girls who have gotten married to locals and have moved from the camps to stay in the village. Interactions happen, for example, in schools, and from there relationships grow (Interview with Local Chief on 23/22/2022).

“Now the host ladies are being married to refugees and vice versa.... I have idea of such intermarriages and even some refugee men who have married Kenyans...there is a refugee, a Burundian, he is called Jimmy, who has married a Kenyan, I know that” (Interview with Local Chief on 23/22/2022).

The products of this type of marriage can culturally shape and transform processes of integration. Another view suggests that intermarriages are more likely to happen within Kalobeyei because of the model on which the settlement is based, which socio-economic integration (Interview with Area Committee Member on 23/11/2022). According to UNHCR (UNHCRb), the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement is based on the concept of seeking new and innovative approaches to refugee assistance programming, which could benefit both refugees and the communities that host them.

Experiences along the Legal dimension – *The question of citizenship and belonging*

Hynie (2018) avers that refugees' ability to integrate is strongly determined by policies that shape their social and material context. She argues that theoretical arguments about refugee integration maintain that integration is closely related to equitable access to opportunities and resources, participation in the community and society, and feelings of security and belonging. Refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei are aware of plans by the government of Kenya to integrate them. They debate on whether once integrated they will become citizens or they will remain refugees. Does becoming integrated come with freedom of movement? They opine that they ought to be able to travel within the country. Comparing Uganda and Kenya, focus group participants in Kalobeyei observe that the process in Uganda is better because a refugee *"is given a card, you can move freely, you can go to any district, you can do business, then that way one can feel you are the owner of the country"* (FGD with refugee group in Kalobeyei Settlement on 30/11/2022). In their present situation, in order to move from Kakuma to Lokichogio, a town located 30 kilometres from the border of Kenya and South Sudan, which can typically be reached in no longer than 30 minutes, one needs a travel document that there is no guarantee will be obtained.

Experiences along the Psychological dimension

Psychological and physical harmony between a human being and the environment they are living in is critical. This also includes a certain amount of reassurance where the integrated feels physically and mentally safe and can mentally plan for their future. A focused group discussion with refugee local leaders revealed that refugees were facing many challenges. *"Some are worried that the camp will be closed, some will say...just a lot of things. Actually, even me my question for you now is it true this camp will be closed?"* (Interview with Local Leaders on 23/11/2022). The refugee community is worried about securing their livelihood and limited opportunities available for them to do so. They reveal that, prior to becoming displaced, they made charcoal and sold farmed vegetables; they also engaged in other types of business. Somali refugees were herders and could sell their animals in the market. *"Back at home there is rain, the soil is fertile, but here that is not the case. But what can you do?"* (FGD with refugee leaders on 23/11/2022). They are afraid that they will not be able to do all this with their current refugee status.

Refugee leaders reveal that although the humanitarian agencies provide equal access to work opportunities, the hosts insist that they should have priority over any work opportunity. *"Say for instance there is an installation of maybe pipe, and then I am the*

*contractor, so for me to say that let's be five casuals from the refugees and also five from the hosts. Then they say that can never be. They say we are eating Bamba Chakula*¹.” For those who are involved in the construction industry, although opportunities are given to negotiate work and salary, sometimes they face opposition from the locals once they have secured the work (FGD with refugee leaders on 23/11/2022). This causes stress because refugees, though endowed with skills and experience, are not always able to secure work and provide for their families. “*See, I also have a family and I need to provide for them so that they can [...] live like other people, but now I have skills and not work*”. Refugees feel that they are looked down upon by being denied opportunities and sometimes abused by the locals (Ibid).

The travel restrictions discussed earlier create the feeling that being a refugee is “*very difficult*” (FGD with refugee leaders in Kalobeyei on 30/11/2022), and so is the lack of certainties: despite the fact that a refugee possesses an Identity Card, this is not a passport and therefore stress is placed on the refugees. For example, if one is assured of their freedom of movement, then “*we can just go to Kitale and do our own business*” and become fulfilled in life (Ibid). In their study, the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2022) highlights that although the new Refugee Act in Kenya provides refugees with the right to work, rights at work, access to justice and freedom of association, the same law limits freedom of movement.

Conclusion

Some of the strides in the Refugee Act of 2021 include the socio-economic inclusion of refugees into the Kenyan economy. The data collected during this study addresses a number of dimensions that relate to integration. Critically, the question of citizenship remains key: whether or not there is a viable route to citizenship where the dilemmas related to the notion of human security are addressed. This is a reality that not only Kenya has to grapple with and demands focus both at a regional and global level. As evidenced, integration is happening in a piecemeal and selective manner, as opposed to taking a holistic dimension. One of the reasons may be due to the realities of refugee hosting, which are historical, economic, political, social and even cultural in nature. This study reveals the need for a holistic intervention to realise the inclusion of refugees in Kenya; it also points to the lack of freedom of movement and to the limitations imposed on other freedoms. These restrictions make refugees feel threatened and, as a result, distressed. Integration is therefore impacted negatively and remains distant.

¹ *Bamba Chakula* is a Ki-Swahili word that refers to the food vouchers that Kakuma refugees are entitled to, which are provided to them by UNHCR.

References

- Barraket, J. 2013. Fostering the Wellbeing of Immigrants and Refugees? Evaluating the outcomes of work integration social enterprise. In Denny, S. & Seddon, F. (Eds.) *Social Enterprise* (pp. 102-119). London: Routledge.
- Betts, A., Delius, A., Rodgers, C., Sterck, O. & Stierna, M. 2019. Doing Business in Kakuma: Refugees, entrepreneurship, and the food market. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford University.
- Crisp, J. 2003. No Solutions in Sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 22(4), 114–150.
- Davis, K. 1941. Inter-marriage in Caste Societies. *American Anthropologist*, 43(3), 376-395.
- Degler, E. & Liebig, T. 2017. Finding Their Way. Labour market integration of refugees in Germany. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).
- Gengo, R. G., Oka, R. C., Vemuru, V., Golitko, M. & Gettler, L. T. 2018. Positive Effects of Refugee Presence on Host Community Nutritional Status in Turkana County, Kenya. *American Journal of Human Biology*, 30(1), e23060.
- Grillo, R. 2011. Danes and Others. In Olvig, K.F. & Paerregaard, K. (Eds.) *The Question of Integration: Immigration, exclusion and the Danish welfare state* (pp.266-276). Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars.
- Hynie, M. 2018. Refugee Integration: Research and policy. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 24(3), 265–276.
- IFC. 2018. *Kakuma as a Marketplace: A consumer and market study of a refugee camp and town in northwest Kenya*. Washington DC: International Finance Corporation (IFC), World Bank.
- ILO. 2022. *Review of National Policy, Legislative and Regulatory Frameworks and Practice in Kenya: A baseline study on the right to work and rights at work for refugees*. Geneva: International Labour Organization (ILO).
- Quian, Z. 1997. Breaking the Racial Barriers: Variations in interracial marriage between 1980 and 1990. *Demography*, 34(2), 263-276.
- Rodríguez-García, D. 2015. Inter-marriage and Integration Revisited: International experiences and cross-disciplinary approaches. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 662(1), 8-36.
- Rytter, M. 2019. Writing Against Integration: Danish imaginaries of culture, race and belonging. *Ethnos*, 84(4) 678-697.
- Song, M. 2009. Is Inter-marriage a Good Indicator of Integration? *Journal of Ethnic and Migration studies*, 35(2), 331-348.

Stein, B.N. 1986. Durable Solutions for Developing Country Refugees. *The International Migration Review*, 20(2), 264–282.

Streitwieser, B., Loo, B., Ohorodnik, M. & Jeong, J. 2019. Access for Refugees into Higher Education: A review of interventions in North America and Europe. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 23(4), 473-496.

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). 2002. *Local Integration*. EC/GC/02/6. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/local-integration> (accessed 13/06/2025).

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). 2013. *A New Beginning: Refugee Integration in Europe*. Geneva: UNHCR. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/new-beginning-refugee-integration-europe> (accessed 13/06/2025).

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). 2014. *The Integration of Refugees: A discussion paper*. Geneva: UNHCR. https://www.unhcr.org/cy/wp-content/uploads/sites/41/2018/02/integration_discussion_paper_July_2014_EN.pdf (accessed 13/06/2025).

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). 2025. *Kenya: Registered Refugees and Asylum Seekers*. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/media/kenya-statistics-package-31-march-2025-pdf> (accessed 13/06/2025)

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCRa). Undated. *Registered Refugees and Asylum-Seekers as of 31 March 2025*. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/media/kenya-statistics-package-31-march-2025-pdf> (accessed 13/06/2025)

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCRb). Undated. *Kalobeyei Settlement*. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/about-us/where-we-work/kalobeyei-settlement> (accessed 13/06/2025)

Vemuru, V., Oka, R., Gengo, R. & Gettler, L. 2016. *Refugee Impacts on Turkana Hosts: A social impact analysis for Kakuma Town and Refugee Camp, Turkana County, Kenya*. Washington DC: World Bank.

Funding acknowledgement

This research was funded by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). Analysis and writing of this article were conducted during a three-month visiting fellowship funded by the Forced Migration and Refugee Studies: Networking and Knowledge Transfer (FFVT) in 2024.

About the author

Dr. Michael Owiso is a Lecturer and Researcher at Maseno University (Kenya) in the School of Development and Strategic Studies. He serves as Director of Odera Akang'o Campus in the same university. He is also Dean of the School of Development and Strategic Studies. He is an Adjunct Fellow at the Humanitarian and Development Research Initiative (HADRI), Western Sydney University, and a Visiting Senior Research Fellow at Kings Global Institutes, School of Global Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences and Public Policy, Kings College London.

To contact the author: mowiso@maseno.ac.ke; owisomike@gmail.com.

Citing this work

Owiso, M. (2025) Refugee Integration: Perspective from Kakuma Camp and Kalobeyei Settlement in Kenya. *HADRI Global Development Working Paper Series*, No.5. Sydney: Humanitarian & Development Research Initiative (HADRI), Western Sydney University.