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Refugee-Led Research Series

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## NAVIGATING THE CITY

The Internal Migration of Refugees from Kakuma and Dadaab Refugee Camps to Nairobi

Asrat Koricha Tolossa

## Abstract

This study explores the interactions between refugees' aspirations, abilities, and institutional constraints as they decide to move from Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps to Nairobi, Kenya, and their experience navigating life in the city. It concludes with a set of recommendations to the refugee support ecosystem to help refugees navigate the significant legal, financial, and bureaucratic barriers that complicate their integration and their search for sustainable livelihoods in Nairobi.

## About the author



Asrat Koricha Tolossa is a refugee from Ethiopia who moved to Nairobi in 2020. He has a Bachelor's degree in Business Management and a background in journalism, and has worked with several humanitarian and research organisations in Kenya. Asrat is passionate about social justice and human rights. Throughout his exile, he has consistently advocated for refugees and asylum seekers through his writing. You can reach him at [aigabp@gmail.com](mailto:aigabp@gmail.com).

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## About the Refugee-Led Research Series

The Refugee-Led Research Series publishes primary and secondary research that has been authored by individuals who have been affected by forced displacement. The Series includes Research Reports and Working Papers. RLRH prioritises papers that apply ethical and rigorous research methods to capture the thematic priorities of displaced communities. Through the Refugee-Led Research Series, we aim to provide evidence to stakeholders to advance policies and programmes that are more responsive to displaced communities' needs.

## About the RLRH

The Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) is an initiative of the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) at the University of Oxford. The RLRH is based in the UK and Kenya, with a research office located in Nairobi at the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA). We create opportunities for researchers with a displacement background to lead primary and secondary research studies in the field of forced migration, from start to finish. Our main thematic interests in Refugee Studies relate to 1) livelihoods and self-reliance, and 2) leadership and participation of displaced populations in humanitarian response and policymaking. RLRH also offers a series of academic programmes which support graduate access and professional development for students with lived experiences of displacement.

## About the Kenya Evidence Platform

To conduct this research, Asrat Koricha Tolossa received a grant from the Kenya Evidence Platform (KEP), an initiative of the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), in partnership with RLRH and Maseno University. The KEP is a three-year project (2023-2026) funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands that aims to ensure that refugee programming and policymaking in Kenya engages with and responds to locally driven and generated research on promoting durable solutions.



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## Acronyms

<b>CBO</b>	Community-Based Organisation
<b>DRA</b>	Department for Refugee Affairs
<b>DRC</b>	Democratic Republic of the Congo
<b>DRS</b>	Department of Refugee Services
<b>EAC</b>	East African Community
<b>FGD</b>	Focus Group Discussion
<b>HIAS</b>	Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
<b>ID</b>	Identification Document
<b>LGBTQ+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Associated Communities
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>NHIF</b>	National Health Insurance Fund
<b>RLO</b>	Refugee-Led Organisation
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme



Passengers on the bus from Kakuma to Nairobi take a break. Photo taken by the author.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Although refugees in Kenya are required to reside in designated refugee camps, some move from the camps to Nairobi in search of better opportunities, or for medical, protection, and family reunification purposes. This qualitative study examines refugees' decision-making processes in leaving the camps, and explores how they navigate life in Nairobi and how their personal aspirations, abilities and resources, and the institutional environment intersect to shape their experiences.
- The Refugees Act of 2021 and the Refugees (General) Regulations of 2024 represent a positive step towards the socio-economic integration of refugees in Kenya. However, they require refugees to obtain a movement pass and justify their need to leave the camps, and require refugees to obtain an exemption letter to remain in Nairobi once their movement pass has expired. The process for obtaining an exemption letter is opaque and few refugees are successful in obtaining one. Refugees who are unable to apply for or obtain a movement pass or an exemption letter have limited access to services and to sustainable livelihood opportunities; they are unable, for example, to obtain business permits and Class M work permits, pay taxes, access public health care and open bank accounts.
- Inadequate health care, insecurity, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities lead refugees to consider leaving the camps to seek alternatives in Nairobi. In deciding to leave, refugees – individually, as a family unit, or as a community unit – weigh up the risks and benefits associated with the refugee ecosystem in Kenya and consider their personal goals, based on their networks and resources. Refugees also consider whether they will be able to return to camp and ensure that their case file remains active so that they can continue to access food aid and other services.
- The availability of resources plays a significant role in refugees' ability to realise their aspirations to leave and to cope with the challenges they face in the city. The costs of moving and settling are significant, and only those who can save money through remittances or from working with humanitarian organisations in the camp or in digital livelihoods or business can afford to do so. The availability of support networks is another factor that determines whether refugees are able to move safely. Support networks provide refugees with information about available resources, bureaucratic steps, where to live safely and cheaply, and how to earn a living, enabling refugees to make strategic choices.
- This Working Paper recommends that the Department of Refugee Services set up a clear process for refugees to obtain exemption letters and transfer their data from the camps to Nairobi. This could be done through a digital platform that would allow camp-based refugees to apply for documents in a more transparent manner. It also recommends that UNHCR and other refugee actors integrate camp-based refugees into their urban protection programmes.



# Introduction

## Rationale and objectives

Kenya operates an encampment policy, whereby refugees are required to reside in designated refugee camps, Dadaab and Kakuma, or the Kalobeyei Settlement. However, refugees frequently move to Nairobi with or without authorisation, to pursue business, employment, and education, or for medical, protection, and family reunification purposes.<sup>1</sup> Refugees in Kenya exhibit significant mobility, with an estimated 23% of Kakuma refugees changing their primary residence within a given year, and 2.4% moving from the camp to a city.<sup>2</sup> In 2023, the Kenyan Department of Refugee Services issued 1,814 movement passes to refugees wishing to leave the camp.<sup>3</sup> More anecdotally, refugees routinely travel to Nairobi and back to the camp; for example, one bus company runs at least one 60-seater bus from Kakuma to Nairobi and back every day.

A number of studies have analysed why refugees in Kenya leave camp and the challenges they face in Nairobi.<sup>4</sup> This paper builds upon this literature to provide empirical evidence on how refugees 1) navigate their decisions to leave the camp and 2) navigate life in Nairobi. Drawing from Betts et al (2023)<sup>5</sup> and De Haas (2021),<sup>6</sup> This study focuses on the interactions between refugees' personal aspirations, their abilities and resources, and the institutional environment.

- **Personal factors** include the aspirations of refugees, and their ability to make choices to improve their lives, mobilise resources to realise these choices, and cope with challenges at all stages of their journeys.
- **Institutional constraints** (such as the Kenyan legal framework and bureaucratic

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<sup>1</sup> Betts A, Omata N, Siu J & Sterck O (2023) '[Refugee mobilities in East Africa: understanding secondary movements](#)', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 49, No 11.

<sup>2</sup> Betts A, Omata N, Siu J & Sterck O (2023) '[Refugee mobilities in East Africa: understanding secondary movements](#)', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 49, No 11.

<sup>3</sup> [The Kenya Gazette](#), 245, 16th November 2023.

<sup>4</sup> See for instance: Mixed Migration Centre (2020) [Urban Mixed Migration: Nairobi Case Study](#); Pavanello S, Elhawary S & Pantuliano S (2010) '[Hidden and exposed: Urban refugees in Nairobi, Kenya](#)', Overseas Development Institute; Tegenbos J & Büscher K (2017) '[Moving Onward?: Secondary Movers on the Fringes of Refugee Mobility in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya](#)', *Transfers*, 7(2), 41-60.

<sup>5</sup> Betts A, Omata N, Siu J & Sterck O (2023) '[Refugee mobilities in East Africa: understanding secondary movements](#)', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 49, No 11; McAteer B, Amado P G, Krisciunaite A & Owiso M (2023) [Somali refugees in Kenya: increasing camp-urban mobility](#), International Institute for Environment and Development.

<sup>6</sup> De Haas H (2021) '[A theory of migration: the aspirations-capabilities framework](#)', *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(1), 8.

requirements) influence the choices that refugees make, and their ability to navigate life in the city.

## Research methods

This study adopted a qualitative approach. Following a literature review, I started fieldwork in July 2024. I conducted in-depth individual interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGD, Table 1), and two key informant interviews with one Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and one Refugee-Led Organisation (RLO).

Fieldwork was conducted in several locations where refugees reside in Nairobi.<sup>7</sup> I targeted refugees who have migrated from Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps to Nairobi, who currently reside in Nairobi and have no plan to return to the camp for an extended period of time. Particular attention was paid to the identification of participants in situations of marginality, such as displaced people from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Associated Communities (LGBTQ+) and refugees with disabilities.

*Table 1: Tools, Nationality and Gender*

Nationality	Male	Female	Total IDI	Male	Female	Total FGD	Total
Somali	3	3	6	5	3	8	14
Congolese	4	4	8	1	1	2	10
Ethiopian	3	2	5	3	2	5	10
Burundi	1	2	3	2	4	6	9
South Sudan	1	1	2	0	0	0	2
Sudan	0	0	0	4	1	5	5
Rwanda	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
Eritrean	1	0	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>52</b>

<sup>7</sup> Fieldwork took place in: Kitengela, Umoja, Jamhuri, Kasarani, Kayole, Kariobangi, Kikuyu, Githurai 45, Ruiru, Pangani, and Eastleigh.



## Positionality

During fieldwork, I encountered advantages and challenges related to my positionality and status. As a former research assistant to Global North researchers in Kakuma, I had already established relationships of trust with some of the refugee and asylum seeker participants, which made identification and interviews easier.

The main challenge I faced as a refugee was accessing informants. I was unsuccessful in securing interviews with the Department of Refugee Services (DRS) and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>8</sup>

In addition, while many refugees were open during interviews, refugees and asylum seekers from Ethiopia, my country of origin, were more cautious than other nationalities. Although I explained my objectives at the start and end of each interview, some of the participants from Ethiopia were not open to sharing information. This can be attributed, among other factors, to fears around abductions and forced returns to Ethiopia.

## Background: the Kenyan legal and policy framework

Kenya has hosted refugees since gaining independence in 1963. In the 1980s, refugees could move freely and had an easier time integrating because they were perceived to bring valuable skills that contributed to Kenya's economy, and because the caseload was limited in scale (10,000 by 1987).<sup>9</sup>

Kenya's refugee policy underwent a significant transformation between the 1980s and 2000s, however, with the large-scale arrivals of Somali, Sudanese, and Ethiopian refugees in the 1990s.<sup>10</sup> Security concerns and geopolitical dynamics became a central part of political discourse.<sup>11</sup> This led to a shift from a relatively lenient approach to a more restrictive stance and the eventual adoption of Kenya's 2006 Refugees Act,<sup>12</sup> which

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<sup>8</sup> These challenges are common among refugee researchers. See: Getachew A, Gitahi M, Ramazani U & Yousif Kara A (2022) ['When displaced persons lead research: experience from East Africa'](#), *Forced Migration Review* 70.

<sup>9</sup> Milner J (2019) ['A History of Asylum in Kenya and Tanzania: Understanding the Drivers of Domestic Refugee Policy'](#), *Monde(s)*, 15(1), 69-92.

<sup>10</sup> Milner J (2019) ['A History of Asylum in Kenya and Tanzania: Understanding the Drivers of Domestic Refugee Policy'](#), *Monde(s)*, 15(1), 69-92.

<sup>11</sup> Agwanda B (2022) ['Securitization and Forced Migration in Kenya: A Policy Transition from Integration to Encampment'](#), *Population and Development Review*, 48(3), 723-743.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobi M & Jaji R (2022) [Refugee policy and selective implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework in Kenya](#), (IDOS Policy Brief No 9; Halakhe AB & Omondi S (2024) [Lessons and Recommendations for Implementing Kenya's New Refugee Law](#), Refugees International.

made staying in camp mandatory.<sup>13</sup>

In accordance with the 2006 Act, refugees were required to obtain the permission of the camp manager prior to leaving the camps. There is evidence, however, that some refugees were relocating from the camps and engaging in a range of socio-economic activities, with or without a movement pass.<sup>14</sup> In 2011, the Department for Refugee Affairs (DRA, now Department of Refugee Services: DRS) started registering and issuing identification documents (ID) to urban refugees in several cities (Nairobi, Malindi, Mombasa, and Nakuru), a move described as an “incontrovertible step towards embracing the notion of a recognized urban refugee population.”<sup>15</sup>

The Refugees Act of 2021 and the Refugees’ (General) Regulations of 2024 reflect the “contradictory policy orientations” of Kenya since 2013: enforcing encampment, promoting socio-economic integration, and frequently announcing camp closures – the most recent occurrence being in March 2021.<sup>16</sup>

Halakhe and Omondi (2024) describe the Act and the 2024 Regulations as a positive step towards the “socio-economic integration of refugees [...] by granting refugees the right to work, freedom of movement in a designated area, and the right to own property,” and by allowing refugees from the East African Community to give up their refugee status and “enjoy all citizens’ rights in all member countries, including the right to work, freedom of movement, and the right to own property.”<sup>17</sup>

Both the Act and the Regulations require refugees to obtain a movement pass from the camp manager to leave “designated areas,” defined as “any reception area, transit point, or settlement area as may be declared by the Cabinet Secretary.”<sup>18</sup> However, it is unclear whether these areas include Nairobi, and/or towns near the refugee camps, or just the camps themselves.<sup>19</sup> In any case, if refugees do not return to the camp once their

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<sup>13</sup> Owiso M (2022) [‘Incoherent policies and contradictory priorities in Kenya’](#), *Forced Migration Review* 70.

<sup>14</sup> Betts A, Omata N & Sterck O (2018) [Refugee Economies in Kenya](#), Refugee Studies Centre.

<sup>15</sup> Refugee Consortium of Kenya (2012) [Asylum Under Threat: Assessing the protection of Somali refugees in Dadaab refugee camps and along the migration corridor](#).

<sup>16</sup> Owiso M (2022) [‘Incoherent policies and contradictory priorities in Kenya’](#), *Forced Migration Review* 70.

<sup>17</sup> Halakhe, A.B. & Omondi, S. (2024). [Lessons and Recommendations for Implementing Kenya’s New Refugee Law](#). Refugees International.

<sup>18</sup> Halakhe, A.B. & Omondi, S. (2024). [Lessons and Recommendations for Implementing Kenya’s New Refugee Law](#). Refugees International.

<sup>19</sup> Halakhe AB & Omondi S (2024) [Lessons and Recommendations for Implementing Kenya’s New Refugee Law](#). Refugees International.

movement pass expires, they must obtain an exemption letter to remain outside the designated area, or they will be criminalised.<sup>20</sup>

As part of its commitment towards more socio-economic integration for refugees, the Kenyan government has developed the Shirika Plan (Socioeconomic Hubs for Integrated Refugee Inclusion in Kenya).<sup>21</sup> However, there is no official information on how the Shirika Plan will address freedom of movement outside the counties where refugee camps are located.<sup>22</sup>

## Navigating decision-making

### Deciding to leave

When making the decision to leave camp, refugees respond to the structural push factors that they face in the camps. Those include **inadequate health care, insecurity, poverty, and lack of educational opportunities**. These constraints push them to seek alternatives in Nairobi, where they may access better health care, safety, employment, and education.

During that process, refugees weigh up the risks and benefits that are associated with the structure of the refugee ecosystem in Kenya, consider their personal goals, call upon their networks and resources, and make decisions at each step of the way on whether and how to move, where to settle, and how to respond to challenges.

#### Box 1: Responding to structural push factors: examples from respondents

**Inadequate health care:** When a young man from Dadaab found that the lack of medical infrastructure meant that the camp could not provide adequate treatment for his ulcer, he was forced to seek care in Nairobi. He sought information from a friend (from his country of origin) who lived in Nairobi and took steps to apply for a medical movement pass, demonstrating the role of support networks in navigating structural constraints.

**Insecurity:** A Congolese pastor in Kakuma decided to flee to Nairobi with his family after escalating ethnic violence targeted his community. As the fighting continued with no perceived intervention from DRS and UNHCR, he decided that the benefits of leaving the camp (protecting his family from violence) outweighed the risks of

<sup>20</sup> [Kenya Gazette Supplement](#) No 25, p273.

<sup>21</sup> Shirika Plan presentation from UNHCR <https://data.unhcr.org/es/documents/download/104460>

<sup>22</sup> Segadlo N, Ogotu N & Ismail I (2024) '[Beyond hype and hope: Unpacking the uncertainties about Kenya's Shirika Plan for hosting refugees](#)'. German Network for Migration Studies blog; McAteer B, Amado PG, Krisciunaite A & Owiso M (2023) [Somali refugees in Kenya: increasing camp-urban mobility](#). International Institute for Environment and Development.

leaving (losing access to food rations and potential resettlement to a third country).

**Poverty:** A Somali refugee from Kakuma decided to migrate to Nairobi “to seek better economic opportunities because life in the camp became increasingly untenable due to extreme heat, food shortages, and limited business prospects.” His desire for autonomy and prosperity, along with strong environmental push factors, led him to “try his luck” in Nairobi – to live in dignity, with the option of returning if he does not succeed.

**Lack of educational opportunities:** A Congolese father in Kakuma recognised the limited educational opportunities available in the camp, based on the information he had from friends and relatives on the better quality of schools in Nairobi. He made the decision to move to Nairobi, where his children could benefit from better educational service providers. Thanks to the remittances he receives from relatives abroad, and savings from conducting business in the camp, he had the capital to pay school fees for his children, and decided to apply for a movement pass to enrol his children in a better school and break the cycle of aid dependency for his family.

**Decision-making is not always a solitary undertaking and can be part of a family or community strategy.** Some larger households (especially from Somali communities) adopt strategies such as dispersing family members outside the camp, particularly to Nairobi.<sup>23</sup> For instance, a young refugee from Dadaab explained: “*Even though there was free education in the camps, the quality was very poor, so my parents decided to bring us to Nairobi. I came for studies, with my sister. [My family] are the ones who made the decision for us to leave the camp.*” For refugees moving to Nairobi, the main advantage of leaving family members behind in the camp is that their relatives can keep their ration cards active. Ration cards are deactivated when a refugee fails to be fingerprinted at the food distribution centre for more than two months. Family members can avoid deactivation by having someone in the family fingerprinted each month. For example, in a family of six (assuming all are 18 years or older), any one of the six can collect food rations from the World Food Programme (WFP) every month. Those who do not have family members to keep their data activated must travel back to the camps every two to three months. This is not always feasible, however, for those who left the camp due to urgent reasons, such as medical concerns or security threats, or those who do not have the resources to travel regularly. If their case file is deactivated, refugees lose access to food aid, including Bamba Chakula<sup>24</sup> money and monthly food rations provided by WFP,

<sup>23</sup> Betts A, Omata N, Siu J & Sterck O (2023) ‘[Refugee mobilities in East Africa: understanding secondary movements](#)’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 49, No 11.

<sup>24</sup> “Bamba Chakula programme is a restricted cash-based intervention designed by WFP as an alternative

and lose their access to resettlement opportunities from UNHCR.<sup>25</sup>

**In some cases, refugees may leave as a group, in particular because of general insecurity.** For instance, the recent conflict between the Nuer of South Sudan and the Ethiopian Anuak in Kakuma resulted in over 3,000 Anuak Ethiopians seeking refuge in Ruiru, in the suburbs of Nairobi.

**The reason for leaving affects whether refugees can consider circular migration between the camp and Nairobi.** Refugees who leave because of security threats against them and inadequate health care are unable to return and/or move back and forth because their lives would be in danger due to continued threats or because the care they need is not available. For example, in terms of health, one diabetic person said he could not return to the camp as he had to undertake kidney dialysis every two weeks in Nairobi. With regard to security, another participant explained that a member of an armed group threatened her when she refused to join, and that she “will never go back to Kakuma as they have strong networks there.” In contrast, poverty and lack of educational opportunities may indeed create an environment that encourages voluntary migration to urban areas but such refugees have the option of returning to their camps if their migration project fails, as there are no significant barriers preventing their return.

**The availability of resources plays a significant role in the ability of refugees to realise their aspirations to leave.** Not all refugees will be able to move to Nairobi, as the cost of moving is substantial. Refugees must save enough money for transportation (the one-way bus fare costs 3000-4000 KSH: 23-40 USD), in addition to accommodation and initial living expenses. This is particularly challenging for those with limited income or who lack financial support. Those receiving remittances are more likely to be able to afford the journey and associated costs for either brief or extended periods. Educated refugees engaged with humanitarian organisations in the camp (as mobilisers or research assistants), refugees who engage in digital livelihoods, and refugees who do business may be able to build savings. Some refugees also receive direct community contributions or rely on family savings, in exchange for sending remittances back to the camp once they start making a living in Nairobi.

**Refugees who are educated (in Kenya or in their country of origin) and/or have stronger support networks are more likely to realise their migration goals.** Respondents reflected that they had received support in obtaining travel documents from their camps, as well as financial support from friends, communities, or churches for their

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to in-kind food assistance.” Betts A, Delius A, Rodgers C, Sterck O, & Stierna M (2019) [Doing business in Kakuma: Refugees, entrepreneurship, and the food market](#), Refugee Studies Centre.

<sup>25</sup> Betts A, Omata N & Sterck O (2018) [Refugee Economies in Kenya](#), Refugee Studies Centre.

migration process. Support networks also provided precious access to information.

### Before leaving: obtaining a movement pass

Once they have decided to leave the camp, refugees must apply for a movement pass to leave the camp legally, by submitting a formal application in person to the camp manager. DRS then issues the passes. Movement passes are typically granted for a period of 15 days to one year, depending on the reason. For instance, for medical purposes, the permit is valid for two months, while for education it is granted for one year. The process is not described in the Act and its Regulations. Box 2 is based on interviews with participants.

#### Box 2: Movement pass acquisition process

1. Applicants physically present themselves at the DRS camp manager's office to request a movement pass. Sometimes they are provided with forms to complete, while on other occasions the officer registers the visitor's details in a logbook. The applicant is required to provide copies of their refugee registration documents, which are typically the proof of registration, along with supporting documents, such as a business licence, medical documentation, or a student results slip or admission letter.
2. Upon submission of the requisite documentation, the applicants are invited for an interview (often on the same day they submit their documentation). These interviews may be conducted as one-to-one session or as part of a panel interview.
3. Applicants with acceptable documentation, such as a referral letter, admission letter, or business permit, and those who can successfully present their travel reasons to the interviewer are permitted to proceed to the next stage for biometric data collection.
4. The officer collects all the required information on the applicant, including biometric data such as photographs and left thumb print. Once finalised, the paperwork is sent back to the camp manager for verification and approval.
5. At this stage, the files will be verified against the information gathered during the interview stage. Once verified, the files will be signed and stamped before being sent back to the biometric section for distribution.
6. The approved movement passes are then distributed to applicants.

**Not all refugees are able to apply for, or to successfully obtain, movement passes.** There are no official numbers of refugees who travel without movement passes and

become criminalised. In 2018, Betts et al found in a survey that “about 32% of refugees who travelled outside Kakuma did so without asking for a movement pass.”<sup>26</sup>

**Refugees may not be able or willing to wait when there are delays in the application process.** It is not uncommon for submitted applications for permits to be misplaced or lost at any stage of the process, leading to delays. During the interview stage, language can be a barrier for applicants who do not speak English or Swahili. With few interpreters available, this may lengthen the application process. The duration to complete the application process varies depending on several factors such as the availability of interpreters and the number of applicants. For example, the higher the number of applicants, the longer the process of obtaining the final permit document, although it typically a maximum of 15 days.

**Refugees may also not be able to provide relevant supporting documents** (e.g. referral letter, admission letter, or business permit) to support their application and will in these cases tend to assume that their claim will not be considered credible. It can be challenging for an applicant to prove that they are self-sufficient and have relatives who can support them. A refugee explained: *“During my first trip to Nairobi in 2022, I was pregnant and quickly received a movement pass. However, during my second attempt, it was challenging to obtain a permit, which caused delays, so I eventually left without it.”* In this case, the refugee applicant did not have the relevant supporting documents and a compelling reason to obtain a movement pass. As a result, some refugees, driven by urgent need, choose to travel without the required movement pass, exposing themselves to the risk of legal consequences. Those who are denied the movement pass often resort to alternative means, such as paying bribes and risking travel without proper authorisation to achieve their relocation goals.<sup>27</sup>

**Resources and networks play a key role in obtaining movement passes.** Refugees with more networks find it easier to navigate the application process thanks to the information they receive from peers who have been successful in applying. Those with more education also find it easier as they are more comfortable with the process and the language requirements of the application.

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<sup>26</sup> Betts A, Omata N, Siu J & Sterck O (2023) [‘Refugee mobilities in East Africa: understanding secondary movements’](#). *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 49, No 11.

<sup>27</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council & International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School (2018) [Supporting Kakuma’s Refugees: The Importance of Freedom of Movement](#).



## The journey: transportation to Nairobi

The nature of the journey to Nairobi and the risks associated with the journey depend on the ability of refugees to obtain movement passes, and on the resources and support networks that refugees possess.

Once the movement permit from the camp manager is secured, refugees have the right to leave the camp either by private transport or, for those who can afford it, by air. In the case of Kakuma, the two private bus transporters are the more commonly used mode of transportation for those travelling from the camp to Nairobi. These are transportation enterprises owned by Somali Kenyans. Private transporters collect data from refugees travelling from Kakuma to Nairobi and verify whether a refugee possesses a movement pass, thereby adding a further control on refugee movement. In the absence of a movement pass, refugees will incur additional costs beyond the standard travel fare, as private transporters may ask them to pay additional charges.

Refugees who choose to travel with informal transporters are at a higher risk higher risk of insecurity, and of paying bribes at checkpoints, even if they have a movement pass.

## Navigating life in the city

Like decision-making, navigating life in Nairobi is characterised by interactions between refugees' own agency and abilities, and institutional constraints.

### Upon arrival: settling in Nairobi

The selection of the area in which to settle illustrates how refugees make strategic choices about where to live, based on the information they have access to, their support networks, and their resources.

In general, refugees prioritise co-national presence, religious or tribal affiliations, and the availability of lower rental costs when choosing specific neighbourhoods in Nairobi. An Ethiopian man, for example, explained his choice to reside in Ruiru by saying: *"Ruiru is widely regarded as one of the most secure locations for refugees, offering a long-standing sense of stability and safety. I decided to rent in this area because of my tribal affiliations with people living in this area. Furthermore, the cost of renting is lower than in other locations."* Likewise, because of cheaper living costs and lower levels of police harassment, Kitengela has become an increasingly popular destination for Congolese refugees.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Betts A, Omata N, Siu J & Sterck O (2023) ['Refugee mobilities in East Africa: understanding secondary movements'](#), *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, Vol 49, No 11.

The presence of support networks also influences refugees' decisions to settle in a particular neighbourhood. Upon arrival in Nairobi, many refugees initially stay in guest houses within refugee-populated areas or with friends and relatives. Many refugees, especially Ethiopians and Somalis, partner up and rent single rooms for three to four people, to reduce their rental expenses. Others may stay temporarily at their first point of arrival in Nairobi, often in religious institutions they knew about before their departure from the camp. A Congolese woman recalls, *"Upon my initial arrival in Kenya, I resided in a church in Kangemi and employed this strategy when I came from Kakuma."*

### Navigating administrative requirements (staying out of illegality)

Once their movement pass expires, refugees are required to obtain an exemption letter from the DRS Commissioner to remain in Nairobi legally.<sup>29</sup> However, refugees face significant challenges in obtaining letters of exemption and transferring their data to Nairobi. These challenges are caused by unclear guidelines, lack of awareness, and corruption. Exemption letters were not delivered between 2017 and 2021 but resumed when the 2021 Refugees Act was passed. To apply for an exemption, refugees must submit an application to the DRS head office, where they must explain their valid reasons for not returning to their camps; these reasons need to fall under the categories of "family reunification, medical grounds, education, employment, business, protection, sports, or aspects that would promote social and economic wellbeing."<sup>30</sup> Exemption letters are issued for six months. Once the letters expire, refugees are required to visit the DRS office for renewal.

However, the process for issuing this exemption letter lacks clarity. After submitting their applications, several refugee applicants were *"instructed to return home and await further communication from the office."* However, some reported years of waiting for permits to be exempted from designated areas and to obtain a Nairobi document, despite following up several times with the office and feeling that their reason for application was compelling and fell within the criteria. One refugee said: *"I submitted my application for the transfer along with other protection documents; however, it has now been four years since I submitted my application, and I am still waiting to be called."*

Only a single respondent indicated that he had been contacted by telephone and subsequently provided with an exemption letter, which he has since been able to renew three times.

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<sup>29</sup> [Kenya Gazette Supplement](#) No. 25, p273

<sup>30</sup> [Refugee Regulations](#), 2024

Not receiving an exemption letter has dire consequences for these newly urban refugees. With no exemption letter, they are unable to transfer their data from the camp to their new address to continue to receive humanitarian assistance. Data transfer enables the applicants to be granted the relevant documents pertaining to their status as refugees in Nairobi, including the proof of registration and the Nairobi refugee ID card. The process of transferring refugee data from camps to Nairobi is also not clearly stated in the 2024 Regulations. Participants described the current process as lacking transparency and fairness. Some also noted that *“refugees with greater financial resources seemed more likely to successfully transfer their data.”*

Refugees who do not receive an exemption letter are subsequently unable to obtain Kenya Revenue Authority (KRA) personal identification numbers to pay taxes, to apply for business permits and Class M work permits,<sup>31</sup> to access the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF), and to open bank accounts. This makes it very difficult for refugees to access health and protection services, to survive economically or to achieve a sustainable and dignified life unless they have significant resources and networks, and it marginalises the camp-to-urban refugees who do not have those resources – as illustrated by the case of this mother: *“In the camp, I used to take a drug that I don't have access to here. Furthermore, I am unable to register for NHIF because of camp documentation. [For health care], I was advised to pay 500 KSH to register each child and also a monthly fee, but I lack the financial resources to do so.”*

While past studies have reported that refugees faced harassment and extortion by the police when they did not have a Nairobi ID card,<sup>32</sup> recent developments appear to have reduced this harmful trend. In September 2023, the Minister of the Interior, Kithuri Kindiki, published six documents pertaining to the identification of refugees, including the Asylum Seeker Pass, Proof of Registration, Movement Pass, Letter of Recognition, Refugee Identity Card and Conventional Travel Document.<sup>33</sup> One noticeable change since the publication of the six documents is the improvement in inter-urban refugee movement, as Nairobi police now recognise the above six documents as valid refugee identification. However, these documents are not accepted by other governmental offices, such as the KRA and private sectors such as Safaricom. These documents are also

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<sup>31</sup> See: Joyce Vuni F and Irugi B (2023) [Refugees' access to work permits and business licences in Kenya](#), Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH), for an overview of the challenges that refugees face to obtain Class M permits and business licences. Since the publication of the study, there have been increased efforts to grant work permits to refugees, as evidenced by the granting of Class M permits to researchers at the RLRH in 2024.

<sup>32</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council (2017) [Recognising Nairobi's Refugees: The Challenges and Significance of Documentation Proving Identity and Status](#).

<sup>33</sup> [Kenya Gazette Supplement](#) No 171, 19 September 2023

not yet accepted by urban-based NGOs and other duty holders.

### Making a living

When they arrive in Nairobi, refugees cope with the high cost of living in Nairobi by engaging in business and employment (formally or informally). While there are better opportunities for refugees in Nairobi compared with camps, refugees face several challenges relating to institutional constraints and the socio-economic environment – as described by a refugee from Dadaab: *“While residing in an urban setting presents its own challenges, it offers a unique opportunity to establish a life for oneself, which was not feasible in the camp.”*

Refugees who successfully engage in business often receive support and know-how from fellow community members. If a particular trade or business has already been established by others of their nationality, a refugee may choose to enter that sector because it is easier to get started with the support and guidance of their network. Refugees may be inclined towards occupations that align with their cultural practices or traditions. For example, Somali and Ethiopian refugees may choose to work in the sale of khat or tea and coffee because these trades are culturally familiar.

Refugees are often pushed into informality by institutional constraints. The high costs associated with formal business spaces in Nairobi and the inability to access business licences without a Nairobi refugee ID push many refugees into informal employment, such as street vending or working in small-scale trades that do not require significant financial investment.

In the professional sector, refugees face significant challenges in securing jobs due to legal and bureaucratic hurdles, such as the need for a Class M work permit and urban refugee ID. These barriers can prevent them from accessing jobs that match their skills and education. A Burundian woman explained: *“Despite holding a degree in agriculture, I am engaged in the sale of garments in an informal setting. Obtaining the requisite work permit has proven to be a significant challenge.”* In the humanitarian sector, refugees struggle to hold long-term positions if they do not hold an urban refugee ID for an extended period of time.

### Accessing protection and support

Refugees who fail to make a living, or do not have the resources and networks to be self-sufficient, rely on their family, friends, and fellow community members for housing and financial support. Refugees sometimes receive in kind and cash support from various religious institutions, such as mosques and churches, alongside social networks, including

faith-based organisations and community-led associations in Nairobi.<sup>34</sup> For example, a Congolese refugee mother explained: *“Upon arriving in Nairobi, I faced the challenge of a finding a place to sleep. A Catholic church provided assistance, allowing me to stay outside the church (inside the gate) for a month.”*

Others try to access more formal support from humanitarian organisations and refugee-led organisations, such as direct assistance or training programmes. However, existing evidence suggests that refugees who do not have a Nairobi refugee ID do not have access to appropriate channels to report protection risks.<sup>35</sup> These refugees generally report feelings of frustration when it comes to the humanitarian support available to them: some complained that support was partial and that, some groups, such as LGBTQ+ refugees who left the camp for protection purposes, received more support than other refugees, and were able to process their data from camps to Nairobi. Others report that the more formal of the refugee-led organisations do not offer services to camp refugees living in Nairobi because these refugees do not have urban documentation, nor do these refugee-led organisations support refugees in their applications for documentation.

## Recommendations

The migration of refugees from camps to Nairobi is a response to a combination of structural constraints and personal motivations. Refugees seek better access to livelihoods, services, and security in Nairobi, yet face significant barriers posed by Kenya’s encampment policies and bureaucratic hurdles, and struggle to become self-reliant. The recommendations below are made to the refugee support ecosystem to help refugees navigate the significant legal, financial, and bureaucratic barriers that complicate their integration and their search for sustainable livelihoods in Nairobi.

### To DRS

- **Set up a clear and transparent data transfer process.** Several of the refugees interviewed for this study (including women) who left camp for safety and medical reasons have been living without documentation in Nairobi for an extended period of time. Despite meeting the criteria set out in the legislation, these refugees have been unable to obtain clear and transparent information from DRS. As a result, they have been unable to access timely assistance, including health care, that would facilitate their integration into Nairobi’s socio-economic structures. The provision of timely documentation assistance would

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<sup>34</sup> Yousif Kara A (2022) [Refugee-led organisations in Kenya](#), Refugee-Led Research Hub Research Paper 2.

<sup>35</sup> Mixed Migration Centre (2020) [Urban Mixed Migration: Nairobi Case Study](#)

therefore be beneficial in reducing the vulnerability of refugees and facilitating their socio-economic integration.

- **Establish a digital platform that enables refugees and asylum seekers to obtain the necessary travel and extension documents in a timely manner.** Incorporating digital technology into the process would make it easier to eliminate inefficiencies, monitor the process and make timely adjustments. Delays in the provision of travel and extension documents can increase refugees' vulnerability. Providing an adequate number of interpreters for all communities would help to remove barriers for those wishing to migrate from the camps to Nairobi.
- **Continue raising awareness on the rights of refugees.** Law enforcement officials at each checkpoint from the camps to Nairobi should be trained in the 2021 Refugees Act and its 2024 Refugees (General) Regulations and be aware of their responsibilities.

#### To UNHCR:

- **Integrate camp refugees into Nairobi services.** The lack of adequate protection in the camps is a major factor motivating refugees to move to Nairobi. However, refugees who leave the camp for health and safety reasons are forced to stay in Nairobi without the necessary support, including health care. In addition, structural barriers – such as difficulties in obtaining a refugee card and a work permit – limit their ability to engage in formal employment. Inclusion of these refugees in UNHCR's programme of services in Nairobi will facilitate their legal residency and enable them to live in a peaceful environment, thereby creating an opportunity for them to address their own problems and become self-reliant.

#### TO NGOs & RLOs:

- **Include camp refugees in urban refugee assistance programmes.** Refugees from camps are largely excluded from urban programming, despite their needs. It is important to improve the protection environment for all refugees. NGOs and RLOs should provide camp refugees living in Nairobi with equitable opportunities as urban refugees. This includes the inclusion of camp refugees in legal assistance programmes, employment opportunities, and capacity building initiatives.

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