

## The politics of sharing aid with host communities

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**Extending refugee aid and services to host communities is a strategy to preserve the humanitarian 'protection space', but may drive unrealistic expectations for host entitlements.**

In many contexts of large-scale protracted displacement, the distribution of humanitarian aid can become highly contentious, especially where local people face their own economic challenges and vulnerabilities but do not qualify for refugee assistance. In order to counter this resentment, which can impinge on the ability of humanitarian organisations to fulfil their protection mandate, aid actors have responded by including locals as beneficiaries and leveraging the aid economy to support local development. But as suggested by the history of the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, this strategy to reduce tension brings additional risks in the long term.

### Refugee-host relations in Turkana County

For decades, refugee-host relations at Kakuma camp have been beset by low-level tensions. When confrontations occur, these tensions can quickly escalate to violence. In 2017, a refugee student from the neighbouring Eastern Equatoria region of South Sudan attacked and killed five Turkana students and a night guard in a high school near Lokichoggio, about 100km from Kakuma. The attacker was taken into police custody, but was then seized from his cell and killed by a local mob.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, Somali refugees marched towards Kakuma town to protest the lack of camp security following a spate of night-time robberies, rapes and murders. They were met at the Tarac River by Turkana protesters concerned that the refugees posed a threat to local businesses. Military intervention was required to keep the two parties separate. More recently, the growing profile of members of the LGBTIQ+ community within the camp has provoked anger and resulted in some violent incidents perpetrated against them by local people.<sup>2</sup>

One particular source of tension is that many local people feel that they have not

meaningfully benefited from the refugees' presence, despite giving up their land and pastures as the camp was constructed. Moreover, from the perspective of Turkana people, who practice a communal way of life and share available resources, it is immoral that refugees are guaranteed a baseline of support from UNHCR while locals struggle with meagre government support. This sentiment is captured succinctly in a narrative that emerged in the early 2000s, which suggested that it is better to be a refugee than a Turkana in Kakuma.<sup>3</sup>

Formally, UNHCR's mandate is to provide protection to refugees, whereas local community concerns fall under the remit of the national and county governments. But for much of Kenya's history, Turkana was neglected in the national development agenda. When the UNHCR set up its operations in Kakuma and began providing aid to foreigners living in Turkana territory, many locals felt a sense of exclusion that was amplified by the longer history of marginalisation.

### Cohesion in law and programming

Humanitarian organisations have responded with efforts to mitigate tensions and promote positive relations between refugees and the Turkana community, usually under the banner of 'peaceful coexistence'.<sup>4</sup> Initially, this involved ad hoc arrangements that opened access to refugee programmes and services for local Kenyans. More recently, such arrangements have been formalised in policies such as the 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the 2018 Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan.<sup>5</sup> Peaceful coexistence has also been codified in law through the 2021 Refugees Act, where several articles specify strategies for promoting peace, including the shared use of public institutions, facilities

and spaces between refugees and host communities. Many of these objectives align with the emerging ‘social cohesion’ agenda in refugee policymaking, although in Kenya the older terminology has stuck.

One problem is that as peaceful cohesion has been formalised and normalised in Kenya’s refugee policy framework, there have been growing expectations for ‘host entitlements’. As in other refugee-hosting areas such as Dadaab in Garissa County, locals in Kakuma have increasingly used advocacy and sometimes even violence to demand benefits from the organisations that operate in their territory. Humanitarian actors have raised concerns about these interruptions to their work. Some of these activities have been organised by local political actors hoping to position themselves as community advocates. Others have attempted to direct ‘host entitlements’ such as jobs or construction tenders to their own networks. This politicisation of aid has been accompanied by disappointment due to unmet expectations of host benefits as well as dissatisfaction about the unequal enjoyment of benefits across the different strata of the Turkana population.<sup>6</sup>

### Taking forward the ‘peaceful coexistence’ agenda in Kenya

Despite these complications, the peaceful coexistence agenda in Turkana holds promise. There is a long history of trade, economic cooperation, and even marriage between refugees and hosts. But policymakers need to strengthen the legal basis of refugees’ belonging in Kenya. Despite efforts to provide refugees with small-scale economic opportunities within the camp area, refugees are still denied freedom of movement and the right to work, unless they seek special permits. Coexistence objectives require some level of equality across different groups, which must be anchored in legal rights for refugees.

Relatedly, peaceful coexistence projects have thus far focused heavily on the economic dimensions of host-refugee relations, which include leveraging aid as an investment in local development. But investing aid

in local development renders the camp a resource for hosts, which risks refugees being seen less as co-inhabitants and more as a commodity. While the host community may be happy for refugees to stay, they may also become accustomed to encampment and oppose granting greater rights for refugees, which would disperse refugees – and the benefits that accompany their presence – to Nairobi and elsewhere in Kenya. Such an attitude may actually work against efforts to promote social cohesion in the long term.

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2. UNHCR Statement on the situation of LGBTQ+ refugees in Kakuma camp [bit.ly/LGBTIQ-Kakuma](https://bit.ly/LGBTIQ-Kakuma)
3. Aukot E (2004) ‘It Is Better to Be a Refugee Than a Turkana in Kakuma’: Revisiting the Relationship between Hosts and Refugees in Kenya’, *Refuge*
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5. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kisedp-2>
6. Rodgers C (2021) ‘Community Engagement in Pastoralist Areas: Lessons from the Public Dialogue Process for a New Refugee Settlement in Turkana, Kenya’, *Pastoralism* 11 (26)

