

Educating for return: Somali refugees in Dadaab

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Finding a ‘durable’ solution for Somali refugees in Dadaab means ensuring they have the knowledge, capacity, confidence and qualifications required for meaningful, lasting return.

In 1991, with the outbreak of civil war in Somalia, refugee camps were established around the small border town of Dadaab in north-eastern Kenya. Since then, Dadaab has become the location of one of the world’s largest and longest-standing protracted refugee situations. At their peak the camps hosted over half a million refugees. As of July 2019, there are over 211,000 refugees, of whom 96% are Somali, the majority of whom were born or grew up in the camps.¹

As ‘non-citizens’ the Somali refugees do not have State protection, and their mobility and employment rights are constrained. Threats, kidnappings and violent attacks perpetrated in Kenya by the Somalia-based militant group Al-Shabaab has fostered an attitude of distrust and fear towards these refugees, whom the Kenyan government accuse of being infiltrated by the group. Caught between the violence and instability of their homeland and a host nation unwilling to integrate them, refugees in Dadaab have been compelled by lack of other options to remain in the camps.

Kenya’s repatriation programme

In November 2013, a Tripartite Agreement was signed between the governments of Kenya and Somalia and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Using the Tripartite Agreement as the legal framework, a voluntary repatriation programme was established in December 2014 which took an incremental approach to return, beginning by providing funds and resources to support those who choose to return, and progressing to formal returns supported by UNHCR.²

However, although the programme is in place, there are few incentives to return to Somalia.

Refugees who did return reported that lack of food and basic services made it nearly impossible to survive or to re-establish their lives. They also found that the quality of shelter and education was not as high as they had anticipated. In areas controlled by Al-Shabaab, movement was restricted, and the general insecurity created fear.³ Despite these reports, in May 2016 the Kenyan government announced plans to expedite the repatriation of Somali refugees and to close down the camps. Two months after this announcement, UNHCR made an appeal for funds to relocate all non-Somali refugees – and those who were in the course of the resettlement process – from the Dadaab camps to Kakuma refugee camp in the north-west of Kenya, as well as to support voluntary returns from Dadaab to Somalia. While UNHCR and the Government of Kenya insisted that returns would be voluntary, the mass relocation of non-Somali refugees sent a clear message to the Somali refugees who remained in camps that were soon to be closed.



Somali refugee students in Dadaab, Kenya. To understand why we have pixelated part of this image, please see www.fmreview.org/photo-policy.

Although voluntary repatriation may be a desirable solution to displacement, there are questions as to how durable return could be under these conditions. The cash incentives offered through the repatriation programme have led to many members of the host community (who may not be refugees but are ethnically Somali) obtaining the US\$200 offered and then returning to Kenya, often using the funds to establish small-scale businesses. More significantly, Kenya's push for repatriation of refugees to a post-conflict nation that is still affected by violence, forced recruitment, and weak education and health infrastructure has resulted in refugees returning to the Dadaab camps or becoming internally displaced within Somalia.

Following the push for voluntary repatriation, the Kenyan government closed its Department of Refugee Affairs, which oversaw the registration of new refugees. The current government entity charged with displaced persons – the Refugee Affairs Secretariat – is not authorised to register people in Dadaab, and new arrivals and returnees are also no longer registered by UNHCR. As a result they cannot access ration cards and other resources and services. Unregistered asylum seekers are even more vulnerable when they lack access to food and lack status and while such an approach may reduce official numbers it ignores the reality of people's needs.

Education: cultivating capacity for return

To rebuild conditions for peace in a post-conflict society, the best investment is in the people who are seeking to return to rebuild their nation. Since December 2014, there have been over 84,000 refugees from all walks of life who have returned to Somalia under UNHCR's repatriation programme.⁴ The majority of those refugees who have worked in Dadaab schools as teachers and those who have earned scholarships and degrees wish to return to Somalia in order to rebuild their lives and serve their home countries. We have seen several graduates of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project return to Somalia to find work they could not obtain in Kenya – in finance or government, with

international NGOs, or starting their own schools. The opportunities they are able to find in Somalia enable them to build skills to become civil servants and future leaders of the nation while enjoying sustainable livelihoods. With education, refugees are able to see themselves as agents of change. By investing in the minds and capacities of refugees, we are investing in individuals who will return to rebuild and transform civil society in a post-conflict nation.

There is a generation of youth who have grown up in the camps, attended school and, through programmes and scholarships run by non-governmental organisations, earned academic qualifications at primary, secondary and post-secondary levels. With their academic qualifications, they see opportunities for meaningful and sustainable employment with international NGOs and a re-established government to rebuild civil society – employment that would not be possible in Kenya.⁵ In order to facilitate long-term, safe and dignified return, we propose that, rather than repatriation programmes, what is needed is the investment in meaningful capacity building of refugees through education and recognised qualifications.

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1. UNHCR Kenya (2019) 'Operational Update: Dadaab, Kenya July 2019' bit.ly/UNHCR-Dadaab-July2019

2. UNHCR 'New procedures set for Somali refugees to return home voluntarily from Kenya', 11 November 2013 bit.ly/UNHCR-Somali-return-2013

3. Human Rights Watch 'Kenya: Involuntary Refugee Returns to Somalia', 14 Sept 2016 bit.ly/HRW-involuntary-Kenya-2016

4. bit.ly/UNHCR-Somali-volrep-July2019

5. As refugees do not have the right to work in Kenya, they can only work as 'incentive workers', who are paid a fixed low wage, typically a fraction of what a Kenyan national would be given for working in the same position.