



How Dadaab Has Changed the Fortunes of North-Eastern Kenya

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In the 1960s, Kenya had a progressive refugee policy that allowed refugees to settle anywhere in the country and to access education. This approach created in Kenya a cadre of skilled and professional refugees. However, [the policy changed in the 1990s](#) due to an overwhelming influx of refugees and asylum seekers escaping conflict in Somalia, Ethiopia and South Sudan. Kenya switched to an encampment policy for refugees, who were mainly confined to camps.

Although there are refugees living in urban and peri-urban areas elsewhere in the country, for over two decades, northern Kenya has hosted a disproportionate number of the refugees living in Kenya. The region has been home to one of the world's largest refugee camps, with generations of lineage having an impact on the economic, social, cultural, and ecological situation of the region because of the support provided by the government and by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in education, health and security services.

Mandera and Marsabit counties, both of which boarder with Ethiopia, Wajir County which borders with both Ethiopia and Somalia and, Garissa County which borders with Somalia, have hosted refugees and migrants displaced from their countries of origin for various reasons. In 2018, the town of Moyale, which is on the Ethiopian boarder in Marsabit County, temporarily hosted over 10,000 Ethiopians escaping military operations in Ethiopia's Moyale District.

Elwak town in Wajir County occasionally hosts pastoralist communities from Somalia who cross into Kenya seeking pasture for their livestock. While the movement of refugees into Marsabit and Wajir counties has been of a temporary nature, Garissa County has hosted refugees for decades.

Located 70 kilometres from the border with Somalia, the Dadaab refugee complex was established in the 1990s and has three main camps: Dagahaley, Ifo, and Hagadera. Due to an increase in refugee numbers around 2011, the Kambioos refugee camp in Fafi sub-county was established to host new arrivals from Somalia and to ease pressure on the overcrowded Hagadera refugee camp. The Kambioos camp was closed in 2019 as the refugee population fell.

According to the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR, and the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS), the Dadaab refugee complex currently hosts over [226, 689 refugees](#), 98 per cent of whom are from Somalia. In 2015, the refugee population in the Dadaab refugee complex was over 300,000, larger than that of the host community. In 2012, the camp held over 400,000 refugees leading to overstretched and insufficient resources for the growing [population](#).

Under international refugee and human rights law, the government has the sole responsibility of hosting and caring for refugees. However, there is little information regarding the investments made by the Kenyan government in the refugee sector in the north-eastern region over time. Moreover, the government's investment in the sector is debatable since there was no proper legal framework to guide refugee operations in the early 1990s. It was only in 2006 that the government enacted the Refugee Act that formally set up the Refugee Affairs Secretariat mandated to guide and manage the refugee process in Kenya.

While the Refugee Act of 2006 places the management of refugee affairs in the hands of the national government, devolved county governments play a significant role in refugee operations. With the 2010 constitution, the devolution of social functions such as health and education has extended into refugee-hosting regions and into refugee camps. While devolution in this new and more inclusive system of governance has benefited the previously highly marginalised north-eastern region through a fairer [distribution of economic and political resources](#), there is however little literature on how the refugees benefit directly from the county government resource allocations.

The three north-eastern counties are ranked among the leading recipients of devolved funds: Mandera County alone received US\$88 million in the 2015/2016 financial year, the highest allocation of funds after Nairobi and Turkana, leading to developmental improvements.

However, it can be argued that the allocation of funds from the national government to the northern frontier counties by the Kenya Commission on Revenue Allocation—which is always based on the Revenue Allocation table that prioritizes population, poverty index, land area, basic equal share and fiscal responsibility—may not have been taking the refugee population into account. According to the 2019 census, the population of Dadaab sub-county is 185,252, a figure that is well below the actual refugee population. The increase in population in the north-eastern region that is due to an increase in the refugee population calls for an increase in the allocation of devolved funds.

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Dadaab refugee camp has been in the news for the wrong reasons. Security agencies blame the refugees for the increased Al Shabaab activity in Kenya, and even though these claims are disputed, the government has made moves to close down the camp. In 2016, plans to close Dadaab were blocked by the High Court which declared the proposed closure [unconstitutional](#). In 2021, Kenya

was at it again when Ministry of Interior Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang’I tweeted that he had given the UNHCR 14 days to draw up a plan for the closure of the camp. The UNHCR and the government issued a [joint statement](#) agreeing to close the camp in June 2022.

The security rhetoric is not new. There has been a sustained campaign by Kenya to portray Dadaab as a security risk on national, regional and international platforms. During the 554th meeting of the African Union Peace and Security Forum held in November 2015, it was concluded that the humanitarian character of the Dadaab refugee camp had been compromised. The [AU statements](#), which may have been drafted by Kenya, claimed that the attacks on [Westgate Mall](#) and [Garissa University](#) were planned and launched from within the refugee camps. These security incidents are an indication of the challenges Kenya has been facing in managing security. For example, between 2010 and 2011, there were several IED (Improvised Explosive Devices) incidents targeting police vehicles in and around Dadaab where a dozen officers were injured or killed. In October 2012, two people working for the medical charity Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) were kidnapped in Dadaab. Local television network NTV has [described](#) the camp as “a womb of terror” and “a home for al-Shabaab operations”.

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Security restrictions and violent incidents have created a challenging operational environment for NGOs, leading to the relocation of several non-local NGO staff as well as contributing to a shrinking humanitarian space. Some teachers and health workers from outside the region have refused to return to the area following terrorist attacks by Al-Shabaab, leaving behind large gaps in the health, education, and [nutrition sectors](#).

However, despite the challenging situation, the refugee camps have also brought many benefits, not only to Kenya as a country but also to the county governments and the local host communities.

Education

According to the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) half the [refugee population in the IGAD member states](#) are children of school-going age, between 4 and 18 years.

In Garissa, the education sector is one of the areas that has benefited from the hosting of refugees in the county because the host community has access to schools in the refugee camps. [Windle Trust](#), an organisation that offers scholarships to students in secondary schools and in vocational training institutes, has been offering scholarships to both the refugees and the host communities. [In July 2021, over 70 students](#) benefited from a project run by International Labour Organisations (ILO) in partnership with Garissa county governments, the East African Institute of Welding (EAIW) and the Kenya Association of Manufacturers (KAM) to give industrial welding skills to refugees and host communities.

However, despite the measures taken by the Kenyan government to enrol refugees in Kenyan schools, there is a notable gap that widens as students go through the different levels of education. Statistics show that of the school-going refugee population, only a third get access to secondary education of which [a sixth](#) get to join tertiary institutions. This is well below the government’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 target that seeks to ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education. This also reflects the situation of the host community’s education uptake. Other investments in the education sector that have targeted the host communities include recruitment and deployment of early childhood education teachers to

schools in the host community by UNHCR and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Non-governmental/intergovernmental support

The presence of refugees has led to NGOs setting up and running projects in the camps. According to Garissa County's Integrated Development Plan, there are over 70 non-governmental organisations present, with the majority operating around the Dadaab refugee complex and within the host communities. The UNHCR estimates that it will require about US\$149.6 million to run its operations in Dadaab Camp this year. However, as of May 2021, only [US\\$45.6 million](#)—31 per cent of the total amount required—had been received.

The decrease in humanitarian funding has had an impact on the livelihoods of refugees and host communities in north-eastern Kenya. According to the World Bank, 73 per cent of the population of Garissa County live below the poverty line. In the absence of social safety nets, locals have benefited from the humanitarian operations in and around the camp. The UNHCR reports that about [40,000 Kenyan nationals](#) within a 50km radius of the Dadaab refugee camp ended up enrolling as refugees in order to access food and other basic services in the camps.

In 2014, the UNHCR reported that it had supported the Kenyan community residing in the wider Daadab region in establishing over [US\\$5 million worth of community assets](#) since 2011. The presence of refugees has also increased remittances from the diaspora, and there are over 50 remittance outlets operating in the Dadaab camp, increasing economic opportunities and improving services. Using 2010 as the reference year, researchers have found that the economic benefits of the Dadaab camp to the host community amount to approximately [US\\$14 million annually](#).

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To reduce overdependence on aid and humanitarian funding in running refugee operations, the County Government of Garissa developed a Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan (GISED) in 2019 that provided ways of integrating refugees into the socio-economic life of the community to enhance their self-reliance. The European Union announced a [Euro 5 million funding programme](#) to support the socio-economic development plan, thus opening up opportunities for development initiatives including income generating activities such as the flourishing businesses at Hagadera market. The recent announcement of the planned closure of the camp has put these plans at risk.

A voice

The host community is increasingly involved in issues that affect both the locals living around the Dadaab refugee complex and the refugees themselves, with the voice of the community gaining prominence in decision-making regarding the county budget and sometimes even regarding NGO operations. NGOs periodically conduct needs assessments in and around the camp to guide the budgeting and planning process for subsequent years and the host community is always consulted.

Interest in governance issues has also increased. For example, between 2010 and 2015 the host community successfully lobbied for [increased employment opportunities for locals](#) in the UNHCR operations. With experience in the humanitarian field, some from within the host communities have secured positions as expatriates in international organizations across the globe, adding to increased international remittances to Garissa County.

Health

Research reveals that, compared to other pastoralist areas, health services for host communities have improved because of the presence of aid agencies in Dadaab. Hospitals managed by Médecins Sans Frontières and the International Red Cross in Dagahaley and Hagadera respectively are said to be offering better services than the sub-county hospital in Dadaab town. The two hospitals are Ministry of Health-approved vaccination centres in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite the massive investments made in the health sector by humanitarian organisations in and around Dadaab, both UNICEF and the World Health Organisation have identified the camp as an entry point for infectious diseases like polio and measles into Kenya. There was a confirmed case of WPV1 (wild poliovirus) in a 4-month-old girl from the Dadaab refugee camp in May 2013. This is a clear indication of the health risks associated with the situation.

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Other problems associated with the presence of the camps include encroachment of the refugee population on local land, leading to crime and hostility between the two communities. These conflicts are aggravated by the scramble for the little arable land available in this semi-arid region that makes it difficult to grow food and rear farm animals, leading to food shortages.

While it is important to acknowledge that progress has been made in integrating refugees into the north-eastern region, and that some development has taken place in the region, more needs to be done to realise the full potential of the region and its communities. Kenya's security sector should ensure that proper measures are put in place to enhance security right from the border entry point in order to weed out criminals who take advantage of Kenya's acceptance of refugees. The country should not expel those who have crossed borders in search of refuge but should tap fully into the benefits that come with hosting refugees.

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