

# The World's Largest Refugee Camps

Kenya on its way from despair to hope?



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## 1. Introduction

Even though (or because of) the world media has been focused on the refugee crisis for more than two years, many people have become unconcerned of this issue. And what is more, most of the media's headlines refer to the European migration crisis. So whereas the international aid is concentrated to the Middle East and Europe, where it is undoubtedly much needed, the resources for African refugee camps are drying out. The top four of the world's biggest and poorest refugee camps have been located in Africa for decades, and all of them in Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

These facts indicate that world may have forgotten about the Kenyan refugee crisis. Unfortunately, this immense issue deepened on May 6, 2016, when Kenyan government announced a six-month term of closing down its refugee camps and repatriation of refugees.

The deadline expired in November 2016 and camps are still inhabited. All burning issues persisted and many more were arised due to the repatriation.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHRC, 2017

### 1.1. THE GLOOMY REALITY

Refugees live in permanent fear and insecurity. They spend their days mostly waiting in queues: at first, to be formally registered and accepted to the camp, then to get material for building a shelter, to get food rations and water, to enroll their children to the school, to be treated in the medical centre, to be granted asylum/full refugee status or finally, to go home.

Staying in refugee camps has become no longer temporal as there is a generation of youth who have never left the camp. They were born out of Somalia, the country where the refugees mostly come from, but are forbidden to become Kenyans. People may not even work, seeking for a job outside camps is illegal. Frankly, refugees are not actually allowed to do anything.



Figure 1: Refugees arriving to Kenya (yellow) come mainly from Somalia (red), followed by South Sudan, DR Congo, Sudan, Ethiopia, Congo Brazzaville, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Tanzania (dark grey).



Figure 2: Kenya and neighbouring countries. Dadaab, the world's largest refugee complex. Kakuma, the world's largest refugee camp. (Dadaab complex consists of 5 refugee camps.)

## 2. Fact Review and Critique

### 2.1. THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1991, in order to accommodate people who had to flee neighbouring countries, several refugee camps were established in Kenya; the Kakuma refugee camp and Dadaab, which is a complex of five sub-camps: Hagadera, Dagahaley, Ifo, Ifo II and Kambioos (the last two were established in 2011).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> UNHRC, 2017

*“It is the local host nations that face the greatest struggles and social tensions when former regional neighbors become refugees,”* wrote Kevin Clarke for *America Press* in July 2016. *“Kenya has absorbed more than 600,000 people driven across its borders by drought, famine and regional conflict,”* he added.<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2. THE DEFINITION OF A REFUGEE

According to the *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*, the convention approved by United Nations conference and a key document so far declared by 145 state parties, a refugee is defined as a person *“owing to wellfounded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”*<sup>4</sup>

## 2.3. WORLD’S LARGEST REFUGEE CAMPS

### 2.3.1. The Kakuma refugee camp

Kakuma, meaning “nowhere” in Swahili, currently hosts 165,000 registered refugees and asylum seekers as of Feb 28, 2017 (UNHCR). Thus Kakuma is the greatest single refugee camp in the world. Kakuma was built during Sudan’s civil war to house the *“Lost Boys of Sudan”* – tens of thousands of children, often orphans, who were forced to leave their families and wander hundreds of kilometers in order not to be killed by soldiers. It took them years to find refugee camps and save their lives.<sup>5</sup>

The Kakuma camp is located in a remote region called Turkana Country. There are common conflicts between refugees and very poor local Turkana people, caused by competition for food and other services. Even more disconcerting are multi-ethnic conflicts, including sexual violence and organised crime, that are occurring inside the camp. The cause is the heterogeneity of people – the camp is inhabited by refugees from 18 national and many ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Clarke K., 2016

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, 2017

<sup>5</sup> Luster T., 2008

<sup>6</sup> Brankamp H., 2016

### 2.3.2 The Dadaab refugee complex

Dadaab complex is the world's largest refugee centre at present. It was built in 1991 to accommodate 90,000 Somali war refugees - in a dry desert, 80 km from Kenya-Somalia border. The population number was quite stable between 1994 – 2006 (177,000 refugees). This led to overtaxed infrastructure and facilities and lack of food. Another increasing up to 400,000 was caused by political upheaval in 2006 and famine in 2011. This resulted into an opening Ifo II and Kambioos camps.<sup>7</sup> After the beginning of repatriation in 2014 the Dadaab population lowered to 275,000 (Aug 31, 2016) and later to 245,000 (Apr 1, 2017).<sup>8</sup>

Somalia is, after 25 years of civil war, a failed state and one of the poorest countries in the world, GDP per capital is 500 \$ (Global Finance, 2016). Estimated population is 8 – 15 million, most of them are migrants. Inhumane living conditions are determined by weak institutional capacity, high unemployment, poor health care and education. On the top of that Somalia has suffered from tsunami, heat waves and famine.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.4. LIFE IN REFUGEE CAMPS

### 2.4.1. Everyday worries

Since the capacity of the camps is often several times exceeded, public infrastructure is overloaded and can not serve all the camp inhabitants. That has resulted in endless waiting for all camp services.

### 2.4.2. Water and food

Refugees usually lack proper access to drinking water in older refugee camps. For example, in Dagahaley there are 9 boreholes, but their aging equipment decreases yields. As consumption grows, deeper boreholes are needed. Approximately 132 people share one water tap, while the accepted standard is 80.

Generally, newer camps are much better equipped. There was only one working borehole in the newer camp Kambioos. A water pipe system improved quantity and quality of water and women and children do not need to walk far for water. Elevated

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<sup>7</sup> Dar O., 2011

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Mazarei A., Barnett S., 2016

steel tanks are used for storage of water. Ifo II camp is supplied by PV Solar Diesel hybrid and PV Solar stand system. Water distribution is 25 l/person/day and latrine coverage is 80%.

Food rations are supposed to ensure 2,100 kilocalories/person/day, but sometimes it is only 1,800 – 1,500. People are provided both rice and oil. To buy vegetables, meat or firewood in the central market, they resell some rice. They have slowly implemented therapeutic feeding programmes for malnourished children in all camps.<sup>10</sup>

#### 2.4.3. Parallel economy

Kenyan refugee camps have existed for 25 years and therefore there has developed a self contained business. Thanks to that food, fabrics, pharmacies, workshops and other goods are reachable. A big part of this economical profit is made by Kenyan locals.

#### 2.4.4. Shelters

Dadaab camps are organized into a grid-pattern and divided into sections and blocks. Similar to usual urban area, the camp contains public buildings, markets and greenery. Because of overcrowding there are often three families on a plot for one. Only a bit of the land is dedicated for roads, which causes traffic jams. As the number of residents grows, the undersized technical infrastructure causes more problems.

The most common type of camp shelter is a tent, which average lifespan is only 6 months (fast degradation because of harsh weather conditions). As the number of refugees rises, the need of new tents as well as replacing old ones.



Figure 3: Building a new camp Kambioos (2011)



Figure 4: An aerial view of Dadaab (2013)

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<sup>10</sup> UNHCR, 2015

Since 2014, temporary shelters (“T-shelters”) have been provided in all the camps. They consist of a timber frame covered with canvas/plastic sheeting. (Unfortunately, plastic “walls” do not provide adequate protection from crime.) The Kenyan government rejected projects of more protective shelters as too permanent. The ongoing production of improvised Mud Blocks Shelters (IMBS) in Kambioos was stopped by government as well.<sup>11</sup>

In 2011, Ifo II camp was designed according to environmental principles. The emphasis was put on urban agriculture, which consists of plants a wide range of tree species. In order to renew lost greenery, each of the refugee families got seedlings to plant.

#### 2.4.5. Conflicts and security

As the camps gather a lot of people, many crimes are committed on a daily basis. For instance: domestic and sexual violence, banditry, drug abuse and disturbance of public order. Other conflicts arise from uneasy coexistence of many nations and ethnic communities,<sup>12</sup> and of course – from helplessness of desperate people.

In 2007, aid agencies in corporation with governments decided to reduce violence and crime in Dadaab. They developed Community Peace and Protection Teams (CPPT), where refugees are actively participating. CPPT (or “refugee guards”) know the community and its problems so they assist the police and UNHCR (as “eyes and ears”). They also mediate in order to calm conflicts, they control crowds and work as foot patrols in camps. CPPT support cultural integration and build up relationships and trust within communities. Unfortunately, CPPT is at the same time at the risk of being attacked and become those who need to be saved.<sup>13</sup>

#### 2.4.6. Conflicts and security

There are several primary schools, one or two secondary schools, usually not more than one adult literacy centre and youth vocational centre in every refugee camp. There are higher numbers of pupils in classroom compared to the older refugee

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<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, 2015

<sup>12</sup> Brankamp H., 2016

<sup>13</sup> Brankamp H., 2016

camps (Dagahaley, Hagadera), approximately 45. A primary school enrolment is less than 38% in older camps.<sup>14</sup>

Besides a lack of school buildings and teachers, the main issue is distance to school. Electricity, sufficient availability of water and computer labs are missed too. The Kenya Ministry of Education has installed solar power in Dagahaley's primary schools, which represents a way how to ensure power in Kenya's schools.

Very problematic is school attendance of girls. Their families prioritize boys to study and girls to stay at home, partly because of a high risk for girls to be raped on their way to school. Instead of school enrolment, parents often arrange marriage for their adolescent daughters. It is due to protection against rape but also to get money from a husband. An evidenced solution is provision dormitory accommodation close to school or at least home schooling by correspondence.<sup>15</sup>

On the bright side, environmental education is provided in last couple of years in the camps (f. e. Ifo II) . Schools organize environmental clubs that inform students about environmental conservation and protection.

#### 2.4.7. Health care

Usually, there is at most one hospital in the camp, the standard of 10,000 residents is not followed (28,000 in Hagadera). Kambioos has no hospital. Several primary health posts provide medial services to the community in the neighbourhood. Overcrowded facilities ensure only a little time time for each patient, which affects care quality.<sup>16</sup>

#### 2.4.8. Community empowerment

Camps, organized in sections and blocks, are managed by democratically elected refugee leadership structure. The structure contains a chairman, a chairladysection leaders and block leaders. Although there are women represented, decisions are made by men (strong cultural traditions).

A very wide range of activities are provided by numerous youth groups. Thus the young are engaged in peer-counselling, public health campaigns, delivering health and shelter services. They also promote community media, human rights and female empowerment. They are taught about prevention of sexual and gender based

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<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, 2015

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR, 2014

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, 2015

violence. Free time activities such as sports and multimedia training are included. Very important are activities focused on national heritage: Somali language, culture and history, traditional dance etc. All these projects help to build a national identity and prevent youth to join radicalized or gangster groups.

Refugee community is supported in various livelihood activities, which contains tailoring and shoe making, weaving and sewing, carpentry, mechanics, soap making and hair dressing. There is a growing need to support livelihood projects.<sup>17</sup>

#### 2.4.9. Natural disasters

Undoubtedly the worst impacts of environmental catastrophes hit the developing countries and the most vulnerable and poorest people - refugees. In 2011, Somalia was affected by an enormous drought. People were losing water sources, their livestock and livelihoods. The maize production was totally ruined. In the same year, inhumane conditions forced 10,000 Somalis to cross the Kenyan borders per day. NGOs reported about exhausted children being left behind while their mothers were struggling to save at least their other children.

In 2017, the similar drought season tortures East and Southern Kenya. There are currently 38 million people in food insecurity all over the world, the most vulnerable is South Sudan and Somalia – a war conflict destroyed farming and inflicted famine.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.5. THE CLOSURE OF REFUGEE CAMPS

The concept of closing Kenyan refugee camps was initiated in September 2013, after a terrorist attack on the Nairobi's Westgate Mall, where 67 people were killed. Following another attack at Garissa University College in April 2015 in which 148 students were killed, Kenyan officials accused the al-Shabaab, a terroristic group of the Islamic extremist movement, of planning both assaults from Dadaab refugee camp.<sup>19</sup>

*“...officials have not provided credible evidence linking Somali refugees to any terrorist attacks in Kenya. Human Rights Watch is not aware of convictions of Somali refugees in connection with any attack in Kenya,”* published HRW on May

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<sup>17</sup> UNHCR, 2015

<sup>18</sup> IRIN News, 2017

<sup>19</sup> Clarke K., 2016



6, 2016.<sup>20</sup> No inhabitants from the refugee camp were arrested or suspect of terrorism.

On Feb 9, 2017 The Hight Court of Kenya dismissed the closure intent as an unconstitutional act. It also rejected forced repatriation as an unacceptable collective punishment and gambling with lives and safety of refugees who were supposed to be returned to Somalia, even though the country is still unstable.<sup>21</sup>

Nevertheless, the Kenyan government insisted on repatriation. Among NGO's, local Kenyan bishops and as well as *Jesuit Refugee Service-Eastern Africa* (JRS) asked officials to rethink their decision. Angella Wells, the officer of JRS, said in July 2016: *"So far only 10,000 people have voluntarily returned since last year. There are hundreds of thousands of people still in the camp, many who do not intend to ever return to a place where they or their loved ones were killed, forcibly recruited into terror groups or have undergone sexual violence."*<sup>22</sup> There is a harsh paradox – Kenyan government ordered to close down camps because of a false accusation of terroristic radicalism. But returning Somalia refugees implies a risk of radicalism – especially dislocated youth, who have never stepped out of camp's borders.<sup>23</sup>

There are some other potential reasons of government's decision about the repatriation. Analysts say that Kenya wants to attract world's attention (i.e. financial and humanitarian help) which is now focused on migration crisis in Europe. The decision could be also an attempt to speed up a the slow pace of voluntary repatriation or just a political move. Ahead of presidential election in August 2017, government criticizes the president Uhuru Kenyatta for his weak attitude to national security.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, it needs to be admitted that Kenyan government has partial competency to carry out repatriation. Thanks to tripartite agreement (expiring in September 2016) that was signed by Kenya, Somalia and the UNHCR are Kenyan officials authorized to voluntarily repatriate Somali refugees. However, the receiving country must provide "a peaceful environment, where rights are respected and security guaranteed". As Somalia is still considered as unsafe,

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<sup>20</sup> Human Rights Watch. 2017

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, 2017

<sup>22</sup> Clarke K., 2016

<sup>23</sup> Nyabola N., 2015

<sup>24</sup> Hoskins V., 2016

Kenyan repatriation procedure is much criticized by many organizations such as UNHCR, Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières and UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Urban Shelter Design and Role of Architects

Despite closing down Kenya's refugee camps or efforts to do so, burdensome problems go on. However, thanks to knowledge gained from its camps we can refer some general principles and ideas for future camps or for upgrading existing ones.

#### 3.1. URBAN PLANNING AND SHELTER

First of all, the **location** of refugee camp is one of the key issues. Establishing the Dadaab camp close to the Somali border could have saved many lives that were lost on the hundreds of kilometres long way from Somalia. On the other hand, security and flood risk also need to be considered.

Of course, refugee camps are designed for a certain number of people. But when a war conflict or natural disaster breaks out, **capacity** is often instantly exceeded. Plans for potential growth of an increasing population density, as well as related inadequate **public services** and congestion should be included in initial project.

Refugee camps are now divided into sections and blocks. For example, in 50,000 Ifo II camp there are two sub-camps and each contains 18 sections, one section consists of four to nine blocks.<sup>26</sup> It means that **navigation and orientation** are almost impossible in absolutely identical blocks. A hierarchical system of streets, landmarks, signposts etc. would help read the urban structure.

Housing quality needs to be indisputably improved. Many NGOs, private sector and other organisations propose durable and permanent shelter solutions. But the situation can not be helped until Kenyan government accepts permanent shelter or even better "permanent refugees". Sustainable solutions are essential.

The proposed housing units are for example **Mud Blocks Shelters**, handmade huts from mud bricks. The side effects are community participation, using local material and knowledge and financial savings. **The Better Shelter**, an awarded

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<sup>25</sup> Hawa Noor M., 2016

<sup>26</sup> UNHCR, 2015

design by IKEA Foundation, contains steel structure, walls and roof with ventilation and solar panel. The modular and adaptable unit is safer, longer-lasting and cheaper. The shelter can be dismantled and used again, expected lifespan is 3 years. In 2015, more than 10,000 units were distributed all over the world.<sup>27</sup>

Also such a trifle as **solar lanterns** and solar phone chargers could make camp life easier. In April 2017, UNHCR distributed over 2,000 of them in Kakuma.

### 3.2. SUSTAINABILITY

Aware of environmental protection, UNHCR introduced a model of **an eco-friendly refugee camp** (for Kambioos in 2009). On order to renew greenery and upgrade microclimate, the vision contains establishment of green belts, provision families with tree seedlings and preventing illegal tree cutting.<sup>28</sup> Further concepts concern **environment education** of residents.

One of reasons why people flee their homes are natural disasters, especially droughts. We can hardly prevent them, but some simple tools may help mitigate the consequences.

A new hybrid **type of maize**, Water Efficient Maize (WEMA) was cultivated to help 300 million African farmers who depend on rainfall water and thus they are in a permanent risk of hunger. Up to 35% increase of maize yields, more reliable harvest and reduced need for pesticides are the main benefits of drought-tolerant and insect-pest protected maize.<sup>29</sup>

Much better access to private sanitation can be provided by **Dry Compost Toilets**, invented by Dr. Sasha Kramer (a co-founder of Sustainable Organic Integrated Livelihoods "SOIL"). Human waste is collected and composted in treatment centres. Natural microbes kill dangerous pathogens at high temperature and organic compost is later sold to local farmers. It is a very simple system ensuring basic human dignity and protection of infection without infrastructure dependency.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.3. SCHOOL AND LIVELIHOOD

It is generally known that education is a key to better opportunities and freedom. Therefore **school attendance** is very important. Although humanitarian agencies

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<sup>27</sup> IKEA Foundation and UNHCR, 2017

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR, 2015

<sup>29</sup> AATF – Africa, 2012

<sup>30</sup> Flammer, 2012

and camp managers are aware of that, there is still a lack of schools. Long distances and absence of dormitories do not allow girls to attend school, only a very few children study secondary school. A lack of computer labs is a serious problem in today's globalized world. A free daily meal could ensure that pupils would attend school.

**Community projects** represent benefits for youth, for multi-ethnic coexistence, for single women and other vulnerable groups. Community police guards ensure **security** and build up trust within people. Projects focused on starting one's own **livelihood** and income activities help people to become independent on welfare benefits and increases their self-confidence. A lot is done by priests and community leaders, who often link community with government.

Architects have begun to participate in some refugee camps issues. For example, in the early 90s, Swedish architect and UNHCR consultant Per Iwansson proposed and initiated the establishment of Hagadera and German architect Werner Schellenberg is an author of Dagahaley Camp's design.<sup>31</sup> However, we need more architects involved in refugee camp planning and developing.

In conclusion, all refugees have the right to be treated as human beings, with full respect to their needs, dignity and humanity. In order to improve life conditions in refugee camps, our society must stop being unconcerned. This will lead to a wide discussion in media and reference literature. It will also cause interest of politicians, agencies and a private sector. The more people from developed countries involve themselves, the sooner, the better and more accurate help will be provided to refugees.

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<sup>31</sup> Umer Farooq K., 2016

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## Graphics and Photos

Figure 1: Graphic made by author

Figure 2: Graphic made by autor

Figure 3: Photo taken by UNHCR/Brendan Bannon. *UNHCR has been feverishly preparing shelter in the new Dadaab camps, but urgently needs 45 000 more tents*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2011/8/4e4522ee9/unhcr-readies-transfer-somali-refugees-new-camp-areas.html> [Accessed 12 April 2017]

Figure 4: Photo taken by IOM/UNHCR/Brendan Bannon. *The sprawling Dadaab camp in Kenya, the world's largest refugee complex*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45051#> [Accessed 12 April 2017]