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Decolonizing refugee integration: challenges and pathways for addressing protracted refugee situation in Kakuma refugee camp

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This article argues for a new refugee integration paradigm that goes beyond colonial practices and neocolonial understandings of integration used to inform policy actions in refugee-hosting nations of the Global South. It advocates for a more just approach that guarantees equal rights and freedoms to those seeking international protection. The article proposes the need for a new approach in humanitarian practice in protracted camps like Kakuma, which is more focused on promoting and protecting the basic refugee rights and freedoms that are increasingly being overlooked in favour of socioeconomic integration founded on capitalistic and colonial models of managing displaced and unwanted populations. This article contends that humanitarianism in one of the oldest and largest camps in the world is still rooted in colonial practices of oppression, restrictions, and marginalization of communities, with the local government acting as an enabler while humanitarian agencies supervise the continued violation of the “bare lives”.

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Introduction

Research on the integration of refugees has been on the rise globally, partly due to the growing concerns about immigration and ethnocultural diversity, particularly in Europe and North America (Holloway and Sturridge 2022). However, little is known about the concept of integration in the global South¹, especially in refugee camps. As posited by Murphy and Vieten (2025) in the introduction of this special issue, the notion of integration has taken different conceptual and methodological forms. In this regard, a better understanding of integration in the South is necessary not only because the region hosts the majority of the global refugees, but also due to the intractable nature of the refugee situations there. The UNHCR data indicates that 75 per cent of the world's refugees are in low – and middle-income countries (UNHCR 2023b). In addition, due to the economic challenges experienced by host nations in the South, there is a growing instrumentalization of refugees as economic actors who can benefit the host communities and nations if they are empowered through the so-called “self-reliance” programmes, which are often designed and promoted by Western aid and development agencies without meaningful engagement and participation of the host countries such

as Kenya. This perception of refugees as economic agents was evident in the World Refugee Day 2024 speech by the UNHCR High Commissioner, Filippo Grandi, in Nairobi, in which he mentioned the benefits of refugee inclusion, such as spurring economic growth, broadening the tax base, and generating trade (UNHCR 2024).

Across Africa, most refugees are hosted in more than 300 crowded camps and settlements, mostly located in remote, marginalized, and border regions such as Kakuma in Kenya (Camarena 2023; Jamal 2003). Moreover, the majority of the refugees in Africa are in what the UNHCR terms protracted refugee situations – where at least 25,000 refugees from the same country of origin have been in exile for more than five consecutive years with no prospect for a solution (Crisp 2003; UNHCR 2009; 2020). This state of temporary permanence for the millions of refugees across Africa is exemplified by Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, which has existed for at least thirty years now. The nearby Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement in the Kakuma area is not different either; it has been in place for more than seven years with no meaningful benefits or solutions to the over 70,000 refugees living there (UNHCR Kenya 2024). Despite having been intentionally established as an alternative and innovative refugee integration approach, in contrast to the longstanding encampment policy in Kenya (Betts, Omata, and Sterck 2020b; Brankamp 2022).

Besides being used as a testing ground for neoliberal economic policies aimed at empowering refugees to become self-reliant, the conditions that refugees live in and the restrictions they are subjected to in Kakuma refugee camps are rooted in colonial history and practices meant to contain, control, and exclude unwanted populations. Brankamp (2019, 1) describes Kakuma refugee camp as an “occupied enclave” and a “tightly controlled space” in which Kenyan police enforce humanitarian violence on refugees living in precarity and under limited mobility. Historically, the region where the Kakuma refugee camp is located was used by the British colonial administration to enforce containment policies in the pre-independence period. Around 1936, the colonial government encamped some of the Ethiopian refugees who fled the Italo-Ethiopian War (Shadle 2019) in the Lokitaung area, which is a town in Turkana County. In addition, during the colonial period, North-Western Kenya was used by the colonial government to test punitive and protective confinement policies against the local pastoralist communities, prisoners, anti-colonial fighters, and refugees (Brankamp and Daley 2020).

As part of its strategy to control the Nile region, the British colonial administration subjugated the Turkana people and set up a military base in Lokitaung to facilitate its military operations in the area and enforce its policies. It included, among other things, dispossessing the Turkana of their land and livestock. It also imposed a punitive hut tax on them. In the same period, the colonial administration declared the Turkana region a “closed district” in the early 1930s, thereby closing it off from the rest of the country (Carr 2017). Post-independent governments also continued to neglect this region. Furthermore, between the 1960s and early 1980s, superficial reforms such as famine relief camps were established in the region to offer humanitarian relief support to the locals impacted by severe drought (Hogg 1986). But no real efforts were made to fix the issues or create change. Based on this history, Brankamp (2022) argued that the history of encampments in North-Western regions such as Turkana has mainly influenced the growth of contemporary refugee camps in the country.

Decolonial theories and Kenya's colonial past and present

Decolonial theories can provide a critical lens through which the oppression, marginalization, restriction, and subjugation of refugees in Kenya can be examined and understood. These theories challenge the enduring legacies of colonialism and how colonial power dynamics continue to shape contemporary socio-political structures, such as the creation and organization of refugee camps. As both a process and outcome, decolonization has varying and contentious definitions (Achieme 2019). When viewed through a legal and political lens, decolonization can be understood as “the pursuit of political equality for colonized peoples” (Achieme 2019, 1539) or “a process that indicates the end of foreign power domination and the recovery and/or development of an independent entity” (Vanyoro 2024, 9). Smith (2012) sees it as a process of engaging with imperialism and colonialism at different levels with established hierarchies of power and knowledge that persist in the modern world and perpetuate inequities and injustices. For example, in the case of refugees in Kenya, it could mean having a critical understanding of encampment as a political tool meant to exercise authority over individuals with limited rights and freedoms. Agamben (1998) rightly called these individuals “Homo Sacer”. They have bare lives and no rights. Consequently, one of the implications of colonial hierarchies or coloniality in refugee affairs is that the issues discussed, and solutions offered are based on the interests of the global North countries (Arat-Koc 2020; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020; Piccoli, Ruedin, and Geddes 2023). In this regard, a decolonial approach to refugee management in Kenya requires a critical understanding of how colonial histories, hierarchies, and structures influence present-day conditions and policies.

In the context of Kenya, the colonial legacy has profoundly impacted the nation's policies and attitudes towards refugees. During the colonial period, the British colonial administration established rigid boundaries and hierarchies, categorizing populations in ways that facilitated control and exploitation. This colonial mindset persists, influencing how the Kenyan state and society perceive and treat refugees. Refugees in Kenya often experience marginalization and restriction, a reflection of decolonial arguments regarding the continuity of colonial power structures. The legal and social frameworks governing refugees are often designed to control and limit their movement and access to resources, echoing colonial strategies of containment and segregation. For example, the encampment policy, which confines refugees to specific areas, mirrors colonial practices of spatial segregation and restriction of indigenous populations in Kenya. During the colonial period in Kenya, indigenous populations were confined to the native reserves and had to get authorization from the colonial administrators to move out of such areas. In addition, the colonial administration used the police force to enforce restrictive and oppressive policies such as carrying movement passes (identity documents) (Anderson 2000; Carotenuto and Shadle 2012; Karari 2018). These colonial practices persist to date and can be seen in how the refugee communities are policed and their rights violated by Kenyan police officers (Crisp 2000a; Brankamp 2019; Shadle 2019; Agwanda 2022).

Furthermore, decolonial theories highlight the subjugation of refugees through the imposition of dominant narratives and knowledge systems that invalidate and suppress alternative perspectives. In Kenya, refugees' voices are frequently marginalized in public discourse and policymaking, reinforcing their subordination and exclusion (Duale 2020; Obiye 2022). This dynamic is reminiscent of colonial epistemic violence,

where colonizers imposed their own worldviews and dismissed indigenous knowledge and experiences. By applying decolonial theories to the study of refugees in Kenya, we can uncover the underlying colonial logics that sustain contemporary forms of oppression and marginalization. Decolonial approaches call for a re-examination of these power relations and advocate for the recognition and inclusion of refugees' perspectives and agency. This shift requires dismantling the colonial legacies embedded in legal, social, and political systems and fostering an environment where refugees are seen as active participants in shaping their own lives and communities.

Therefore, decolonial theories offer valuable insights into the enduring impacts of colonialism on the treatment of refugees in Kenya. By examining the oppression, marginalization, restriction, and subjugation of refugees through a decolonial lens, we can better understand the deep-rooted power structures at play and work towards more equitable and just policies and practices.

Methodology

This research is based on a qualitative ethnographic study done in Kakuma and Kalobeyei between May and July 2023. To contextually understand the challenge of integration in Kakuma, 30 semi-structured in-depth interviews, four focus group discussions, and non-participant observation were employed in the field. Those interviewed included 10 refugees, 10 local Turkana host community members, 4 humanitarian agency officials, and 6 government representatives drawn from the county and national government departments. The refugees were purposively sampled from different groups and included Somali, South Sudanese, Burundian, Ugandan, Congolese (DRC), and Sudanese. These refugee groups make up the largest portion of the refugee population in Kakuma refugee camps and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement (UNHCR 2023a). The initial participants, who had worked in Kakuma, were identified through the researcher's own networks, while the rest were identified through snowball sampling. Pseudonyms have been used to replace participants' names.

Kakuma refugee camps

Kakuma Refugee Camp is in the remote semi-desert and marginalized North-Western region of Kenya – Turkana County. The camp began around early 1992 when a group of about 12,000 young Sudanese boys were brought to the Kakuma area from the nearby border town of Lokichoggio. The group had previously been expelled from various refugee camps in Ethiopia and had gone back to Southern Sudan before eventually walking around one thousand miles to Kenya (Jansen 2018; Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru 2016). After staying in Lokichoggio for a few months, the young boys, who would later be known as “the Lost Boys”, were then relocated to Kakuma and settled about 1 kilometre from the town centre at the present-day Kakuma camp one. Having “appeared almost out of nowhere” (Otha 2005, 231), and with features of a large town (Jansen 2018; Montclos and Kagwanja 2000; Otha 2005), Kakuma refugee camp has grown over the last three decades to become one of the biggest refugee camps in the world and one of the longest-lasting refugee settlements in Africa (Oka 2014). Due to the increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers – displaced from the Horn of

Africa and Great Lakes regions by conflicts, violence and climate change impacts – the size of the camp has kept on increasing with new camps being created to accommodate new arrivals.

As of June 2024, the camp hosted 289,000 refugees (UNHCR Kenya 2024). Simply put, there are more refugees in Turkana West Sub-County than the local host communities, which numbered about 239,000 (KNBS 2019). Within the camps, there are well-developed social and public services like schools, hospitals, roads, playgrounds, hotels, and restaurants. More particularly, there are hospitals in all four sub-camps, ramshackle but vibrant market centres, and schools run by humanitarian agencies while others are privately managed by entrepreneurial refugees. The camps are managed and administered by the Department of Refugee Services (DRS), which also conducts the refugee status determination (RSD), while the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR)'s role in Kakuma is mainly to offer protection services, assistance, and support to refugees through the distribution of food rations, cash-based assistance to refugees, shelter, and resettlement interviews, among others.

Conceptualizing refugee integration: theoretical and practical challenges in Kenya

Integration remains a key policy objective and humanitarian-development outcome for most programmes targeting refugee-hosting areas and has been a significant focus of public and academic debates (Phillimore 2012). In addition, the concept is contentious, contested, and context-based, with varying definitions and different usages by organizations, policymakers, and practitioners (Ager and Strang 2008; Strang and Ager 2010). According to Robinson (1998) and Castles et al. (2002), integration is used, understood, and measured differently. While much of the research on and definitions of integration have mainly focused on the refugee host/refugee-hosting populations in the global North, mainly Europe and North America (Ager and Strang 2004a; 2004b; Donato and Ferris 2020; ECRE 2002; Fix, Hooper, and Zong 2017; Sigona 2005), a review of the definitions and frameworks is critical for a better understanding and contextualization of the concept in other refugee-hosting regions like Kakuma in Kenya.

Despite the lack of a formal definition of integration in the global refugee legal instruments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the 1969 Organization of African Unity (OAU) Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, the UNHCR generally defines integration as a process that is mutual, gradual, and multi-faceted, with legal, social, economic, and cultural dimensions (UNHCR, no date). In addition, in terms of measurement, the UNHCR states that there are no prescriptions for effective integration; thus, the integration programmes should be adapted based on needs and deficiencies identified over time (UNHCR, no date). However, based on the UN conceptualization, there are no universally accepted outcomes of refugee integration as they may differ depending on several factors. Furthermore, one weakness of the preceding definition is that it does not elaborate on what constitutes the four dimensions highlighted and omits the political dimension of integration, which gives the refugees agency over the political processes in the host communities.

The UNHCR definition relates to ECRE's (2002) conceptualization of integration, in which the concept is defined as a dynamic, two-way, long-term, and multidimensional

process. As a dynamic and two-way process, refugees are expected to prepare to adapt to the hosts' lifestyle without losing their own cultural identity. In contrast, the hosts must adapt their institutions for the new population (ECRE 2002). However, the anticipated changes for refugees and hosts, as highlighted by ECRE (2002), can also be complicated, especially in refugee camp contexts where refugee policies restrict refugees' access to resources and exclude them from the decision-making process that directly impacts their lives. Moreover, in camp contexts like Kakuma in Kenya, there is a deliberate focus by the government to maintain how the institutions operate with an expectation that refugees will adapt to the existing regulations and policies rather than repurposing the institutions in response to the refugee needs and realities. For example, the restrictions on freedoms of movement and work imposed in the camps have been enforced by the Kenyan government, notwithstanding the existing evidence that demonstrates the positive economic impact of refugee presence in Kakuma and the Turkana region in general (IFC 2018; Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru 2016).

Consequently, refugees living in camps like Kakuma are forced to endure years of protracted displacement under a system that is deliberately structured to control and exclude them, thus denying them their rights to dignified and humane asylum. Even in instances when the government of Kenya has changed its refugee policies, like in 2021 when it adopted new refugee legislation, the preference for encampment has always superseded the limited socioeconomic rights accorded to refugees, such as being included in national development plans and given rights to engage in business. As such, one of the main criticisms of the Kenya Refugees Act of 2021 is that it was still highly influenced by the perception of refugees as a security concern. It contained provisions that made it possible for government agencies to violate the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. For example, Section 4 (d) stated that the Government would not recognize as refugees those deemed to pose a threat to national security, while Section 29 (2) also authorized the denial of entry to a refugee or asylum seeker for similar security reasons. Further, Section 19 (1) permitted the Cabinet Secretary for Interior and Coordination of National Government to expel any refugee or their family member from Kenya on the grounds of national security and public order. The Act failed to clearly guarantee refugees the right to work and freedom of movement, which are essential for promoting their socioeconomic rights and participation in the local and national economies. Instead, it focused more on clarifying the roles of various institutions involved in refugee affairs and was vague on how the country would work towards the realization of durable solutions – which are the UNHCR preferred solutions to refugee crises and include local integration, resettlement, voluntary repatriation, and other complementary pathways such as scholarships.

Moreover, integration has been defined as not just a two-way process but one that is multidimensional and “involves many actors, agencies, logics, and rationalities” (Sigona 2005, 118). This multidimensional nature of integration means that the responsibilities and outcomes of integration efforts and programmes do not rest on the refugees and host communities but involve several factors and realities based on the context. Bourhis et al. (1997), on the other hand, stressed the value of individual group preferences as the critical determinants of the relational outcomes of the various adaptation/integration strategies adopted by refugees and host communities. According to them, problematic and conflictual relations between the hosts and refugees emerge when the two groups pursue different preferences or strategies (Bourhis et al. 1997). So, for integration

to work, both hosts and refugees must seek a common goal. In a case where the refugees, for example, are in favour of integration while the hosts prefer assimilation, problematic relations such as conflicts and hostilities between the two groups will emerge. The problematic and conflicting relations resulting from refugee-host interactions are unintended outcomes of integration programmes and policies, which should primarily promote mutual respect and peaceful relations among refugees, hosts, and other actors such as civil society.

The importance of individual group preferences is relevant in a camp context like Kakuma, where the government policy, by design, overtly favours the separation and exclusion of refugees from the hosts as embodied by the enduring encampment policy. This is enforced through measures put in place by the government such as a dusk-to-dawn curfew, heavy police patrols and presence within and around the camp, and a travel ban on refugees who intend to travel outside Kakuma to other parts of the country. The humanitarian agencies, on the other hand, work towards promoting more significant economic interactions between refugees and hosts for better socio-economic integration of refugees. The socioeconomic integration of refugees in Kakuma is exemplified by the nearby Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, which was established by the UNHCR and Kenyan government in 2015 to promote refugee self-reliance.² More than seven years since its establishment, Kalobeyei has not lived up to its expectations as promoted by humanitarian organizations. Studies conducted on the impacts of the settlement reveal a lack of significant positive outcomes for the refugees and hosts (Betts et al. 2018; Betts Omata, and Sterck 2019; 2020a; 2020c). Moreover, based on field interviews with refugees living in Kalobeyei, there was no adequate involvement and participation of refugees in the creation of the settlement. As such, when the time came for the relocation of some refugees from Kakuma camps to the settlement, most of them refused to cooperate while others who moved to the settlement later returned to camps. This was occasioned by rumours within the refugee communities that Kalobeyei was a permanent settlement and those moved there would not get a chance of being resettled to a third developed country. Based on an interview with some refugees and a UNHCR officer, the unpopularity of Kalobeyei among refugees, therefore, is understandable, considering that most refugees in Kakuma are rather hopeful of being resettled to a western country.

For the refugees and hosts in Kakuma, the preference depends on personal needs and social engagements; for example, the refugees engaged in entrepreneurial ventures prefer integration for obvious economic benefits that will be derived from it, while others prefer separation and resettlement in third countries due to perceived hostilities from the local Turkana hosts, a desire to live a better life, or loss of hope due to prolonged experience in exile (Muluka 2023). Among the host community, there are varying preferences based on socio-economic factors – such as business and job opportunities – as some favour encampment while others support the idea of more integration with the refugees. This confusing approach is why Owiso (2022) argued that Kenya's refugee policies and priorities are incoherent and contradictory. Owiso particularly criticizes Kenya's Refugee Act of 2021 as embracing "both integration and encampment in a confusing combination of seemingly contradictory policy orientations" (Owiso 2022, 71).

The incoherent and inconsistent refugee integration policy orientation in Kenya is also visible in how the government and aid agencies like the UNHCR in Kakuma have

continued to focus on economic integration at the expense of socio-cultural integration. The focus on economic integration is because of the historical economic marginalization and endemic poverty levels in Turkana County. The region is one of the most economically marginalized and underdeveloped areas in Kenya, with a human development index score of 0.2697, which is significantly lower than the national average of 0.520 (CRA 2012), and it has the lowest literacy rates in the country, reaching only 39 per cent. Further, it has the highest poverty rates, high proportions of self-assisted deliveries at 34.5 per cent, high malnutrition levels, and more than half of the households (64.2 per cent) receiving cash transfers (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics 2018). Put simply, the County is the poorest in Kenya (Omari 2011; Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru 2016), and this can be partly attributed to the discriminatory development policies of both the colonial administration and post-independent regimes. The colonial government, for example, viewed it as backward and economically unproductive, while the post-colonial regimes' focus on agriculturally productive areas in central and western Kenya perpetuated further this biased development agenda (Eriksen and Lind 2009). As such, much of the integration efforts have been aimed at bridging the poverty and marginalization gap in Turkana through infrastructural development like roads, schools, hospitals, markets, and business development. However, the negative consequence of the development-oriented approach to fostering integration has been the emergence of strong feelings of entitlement to development and humanitarian support, thus leading to the politicization of humanitarian aid in the area (Nabenyo 2022). While the economic integration has somewhat improved significantly (Sanghi, Onder, and Vemuru 2016), Nabenyo (2022) warned that it risks refugees being perceived more as commodities than co-inhabitants in the area.

Another challenge with the persistent focus of humanitarian agencies on socioeconomic integration is the continued reduction of global funding for humanitarian programmes, which might hamper the effective implementation of humanitarian projects. Due to donor fatigue and emerging crises worldwide, humanitarian funding for protracted situations has significantly reduced (Chakravarty 2021; Miliband and Gurumurthy 2015; Zarocostas 2024). For example, the funding for UNHCR operations in Kenya was reduced by half between 2010 and 2015 (from USD 417 million to USD 207 million) (O'Callaghan et al. 2019). Moreover, only 14 per cent of the total UNHCR financial requirement of 170.1 million US dollars was funded in 2019 (UNHCR 2019), aggravating the serious financial constraints faced by the main humanitarian agency. This directly affects both the refugees, as they are left in an uncertain and prolonged state of limbo where they are expected to integrate socioeconomically, yet the government and humanitarian agencies are unable to fulfil their mandates due to funding shortfalls. Therefore, inadequate funding for the UN Refugee Agency puts at risk some of the protection and assistance programmes for refugees and hosts in Turkana.

In addition, the pursuit of socioeconomic integration by humanitarian agencies shifts the focus from the immediate primary needs of refugees such as proper shelter, sufficient food, and quality healthcare, which are essential but lacking in a refugee camp like Kakuma. According to studies conducted in Kakuma, malnutrition resulting from a lack of adequate food is rampant in Kakuma refugee camp (Kahara, Turoop, and Majiwa 2021; Kamau, Kibuku, and Kinyuru 2021; Kodish et al. 2011). The shelters in which refugees live are mostly mud-walled with corrugated iron sheets, while others are temporary tents

exposing people to dangers such as malaria and theft (Nabie Bayoh et al. 2011). Jansen (2018, 25) puts this into perspective by describing the refugee shelter in Kakuma as “refugee prison”. On healthcare, Jemutai et al. (2021) state that access to quality and affordable health services remains a challenge for refugees in Kakuma. Yet, humanitarian agencies are constantly advocating for socio-economic integration in an environment where the main intended beneficiaries are basically deprived of basic human necessities and excluded from government services. This re-imagining of camps as spaces for testing economic projects risks hurting refugees more and creating a capitalist environment where some thrive at the expense of others. In this regard, Brankamp et al. (2023, 9) warn that such efforts wrongly shift the attention from “the root causes of displacement and injustice, as refugee suffering is primarily attributed to idleness and humanitarian handouts, while artfully concealing the complicity of global corporations and financial institutions in perpetuating the exploitative operations of capital”.

To better understand integration as a process, it is critical to identify the point at which it begins for refugees and host communities. Strang and Ager (2010) say that, for refugees, integration begins at their chosen destination upon arrival. Moreover, Strang and Ager opined that the experiences of the refugees at the point of arrival shape the integration process, and not the acquisition of legal status (Strang and Ager 2010). This notion challenges the perceptions that the integration process can only begin once an individual has their refugee status determination (RSD) process concluded and their status affirmed. In Kenya, for example, international protection applicants whose statuses have yet to be determined cannot engage in socio-economic activities such as operating businesses due to the denial of permits and are not able to access opportunities such as scholarships and resettlement (Balakian 2016; Laws of Kenya 2021; Norwegian Refugee Council 2017). The period when an individual applies for international protection and gets refugee status is therefore critical in ensuring successful integration.

In addition, deciding to stay in the host community or moving to another place due to restrictions or other fears also impacts the integration process. Losi and Strang (2008) found that refugees want to stay and integrate in a place with opportunities, safety, and protection. Hence, understanding refugees’ intentions to settle or move out later is critical in formulating better and more responsive refugee integration policies. Furthermore, the role of the destination community in the decision of refugees to stay or not is also vital in understanding the challenges encountered while integrating refugees in long-term situations like the Kakuma refugee camp. While the government of Kenya’s intention to integrate refugees is clear, albeit inconsistent in practice, based on an interview with a UNHCR officer in Kakuma, most refugees in Kakuma prefer resettlement rather than local integration. The officer’s views are also supported by Muluka (2023), who opined that most refugees are attracted to and stay in Kakuma due to the hopes and desire to be resettled in developed nations in Europe, North America, or Australia. Muluka states:

Kakuma and Kalobeyei refugee camps have morphed into springboards of further migration to Europe, Australia, and the Americas. They lost their original character as emergency relief points and became, instead, holding grounds for people seeking better homes away from their original homes ... they were waiting for UNHCR to resettle them in another country. Kakuma and Kalobeyei were their homes for the time being (Muluka 2023, 37).

In this regard, the motivation to move to Kakuma and the choice to wait for resettlement instead of integrating for some refugees in Kakuma negatively affect how integration is perceived among the refugees and efforts to provide quality asylum in the area. In addition, the persistent plans to socioeconomically integrate refugees point towards a lack of understanding of the intentions of the majority of refugees in Kakuma on the part of the government of Kenya and humanitarian agencies that seemingly assume that integration will automatically work without the proper analysis and consideration of the complex needs and motivations of the refugees and host communities.

Towards a more just and humane refugee regime

As demonstrated above, the challenge of decolonizing integration in Kenya – ending inequalities and injustices committed against refugees – mainly stems from a lack of proper understanding of integration and its contextualized implementation among the host governments and humanitarian agencies. In Kakuma, some actors, like aid agencies, perceive integration through a development lens, while refugees view it as access to rights and freedoms. The local hosts, on the other hand, view it as being able to access humanitarian services and benefits.

In this regard, one NGO official stated:

It is about giving solutions to people's needs, and in a refugee situation you get that there is a lot of competition for resources between the host and refugee community. Now for you to bring about social cohesion, you must sort the economic and the developmental portion either way, because these people are competing for limited resources; in a place like this, we don't have water. Now, how do we bring about social cohesion through this water as a commodity? Through developmental solutions. (NGO official)

Consequently, more than half a million refugees are condemned to crowded refugee camps located in remote border regions with no prospects for solutions or assistance. Inside the refugee camps, all manner of injustices is perpetrated against refugees at the hands of those entrusted with the responsibilities of protecting and supporting displaced and vulnerable populations. Based on interviews conducted in Kakuma, everyday violence occurs in the following forms: refugee to refugee, refugee to host, host to refugee, government security officers to refugees, and humanitarian workers to refugees.

These young men are beginning to involve themselves in crime, such as breaking into people's houses and stealing things. (Kakuma local host)

I was beaten so much with clubs and cut up using machetes. But God helped me when I went to the hospital, I was treated, and I left and continued to search for money to continue with my treatment. So that is one problem that is in the settlement and camp because insecurity sometimes is brought about by fellow refugees, and sometimes it's brought about by the police. (Burundian Refugee)

While some forms of violence are not physical, such as those committed by humanitarian workers against refugee violence, others involve physical violence such as assault, sexual and gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, and murders among others (Bishop 2019; Brankamp 2019; Crisp 2000a; Horn 2010; Jansen 2011). Indeed, Crisp (2000b, 54) states that it is "impossible to quantify the amount of violence which takes place in

and around Kenya's refugee camps", especially in Kakuma, which has been described as an "occupied enclave" by Kenyan security forces (Brankamp 2019, 68).

So, can humanitarianism in Kenya's refugee camps be just, equitable, and inclusive? To achieve this, firstly, there is a need for self-introspection, which should be guided by the objective of doing things differently from how they have been conducted in the past three decades that the camp has been in existence. Moreover, the plans and projects should be redesigned to focus on the primary needs of the refugees, such as protection, before diversifying the assistance and focusing on secondary matters, like economic integration. This shift is essential because the need to derive economic benefits from refugees hosted under harsh conditions – environmentally and economically – like in Kakuma risks pushing more refugees into poverty and worsening their lived experiences of international protection. As one government official put it, this can begin by asking the refugees what they need rather than imposing decisions upon them.

So, it's better that they ask the people so that they make appropriate considerations because the people can tell them that what we need is one two three four, then when they go, they will consider the priorities of the beneficiaries and so when they are coming with those things, they will be happy because they will be things that they needed. (Government official)

While in developed nations, the focus is on integration upon arrival and economic empowerment for self-sustenance; that is not the case in most countries in the Global South. This is mainly because most countries in the South have weaker economies, with a sizeable segment of the population living in poverty, particularly in the regions hosting refugee camps. In Kenya, for example, while a humanitarian agency might favour socio-economic integration for urban refugees (i.e. those living in urban areas like Nairobi, Mombasa, Thika, and Nakuru), the situation is different for those living in refugee camps such as Kakuma, where they are exposed to the double problems of encampment and the poor economic conditions of Turkana County. Indeed, during the interviews with refugees in Kakuma, one South Sudanese refugee pointed out that most Turkana hosts are living in extreme poverty, sometimes worse than the refugees themselves; thus, it would be a difficult task for them to make a living on their own in such hostile economic conditions.

So if you tell me as a refugee, I have never gone to school, and I have no work skills, and you integrate me in Kenya, where am I going to start? Because if I was a farmer, unless you give me some land so that I can work on this land, where am I going to start? So if you integrate me, I fear that I will not have the opportunity to actually go beyond what I am currently. (South Sudanese Refugee)

Therefore, a renewed focus on the primary needs of refugees will not only ensure that all refugees can access adequate food, healthcare, and shelter, but also prepare the necessary conditions for complementary projects that aim at providing alternative economic opportunities for refugees. It is practically impossible to effectively implement socioeconomic programmes for a population that can barely eat three meals a day and is living in squalor conditions. While most humanitarian agencies like the UNHCR would support the focus on socioeconomic integration due to the depleting global humanitarian funding, it is instructive to note that for a long time the host governments have not been fully involved in refugee affairs. The Kenyan government, for example, transferred the responsibilities of managing refugees to the UNHCR in the early 1990s due to the massive influx

resulting from civil and political crises in neighboring Somalia and Sudan, and only recently showed interest in active involvement in refugee affairs through the passing of the 2021 refugee legislation (Elliott 2012; Milner 2019; Raddatz and Kerby 2020).

Active involvement in refugee affairs by governments should go beyond the everyday policing and administrative duties in the camps but should also include budgetary allocation meant to support the protection and assistance of refugees, and to increase the human resource capacity in the departments responsible for managing refugees such as immigration and citizen services. In the past years, the Kenyan government made little financial investment into refugee protection and assistance, and only relied on donations from humanitarian agencies and western governments. Occasionally, whenever the donations were delayed or reduced, the government would threaten to close down the camps and deport refugees to their countries of origin as witnessed in 2015 and 2021 (Reuters 2021).

Secondly, it is vital that the humanitarian workers and government officers based in Kakuma change their attitudes towards how they treat refugees. Based on field interviews conducted in Kakuma, refugees recounted the violence and abuse they are forced to endure at the hands of those who they expect to protect them, like government officers, private security officers, and humanitarian workers. According to one refugee, physical abuse such as beatings is commonly prevalent during relief food distribution, at the police stations – which speaks to Kenya’s wider violent policing culture rooted in colonial standards – and even during protests organized by refugees in the camp.

So inside the camp we fear the police, if you think you have a certain mistake you fear a lot, because if you are taken, you will be beaten and people must pay money to release you. (DR Congolese Refugee)

Interestingly, some refugees furthermore singled out humanitarian workers who have stayed in the area for longer periods as some of the main perpetrators of psychological violence against refugees. According to Brankamp (2019), cases of violence perpetrated by government and humanitarian workers against refugees are not surprising, but are a common feature of humanitarian activities in spaces controlled and cared for like refugee camps (Branch 2012; Malkki 1995).

Some of them (humanitarian workers) are nice, but I think the friendly people are new in the work because they want to sustain their work, but some are really harsh. (Somali Refugee)

By design, camps are meant to disempower refugees and strip them of their dignity and humanity, turning them into what Agamben (1998) termed “bare lives”. To address this problem, the occasional re-training of humanitarian and government workers in Kakuma refugee camps on basic human rights and humanitarian principles such as “do no harm” is needed. In addition, an open channel of communication should be made available to the refugees where they can report instances of abuse to an independent humanitarian operations oversight body – in Kakuma or at the national level – that will then investigate and take appropriate action against those found culpable.

Finally, there is a critical need for a refugee policy that is pro-refugee protection and not meant to maintain the status quo, which is purposely aimed at managing “humanitarian concerns with security concerns” (Betts 2022, 268) as exemplified by the 2021 Refugee Act. Upon its adoption, the Kenya Refugees Act of 2021 was hailed as

representing a new paradigm in managing refugee issues, especially by promoting the socioeconomic rights of refugees, which had initially been curtailed under the previous 2006 legislation. This new Act of 2021 recognized the benefits of socioeconomic integration of refugees to the country and host communities, and leaned towards allowing them to engage in economic activities for the growth and development of the host communities and the country (Laws of Kenya 2021). Moreover, the 2021 legislation also incorporated global commitments and agreements such as the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, the 2018 Global Compact for Refugees, and the UNHCR's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) threefold objective of alleviating the impacts of refugee presence on the hosts, achieving self-reliance for refugees, and improving humanitarian development.

However, the 2021 Act was still influenced in a big way by the perception of refugees as a security concern. It contained provisions that made it possible for government agencies to violate the rights of refugees and asylum seekers. For example, Section 4 (d) stated that the Government would not recognize as refugees those deemed to pose a threat to national security while Section 29 (2) also authorized the denial of entry to a refugee or asylum seeker for similar security reasons. One NGO official agrees with managing the security risks of hosting refugees and states:

If you don't securitize the laws on refugee management, it will be very difficult to manage because what will happen is those rebels create small militias here? Then, it will force us, the hosts, to look for safe Havens. (NGO Official)

Additionally, the Act does not clearly guarantee the right to work and freedom of movement to the refugees, but instead, it focuses on clarifying the roles of various institutions involved in refugee affairs and is vague on how the country will work towards the realization of a durable solution. Backed up with genuine political will, new legislation that explicitly guarantees the refugees the right to work and move will, therefore, promote their effective integration and restore to them the dignity and humanity that they have been denied for so long. The proposed new legislation at its core should move towards total decampment and giving the refugees the right to settle anywhere in the country if they have the proper documentation and the means to sustain their lives. Documentation remains a big challenge in Kakuma (AREL 2024; NRC 2017; WUSC 2023), thus enhancing the process of acquisition of requisite documents and integration into the national registration bureau database will enable the refugees to enjoy the rights to register and operate businesses and seek employment.

Conclusion

In this paper, the challenge of integrating refugees in Kenyan refugee camps has been analyzed and explained from a decolonial perspective. As demonstrated, while colonialism ended at least sixty years ago in Kenya, its legacies persist and continue to be enforced on marginalized populations, including refugees. This takes the forms of securitization of refugee issues, restrictions of movement and labour participation, oppression, and violation of refugee bodies in the camps. Furthermore, as elaborated, the main challenge of integrating refugees in Kenya originates from the different conceptualizations of integration by humanitarian and governing bodies, and what it means in a protracted

displaced setting with equally marginalized and underserved host communities such as Turkana County, where the Kakuma refugee camps are situated. Consequently, governments and humanitarian organizations operating in refugee camps design and implement contradictory policies which inadvertently serve to reinforce the exclusionary and oppressive mechanisms meant to contain refugees, such as encampments, instead of upholding the rights of refugees and promoting their access to the UNHCR's durable solutions. For example, the intended shift towards socioeconomic integration without meaningful reforms in the way the camp is managed and the overall economic conditions of the host community risks exposing refugees to new forms of vulnerability without adequate protection measures.

As such, a more humane and just refugee integration approach in Kenya would require a new paradigm shift from the usual vague policies and humanitarian practices that are primarily focused only on instrumentalizing refugees as economic players to a deliberate refugee regime that guarantees the protection needs of refugees while expanding their socioeconomic rights and freedoms. In this regard, and as Murphy and Vieten argue in the introduction of this special issue, the refugee integration efforts in protracted situations should be empathetic and informed by a genuine desire to give refugees a choice to engage in other livelihood activities. Currently, many refugees in Kakuma are anxious about the "self-reliance" and "socioeconomic integration" debates, which they view as efforts meant to validate the intended replacement of humanitarian aid with economic programmes grounded in neoliberal ideologies of self-sustenance.

Notes

1. According to Dados and Connell (2012), Global South is a phrase used to refer to regions such as Latin America, Asia and Africa. It is also used interchangeably with terms such as third world, developing countries/economies, and low- and middle-income countries, and often describes politically and culturally marginalised regions. These terms are politically-laden. In this research, I use the term Global South with full cognisance of the political implications.
2. According to the UNHCR Handbook for Self-reliance, it is defined as the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet essential needs (including protection, food, water, shelter, personal safety, health and education) in a sustainable manner and with dignity (1).

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