



Learning Brief

October 2024

Localization of Forced Migration Research and Knowledge Production in Kenya

Introduction

Kenya stands as a significant host country for refugees from neighbouring countries, notably Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The refugee population in Kenya (registered refugees and asylum seekers) continue to grow in 2024 with the majority residing in camps and urban areas like Nairobi.

Over the years, research concerning refugee issues has predominantly been carried out by foreign researchers, creating an evidence base that often does not reflect the voices and perspectives of refugees themselves or the Kenyan communities hosting them. This necessitates a shift towards localizing refugee research and knowledge production, which can ensure a more nuanced and culturally relevant understanding of the needs and challenges faced by refugees and host communities.

The Kenya Evidence Platform Project is grounded on the need for this shift. The project supports local generation of high-quality research on durable solutions for refugees in Kenya and capacity strengthening of local refugee researchers. Additionally, it advocates for evidenced-based policy and programming in Kenya, bridging the gap between policy and practice.

Overview of the Brief

This brief highlights: the key facts and figures, the landscape of refugee research in Kenya, the Importance of the Localization of Refugee research and Knowledge Production, the Key Messages (these are drawn from the Kenya Evidence Platform Annual Conference in September titled "Rethinking collaboration: localizing knowledge production to inform sustainable solutions for displacement-affected communities in Kenya") the Key messages are also drawn from the Evidence Mapping Report commissioned by Kenya Evidence Platform "Evidence Mapping – Towards a Common Refugee Research Agenda in Kenya". Additionally, the brief highlights key challenges and recommendations for promoting Localization of refugee research in Kenya.

Key Facts and Figures



Refugee Population: 557,959 registered refugees and 212,266 asylum seekers in Kenya (mid-2024).



Geographical Distribution: Garissa County (382,639), Turkana County (285,238), and urban areas like Nairobi (102,378).



The actual population of refugees is likely higher due to unregistered individuals.



There is insufficient research on the socio-economic integration of refugees and the broader impacts on both refugee and host communities in Kenya.



A majority of refugee-related research in Kenya has been conducted by foreign academics or organizations from the Global North, leading to a skewed understanding of local realities.



There is a significant gap in research originating from within Kenya, especially by refugees and Kenyan communities themselves.



Local researchers often play roles as "assistants" rather than leading research efforts.

The *Traditional Research Model*¹ is an extractive model where data is often taken from refugees and host communities without any meaningful participation. It devalues local

¹ <https://lrnagweb.sitohost.iu.edu/doc/pdf/wv-u15-gaudry.pdf>

knowledge by enforcing top-down approaches, often marginalizing these communities. Recent studies highlight some of the key ways to promote meaningful participation of refugees.²

Promoting local production of knowledge (overcoming the limitations of traditional methods).



Refugee-led Organizations acting as platforms that foster leadership, build research capacity of refugees and community-driven solutions.



Co-producing Knowledge: Effective localization of research requires co-creation between researchers, refugees, and local communities. By involving the local community from the onset, research can reflect the realities on the ground, making it more impactful.



Inclusivity and Complexity; research must reflect the complexity of the lives of displaced communities. Understanding local cultural, economic, and social systems is crucial for producing meaningful research and policies. There is a growing recognition that research should go beyond data extraction and empower local actors to interpret and utilize the findings.



Building Local Capacity: Kenya has a wealth of potential local researchers, particularly from refugee-hosting areas. Efforts must be made to empower local academic and non-academic researchers, providing them with the tools and platforms to take the lead in producing and disseminating knowledge.



Collaboration with local institutions: building long-term partnerships with local academic institutions is very critical. These institutions should play a more active role in research and policymaking on displacement related issues.

Collaborating with international organizations like the UNHCR can enhance the capacity of local actors and ensure that research efforts are aligned with the needs of displacement-affected communities.



2 Cohere. Addressing Five Barriers to Implementing “Meaningful Refugee Participation” in the Refugee Response. 2022. [Addressing five barriers to implementing “Meaningful Refugee Participation” in the refugee response](#)

What are the Key Messages?

A Participatory Research Agenda

Developing a unified, locally-informed refugee research agenda is essential to address current evidence fragmentation and the disconnect between policy and ground realities. The process should involve direct participation from refugees and local communities.



Addressing Research Gaps

Research should expand beyond camp-centric studies to explore the realities of refugees in urban areas and their interactions with host communities. This includes examining socio-economic inclusion, environmental sustainability, and conflict dynamics.



Inclusivity and Digital Accessibility

A substantial body of research already exists within Kenya but is often not digitized or accessible online. Making local research digitally accessible can enhance global understanding of refugee dynamics from an African perspective.

Enhancing Policy and Practice

Locally-generated research can bridge the gap between policy frameworks like Kenya's Refugees Act (2021) and their on-ground implementation. Continuous localized research will ensure that policies reflect the lived experiences of refugee and host communities, promoting accountability and evidence-based decision-making.





Challenges and Gaps in Localization of Forced Migration Research and Knowledge Production.

- a) *Limited Financial Resources:* There is inadequate funding for the engagement of local actors beyond the research phase. While many projects support data collection, the dissemination of findings to key policymakers remains underfunded. Evidence indicates that Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) are often severely underfunded. In 2022, the average funding to RLOs was 10 times smaller than that to local/national non-governmental organizations .³
- b) *Differing Priorities:* The alignment of research goals between local communities, policy makers, and international organizations is often problematic. Many local actors find it difficult to ensure their research resonates with decision-makers due to competing interests and different policy priorities.
- c) *Access to Policymakers:* Refugee-led research often faces barriers in reaching government officials who can influence policy decisions. Building trust and ongoing dialogue with policymakers requires continuous financial and organizational support, which is frequently unavailable.
- d) *Lack of meaningful partnerships:* refugee-Led Organisations are able to access project-based or event-based partnerships, however, this does not grant them the credibility required to foster partnerships with potential state and private donors. This incapacitates the ability of RLOs to actively support local generation of evidence.
- e) *Inadequate capacity among RLOs and other local actors:* these relate to financial management, proposal development, and operations.

³ [The failure to fund refugee-led organisations: why the current system is not working, and the potential for change | ODI: Think change](#)

Recommendations

-  **Capacity Building and Institutional Support:** For localization to be successful, local academic institutions, RLOs, and other grassroots organizations need ongoing capacity building. The Kenya Evidence Platform (KEP) is a key initiative that supports local research efforts. Strengthening such platforms will ensure long-term sustainability and the localization of knowledge production.

-  **Inclusive Dissemination:** To ensure research findings reach diverse audiences, it is essential to use multiple dissemination pathways. The use of multimedia approaches, such as films and participatory media, to humanize refugee experiences and make the findings more accessible is an approach yet to be explored further by a number of practitioners and academics.

-  **Collaborative Research Agendas:** Establish collaborative platforms that bring together local researchers, refugee leaders, policymakers, and international actors to co-create a shared research agenda that aligns with local and national priorities.

-  **Enhancing Co-Creation in Research Design:** All stakeholders should be involved from the early stages of research design. By involving refugees, local communities, and policymakers, research can better reflect local priorities and be more readily adopted into policy.

-  **Long-term Partnerships and Collaboration:** The success of localized research will depend on the ability to form long-term, mutually beneficial partnerships. International donors and organizations should focus on building capacity and promoting joint research efforts, ensuring that the research outcomes are actionable and relevant. Additionally, Research must focus on long-term development needs in refugee-hosting areas.

-  **Prioritize Local Voices:** Refugee and host communities must be at the center of research efforts. There should be a transition from external research leadership to local ownership, with local researchers designing and conducting studies.

-  **Invest in Local Research Infrastructure:** Strengthen local academic and research institutions, especially in refugee-hosting regions, to facilitate the production of high-quality, contextually relevant research.

-  **Digitalization and Accessibility:** Facilitate the digitization of locally produced research to ensure wider access and inclusion in global debates on refugee issues.

-  **Prioritize direct Funding to Refugee led Organizations:** donors should prioritize direct funding to refugee led organizations. Additionally, donors should consider funding a consortia of RLOs to enhance effectiveness in performance

Kenya Evidence Platform

The Kenya Evidence Platform has 3 outcome areas; Increased locally-generated high quality research focused on the promotion of durable solutions for refugees, strengthened capacity and skills of refugee and local academic researchers to shape and influence the refugee aid architecture and Refugee policy and programming in Kenya. On delivery, the Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) is in partnership with

Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) and Maseno University (MU). This is in addition to the support from core group members and other partners. The project is funded by the Kingdom of the Netherlands. It aims to drive evidence-based Refugee programming and policymaking in Kenya through locally driven and generated research on the promotion of more durable solutions for refugees.



Our Commitment to Localization of Knowledge Production:

ReDSS will ensure collective action by leveraging on our members and partnerships to ensure the outcomes of this conference will shape the work on a common refugee research agenda currently in the process of development. ReDSS will also use its platform to facilitate learning and exchanges on specific topics of further discussion identified throughout the conference

The **RLRH** will expand opportunities for refugee researchers in Kenya by offering grants to three researchers who wish to conduct independent research projects on issues related to refugee governance, service integration, socio-economic inclusion, environmental sustainability, and durable solutions. Additionally, the RLRH will continue to develop the research capabilities of refugees in Kenya through the provision of in-person and online training sessions.

Maseno University will continue to explore possibilities and strategies of establishing a national academic network among universities and other research institutions in Kenya to enhance knowledge development in areas relevant to the understanding of refugees – host integrative processes in Kenya. Maseno will provide mentorship and coaching to refugee researchers and early career scholars with a clear overall strategy to enhance the production, quality and impact of local evidence.

Further Reading:

1. Evidence Mapping – Towards a Common Refugee Research Agenda in Kenya, Report, 2024 (ReDSS)
2. Building Evidence to Enhance the Welfare of Refugees and Host Communities in Kenya-
Building Evidence to Enhance the Welfare of Refugees and Host Communities in Kenya (worldbank.org) (World Bank, 2024)
3. The failure to fund refugee-led organisations: Why the current System is not working *HPG report (odi.org), 2023.*
4. Getachew, A., Gitahi, M., Kara, A., Ramazani, U. (2022). 'Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa: Community Perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania.' Refugee-Led Research Series, Research Report (1), September 2022. *Refugee-Led-Organisations-in-East-Africa-Regional-Full-Report.pdf (refugeeledresearch.org)*
5. <https://data.unhcr.org/>

