



ANALYSIS OF PRIMARY EDUCATION IN REFUGEE CAMPS: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS IN DADAAB REFUGEE CAMP, GARISSA COUNTY, KENYA

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Abstract:

This is a conceptual paper which analyses the challenges and prospects of primary education in Dadaab Refugee Camp, Garissa County, Kenya, one of the world's largest and longest-standing refugee settlements. Whereas education is a fundamental right and pathway to empowerment, refugee children in Dadaab face major barriers, including overcrowded classrooms, inadequate infrastructure, teacher shortages, limited learning materials, and chronic underfunding. Despite Kenya's commitment to international frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), and the 2021 Refugee Act, policy gaps and weak implementation continue to limit access and quality. It is by Human Capital Theory and the Capabilities Approach, which frames education as both an economic investment and a rights-based strategy for creating and enhancing opportunities. Leveraging on scholarly work, policy documents, and institutional reports, it highlights structural, socio-economic, and governance constraints shaping refugee education. Emerging issues include Kenya's transition to the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), the recognition and accreditation of refugee teachers, and the potential of digital learning innovations. While challenges remain acute, opportunities lie in curriculum reforms, sustainable financing, teacher professional development, and stronger partnerships. Strengthening refugee education is both a humanitarian obligation and a developmental imperative, fostering self-reliance, social stability, and long-term resilience for displaced and host communities.

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1. Introduction

Education is globally recognized as both a human right and a foundational driver of sustainable development, yet millions of children in refugee settings remain excluded from equitable learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2017; UNHCR, 2019a). Refugee education sits at the intersection of humanitarian relief, development policy, and human rights discourse, making it one of the most complex challenges for national governments and international actors (Dryden-Peterson *et al.*, 2018). In Kenya, the Dadaab Refugee Camp—established in 1991 to host Somali refugees fleeing conflict—remains a critical case study for understanding these dynamics. With a population exceeding 230,000 refugees, including tens of thousands of school-aged children, Dadaab represents both the urgency and fragility of refugee education systems (UNHCR, 2024).

Despite international commitments such as the 1951 Refugee Convention (UNHCR, 2011), the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (United Nations, 2023), and the Global Compact on Refugees (UNHCR, 2019a), educational provision for refugees in Kenya remains uneven. Refugee children in Dadaab encounter systemic challenges, including overcrowded classrooms, limited infrastructure, high teacher turnover, and chronic underfunding (Government of Kenya, 2024; Mburu *et al.*, 2024). The Teachers Service Commission Act (Government of Kenya, 2012) and the Refugee Act (Government of Kenya, 2021) provide policy frameworks for education inclusion, but inconsistencies in their implementation continue to constrain access and quality.

From a theoretical perspective, Human Capital Theory underscores the role of education in improving livelihoods and contributing to economic resilience, while Sen's Capabilities Approach highlights the expansion of freedoms and agency that education affords displaced children (World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2023). Together, these perspectives illuminate how education serves not only as a humanitarian necessity but also as a long-term investment in peace, stability, and social transformation.

In recent years, Kenya's education landscape has undergone significant reforms, particularly the shift to a Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC), which emphasizes skills, adaptability, and learner-centered approaches. However, the integration of refugee learners into CBC remains underexplored, raising questions about curriculum alignment, teacher preparedness, and resource distribution (Ministry of Education, 2024). This reform moment provides an opportunity to reassess the structural and policy foundations of refugee education in Dadaab.

The paper therefore investigates the challenges and prospects of primary education in Dadaab Refugee Camp, analyzing emerging issues such as curriculum reforms, teacher accreditation, funding constraints, and technological innovations. The analysis situates Dadaab within global debates on refugee education while offering Kenya-specific policy insights and potential mitigation strategies.

2. Research Gap

While refugee education in Kenya has been extensively documented in humanitarian and policy reports, significant gaps persist in scholarly inquiry. First, existing literature disproportionately focuses on access rather than quality of education, leaving underexplored the dimensions of pedagogy, teacher welfare, and learner outcomes (Mburu *et al.*, 2024; UNHCR, 2021). Second, most studies examine refugee education through a humanitarian relief lens, with limited attention to its integration into national education systems, particularly in the context of ongoing curriculum reforms (Ministry of Education, 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Third, policy inconsistencies between national frameworks (such as the TSC Act, 2012 and the Refugee Act, 2021) and international commitments (e.g., the Global Compact on Refugees) have not been systematically analyzed to assess their impact on educational service delivery in Dadaab. This results in a lack of empirical clarity on how governance structures and financing models either enable or constrain refugee education. Fourth, emerging issues such as digital learning, teacher professionalization for refugees, and financing sustainability are underrepresented in the academic discourse, despite their growing significance in practice (AVSI, 2023; World Bank, 2018).

Finally, there is a dearth of policy-focused research that links refugee education to long-term development and peacebuilding in Kenya's refugee-hosting regions. The interplay between education, social cohesion, and local integration remains insufficiently theorized and empirically tested. Addressing these research gaps is critical for designing inclusive, resilient, and future-oriented education systems that support both refugees and host communities.

3. Relevant Literature

Existing scholarship on refugee education underscores both progress and persistent structural challenges. Dryden-Peterson *et al.* (2018) highlight that while access to primary schooling in protracted refugee settings like Dadaab has expanded, learning outcomes remain poor due to overcrowding, insufficient teacher training, and reliance on unaccredited refugee educators. UNHCR (2019a, 2021) advances inclusion frameworks such as the CRRE, yet critics argue that these strategies often remain aspirational, constrained by fragmented implementation and donor dependency (World Bank, 2018; UNHCR, 2024). In Kenya, the 2021 Refugee Act promises stronger rights, but practical enforcement—particularly regarding teacher accreditation, curriculum integration, and financing—remains inconsistent (Government of Kenya, 2021; Mburu *et al.*, 2024).

Recent literature also questions the sustainability of humanitarian-led education, warning of cyclical funding crises that undermine continuity and quality (UNESCO, 2023; Ministry of Education, 2024). While digital learning and the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) are seen as innovative pathways, their applicability in resource-poor refugee contexts is contested, given technological, infrastructural, and language barriers

(AVSI, 2023). Overall, the literature reveals a tension between global rights-based commitments and local implementation realities. The critical gap lies in developing integrated, context-sensitive, and sustainable policy responses that reconcile humanitarian imperatives with national education reforms.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on two complementary perspectives: Human Capital Theory and Sen's Capabilities Approach.

Human Capital Theory underscores education as an investment that enhances knowledge, skills, and productivity (World Bank, 2018). In Dadaab, primary education can build the foundations for refugees' employability and self-reliance, reducing long-term aid dependency and fostering resilience in displacement contexts.

Sen's Capabilities Approach emphasizes expanding freedoms and opportunities that allow individuals to live meaningful lives (UNESCO, 2023). For refugee children, education enhances not only cognitive skills but also agency, dignity, and social inclusion. It empowers learners to participate in community development and future reconstruction efforts in their home or host countries.

Together, these perspectives frame refugee education not merely as humanitarian relief but as a strategic investment in human potential and social stability. They highlight the need for policies that go beyond access, focusing on quality, equity, and sustainability in Dadaab's primary education system.

3. Methods

This paper adopts a conceptual and policy-analysis approach rather than an empirical study. The methodology integrates three dimensions:

3.1 Document and Policy Review

Key legal frameworks and policies, such as the Refugee Act (2021), the Teachers Service Commission Act (2012), UNHCR's Refugee Education 2030, and the Ministry of Education Sessional Paper (2024), were reviewed to assess the alignment between policy provisions and the realities of primary education in Dadaab.

3.2 Comparative Benchmarking

Best practices in refugee education from global frameworks (UNESCO, 2017; UNHCR, 2019a; AVSI, 2023) were analyzed against Kenya's strategies. This benchmarking highlights gaps in teacher welfare, funding, and curriculum adaptation.

3.3 Analytical Framework Application

Using Human Capital Theory and the Capabilities Approach, the paper conceptualizes refugee education as both a driver of economic empowerment and a foundation for agency, social participation, and long-term resilience.

This blended methodology enables a critical understanding of challenges and opportunities while producing policy-relevant insights that can inform government agencies, humanitarian organizations, and university-led interventions.

4. Results and Discussion

The analysis reveals five interrelated themes shaping the delivery and outcomes of primary education in Dadaab refugee camps. These themes underscore the structural, institutional, and contextual barriers that require urgent redress through policy and practice.

4.1 Teacher Welfare and Professional Development

Teachers in Dadaab face persistent challenges in recruitment, retention, and welfare. Many are employed as incentive-based refugee teachers, earning significantly less than their Kenyan counterparts (UNHCR, 2021). Limited career progression pathways, inadequate training, and irregular compensation reduce motivation and compromise instructional quality. This undermines both Human Capital Theory's premise of skill investment and the Capabilities Approach's call for professional dignity.

4.2 Access, Equity, and Gender Inclusion

While enrolment in primary schools has improved, disparities remain across gender, disability, and socio-economic status. Girls face higher dropout risks due to early marriage, cultural practices, and household responsibilities (Mburu *et al.*, 2024). Learners with disabilities lack adequate support systems and infrastructure. Such inequities perpetuate cycles of exclusion and contravene both the Refugee Act (2021) and global commitments to inclusive education.

4.3 Funding Gaps and Resource Constraints

Primary education in Dadaab is largely donor-dependent, with recurrent shortfalls in funding (UNHCR, 2024). Limited investment affects infrastructure, learning materials, and school feeding programs that are critical for retention. Overcrowded classrooms and insufficient textbooks compromise learning outcomes. The unpredictability of aid flows exposes the fragility of refugee education financing and calls for innovative, sustainable models that integrate government and private-sector partnerships.

4.4 Curriculum Relevance and Adaptation

The adoption of the Kenyan Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) in Dadaab offers opportunities for alignment with national education standards. However,

implementation is constrained by inadequate teacher preparedness, lack of contextualized materials, and limited sensitivity to refugee learners' psychosocial needs (Ministry of Education, 2024). Without curriculum adaptations that reflect displacement realities, learning risks being alienated from students' lived experiences.

4.5 Governance, Coordination, and Policy Coherence

Fragmented coordination among government agencies, humanitarian organizations, and implementing partners hampers effectiveness. Overlapping mandates between the Ministry of Education, Teachers Service Commission, UNHCR, and NGOs create inefficiencies and policy ambiguities (UNESCO, 2023). Limited involvement of refugees in decision-making further weakens program ownership and sustainability. Strengthening multi-level governance and accountability is critical for coherent refugee education delivery.

4.6 Policy Implications and Recommendations

The analysis of challenges and opportunities in Dadaab's primary education highlights critical areas where policy reforms, institutional coordination, and innovative practices can significantly enhance outcomes.

4.7 Strengthening Teacher Welfare and Professionalism

Policy Implication: Inadequate compensation and lack of professional pathways undermine quality teaching.

5. Recommendations

The Teachers Service Commission (TSC) should progressively absorb qualified refugee and national teachers into formal employment frameworks, ensuring fair wages, career development, and recognition. Universities can support through certification, mentorship, and research on teacher welfare.

5.1 Advancing Inclusive and Equitable Access

Policy Implication: Persistent gender and disability disparities weaken the impact of education.

The Ministry of Education and humanitarian partners should expand gender-sensitive programs, scale up disability-inclusive infrastructure, and embed equity indicators in monitoring frameworks. Local communities must be engaged in advocacy and ownership.

5.2 Securing Sustainable Financing Models

Policy Implication: Over-reliance on volatile donor funding jeopardizes the continuity of learning.

Government should earmark dedicated refugee education funds within national budgets, complemented by innovative financing (e.g., public-private partnerships, diaspora bonds). Humanitarian agencies can align support with national education plans to reduce duplication.

5.3 Contextualizing Curriculum and Pedagogy

Policy Implication: Curriculum delivery often fails to reflect displacement realities or refugee needs.

Adapt the Competency-Based Curriculum (CBC) with psychosocial support, peace education, and livelihood-oriented content. Teacher training should emphasize inclusive pedagogy and trauma-informed practices.

5.4 Enhancing Governance and Coordination

Policy Implication: Fragmented mandates weaken policy coherence and accountability.

Establish a joint Refugee Education Coordination Council bringing together the Ministry of Education, UNHCR, NGOs, and refugee representatives. This platform would harmonize planning, ensure accountability, and promote refugee participation in policy design and monitoring.

5.5 Leveraging Innovation and Technology

Policy Implication: Infrastructure gaps limit access to modern, resilient learning models.

Invest in digital learning infrastructure and public-private partnerships with technology firms. Pilot scalable models of blended learning, tailored to low-resource refugee contexts.

6. Conclusion

Primary education in Dadaab refugee camps stands at the intersection of humanitarian response, development planning, and social transformation. The analysis in this chapter demonstrates that while significant progress has been made in expanding access to schooling, systemic challenges continue to undermine quality, equity, and sustainability. Issues of teacher welfare, funding instability, curriculum adaptation, and governance fragmentation remain persistent obstacles. These structural weaknesses highlight the limits of short-term, donor-driven approaches and the urgent need for sustainable, nationally anchored strategies.

At the same time, opportunities exist that, if scaled, can transform refugee education into a catalyst for resilience. The Refugee Act (2021) and national education policies create a framework for inclusion within Kenya's broader education system. Emerging practices—such as professional development programs for refugee teachers, gender-sensitive retention initiatives, and blended learning models—offer promising pathways for addressing entrenched inequalities. Stronger collaboration between the

government, humanitarian actors, and refugee communities themselves can further enhance ownership and long-term impact.

Framed through Human Capital Theory, refugee education in Dadaab should be seen as an investment in human potential that enhances employability, reduces aid dependency, and fosters socio-economic contribution in both host and home contexts. From the perspective of the Capabilities Approach, education expands freedoms, dignity, and agency, enabling refugee children to become active participants in shaping their futures and contributing to community development.

Moving forward, policy attention must prioritize sustainable financing, fair teacher recruitment, inclusive curricula, and harmonized governance structures. Investment in these areas not only addresses immediate humanitarian needs but also builds foundations for stability, peace, and development. Ultimately, primary education in Dadaab should not be treated merely as a stopgap measure for displaced populations but as a strategic platform for nurturing resilience, social cohesion, and long-term transformation in refugee and host communities alike.

Ethical Approval Statement

This study did not involve human or animal participants. It is based on secondary data, policy review, and conceptual analysis.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest.

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