

# Localizing Climate Adaptation Planning in Kenya's Refugee-Hosting Counties

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## About Refugees International

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.

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# Executive Summary

Kenya sits at the nexus of two of the most profound challenges of our time: climate change and displacement. The east African country faces some of the [most significant impacts of climate change](#) while hosting [nearly 800,000 refugees and asylum seekers](#). This creates a significant opportunity for Kenya to play a leading role in the global effort to ensure refugees and other displaced communities are able to prepare for and respond to climate change.

As Kenya implements its Refugees Act—legislation that will integrate refugees across various forms of government services and the economy—it should also act as a leader in refugee inclusion in climate adaptation. Kenya has already missed an opportunity to consult with refugees and displaced people in its National Adaptation Plan (NAP), a national level plan that, with support from the UN, is developed to adapt to and prepare for climate change. But it is not too late to right that wrong as the plan is implemented at the local level.

Kenya is not alone in this. Despite UN Climate Change (UNFCCC) provisions to consult with vulnerable groups, refugees—one of the most vulnerable groups—have been categorically [excluded](#) from adaptation planning and actions in most countries to date. Failure to include refugees in national adaptation planning and local-level implementation increases their vulnerability to disasters due to lack of early warning systems and preparedness, leads to repeat displacement and psychosocial trauma, worsens water-borne diseases and negative health outcomes due to extreme heat, and deepens poverty and reduces self-reliance within refugee communities as they do not receive support to adapt their livelihoods to climate change. At the same time, refugee communities often live in areas that are [highly exposed](#) to the effects of climate change and are often made more vulnerable to these impacts by various policies that limit their adaptive capacity.

Massive floods from April to June 2024 put this dynamic into sharp relief: more than 20,000 refugees in Kenya were displaced—again—in flooding that devastated parts of the Dadaab refugee complex, one of the largest in the world, leaving refugees in the camp with a compounded crisis.

While these impacts present enormous challenges for refugees, host communities, and the national government alike, they also provide an opportunity for Kenya to lead. With support from the international community, Kenya and governments that host large numbers of refugees must take steps to address these barriers to safe and effective climate adaptation for refugee communities.

As the impacts of climate change are experienced differently from place to place and community to community, local plans at the municipal, county, and state or province level must be developed, or these national plans must be localized to be implemented at the appropriate level for each proposed action.

Refugees in Kenya could be a key piece in this puzzle: they and their host communities are already doing significant work at the community level to adapt to climate change and support themselves. Yet, they often lack the resources, including funding and technical support, to be fully effective in these efforts and they are rarely well-coordinated with national-level plans and programming.

From April to June 2024, Refugees International met with refugee communities, Kenyan civil society leaders, UN agencies, contributing country governments, and Kenyan government officials to understand how Kenya is including refugees in their climate change adaptation efforts and where they are falling short. Drawing on these interviews, this report examines the effects of the climate emergency on refugee communities in Kenya and how Kenya's national and local governments, donors, and humanitarian agencies can support refugee-led adaptation to climate change.

# Recommendations

## To the Government of Kenya:

- The Ministry of Environment, Climate Change & Forestry's Climate Change Directorate should include refugees and refugee-hosting communities in all national disaster early warning systems and preparedness activities. It should provide technical assistance on climate change actions and responses to refugee communities, such as education on climate-adaptive agriculture and support to make shelters more resilient.
- The Ministry of Environment, Climate Change & Forestry's Climate Change Directorate should include refugees in consultations for the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of Kenya's NAP, in accordance with Article 69(d) of the Constitution of Kenya that the government shall encourage public participation in the management, protection, and conservation of the environment.
- The Ministry of East African Community, Arid and Semi-Arid Lands, and Regional Development's National Drought Management Authority should ensure that the refugee-hosting areas are included in all of its drought management and disaster risk reduction actions. It should also support counties in capacity-building, data collection, and developing mechanisms to link national and county-level climate change data and information to planning processes, ensuring inclusion of refugees in this work.
- The implementation of the Shirika Plan and attendant Refugees Act policies should be done in a climate-sensitive and informed way, ensuring that development actions are also adaptive to the impacts of climate change on refugees.

## To the Garissa and Turkana County Governors and Municipal Boards:

- Include refugees in the county consultation processes for the development and implementation of [County Integrated Development Plans](#), ensuring that Kakuma's and Garissa's integrated socio-economic development plans are coordinated with Turkana's and Garissa's, respectively, County Integrated Development Plans.
- Ensure that refugee communities are included in natural disaster early warning systems.

- Work with the national government and international partners to build capacity, collect data, and develop mechanisms to link national and county-level climate change data and information to development and climate adaptation planning processes.
- Partner with UNDP, UNEP, and [UN-HABITAT](#) to incorporate adaptation across [urban planning](#) and sustainable housing improvement efforts.

## To the donors and UN agencies supporting NAP development:

- Require inclusion of refugee communities in any climate programming that is funded or supported through technical assistance.
- Increase funding and technical support for the appropriate government ministries to include refugees within their vulnerability assessments and NAP processes.
- Provide capacity-building trainings and funding to strengthen and expand the existing work of refugee-led organizations.
- Ensure that new arrivals to settlements and urban areas are supported in accessing safe, climate-resilient housing, livelihood opportunities, and relevant information to prepare for local hazards.

# Methodology

Refugees International conducted a series of field interviews in Kenya in April 2024 as well as follow-up conversations conducted virtually from April through October 2024, and desk reviews of policy documents and other reports. We interviewed individuals from refugee-led organizations, the World Bank, UN agencies, the Kenyan government, humanitarian organizations, and other experts in Nairobi, Kakuma, and Dadaab.

# Climate Adaptation, NAPs, Inclusion, and Localization

To understand the importance of refugee inclusion in climate adaptation efforts, they must be viewed in the context of global climate change adaptation frameworks. This section explains what is meant by climate adaptation, National Adaptation Plans, and efforts for greater inclusion and participation by groups in vulnerable situations in these planning processes.

## What is Climate Adaptation?

Climate adaptation is how communities respond to the effects of climate change.<sup>1</sup> These efforts can be led by governments, communities themselves, or often a combination of the two. Adaptation planning often takes place across levels of government, but as the effects of climate change can be highly localized—meaning changes in temperature or rainfall or other climatic factors are experienced differently from household to household or town to town—the implementation of adaptation actions must take place at the local level as well.

Adaptation can reduce exposure to climate change, minimize vulnerability to it, or both. Exposure to climate change and vulnerability to it are two different things. While exposure indicates the risks and hazards faced by a community, vulnerability is affected by adaptive capacity, which can be constrained or supported by various social, environmental, economic, and political factors that are unrelated to climate change or the environment.

In ideal circumstances, adaptation planning thus increases the adaptive capacity of communities and ensures they have the appropriate resources to fulfill the plans developed. These can be efforts that build or reinforce physical infrastructure, such as water diversion mechanisms, strengthening homes, and placing sandbags in the case of flooding, or social infrastructure, such as early warning systems and education or training programs for disaster response or diversifying livelihoods. On a larger scale, this could mean movement out of harm's way temporarily or permanently, through shelters or planned relocation programs.

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<sup>1</sup> This is referring to planned adaptation in human systems. Adaptation can also occur autonomously and spontaneously across natural ecosystems. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines adaptation as “the process of adjustment to actual or expected climate and its effects in order to moderate harm or take advantage of beneficial opportunities.” The adaptive capacity of a community refers to its “ability to demand, access and use climate information (as well as other types of information) to identify, assess and choose adaptation options; to innovate in response to evolving challenges and opportunities; and to make forward-looking and flexible decisions that enable them to adapt to a changing climate.”

Diversifying livelihoods and mobility as adaptive measures can be particularly difficult for refugees in countries with strict encampment policies or other restrictions on freedom of movement and the right to work. Considering how these restrictions limit refugees' adaptive capacity and how to overcome them are important steps for governments to take to support greater inclusion of refugees and host communities in adaptation planning and ultimately improved resilience for all communities.

## What are National Adaptation Plans?

At the national level, countries outline how they will respond to the impacts of climate change through [National Adaptation Plans \(NAPs\)](#), informed by the particular contexts—environmental, institutional, and social—in each country. In addition to being country-driven, their development should be gender-sensitive, participatory, and fully transparent, as agreed in [COP decision 5/CP.17](#).<sup>2</sup> The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) secretariat supports 'developing' (non-Annex I)<sup>3</sup> countries to develop and implement these plans, particularly through the [Least Developed Countries Expert Group \(LEG\)](#). Contributing countries provide financial and technical assistance bilaterally as well.

## Inclusion in NAPs and Localization

Participation by refugees and other vulnerable groups in the NAP process has been enshrined in UNFCCC decisions and is key to ensure the consideration of all relevant issues, community resources, and responses. In [Decision 5/CP.17](#), Parties agreed that adaptation action should consider “vulnerable groups, communities and ecosystems.” Refugees are included among these vulnerable groups and communities, given the many restrictions that limit their adaptive capacity. To ensure the protection and assistance of refugee communities, in light of the severity of the impacts of climate change for many of them, their inclusion in climate adaptation programming is critical.

In most [NAPs submitted](#) to date, [this consultation has not occurred](#). This exclusion means that national government responses to climate change will likely not be “[appropriate, accessible,](#)” nor “[inclusive.](#)” If refugees are not consulted, strategies may not meet the specific concerns or requirements of refugee communities; they may not be culturally or contextually appropriate; and they may be inefficient, overlooking or replicating already existing efforts.

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<sup>2</sup> Full details on the NAP process and its history, objectives, guiding principles, and guidelines can be found on the UNFCCC's NAP Central, and additional information about their creation can be found in “It's Time for Us to be Included”: An Assessment of Refugee and Displaced People's Participation in National Adaptation Planning's” Appendix B.

<sup>3</sup> Per the UNFCCC, “Non-Annex I parties... are mostly developing countries that are considered especially vulnerable to the effects of climate change. These countries include those with low-lying coastal areas, arid and semi-arid regions, and those prone to drought and desertification. They also include countries with fragile mountainous ecosystems and economies that are dependent on fossil fuel production, use, and exportation.”

At worst, NAPs often ignore the existence of refugee populations entirely. Many governments presume that refugee hosting will be a temporary state of being and thus neglect long-term planning for these communities as well as host populations. Yet, this ignores the reality of protracted refugee situations, with average displacement for refugees reaching [twenty years](#) now. As the effects of climate change worsen, governments must be clear-eyed about the presence of refugee communities and how climate change will affect them. This necessitates including them in ongoing climate adaptation planning efforts at the national and local levels.

While NAPs are developed at the national level, climate impacts are felt—and thus must be adapted to—locally. [Community-based adaptation](#) has long-existed in communities using local knowledge to support adaptation initiatives rooted in local needs, expertise, and planning processes. Examples of [successful efforts](#) include participatory risk and vulnerability assessments, communal decision-making around shared resources, and women-led collectives for livelihoods diversification.

Finally, refugees and IDPs are already leading efforts to respond to climate change in their own communities. To ensure effective and efficient coordination of these efforts and understand the local context into which national plans will be implemented, NAP processes must consult with these groups during the planning phase and work with them to implement relevant actions in these communities.

National governments must also consult and collaborate with actors from the development and humanitarian sector, such as the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), NGOs, and multilateral development banks, to ensure coherence across disaster preparedness and response, protection, and long-term economic and livelihoods planning as all are affected by the impacts of climate change. This will reduce redundancy and improve efficient use of resources by mainstreaming support for displaced populations with climate adaptation plans. It will also more effectively serve both displaced and host communities by ensuring that the needs and concerns of all groups are heard and that plans are responsive to them.

# The Landscape of Climate Change and National Adaptation Planning in Kenya

Globally, Kenya ranks high in vulnerability to climate change and low in climate readiness, making it an important actor for the implementation of climate adaptation initiatives. Kenya's National Adaptation Plan also highlights the need for inclusion of displaced communities, a critical feature as the country is home to hundreds of thousands of refugees and internally displaced people.

The principal documents relevant to climate adaptation in Kenya today are the country's [National Adaptation Plan](#), in effect from 2015–2030; third National Climate Change Action Plan (NCCAP), covering the period from 2023–2027; and the Climate Change Act of 2016 and Amendment from 2023. Funding for and implementation of these activities remains to be fully realized. This report focuses on the NAP, as that intersects with international agreements from the UNFCCC and its lessons may be more applicable to other countries compared to other domestic plans and legislation.

## Kenya's National Adaptation Plan

Kenya's NAP identifies drought, flooding, and sea-level rise as the country's primary climatic hazards. The NAP also notes the destruction of infrastructure, such as dams, roads, homes, and pipes, by flooding and storms and an attendant increase in waterborne or sanitation-related diseases, including typhoid, cholera, and malaria.

To address these issues, the NAP recommends a number of actions, including enhancing participatory scenario planning with communities, mainstreaming disaster risk reduction (DRR) planning, and community-based approaches to reduce natural resource-based conflicts. To conserve and repair ecosystems, the NAP proposes strengthening tree-planting and conservation initiatives, promoting the use of efficient irrigation systems, and rehabilitating water catchment areas.

The NAP states that it was developed through a “cooperative and consultative process that included stakeholders from the Government, the private sector, and the civil society; with the support of international development agencies.” However, it does not mention engagement with any refugee communities in its development, and the refugee leaders we interviewed stated that they were not aware of any meaningful consultations with refugee communities during the planning process.

In spite of this exclusion of refugees from the planning process, Kenya's NAP mentions the need to strengthen the adaptive capacity of vulnerable groups, including displaced people. To accomplish this, the NAP recommends strengthening and expanding social protection and insurance mechanisms against climate hazards, establishing affordable

and accessible credit lines, and promoting livelihood diversification and climate-resilient sustainable livelihoods.

As outlined in the previous section, refugees, asylum seekers, and other displaced populations have often been particularly vulnerable due to legal and policy decisions as well as their circumstances and geographic exposure to climate change. Thus, they must be included as part of the objective to enhance resilience of vulnerable populations to climate shocks.

Refugees and host communities must be able to continue to earn livelihoods in the wake of climate change. Kenya's NAP highlights several relevant activities—such as the promotion of climate-smart agriculture, changes in land use to adapt the livestock sector to climate change, and capacity-building for livestock insurance schemes, management, and breeding—to support the adaptation of the two primary livelihoods strategies, agricultural and livestock, to climate change. To ensure the well-being of refugees and host communities, these activities must extend to these communities.

Kenya's NAP has already created the policy pathways needed to provide appropriate resources to refugee-hosting counties for adaptation. First, it sets a goal to “mainstream climate adaptation in national and county (sub-national) development planning.” Second, it highlights the objective to enhance “resilience of vulnerable populations to climate shocks through adaptation and disaster risk reduction strategies.”

Kenya already has a number of programs to devolve planning to the county level, but there is limited coordination between these programs, the National Adaptation Plan, and refugee communities. County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), the [five-year plans](#) developed by each of Kenya's counties outlining their development priorities and actions, should start by mainstreaming climate adaptation actions. As Kenya's new Refugee Act and associated policies evolve, these CIDPs are expanding to include refugee communities.

Both Turkana and Garissa, Kenya's primary refugee-hosting counties, have worked with the UN Refugee Agency to establish [integrated settlement programs](#) to expand local integration of refugees with host communities. These are intended to promote self-reliance of refugees through expanded economic rights and opportunities and to provide national services, such as healthcare and education, across both groups. The plans, now in their second iteration, which will last from 2023 to 2027, are the [Kalobeyi Integrated Socio-economic Development Programme \(KISED\)](#) for refugees in the Kalobeyi Settlement in Turkana County and the [Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan \(GISED\)](#) for refugees living in Dadaab refugee camps in Garissa County.

While these plans should complement and facilitate the achievement of the same goals as the CIDPs and NAP, they do not always do so in practice as they have separate planning processes and implementation. Kenya's NAP assigns responsibility to

each county's sectoral agencies for mainstreaming climate change activities at the county level. This would entail, for example, the County Departments of Agriculture, Livestock, and Pastoral Economy and of Water, Environment, Energy & Natural Resources implementation of actions such as community-based approaches to reduce natural resource-based conflicts and tree planting across refugee and host communities in these counties. But better coordination is needed to ensure refugee inclusion in county sectoral agencies' work, as well as from the national level to the county level to ensure national policy is being implemented in the intended fashion at the local level.

# The Refugees Act of 2021 and Shirika Plan

Two recent shifts to Kenya's refugee regime may move the country from an encampment model to a settlement model through greater socio-economic integration of refugees within host communities: the [Refugees Act of 2021](#) and the UNHCR-supported [Shirika Plan](#). If fully implemented, the Refugees Act would grant refugees in Kenya the right to work and to own property, as well as freedom of movement (in a "designated area"). Refugees would be able to access national education and healthcare systems, and be included in county governments' development plans. The Shirika Plan builds on this legislation with support from the UNHCR to transform the current camps in Garissa and Turkana counties into integrated settlements, such that refugees can become self-reliant rather than receiving humanitarian assistance.

However, it remains to be seen if the political will exists to successfully implement these efforts, and detailed guidance as to [how this implementation will be achieved](#) is not yet available. The final text of the Shirika Plan has yet to be published, nor have the policies required to achieve the Refugees Act's aims. The "designated area" in which refugees will have freedom of movement has not been defined, nor have questions on land tenure been resolved.

The final phase of the Shirika Plan is intended to be "resilience," presumably in which communities are resilient enough to support themselves. However, resilience is not something that can be achieved at the level of an individual or a community. As climate change worsens, numerous systems must be supported to achieve any semblance of resilience, from housing and road infrastructure, to agricultural practices, to healthcare services. In order to do so, county governments must consider how climate change will affect each area of people's lives and ensure that adaptation and mitigation plans are mainstreamed across all areas of government service delivery. For the Shirika Plan to be effective in achieving its aim of resilience, in addition to [greater consultation with affected communities and humanitarian agencies and incorporation into refugee policy](#), it must include provisions for how climate change will affect the lives and livelihoods of refugees that it hopes to support.

# Climate Change in Refugee Communities in Kenya and Host Counties' Adaptation Plans

To understand how refugees and host communities are experiencing the climate crisis and what adaptation efforts are already underway, it is necessary to look at the impacts of climate change and policy responses at the local level. This section provides an overview of the effects of climate change in Kenya's two primary refugee-hosting counties, Garissa and Turkana, as well as Nairobi County, which is home to a number of urban refugees. It also discusses efforts being led by refugee communities in Garissa's Dadaab Refugee Camp and the county-level adaptation planning being conducted by Turkana County, where Kakuma Refugee Camp and the Kalobeyei Settlement are located.



A member of Development and Empowerment of Society, a refugee-led organization in Kakuma Refugee Camp, prepares tree seedlings for planting as part of their climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. Photo credit: Tangi Jerome, Project Manager, Development and Empowerment of Society.

# Garissa County

Garissa County is host to the Dadaab refugee complex, which has long been one of the largest refugee settlements in the world. Dadaab includes three separate camps—Dagahaley, Hagadera, and Ifo—and is home to nearly 400,000 refugees and asylum seekers as of [June 2024](#). Most, over 97 percent, of these individuals have come from Somalia, which not only shares a border with the county but also many cultural, economic, and geographic similarities, including impacts of climate change.

Garissa County is facing similar effects to much of the region, including increasing temperatures and changing rainfall patterns, contributing to both drought and extreme floods. With El Niño causing warmer oceans and greater rainfall in 2024, Garissa County has faced severe flooding. In April and May [more than 20,000 refugees](#) were displaced yet again from their homes and shelters across Dadaab.

Climate change is having a massive impact on livelihoods for Garissa's communities. Many Kenyan residents of Garissa County are pastoralists or agro-pastoralists, earning a living from raising livestock or raising livestock and farming. This reliance on the land for their livelihoods [heightens](#) their sensitivity to climate-related shocks and stresses. Recent climate-worsened disasters have even led some to turn to the humanitarian support offered to refugees and asylum seekers in Dadaab when facing loss of livelihoods, such as crop failure and death of livestock, in order to survive. Host communities' need for humanitarian assistance intended for refugees highlights the severity of the consequences from recent droughts, extreme heat, and floods, and suggests limitations to the adaptation support currently available to many Kenyan communities. This also underscores the need for support to be available to both refugee and host communities to reduce intergroup tensions and perceived competition for humanitarian assistance and resources.

Pastoralists are less able to survive using traditional coping methods and practices and being forced to diversify their livelihoods in response to climatic stressors, such as drought and extreme heat. Consequently, many Kenyan households in Garissa are transitioning to agro-pastoralism to increase their resilience to these pressures, by farming as well as raising livestock. However, Dadaab's refugee communities are prevented from engaging in similar adaptive choices due to constraints on their freedom of movement—such as strict encampment policies and limited land allocations to refugee households—and limits on their economic opportunities, such as restrictions on land tenure, property rights, and access to the formal employment market. These prevent them from accessing a sufficient amount of land to support themselves through farming or to move freely to follow traditional livestock herding patterns.

Refugees living in Dadaab's camps described to Refugees International the challenges caused by the displacement from the flooding from April through July of 2024. One individual we spoke with told us that as they fled with their family, they were only able to take small items on their backs. They settled several kilometers away while waiting for the water to recede. They described destruction of homes and gardens, injuries and deaths of people caught up in the flooding, and resulting widespread cholera and other

water-borne diseases. For months, many people were forced to sleep outside in areas that were not flooded while others used schools as temporary shelters as their homes had been destroyed. Children were unable to attend school for months on end, leading to a loss of educational opportunities.

Vulnerability to climate change is not neatly nor solely influenced by environmental shifts but also shaped by myriad connected variables including social, economic, and political factors. In speaking with refugees living in Dadaab, many highlighted that various groups were affected differentially by the 2024 flooding. Newer arrivals, with less sturdy homes more susceptible to being damaged by storms and flood, were more likely to be displaced than earlier arrivals.

UNHCR [also noted](#) that flooding disrupted supply chains, causing a spike in the price of commodities and making it more difficult for many households to fulfill their basic needs. To help recover, UNHCR was able to provide plastic sheets, blankets, water jugs, food, and fuel, but refugees otherwise stated that they had to rebuild their homes themselves with no additional support. To rebuild homes, people were forced to cut down trees to use as construction materials, leading to further deforestation around the camp areas.

Finally, deforestation is a significant concern across the region, and many refugee-led organizations highlighted their efforts to reduce it by supporting communities in transitioning to alternate fuel sources and by planting trees.

## Refugee-Led Efforts for Climate Adaptation

Refugee communities are often leading the way in terms of climate adaptation for themselves, including disaster preparedness and response. For example, before the 2024 flooding in Kenya, many refugee-led organizations (RLOs) supported families to fill bags with soil to serve as flood barriers. County and national governments should support these informal efforts by funding RLO-led disaster preparedness efforts. They should also provide support for improving infrastructure in these areas to be more resilient to hazards and ensure that official early warning systems include refugee populations as well.

Other examples of refugee-led efforts include initiatives to plant trees, promote sustainable building methods, and mobilize youth. Many of the refugee-led organizations with whom we spoke also requested capacity-building and additional support to continue their efforts. In the wake of this year's flooding, [UNHCR has recommended](#) that both refugees and host communities be provided with training on disaster preparedness and water conservation practices, as well as support for livelihood diversification, such as agricultural training and microfinance.

## **Dadaab Chapter Refugee Voices: Ending Deforestation through Tree Planting and Sustainable Building Methods**

As an advocacy and direct service organization, Dadaab Chapter Refugee Voices focuses on raising awareness of the risks of climate change and how communities can adapt in their local context. One of the key issues they hope to address is deforestation in and around the Dadaab complex. As refugees are provided with minimal building materials to build their homes and often have limited access to cooking fuel, many turn to trees for both. This has led to significant deforestation in the area, which both harms climate mitigation efforts by reducing the intake of carbon dioxide by trees and leads to more dangerous conditions for local communities in terms of climate adaptation. Trees provide essential support in terms of shade from extreme heat and their roots prevent flooding, landslides, and support preservation of topsoil to maintain suitable farming conditions.

Dadaab Chapter Refugee Voices aims to plant 5 million trees and to transition the community to brickmaking for homes to reduce dependence on trees for construction materials and promote the use of other fuel sources. They need funding to purchase equipment to make the bricks, which would then also provide jobs for the community as well as a more sustainable building material, and also require support to build the capacity and knowledge of their communities around the need for climate adaptation.

Solutions can come from and be driven by refugee communities, with the right support. As Mohamed Jimale of Dadaab Chapter Refugee Voices shared:

“We need to be engaged; we need the national government, the county government, the international partners to engage us so we can raise our voices, what we face as refugees. We are the best people to tell the world what it means for climate displacement. The problems it puts on us, the measures that can be taken. We want people to listen to us so they can streamline their policies with the recommendations that we give, so that we can improve our lives.”

## **Community Aid Network, Dagahaley Refugee Camp: Mobilizing Youth and Improving Food Security**

The refugee-led Community Aid Network in Dadaab’s Dagahaley Refugee Camp has been focusing on similar issues, supporting tree planting and transitioning to renewable energy sources. They have also highlighted waste management and agricultural adaptation as key environmental concerns within the camp complex. The organization provides training and support to mobilize younger residents to support these interventions when possible.

Agriculture and small farming have been highlighted as key components of the [Shirika Plan](#), the UNHCR and Kenya’s plan to transition refugee camps to integrated settlements, promote socioeconomic inclusion of refugees, and bring support to host com-

munities. The Kenyan government, funders, and humanitarian aid agencies have highlighted that this will entail a transition away from provision of food aid and to greater self-reliance among refugee communities. To make this sustainable and safe for the refugee communities, agriculture must be a reliable livelihood option and sufficient to sustain the communities despite the effects of climate change.

Community Aid Network supports home garden and small-scale farming initiatives for families in partnership with Lutheran World Federation. These home gardens support diversity of food supply, which improves food security and nutrition by diversifying diets for camp residents receiving food supplies, often just one or two types of staple foods. Home gardens also improve soil quality and serve as small-scale climate mitigation efforts by expanding the diversity of crops and increasing plant ground cover in these arid and semi-arid areas.

The Kenyan government and international donors must support these local initiatives that are already being led by refugee organizations, as well as include refugee communities in active and meaningful decision-making. Facilitating access to full information about potential climatic effects and available resources for adaptation in an ongoing manner are critical to allowing communities and households to make informed decisions.

The challenges of climate change, from drought and extreme heat to flooding and food insecurity, facing refugees and host communities in Garissa County are complex and significant. They are exacerbated for refugees by additional restrictions on their access to labor market activities and land tenure and property rights. For example, refugees have smaller land plots, often just “kitchen gardens,” and are restricted from access to banking systems. Thus, they may not be able to obtain credit to invest in climate-adaptive agricultural inputs or these tools might not be worth the investment at smaller scales. Additionally, even for those who are financially able to do so, refugees may not feel secure in their land tenure due to the limits on property rights, and thus unwilling to invest in, such as more resilient seed varieties and irrigation methods that would improve the output from farming.

In spite of these challenges, refugees are leading efforts to respond already and can be supported in this work through additional funding, capacity-building, and incorporation into decision-making bodies to build their partnerships with host communities for the mutual benefit of all Garissa residents. Greater implementation of the Shirika Plan and Refugee Act would provide the wider policy and regulatory context for these refugee-led efforts to succeed.

# Turkana County

Turkana County is home to over 200,000 refugees in Kakuma camp and nearly 75,000 people in the Kalobeyi settlement as of [July 2024](#). The refugee communities in Turkana County come from a diversity of backgrounds, with over half coming from South Sudan and others from Somalia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Ethiopia, Sudan, and more.

Much like Garissa County, Turkana County is facing increasing temperatures and changing (and unpredictable) rainfall patterns, contributing to both drought and extreme floods. Similarly, many residents of Turkana County are pastoralists and agro-pastoralists. [Turkana County](#) has also long been disconnected from much of Kenya's infrastructure, marginalized, and faced high rates of poverty and malnutrition prior to the onset of the effects of climate change. With the impacts of climate change and additional population growth from hosting refugees, the county must be prepared to meet the challenges of adapting livelihoods and homes to the extremes of the climate crisis.

Refugees living in Kakuma highlighted to Refugees International that they are facing widespread malnutrition as rations have been reduced since March 2024 and that the flooding at the end of May 2024 brought widespread mosquito-borne diseases, particularly malaria, and exacerbated locust populations, which is leading to destruction of crops and further hunger and malnutrition. The hunger crisis is so severe that people reported increasing levels of theft and violence over food and even deaths by suicide due to lack of food. People we spoke with also noted that the heat in the camp, likely worsening due to climate change, forces many people to sleep outside, but that they fear violence when they do so.

The [County Government Of Turkana Sub-County Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan \(CCAP\), Turkana West Sub-County, 2023-2027](#) outlines numerous actions to do so. Turkana is unique among the counties reviewed here in that its plan explicitly mentions human mobility and participation by displaced communities. Specifically, the plan supports the Turkana County Government to:

- “Incorporate human mobility aspects into climate change and disaster risk reduction policies;”
- “Prevent climate induced displacement such as: prevention and mitigation of natural resource-based conflicts, livelihood support to climate affected communities and emergency response for migrants displaced by climate change;” and,
- “Facilitate the participation of migrants, displaced persons, and communities, especially the most vulnerable, in all climate actions.”

While refugees are not explicitly mentioned among these groups whose participation is highlighted, given the aforementioned restrictions that constrain their adaptive capacity, they are certainly among the groups of displaced people and communities that have been made most vulnerable and that must be included in all climate actions, as the plan stipulates.

Kalobeyei settlement has been the Kenyan government's first attempt to expand livelihood options for refugees in terms of access to agriculture and a move away from strict encampment, as part of the Shirika Plan. This makes the settlement's adaptation to climate change all the more important, as steps must be taken to ensure that crops are not destroyed by either drought or flooding. Without this adaptation, refugees' food security and survival would be in jeopardy, if they are no longer being provided with food aid and left to sustain themselves on agriculture alone. UN-HABITAT's [Kakuma Regeneration Strategy](#) outlines a comprehensive approach to the area's socio-economic development and resilience, including climate adaptation and mitigation strategies.

Beyond climate adaptation, land tenure and property rights issues provide significant challenges for integration and self-reliance of refugees and must be addressed simultaneously. For refugees to invest in climate-smart agricultural solutions, they must feel secure in their continued access to land; this security can only be provided through a change in county land tenure laws and [a suite of reforms](#) to the refugee policies governing their rights.

While the Kalobeyei settlement is a strong first step to supporting refugees' self-reliance, this must be accompanied by their inclusion in adaptation programming if their livelihoods activities are going to be successful and sustainable. Turkana County has also taken solid steps towards participation by displaced communities and ensuring planning for human mobility in response to climate change. To take this work forward, Turkana County must ensure that refugees are meaningfully included in the next iteration of the County Integrated Development Plan and should attempt to include refugees on Kakuma's municipal board.<sup>4</sup> This will support the continuation and expansion of refugee-led efforts to adapt and respond to climate change through capacity-building, financing, and decision-making.

Donors can support this effort by requiring equal participation by refugee and host communities in funded programs. For example, the World Bank's IDA Window for Host Communities and Refugees (WHR) Urban Development Grants include a [stipulation](#) requiring public consultations between municipal boards and residents at least once per quarter, with representatives from refugee communities forming 50% of the participating stakeholders.

## Nairobi County

Globally, refugees are [increasingly living in urban areas](#), often informally, without access to official humanitarian assistance, and frequently subject to [abuse and harassment](#). Kenya is no exception to this trend. While the informality of many urban refugees makes data gathering difficult, [UNHCR reports](#) over 104,000 registered to urban

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<sup>4</sup> Municipal boards are semi-autonomous units within county-level Lands, Physical Planning & Urban Development departments, responsible for provision of basic services and participating in land management. The elevation of refugee-hosting areas to municipalities provides the opportunity to promote inclusive development of the previously unregistered community land but will require institutional development and technical assistance. However, this would require amendment of Kenya's Urban Areas and Cities Act, which restricts board membership to Kenyan citizens at present.

areas, primarily Nairobi. Many of the refugees living in Nairobi reside in these informal settlements, facing increased vulnerability due to these conditions as well as difficulty accessing formal employment and a lack of official support available to them because of their informal status. This context requires different policy and programmatic interventions than more rural regions.

Additionally, Nairobi and its residents often face different climate impacts and environmental challenges than the more rural regions of Garissa and Turkana County. Namely, Nairobi is facing land subsidence (sinking) due to overuse of groundwater from the Nairobi Aquifer. The city is also experiencing extreme weather, witnessing particularly [severe flooding](#) during the prolonged heavy rainfall across the region in April and May 2024. Rapid urbanization, challenges in city planning and land use, and lack of sufficient infrastructure in informal settlements reduce resilience to flooding for those living in Nairobi County.

Many of Nairobi's current climate adaptation efforts address water management—such as prohibiting water harvesting to reduce the subsidence mentioned above and requiring new construction to be flood-proofed—and waste management and recycling. These efforts are outlined by the [National Climate Change Action Plan 2018-2022](#) released by Kenya's Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Climate Change Directorates.

Kenya's NAP also features recommendations on housing, population, and urbanization that should be fulfilled across all urban areas for all residents, including IDPs and refugees. Recommended actions include integrating adaptation into relevant building and urban planning policies and regulations and enhancing the adaptive capacity of the urban poor by increasing the number of affordable housing and related infrastructure. Kenya's [affordable housing program](#) should prioritize particularly vulnerable groups in informal urban settlements, including refugees, given their more limited adaptive capacity due to employment restrictions and smaller social networks.

This is particularly relevant for the many refugees and IDPs who move into cities, especially Nairobi, as they often move into areas that are more vulnerable to hazards such as flooding. Consequently, they face increased exposure to climate hazards and may experience repeat displacement as their new homes become temporarily or permanently uninhabitable. This type of instability and exposure to disasters can lead to dangerous living conditions, disrupt social cohesion, and limit access to basic services like healthcare and education.

Restrictions on formal property rights and employment for refugees reduce their ability to access safe housing and to fund adaptation efforts, such as improving homes to make them more stable during storms and flooding. Though the Refugees Act of 2021 permits some access to the formal labor market, tremendous legal, policy, and bureaucratic barriers remain. Moreover, without secure land and property rights, many refugees struggle to earn enough for basic necessities and safe homes to live in, much less additional funds to diversify their livelihoods, strengthen their homes against storms, or recover after disasters.

While this is a barrier to all refugees, the higher cost of living in urban areas makes this particularly an issue for refugees living in Nairobi. Cities present more diverse livelihood options as well, which would be available to refugees if they were able to access bank accounts, property ownership, and other forms of formal employment. Thus, while inclusion in all adaptation programs is critical, urban refugees would also be better equipped to respond to climate change following revision to restrictive policies, such as limitations on land and property rights, that better support their integration.

Finally, both internally displaced Kenyans who have moved to Nairobi following the impacts of climate change on their home regions and refugees often find themselves living in informal settlements with weak infrastructure that is not able to withstand the effects of climate change, such as extreme flooding. Government funding to implement [improvements to urban infrastructure](#) in informal settlements, such as better water and waste management, as well as affordable and safe housing options for all residents would support these communities in surviving the future storms that climate change will undoubtedly bring.

# Conclusion

Kenya's National Adaptation Plan and related plans and legislation offer a beginning for strong climate action across the country. This action must not exclude the refugee communities that have lived in Kenya for decades and who are and can continue to be contributing members of Kenyan communities if appropriate policies ensure their full integration. This integration must come alongside inclusion in climate adaptation planning and funding, particularly around self-reliance and the issues of climate adaptation for agricultural and pastoralist livelihoods as well as safety during major flooding and other climate-worsened storms. This includes funding from partner countries, the UNFCCC, and the World Bank's Window for Host Communities and Refugees. Many refugee-led organizations already are working in these areas and could be expanded with additional funding and capacity-building. Support for these programs can come from international institutions including the UNFCCC and multilateral development banks, bilaterally from donor countries, the Kenyan government, and county governments.

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