SUMMARY

SHIRIKA PLAN FOR REFUGEES AND HOST COMMUNITIES – 2025

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Forced Migration & Displacement Research Hub

Introduction

The Shirika Plan for Refugees and Host Communities is an initiative by Kenya's Ministry of Interior and National Administration in response to a drastic increase in the number of refugees hosted in Nairobi. This plan aims to socially and economically integrate refugees in their host communities to reduce overreliance on humanitarian aid and already strained government resources.

The Government of Kenya worked closely with development partners and other stakeholders through a the whole of society, whole-of-government and whole-of-donor-partner approach. This effort seeks to essentially remodel Kenya's Refugee response initiative, creating an ecosystem of self-reliance among refugees through the enforcement of six thematic pillars: system building, integrated services, human capital and skill development, climate action and natural resources management, suitable economic development, durable solutions, and complementary pathways.

Objectives

Facilitate transition to government-led, development-oriented and integrated services

Strengthen the capacity of government institutions to serve refugees and host communities

Enhance resource mobilisation to support integration in the spirit of burden sharing

Promote socio-economic integration to allow self-reliance

Foundational Principles

Transition from Humanitarian Aid to Development-Oriented Solutions

The Shirika Plan articulates a strategic policy shift by the Government of Kenya and its partners, moving from short-term humanitarian assistance towards long-term, development-oriented interventions. Its primary objective is to promote sustainable livelihoods and self-reliance among refugees and host communities alike.

Anchored in the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees (2018), the Plan reinforces commitments to durable solutions, particularly local integration, and support to host countries. It further operationalises the Compact's emphasis on enhancing refugee resilience through access to education, employment, and inclusion in national systems and services (UNHCR, 2018).

The Shirika Plan is fully aligned with Kenya's Vision 2030, the national development agenda that itself emphasises inclusive growth and social equity. The Plan promotes the inclusion of marginalised populations as active participants in national progress, by embedding refugees within broader development frameworks.

UNHCR's 2023 policy direction further supports the integration of refugees into national development planning, and Kenya's adoption and implementation of the Shirika Plan exemplify this approach. As countries worldwide pursue coordinated strategies to address displacement through sustainable solutions, the Shirika Plan positions Kenya as a regional leader in promoting integrated and durable approaches to forced displacement.

Integration and Self-Reliance

The Shirika Plan is a pro-social framework designed to promote the socio-economic inclusion of refugees by integrating them into local communities and public service systems, rather than isolating them in camps or segregated settlements. It is grounded in the principle that creating a self-reliant populace of refugees contributes to a gradual reduction in prolonged dependence on humanitarian aid, enhances individual dignity, and enables refugees to participate meaningfully in local economies.

Empirical evidence from the Refugee Self-Reliance Index (RSRI) (2021) supports this approach, demonstrating that when refugees are granted legal recognition and economic rights, their outcomes in income generation, health, and education markedly improve – resulting in a diminished reliance on external assistance.

The Shirika Plan draws significantly from the Kalobeyei settlement model in Turkana County, which operationalised integrated service delivery and cohabitation between refugee and host populations. In Kalobeyei, refugees and host communities share infrastructure such as schools and health centres and jointly engage in livelihood programmes, providing a tangible demonstration of the benefits of inclusive and cooperative development models.

Further reinforcing this approach, the World Bank's Horn of Africa Initiative (2021) affirms that targeted investments in refugee-hosting areas yield dual dividends – supporting displaced populations while simultaneously contributing to local development. Building on this foundation, the Shirika Plan advocates for the strategic redirection of external resources to create joint economic opportunities that serve both refugees and host communities.

Burden Sharing and Partnerships

The Shirika Plan is founded on the recognition that no single actor can independently deliver sustainable and durable solutions to forced displacement. Instead, it adopts a multi-stakeholder, multi-level approach that engages national and county governments, development partners, humanitarian agencies, the private sector, and refugees themselves in a coordinated effort to advance refugee inclusion and resilience (UNHCR, 2017).

This approach reflects the principles of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), which advocates for a whole-of-society model that is inclusive, participatory, and grounded in shared responsibility. Building upon the CRRF, the Shirika Plan integrates multiple sectors – including health, education, enterprise development, and infrastructure – into a cohesive framework aimed at strengthening refugee-hosting areas (UNHCR, 2017).

Kenya's devolved governance structure further enhances the Plan's effectiveness by empowering county governments to play a central role in the coordination and implementation of refugee-related interventions. Counties such as Turkana, Garissa, and Wajir are at the forefront of the Shirika Plan, assuming leadership responsibilities and shaping locally appropriate responses (Republic of Kenya, 2022).

In line with contemporary development paradigms, the Shirika Plan also aligns with private-sector driven strategies that emphasise investment in displacement-affected regions. The World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC), through initiatives such as the Kakuma Kalobeyei Challenge Fund, has shown the value of market-based solutions

in cultivating inclusive economic development in refugee-hosting contexts (IFC, 2018).

Critically, the Plan underscores the importance of refugee agency and accountability by actively involving refugee communities in the design, planning, and implementation of interventions. This participatory ethos ensures that solutions are not only contextually relevant but also institute a sense of ownership, thereby enhancing the long-term sustainability and impact of the initiatives (UNHCR, 2023).

Legal and Policy Alignment

The successful implementation of the Shirika Plan is underpinned by a robust legal and policy framework that affirms the socio-economic rights of refugees and facilitates their inclusion in national development processes. Ongoing efforts aim to ensure that the Plan is supported by progressive legal instruments that enable the full participation of refugees in social, economic, and civic life.

A key milestone in this regard has been the enactment of the Refugees Act, 2021, which was a significant legislative advancement. This law recognises refugees' rights to work, operate businesses, access public education, and own property – thereby affirming their entitlement to engage meaningfully in the Kenyan economy and society. Crucially, the Act replaces the camp-centric framework established under the Refugee Act, 2006, and establishes a legal foundation for out-of-camp, area-based solutions that align with the objectives of the Shirika Plan.

Further support is provided through the National Action Plan on Durable Solutions, which serves as the strategic and legal companion to the Shirika Plan. It articulates Kenya's formal commitment to pursuing durable solutions for refugees and displaced populations and sets out the institutional mechanisms necessary to realise these goals (Republic of Kenya, 2022).

Kenya's obligations under international refugee law – stemming from its ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1969 OAU Convention – reinforce this national legal framework. These instruments mandate the protection of refugees and also encourage states to facilitate their local integration where feasible. The Shirika Plan thus builds on Kenya's domestic and international commitments to establish a comprehensive, rights-based approach to refugee inclusion and sustainable development.

Strengths

Promotion of Self-Reliance and Economic Empowerment

The Plan encourages refugees to become economically self-reliant by enabling access to formal employment, entrepreneurship, and integration into local economies (ReliefWeb, 2025). It is modeled on the successful Kalobeyei Integrated Social and Economic Development Programme (KISEDP), which demonstrated that refugee inclusion can strengthen both refugee and host economies (Refugees International, 2023).

Supportive Legal Framework for Integration

The Refugee Act of 2021 legally facilitates refugee integration by granting key rights – such as freedom of movement, employment, and access to national services – which underpin the implementation of the Shirika Plan (ReliefWeb, 2025; ReliefWeb, 2024).

Infrastructure Development Benefiting Host Communities

Under the Plan, investments in roads, water systems, healthcare, and education are designed to serve not only refugees but also host communities, furthering mutual development (UNHCR, 2024; ReliefWeb, 2025). This aligns with UNHCR strategies to enhance inclusive service delivery (UNHCR, 2023).

Alignment with International Frameworks

The Shirika Plan is closely aligned with the Global Compact on Refugees and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, demonstrating Kenya's commitment to global refugee governance and attracting international support (Segadlo et al., 2024; UNHCR–Government of Kenya press release, 2023).

Strong Public and International Support

Kenya's refugee model has garnered praise as a regional exemplar, receiving backing from the World Bank through development loans contingent on Plan implementation (The Elephant, 2024). It is viewed as a sustainable, development-oriented paradigm that capitalizes on refugee contributions (ReliefWeb, 2025; The Elephant, 2024). This point is not to be mistaken with whether public participation was adequately conducted.

Weaknesses

Limited Participation and Insufficient Transparency

Stakeholders have underscored a deficiency in genuine participation from refugees and host communities. Despite a series of over 75 engagement forums, many participants report feeling excluded from decision-making processes, asserting that oversight mechanisms and public awareness remain inadequate (Kinyanjui, 2025; Refugees International, 2025). The absence of clear implementation guidelines exacerbates concerns regarding the plan's legitimacy and long-term viability (Refugees International, 2025).

Ambiguity in Legal and Institutional Frameworks

The Shirika Plan is not yet rooted in robust legal or institutional underpinnings. The delayed release of its blueprint and regulatory guidance raises questions about its enforceability and coherence (Refugees International, 2025; African Scholars, 2024). Moreover, the Department of Refugee Services (DRS) lacks the necessary autonomy and funding, rendering it reliant on donor agencies like UNHCR. This structural fragility may compromise coordinated implementation by national and county actors (Refugees International, 2024).

Uncertain Legal Status and Protection Rights

Despite the 2021 Refugee Act granting refugees freedom of movement, work rights, and property ownership, details concerning “designated areas,” land tenure arrangements, documentation processes, and integration criteria remain undefined (Segadlo et al., 2024; Refugees International, 2025). These unresolved legal ambiguities create “uncertainty for refugees regarding their daily lives, legal status, and entitlements” (Segadlo et al., 2024).

Environmental and Resource Concerns

Converting refugee camps into urbanized settlements is likely to increase pressure on fragile local ecosystems. Observers warn that uncoordinated infrastructure expansion could lead to land degradation and overuse of vital resources such as water (Kinyanjui, 2025).

Coordination Challenges Across Government Systems

The co-management of refugee affairs presents significant coordination dilemmas. While refugee status is determined at the national level, essential services such as healthcare and education are decentralized. This jurisdictional complexity leads to coordination gaps and uneven service delivery (Refugees International, 2024, 2025). Additionally, some local leaders report inadequate engagement in the consultation process, potentially undermining community trust and support (Kinyanjui, 2025; Segadlo et al., 2024).

Implications

A document such as the Shirika Plan is bound to have far reaching implications. The first of these is the policy coherence and strategic ambition that it represents. Launched in March 2025 as a critical policy roadmap, the Shirika Plan embeds refugee inclusion within Kenya's national development vision and the 2021 Refugees Act while explicitly mirroring global frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees. Its three sequential phases – Transition, Stabilisation and Resilience – seek to replace short-term humanitarian aid with long-term, government-led service delivery and economic opportunity, thereby positioning Kenya as a regional test-bed for "development-oriented protection.

Yet the very legal architecture that gives the Plan its normative heft remains porous. Key implementing regulations on work-permit issuance, land tenure in "designated areas," and data-sharing across ministries are still in draft form. This ambiguity heightens transaction costs for private investors and risks relegating refugees to informality even while the law nominally grants full work and movement rights. Civil-society critiques further warn that opaque guidelines could entrench a two-tier system in which rights exist on paper but stall in practice. But, if recent developments are indicative of future implementations, then there is much to be celebrated. In the days following the Shirika Plans unveiling, refugees have since been allowed to use their identification to register for SIM cards – a step in the direction (as covered by FMDRH in a recent release).

Empirically, self-reliance experiments such as the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Programme demonstrate tangible welfare gains – higher food-consumption scores, better dietary diversity and stronger perceptions of economic autonomy relative to the neighbouring Kakuma camp – suggesting the Plan's market-based logic is sound. Nationally representative polling conducted in early-2025 likewise shows broad Kenyan support for refugee work rights, free movement and shared services, driven by expectations of increased business activity and tax revenues. Nonetheless, host-community concern over grazing land, water scarcity and job competition remain acute in

the arid counties of Turkana and Garissa, underscoring the need for transparent compensation and joint-infrastructure arrangements to avert local backlash.

Moreover, on paper, a multi-level governance structure – anchored by the Department of Refugee Services (DRS), a National Steering Committee of principal secretaries and governors, and six pillar-specific working groups – should facilitate vertical and horizontal coordination. In reality, the DRS remains severely under-resourced relative to its expanded mandate, and both refugee-led organisations and county assemblies report limited influence over budgeting and monitoring processes. Without systematic participatory mechanisms and capacity-building for county line-departments, the risk is a proliferation of parallel donor projects that dilute state ownership and erode public trust.

There are questions over the fiscal sustainability and donor dependence. The Plan's four-year Transition phase alone carries an estimated price-tag of US $943 million – equivalent to roughly 1 percent of Kenya's annual GDP – and coincides with a contraction in traditional humanitarian financing. Recent aid-pipeline cuts have already forced food-ration reductions in Kakuma and Dadaab, illustrating how fiscal shocks could strand partially built infrastructure and trigger "integration fatigue." The government's blended-finance strategy (concessional loans, outcome-based instruments and private-sector co-investment) is therefore not optional but existential; its success will hinge on robust fiduciary safeguards and demonstrable returns for both refugees and hosts.

But, if Kenya can close the regulatory gaps, deepen community participation and secure predictable, diversified capital, the Shirika Plan could yield a demonstrable development dividend, higher county-level GDP, reduced humanitarian spending and a replicable IGAD-wide model of refugee inclusion. Failure to act on these fault-lines, by contrast, may lock the policy into an expensive holding pattern, intensifying local tensions and inviting a return to restrictive encampment. In short, the Plan's transformational potential is real but contingent: its trajectory will be determined less by visionary framing than by the day-to-day politics of legal precision, fiscal discipline and grassroots accountability.

Conclusion

This brief constitutes another FMDRH policy summary, distilling the strategic opportunities and risks embedded in Kenya's Shirika Plan and reinforcing our Hub's mandate to translate rigorous, context-specific research into actionable guidance. Grounded in our mission to pioneer evidence-based solutions for forced-migration challenges, FMDRH will continue to convene stakeholders, generate empirical insights, and build practitioner capacity so that initiatives like the Shirika Plan advance both refugee self-reliance and host-community prosperity. In doing so, we reaffirm our commitment to excellence, integrity, and social impact, strengthening the knowledge ecosystem that drives humane, development-oriented refugee governance across Africa.

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