



African Population and
Health Research Center
Transforming lives in Africa through research.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Policy Brief

June 2025

Co-Authors: Lydia Namatende-Sakwa, Abdimalik Farah, Davis Muli Musyoki, Charity Waweru-Mwangi and Alvin Kimani

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Introduction

Refugee teachers in Kenya's Kakuma and Dadaab camps are unsung heroes, driving education for displaced children under immense challenges. Despite holding the key to brighter futures, they are locked out of formal recognition, professional growth, and equitable opportunities. This brief shines a spotlight on their resilience while calling for transformative action: recognize their qualifications, integrate them into the national education system, provide tailored training, support their mental well-being, and empower them as community leaders. By unlocking the potential of these educators, we not only uplift refugee communities but also strengthen the foundation for inclusive, quality education. It's time to recognize, reform, and rise together.



Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

In the arid plains of northern Kenya, within the vast expanses of the Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps, the wind of change is silently blowing, promising to revolutionize the education sector to benefit a vulnerable group of learners long disadvantaged by their status as refugees.

While these camps are often portrayed as places of considerable strife, they are also home to a community of unsung heroes—refugee teachers—whose unwavering dedication to education is helping shape the future of displaced children. Yet, despite their critical role, these teachers face immense challenges that not only hinder their professional growth but also limit their ability to meet the educational needs of their students.

Refugee teachers are the backbone of education in the camps, yet their efforts often go unnoticed. While education is a fundamental human right for millions of displaced people worldwide, accessing quality education remains elusive. This challenge is particularly pronounced in Kenya's refugee camps.

With over 70 million displaced people globally, Kenya hosts a significant portion of this population. While refugee children represent a hopeful future for their families and home countries, the teachers often face the greatest responsibility to ensure the future is realized.

Empowering them is not just a matter of improving their professional growth; it is an urgent need that should be prioritized for the displaced children to receive the quality education they deserve.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

The TeachWell Project, sponsored by LEGO Foundation and Grundfos Foundation, a consortium of partners for both teachWell unlocking playful learning and TeachWell Voices (Save the Children International, Elimu Yetu Coalition (EYC), International Rescue Committee, African Population and Health Research Center, Research Triangle International, Lutheran World Federation, and Film Aid Kenya), is currently implementing interventions towards policy advocacy to support the inclusion of refugee teachers into the national education system in Kenya.



Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Who are refugee teachers?

Three distinct types of teachers shape the educational landscape in Kenya's refugee camps:

- National Teachers are qualified teachers registered with Kenya's Teacher Service Commission (TSC). They typically hold teaching credentials recognized by the Kenyan government and are employed under the national education system
-
- Refugee Teachers: displaced individuals who continue to educate within refugee communities but are not registered with Kenya's Teacher Service Commission (TSC). Despite holding diplomas or degrees, their qualifications often lack recognition in Kenya, restricting access to official teaching roles and professional development opportunities.

Refugees who become teachers after arriving in the host country



Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

The silent struggles of refugee teachers

In Kakuma and Dadaab, the educational landscape is a complex mix of hope, resilience, and hardship. These camps provide a lifeline for thousands of children who might otherwise be denied an education. This is largely due to the unwavering efforts of refugee teachers. Many of these teachers are refugees themselves, having fled violence, conflict, and political instability in their home countries.

Most of these teachers migrated from South Sudan and Somalia, with some coming from Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. They bring a deep commitment to education and a desire to help shape a better future for displaced children.

However, the path to becoming a teacher in the camps is fraught with numerous challenges. One such teacher is John Ekai (a pseudonym), a Sudanese refugee who arrived in Kakuma, Kenya, during his early teenage years. He completed his primary and secondary education in the refugee camp and earned a teaching diploma based on Kenya's national education curriculum. Despite his commitment to attaining the qualifications, John struggles to gain recognition and registration from the Teacher Service Commission (TSC).

"Without proper recognition, my career advancement remains stagnant," he explains, adding, "I'm unable to access important Teacher Professional Development (TPD) opportunities that could help me teach better and be rewarded as a non-refugee teacher." This is a common story for many refugee teachers—highly skilled but caught up in a system that does not fully recognize their qualifications and limits their ability to fully contribute to the workforce with their potential remaining underutilized.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Systemic barriers to quality education in the refugee context

The challenges faced by refugee teachers in Kenya's refugee camps are multifaceted, with systemic barriers that hinder their professional growth and limit their ability to fully contribute to the education of displaced children. These challenges include:

1. Lack of formal recognition and registration

The lack of formal registration may be refugee teachers' most significant barrier. Despite having the necessary skills and experience, many refugee teachers are excluded from official teaching positions because the Kenyan government does not recognize their qualifications. According to Kenya's current Teacher Service Commission (TSC) policy, only Kenyan citizens can be formally employed as teachers. This excludes many qualified refugee teachers from entering the formal education sector, even though they often represent the camps' most readily available and committed teaching workforce.

As a result, these teachers are relegated to temporary, informal, or volunteer roles, with few opportunities for career advancement. Refugee teachers like John, who have earned diplomas and degrees either from the Kenyan education system or from their country of origin, struggle to have their credentials recognized by the Teacher Service Commission (TSC). This stalls their career advancement, limits access to professional development opportunities, and results in much lower pay than their TSC-recognized counterparts. These challenges contribute to low morale and higher teacher attrition rates that ultimately affect the general learning outcomes of learners in refugee learning settings.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

2. Limited professional development opportunities

Professional development is crucial for any teacher, but refugee teachers in camps like Kakuma and Dadaab often face significant gaps in training and support. Only 42% of refugee teachers in these camps have received formal teacher training, compared to 96% of national teachers. This disparity in qualifications contributes to the challenges they face in managing large classrooms with minimal resources.

Refugee teachers are often left to navigate complex teaching environments with little support or opportunities for growth. The lack of structured teacher professional development and continuous capacity development programs means that many teachers, like Mr. John, are left to prove their worth through sheer dedication without the training or resources that would help them improve their skills and teaching methods.



Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

3. Systemic discrimination and marginalization

Refugee teachers face significant social marginalization, with their roles in education often undervalued. They are frequently seen through the lens of their displacement, which leads to perceptions of inferiority and lack of legitimacy in their work. Social biases based on nationality, ethnicity, or refugee status often exclude them from formal education systems despite their qualifications and commitment.

This exclusion undermines their professional worth and fosters feelings of isolation and diminished self-worth. As a result, their crucial role in educating displaced children is overlooked, even though refugee teachers bring unique insights and empathy, particularly in helping students who share similar experiences of displacement.

4. Overcrowded classrooms and limited Resources

In addition to these bureaucratic hurdles, refugee teachers in Kakuma and Dadaab often work in overcrowded classrooms with limited resources. Many teachers are expected to manage large groups of children in makeshift classrooms with limited teaching aids or materials. The dire shortage of resources, including textbooks and classroom supplies, means that refugee teachers must find creative ways to deliver quality education despite these overwhelming challenges.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

5. Psychosocial strain

Many refugee teachers themselves have experienced trauma, displacement, and loss. While they are both obligated and committed to providing a better future for the children in their care, the emotional burden of their own experiences often affects their ability to teach effectively. Working in a high-stress, uncertain environment only adds to the strain, leading to burnout, mental health challenges, and low morale. Many teachers feel undervalued and unsupported, leading to higher turnover rates and difficulty retaining skilled educators.

Barriers to gaining recognition and registration

The lack of formal recognition and registration is not just a personal setback for refugee teachers—it is a barrier to improving the quality of education in refugee camps.

Refugee teachers in host countries, Kenya included, face numerous challenges shaped by local, political, economic, and security factors. Tensions between host communities and refugees, particularly in areas with large refugee populations, result in competition for resources like jobs, land, and water, leading to frustrations that may exacerbate discrimination against refugee teachers.

Additionally, political pressures, both from domestic and international sources, influence government policies, creating an environment where refugees are viewed as burdens and their access to employment is restricted. Economic strain, particularly in regions already struggling with poverty, further limits the resources available for education and undermines the potential for inclusion of refugee teachers into formal systems.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Security concerns also play a significant role. Governments often link refugee camps with security risks, leading to stigmatization of refugees, including teachers, and the imposition of stricter border controls and work permit restrictions. These policies create barriers for refugee teachers seeking formal employment, forcing many into informal, underpaid roles that do not fully utilize their qualifications. Furthermore, refugee teachers often face intense competition for teaching positions from local candidates, especially in regions with high unemployment.



Their expertise, particularly in emergency or conflict-related education settings, is often undervalued, as the formal education system fails to recognize or support the unique skills they bring. This combination of marginalization, economic hardship, security concerns and policy constraints significantly hampers refugee teachers' professional growth and integration in host countries.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Conclusion: The Urgent Need for Reform

Refugee teachers in Kenya's camps play a crucial role in educating displaced children, yet they face significant barriers. Urgent policy reforms are needed to recognize their qualifications, provide professional development, and integrate them into the formal workforce. Supporting these teachers is key to ensuring that children in Kakuma, Dadaab, and beyond receive the quality education they deserve. The following changes are essential to improving their status and empowering them to better serve their students:

1. **Formal Recognition of Refugee Teachers in National Teacher Training Frameworks:** The Kenyan government, in collaboration with international organizations, should develop a policy that formally recognizes the qualifications of refugee teachers and includes them in the national teacher training and certification processes. This would involve creating pathways for refugee teachers to gain formal accreditation through bridging programs or by recognizing their qualifications from their countries of origin.

2. **Expanding Professional Development Programs:** Providing refugee teachers with access to continuous professional development is critical. Offering specialized teacher training programs tailored to the refugee context—focusing on trauma-informed teaching, multilingual education, and the integration of technology—would enhance their teaching skills and equip them with the tools needed to navigate the unique challenges of the refugee setting.

Creating Pathways for Refugee Teachers to Gain Formal Recognition

Conclusion: The Urgent Need for Reform

3. Integration into the Formal Kenyan Education System: The Kenyan education system should integrate refugee teachers into the formal workforce, providing them with permanent contracts and ensuring equitable pay and working conditions. Refugee teachers should be recognized as essential contributors to national educational goals, especially in areas like Kakuma and Dadaab, where qualified educators are in short supply.

4. Recognition of Refugee Teachers as Change Agents: Refugee teachers should be empowered as community leaders and advocates. We can create a more inclusive and responsive educational environment by involving them in policy discussions and decision-making processes regarding education in refugee camps.

5. Support Mental Health and Well-being: Addressing the psychosocial needs of refugee teachers is crucial. Providing them with access to counseling services and creating supportive networks within the teaching community can reduce burnout and improve the overall quality of education in the camps.

Refugee teachers are not just survivors but the architects of a brighter, more hopeful future for the children they teach. Let's stand together and give them the recognition and support they deserve.