



LUND
UNIVERSITY

Lund University Master of Science in
International Development and Management

May, 2026

“Pushed to the edge of the cliff”:

An analysis of practitioner perspectives on the governance of refugee livelihoods in Nairobi,
Kenya

Author: Millena Navega

Supervisor: Maryam Nastar

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	6
CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE AND AIM.....	7
1.1 Introduction.....	7
1.2 Research Objective and Research Questions.....	10
1.3 Thesis Outline.....	10
CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK.....	11
2.1 Literature review.....	11
2.1.1 Governance and Humanitarian Responses Worldwide.....	11
2.1.2 The Relief Landscape.....	12
2.1.3 Contributions to Existing Literature.....	13
2.2 Theoretical Grounding.....	14
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY.....	18
3.1 Methodological Approach and Research Design.....	18
3.2 Population and Sample.....	19
3.3 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments.....	20
3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews.....	20
3.3.2 Document Analysis.....	21
3.4 Information Processing Techniques.....	22
3.5 Positionality, Ethical Considerations, and Potential Limitations.....	23
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION.....	25
4.1 How does the refugee documentation system function in Nairobi, Kenya?.....	25
4.1.1 Documentation as a gatekeeping mechanism.....	25
4.1.2 The urban–camp registration divide.....	26
4.1.3 Legal liminality: asylum seekers, citizenship, and differentiated enforcement.....	28
4.2 How does it affect the refugees' livelihood strategies?.....	31
4.2.1 Nationality and cultural locus as livelihood determinants.....	31
4.2.2 Informality and self-employment as the structural default.....	33
4.3 What driving forces underpin the refugee's documentation system?.....	35
4.3.1 Funding cuts and the self-reliance shift.....	35
4.3.2 The Limits of Localization.....	37

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION.....	41
References.....	45
Appendices.....	51
Appendix 1: Interview Guide.....	51
Appendix 2: Informed Consent For Participation In A Research Interview.....	54

List of Tables

Table 1: Profile of Participants Interviewed.....	20
Table 2: Core Refugee Governance Framework Documents.....	21

List of Figures

Figure 1: Circulation and Management of Refugee Economies in Urban Space. Source: Author's own, after Foucault (1978) and Butler (2004).....	17
Figure 2: The anti-politics machine and the localization paradox. Source: Author's own, after Ferguson (1990).....	37

Lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their claims to sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as 'grievable.'

– Judith Butler (2004: 32), *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*

Acknowledgements

This thesis was only made possible thanks to the support of exceptional people, to whom I hold tremendous gratitude. To all my friends whom I made throughout all my moves – Lund, Rome, Nairobi – and who created new dimensions of home beyond what I thought fathomable. Without fixed roots right now, my dear friends gave me the stability to continue and flourish. You've created new universes in me.

To my family in Brazil, thank you for allowing me to dream about the world. Likewise, for my education, for the books, and for supporting my outlandish ideas.

To Dr. Mureithi, who endorsed my application to conduct fieldwork in Kenya and included me in other projects in situ. To Dr. Nastar, who has graciously supervised my work throughout these months, from the preparation of my research in Kenya all the way to the conclusion of this thesis.

This thesis would also not exist without the generosity of those who gave me their time and, more meaningfully, their stories. To each person who sat with me in Nairobi and shared a piece of their world: you are not merely participants in this research, you are its heart. I left every conversation richer, and I carry what you shared with me far beyond these pages.

Finally, I would like to convey my gratitude to the Swedish Institute and to Sida (Swedish Development Cooperation Agency) for truly transformative support that opened doors I never thought possible. Having been awarded the SI Scholarship for Global Professionals by the Swedish Institute, I was able to study in my master's program with a full scholarship, free from financial strain, and dedicate myself entirely to completing this milestone. Further to this, with the Sida Minor Field Studies (MFS) Grant, I was able to successfully complete my data collection and field studies in Nairobi while promoting Sweden abroad – an accomplishment that I will forever take with me to my further endeavours. In ways both practical and profound, Sweden gave me the space to become.

Abstract

This thesis examines how urban refugee economic survival is governed within Nairobi, Kenya, through the perceptions of humanitarian-development practitioners. Despite Kenya's Refugee Act 2021 representing one of the region's more progressive frameworks for refugee economic inclusion, the distance between its formal provisions and operational reality remains vast. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with practitioners across NGOs, international organizations, and refugee-led organizations, supplemented by document analysis in a qualitative case study design. The analysis draws on Ferguson's (1990) anti-politics machine and Butler's (2004) concept of differential *grievability*, with additional grounding in post-structuralist and post-development scholarship. Three converging dynamics emerge from the findings. First, documentation and registration systems function as technologies of managed exclusion. Second, livelihood strategies are systematically directed toward informality as the principal permissible economic space, shaped by the intersection of legal constraints, nationality, gender identity, and sexual orientation in ways that produce differentiated but uniformly precarious outcomes. Third, the self-reliance paradigm depoliticizes disinvestment by reframing funding withdrawal as developmental empowerment through localization. Together, these findings reveal how refugees and asylum seekers in Nairobi occupy the margins of a governance system historically architected around encampment, traced here through the practitioners who navigate its contradictions from within.

Key words: refugees, Nairobi, Kenya, humanitarian-development nexus, livelihoods, self-reliance, asylum seekers

Word Count: 14989.

CHAPTER 1: PURPOSE AND AIM

1.1 Introduction

There is a quiet but potent violence in the architecture of urban refugee governance in Kenya. The country hosts one of the largest displaced populations on the African continent, and yet the systems designed to manage that presence have consistently yielded stipulations in which legal recognition and economic participation remain out of reach (Halakhe & Kara, 2025). Over 800,000 refugees and asylum seekers were registered with UNHCR in Kenya as of 2025, of whom approximately 118,000 resided in urban settings across Nairobi, Mombasa, and Nakuru (UNHCR, 2026). Further to this, vast backlogs are created in the national registration systems (Ginn & Tang, 2025). Situated at the edges of humanitarian and state assistance, and increasingly beyond the reach of development mechanisms as many programs have been curtailed amid prolonged funding shortfalls, these groups continue to face significant challenges (Ikanda & Kuhnt, 2025). At the same time, refugees in urban areas are woven into conditions of marginalization while simultaneously navigating markets, raising children, running informal businesses, and paying inflated rents within those same environments. The underlying expectation is that proximity to opportunity can substitute for the legal and institutional infrastructure necessary to access it (Jaji, 2012).

By contrast, the story of how Kenya arrived at this point is one of policy ambition incessantly outpacing institutional capacity. For much of the post-independence period, Kenya maintained a relatively open approach to refugees, permitting skilled arrivals from Uganda and neighbouring countries to work and settle freely across the country (World Bank, 2023). That posture collapsed in the early 1990s, when large inflows from Somalia, Ethiopia, and the Great Lakes region prompted a sharp policy reversal toward encampment, concentrating displaced populations near the Somali and South Sudanese borders and eventually making residence outside designated camps a criminal offence by 2014 (NRC & IHRC, 2017; World Bank, 2023; Ikanda & Kuhnt, 2025). The Refugee Act of 2021 formally broke with this trajectory by introducing a rights-based framework granting refugees access to the labor market and the ability to establish businesses (Halakhe & Kara, 2025). This was accompanied by the Shirika Plan, a government initiative to transform camps into integrated settlements serving both displaced and host populations (Republic of Kenya, 2023). On paper, this represented a serious rethinking of what Kenya's relationship with its refugee population could look like.

In practice, the distance between that paper and lived reality is tremendous. To illustrate this notion, the World Bank (2023) estimates that over 80,000 refugees reside in Nairobi alone, the majority in informal settlements with inadequate access to public services. The share of employed refugees

remains unchanged regardless of educational attainment, suggesting that what is at work is structural exclusion in lieu of individual deficiency (World Bank, 2023). Halakhe and Kara (2025) documented, at the time of their study, of 86 refugees who applied for the Class M work permit formally available to them under the Refugee Act 2021, only one received approval. Furthermore, stated by the authors, the Kenyan government has not publicly disclosed how many permits have been issued in total since the Act's passage.

According to the Mixed Migration Centre (2022), 82% of refugees in Nairobi identify a lack of opportunity as their primary barrier to employment, while 69% cite insufficient documentation. Over a third of refugee households report that income never covers basic needs, and 76% are unable to save after meeting subsistence costs. Among women, the picture is considerably grimmer. Refugee women bear disproportionate household responsibility while facing lower employment rates, significantly higher rates of educational exclusion, and markedly lower indicators of economic empowerment than both Kenyan women and refugee men (World Bank, 2023).

Table 1: Refugees in Kenya's Urban Areas by Country of Origin, 2022–2025 (Nairobi, Nakuru and Mombasa)

Country of Origin	2022	2023	2024	2025
Total	58,331	61,686	67,678	70,996
Somalia	16,928	17,583	18,977	18,750
DR Congo	21,806	23,413	24,878	26,079
South Sudan	8,509	8,516	8,609	8,750
Ethiopia	7,175	7,937	10,554	12,123
Eritrea	921	1,013	1,216	1,582
Burundi	1,574	1,714	1,773	1,923
Rwanda	574	596	620	628
Uganda	337	348	343	339
Sudan	138	148	204	312
Other	369	418	504	508

Source: UNHCR (2026).

Table 1 breaks down the urban refugee population in Kenya by country of origin between 2022 and 2025. The figures reveal a population that is not only large but growing steadily, rising from 58 thousand to over 70 thousand registered individuals in the four-year period (UNHCR, 2026). As the findings of this thesis will demonstrate, country of origin shapes not only the cultural and social resources that refugees bring to urban economic life, but also the specific forms of institutional risk

and administrative precarity they are likely to encounter within Nairobi's governance environment. This is why, underlying all of this is a data deficit that makes the problem harder to see and therefore easier to ignore, where cognitive dissonance is consolidated (Allen, 2015). Refugees have historically been excluded from national census records, housing surveys, and economic studies conducted by the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics, making planning for their inclusion an uphill task from the outset (Halakhe & Kara, 2025). The refugee status determination figures available from UNHCR Kenya tell their own story of a system under considerable information strain. In February 2026, only two individuals applied for urban status determination and none were recognized, while November 2025 recorded over 10,000 applications with more than 48,000 cases pending (UNHCR, 2026).

All the same, these figures demand careful reading. As previously noted, the World Bank (2023) places the Nairobi figure alone at over 80,000, hence, a number that does not straightforwardly reconcile with UNHCR's broader urban totals, which span Nairobi, Nakuru, and Mombasa combined in Table 1. As funding contracts and urban programs are suspended – examined in the findings – this data environment grows correspondingly murkier. Organizations that once generated the granular, community-level information necessary to identify and support urban refugees are no longer operational. This exemplifies the increasing complexity of operating within a machine in which shrinking resources simultaneously constrain assistance and erode the data infrastructures needed to identify need, producing a situation where the population in question becomes both underserved and statistically unrecognized (Willig, 2012; Ferguson, 1990).

In the pages that follow, it is within this context that the present thesis situates its investigation. Kenya's legal framework for refugee economic inclusion exists and is, by regional standards, denominated as progressive (Betts, 2021; Ginn & Tang, 2025). What demands examination is the set of administrative, discursive, and institutional practices through which that framework is rendered ineffective in practice, and through which responsibility for economic survival is progressively transferred onto refugees themselves. This research investigates these practices through the accounts of NGO, international organizations (IOs), and refugee-led organization (RLOs) practitioners. They constitute the primary unit of the present analysis and operate within Nairobi's humanitarian-development nexus. These actors are not the architects of exclusion as many work actively against the very constraints this thesis examines, operating within, and frequently in spite of, a governance environment that systematically limits what they can offer and to whom. Engaging with their professional perspectives therefore offers a ground-level account of how a protection regime functions in practice, where its contradictions are most acutely felt, and what the gap between legislative ambition and operational reality looks like from inside the institutions tasked with bridging it.

1.2 Research Objective and Research Questions

This research examines how urban refugee economic survival is administratively observed within Nairobi's humanitarian-development nexus. In doing so, this thesis aims to shed light on where such contradictions in the refugee regime in the capital city are most acutely felt, and what the gap between legislative ambition and operational reality looks like from inside the institutions tasked with bridging it. The analysis attends to the differentiated experiences of humanitarian-development practitioners that work with refugees across lines of nationality, gender and sexual identity, health, and legal status, while tracing how oscillations in humanitarian funding reconfigure the conditions of possibility for livelihood resilience. The following research question and sub-questions guide this exploration:

Main Research Question:

How is refugee economic survival shaped within Nairobi's humanitarian-development nexus?

Secondary Research Questions:

1. How does the refugee documentation system function in Nairobi, Kenya?
2. How does it affect the refugees' livelihood strategies?
3. What driving forces underpin the refugee's documentation system?

1.3 Thesis Outline

This thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter One established the research context and posing the research questions that guide the study. Chapter Two reviews the existing literature on humanitarian governance and the relief-to-development divide, before setting out the theoretical framework synthesised from post-structuralist and post-development scholarship. Chapter Three elaborates the methodological approach, detailing the qualitative case study design, sampling strategy, data collection instruments, and analytical procedures, alongside a discussion of positionality, ethical considerations with the study's limitations. Chapter Four presents the empirical findings and discussion, organized around the three sub-questions: the function of documentation and registration as mechanisms of economic governance; the differentiated livelihood strategies of urban refugees under conditions of legal constraint; and the reconfiguration of survival responsibility through shifts in humanitarian funding and programming. Chapter Five concludes the thesis with key analytical reflections on the spatial and social dynamics of refugee economies in Nairobi, and identifies directions for future research and policy engagement.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Literature review

2.1.1 Governance and Humanitarian Responses Worldwide

Historically, the pertinent international governance structures surrounding the protection of refugees, and thereby their status quo in the global context, have been established for dozens of decades (Hyndman & Mountz, 2007; Ilcan & Rygiel, 2015; Ramadan, 2013). This has been the case since the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, alongside the responsibility vested in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to oversee such protection (Davitti & Vankova, 2024). Early attention to the economic dimensions of refugee protection emerged alongside the institutional expansion of humanitarian aid in the late twentieth century. Foundational analyses by Harrell-Bond (1986) and Zetter (1991) began questioning the logic of perpetual relief assistance that rendered refugees as passive aid recipients, essentially not as political and economic actors. Their critiques revealed that humanitarian systems, though designed for protection, often reproduced dependency and reinforced exclusion. By the 1990s, this evaluation expanded as UNHCR and donor governments began acknowledging the limitations of indefinite ‘care and maintenance’ models, especially within protracted refugee situations (Crisp, 2003; Jacobsen, 2005).

During this period, the notion of a *relief-to-development continuum* gained prominence as scholars and practitioners sought to link emergency aid to longer-term development strategies (Macrae & Harmer, 2004; Harpviken, 1997). The central premise was that humanitarian assistance should evolve towards supporting self-reliance and sustainable livelihoods. Nonetheless, in practice, this continuum rarely materialized. Donor fatigue, limited coordination between humanitarian and development institutions, and the political sensitivity of refugee integration continuously leads to the persistence of fragmented responses. The academic conversation shifted towards identifying the *structural causes* of this persistent gap by the early and mid-2000s (Lacroix, 2000; McNamara & Gibson, 2009). No matter the circumstances, refugees are still viewed as those who are in need of international protection. This is the case when their own state is either unwilling or unable to guarantee access to their rights. Building on these critiques of humanitarian space, later scholarship turned towards the macro-institutional dimensions of refugee governance. Moreover, as Betts (2010) observes, the international mechanisms devised to ensure such protection have themselves undergone a striking metamorphosis (Loescher, 2001; Chimni, 2009; Barnett, 2013).

Betts (2009; 2010) conceptualized the ‘refugee regime complex’ to capture how overlapping international institutions – ranging from UNHCR and the World Bank to regional development

agencies – created fragmented governance arrangements that blurred the lines between humanitarian relief, migration management, and security policy. This fragmentation mirrored the divergent interests of donor and host states: donors operating through humanitarian budgets and host governments navigating domestic constraints (Mbaka, 2025). The resulting structure of global assistance became reactive rather than developmental, responsive to visibility and crisis then to sustainability. Concurrently, the exponential funding contraction exposes the enduring misapprehension that refugee issues belong solely to the humanitarian sphere. Such an assumption has structured the international imagination of refugees as passive recipients of aid, as opposed to active agents of economic and social participation, as Betts et al. (2017) wryly notes. To that end, the persistence of protracted refugee situations demonstrates how such views produce a cycle of dependency that both legitimates exclusion and obscures the developmental dimensions of displacement (Jacobsen, 2006; Brankamp, 2019).

2.1.2 The Relief Landscape

The UNHCR recorded 129.9 million forcibly displaced and stateless people globally, representing an increase of 48% over five years, and, for the first time in 2024, a funding rate below half of assessed needs (UNHCR, 2025). The scale of global displacement thus coincides with an unprecedented shortfall in the resources allocated to address it. This fiscal imbalance exposes the growth of displacement outpacing the willingness of the international community to finance durable responses (Davitti & Vankova, 2024). Scholars of refugee livelihoods have responded by reframing the question. Jacobsen (2005; 2006) and Werker (2007) examined the microeconomies of camps and urban settlements, identifying informal markets and self-reliance strategies that challenge assumptions of passivity. Building on this foundation, Betts et al. (2017) introduced the concept of *refugee economies*, defining them as resource allocation systems encompassing the production, consumption, and exchange activities of displaced populations. This framework provided a holistic lens for analysing economic life within forced displacement, transferring attention from aid inputs to refugee agencies. Complementary studies by Omata (2021; 2023) and Milner (2016; 2008; 2014) emphasized that while refugees generate economic value, institutional fragility and short-term funding cycles often constrain their capacity to participate fully in local economies.

At the policy level, the humanitarian–development divide has become a central theme in global refugee governance. Still, the political economy of aid remains largely donor-driven, reflecting what Dryden-Peterson (2016) describes as the temporal tension between immediate humanitarianism and long-term reconstruction, amid evolving reframing of refugee regimes (Omata, 2023). Development agencies have often been reluctant to incorporate refugee populations within their planning frameworks, viewing them as external to national systems and are “subject to racialised processes of

control and exploitation” (Hepner & Treiber, 2021: 180). Simultaneously, host states in the Global South bear disproportionate responsibility for large refugee populations with minimal fiscal compensation (Betts & Milner, 2019; Mendenhall & Falk, 2023). In this case, the descent of development practice is not a post-Project 2025 surprise: it has been ongoing since the 1990s, following periods of voluminous changes in the global refugee regimes (Hyndman, 2000; Yüksel, 2026; Haug, Novoselova & Klingebiel, 2025).

Having regard to the above, current debates reveal that the relief-to-development gap is not merely financial but governance-based as well. The persistence of fragmented funding structures and the reliance on ad hoc donor commitments goes mutually with reflections that Ilcan and Rygiel (2015) make on resiliency humanitarianism, in which the failure to bridge the relief-to-development gap is absorbed through the reconfiguration of refugees as self-governing subjects expected to adapt to conditions they did not produce. Spiegel (2017) has argued that the humanitarian system is not simply overstretched but unfit for purpose, designed for acute emergencies and consistently overlooking protracted displacement contexts that now define the majority of global cases. His analysis further presses that the economic and social contributions of refugees to host economies remain underexplored, and that alternatives to encampment, when adequately resourced, can generate dignified, community-integrated outcomes that benefit both displaced and host populations. This example points to recognition in the literature that addressing the humanitarian-development nexus requires a reevaluation of mandates, targeting, and the boundaries between relief and development action (Spiegel, 2017). Lontiris and Ruano (2026) corroborate this assessment through their scoping review, identifying a widening mismatch between mapped humanitarian needs and available resources, and documenting growing scholarly and policy consensus that interventions must be designed and implemented closer to the ground. Their findings point to localization, understood as the transfer of funding, decision making, and implementation responsibilities to national and community level actors, as an increasingly prominent response to the inefficiencies associated with donor driven humanitarian governance structures (Lontiris & Ruano, 2026). Institutional inertia, without reevaluation, sustains fragility within the aid system and constrains the transformative potential of refugee inclusion policies (Njeru, 2025; Wallis, 2025).

2.1.3 Contributions to Existing Literature

This thesis makes three interrelated contributions to existing scholarship on refugee governance, urban livelihoods, and humanitarian-development theory. Existing post-structuralist analyses of refugee governance have been predominantly anchored in the camp as their privileged empirical site, due to biopolitical framings of enclosure and exception. This thesis extends and reworks that vocabulary in urban, non-camp settings by demonstrating that analogous governing rationalities

persist and are reconfigured in the absence of physical enclosure. The second contribution is analytical. By incorporating Butler's concept of *grievability*, the thesis foregrounds how governmentality alone cannot fully account for the differentiated visibility of refugee suffering, as it tends to frame refugee economies as monolithic survival mechanisms. The third contribution is empirical and methodological. The research generates both bottom-up and top-down practitioner-level evidence of how the gap between Kenya's refugee policies and lived urban reality is produced and sustained.

2.2 Theoretical Grounding

This thesis draws on an analytical framework synthesized from two complementary theoretical traditions: post-structuralism and, most importantly, post-development scholarship. Within these bounds, the present research develops an analytical framework grounded in Butlerian notions of grievability and post-development scholarship, primarily drawing on Ferguson. It also engages with Hyndman, Agamben, Escobar, and Agier to examine how refugee livelihoods in Nairobi are qualified as governable.

Post-Structuralism

In this thesis, Michel Foucault's contribution in post-Structuralism is employed as a framework for analyzing how economic life is governed without direct command. Building on this shift, Foucault's intervention lies in demonstrating how population emerges not merely as a demographic fact, but as a domain rendered intelligible through governmental reason. Governance therefore operates by aligning itself with what appears natural, such as market participation or informal economic activity, while simultaneously subjecting these processes to calculated intervention. In this sense, the governance of refugee populations therefore works not by suspending economic realities but by incorporating them strategically into expansive rationalities of management and bureaucratic optimisation (Foucault, 1978).

This conceptualization is central to the present study. While Foucauldian governmentality can disentangle governance rationalities, it remains less attentive to the normative question of when suffering calls for political response, and whose suffering is constituted as grievable, and thus more likely to be recognized. Judith Butler's (2004) concept of grievability provides the main frame of reference through which to interrogate these distinctions. Although Butler's framework extends into questions of mourning, of which lives are publicly grieved as lost, the present thesis does not engage with that dimension directly. My point, rather, is the foundation upon which grievability rests: recognition. As she argues, "there are schemes of recognition that determine in a relative sense who will be regarded as a subject worthy of recognition. We can call this the differential distribution of

recognizability.” (Butler, cited in Willig, 2012: 140). This is where Butler connects directly to the conditions documented in this research.

Butler (cited in Willig, 2012: 140-141) argues that “if recognition is fully lacking, that is, a life is unrecognized, is refused recognition, and has no standing before the law, or is deprived of legal rights and protections, then that life is actually imperiled by the lack of recognition.” Within this framework, examining refugee livelihoods in Nairobi permits the exposure of how prolonged economic insecurity is normalized as an enduring condition, its significance diminished through narratives of resilience and self-reliance. Refugees remain objects of governance, even as their hardship is displaced from political urgency. Critically, this does not reduce refugees to passive objects. Polychroniou (2021: 264) highlights that “agency is intertwined, in Butlerian terms, with vulnerability, as it surfaces within the most precarious conditions and it manifests the precarious subject's persistence to live, resist and demand.” Butler's insistence that agency and vulnerability are not opposites allows the activity of generating livelihoods to be read neither as evidence that structural conditions are bearable, nor as heroic exception, but as the ordinary form that survival takes when recognition is withheld. I argue that Butler's formulation offers a necessary expansion to the limits of Foucauldian governmentality, and this will be used throughout the findings presented.

Post-Development

Shifting attention to not only asking whether development ‘worked,’ postdevelopment scholars redirected awareness to how development operates as a historically specific domain of thought and action. Also building upon the Foucauldian stance from sovereign command to administrative rationality, I incorporate post-development scholarship on the productive effects of development practice in my analytical framework. While traditional livelihood models often treat economic activity as a neutral outcome of agency, I contend that, following Ferguson (1990), these initiatives function as an ‘anti-politics machine’ that depoliticizes refugee precarity by depicting it a matter of bureaucratic optimization and individual resilience. This is why James Ferguson’s *The Anti-Politics Machine* (1990) remains a touchstone. Ferguson’s analysis is that development institutions generate a distinctive form of discourse through which social and economic life is catalyzed legibly.

Importantly, Ferguson does not treat development discourse as a collection of abstract ideas detached from material reality, so administrative rationality is brought to the fore. Even if development interventions, to Ferguson (1990), frequently fail to achieve their stated objectives, they nonetheless produce chronic ramifications. Escobar (2011) deepens this argument by demonstrating how the development apparatus generates ‘client’ categories that organize populations in ways that reproduce existing institutional relations while presenting themselves as neutral facts. Approached through what

Escobar (2011) calls institutional ethnography, the refugee context in Nairobi is used to examine how professional categories and textually mediated discourses come to substitute for the lived experiences of those they claim to represent. Ergo, burying experiences within the institutional matrix that organizes its representation. Escobar's (2020) later work places this in the context of extraction-based geographies, where the same global processes that displace people in the Global South also layout how they are understood and governed after they move.

Driving insights from Foucault's governmentality, Jennifer Hyndman's *Managing Displacement* (2000) analyzes refugee management as a set of regulatory practices that organize space, movement, and eligibility. Humanitarian governance, with her inputs, functions through calculation; considering how it defines who qualifies for protection, where they may reside, and under what conditions assistance is distributed (Weima et al., 2026). By applying governmentality in this way and integrating Jennifer Hyndman's (2000) work on humanitarian governance, I frame these interventions as administrative practices where refugees become governable because they are inserted into systems of categorization that define their needs, risks, and capacities. Through what she terms "refugee geographies," Hyndman reveals how the refuge spaces are not simply shelters from conflict, but administrative terrains where the categories of *us* and *them* are continuously rehearsed and re-inscribed. Such spatial politics, she argues, deepens the divide between donors and recipients, reinforcing what she calls "the politicization of need and the politics of need." (Hyndman, 2000: 181). That is, who is seen as deserving – similar to grievability (Butler, 2004) – and who has the authority to decide. Her framing resonates with substantial analyzes of humanitarian governance that conceptualize aid as a performative practice rather than an apolitical response (Fassin, 2007; Barnett, 2013).

Beyond Nairobi, refugees are incorporated into systems of surveillance and assistance that secure survival while delimiting political membership. Camp scholarship has also drawn on Giorgio Agamben's (2005) interpretation of Foucault to frame the refugee as a figure caught within a state of exception. While Agamben (2005) departs from Foucault by emphasizing sovereign suspension of law, the shared concern lies in how legal status becomes unstable. The camp is conceptualized as a zone in which the distinction between norm and exception blurs, where individuals are recognized and excluded simultaneously, protected and restricted at once. This duality reveals the production of a subject who is neither fully inside nor fully outside the political order (Agamben, 2005). Importantly, this theoretical move is crucial for the present thesis, even though the empirical focus is Nairobi instead of camp settings. To no surprise, camp-based scholarship conceptualizes governance through physical enclosure and spatial containment. In urban settings like Nairobi, however, no such perimeter exists. If the camp is a concentrated space of biopolitical management (Agier, 2020; Agamben, 2005), urban refugeehood can be understood as its dispersed form. Refugees *can* circulate within the city, yet

their movement and economic participation remain systematized through conditional recognition. By extending these analyses beyond the camp, this thesis examines how the same rationalities identified by Hyndman, Agamben, and Agier operate in less visibly exceptional spaces (e.g., Nairobi). The aim, therefore, is not to reproduce camp theory, but to draw from its analytical foundation. Where camp scholarship highlights the biopolitical management of life in enclave-like structures (Ramadan, 2013), this work aims to reveal how the responsabilization of economic survival becomes the equivalent governing idiom in urban contexts.

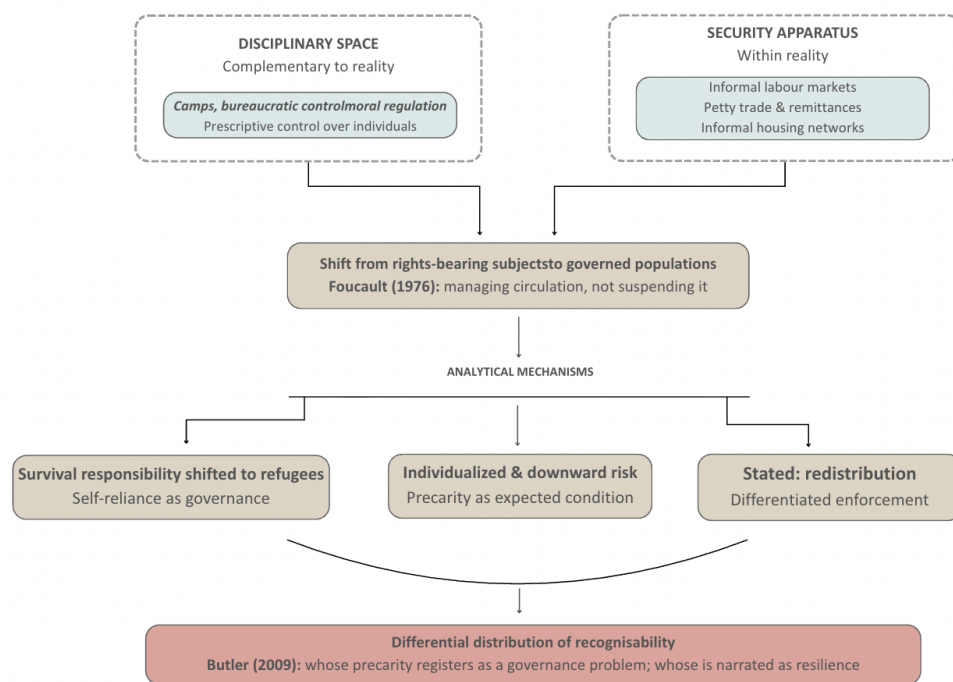


Figure 1: Circulation and Management of Refugee Economies in Urban Space. Source: Author's own, after Foucault (1978) and Butler (2004).

Ultimately, Figure 1 captures the change from containment to responsabilization. The flow reads top-down: the two theoretical inputs (disciplinary space and security apparatus) converge into the central Foucauldian shift, which fans out through three analytical mechanisms, and all three converge at the bottom into Butler's recognisability frame. Nairobi does not resemble the enclosed spaces analyzed by Hyndman or Agier. Refugees circulate within urban markets and neighbourhoods, and all the same, the absence of perimeter fences does not imply the liberty to participate freely in the city. There are three points here: i) documentation regimes continue to structure employment possibilities; ii) legal ambiguity conditions access to formal labor, and iii) development-oriented livelihood programs frame refugees as entrepreneurial subjects responsible for economic integration.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodological Approach and Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design centred on a single case study of urban refugee governance in Nairobi. A qualitative approach is warranted because the analysis is concerned with how governance operates through institutional reasoning, versus through outcomes that can be isolated and measured (Warren & Bell, 2022). The study does not seek to evaluate the success of livelihood programs or to quantify economic activity. Instead, it examines how survival in the city is accessible within policy and practice, and how responsibility for making a living is progressively reconfigured as an individual burden within refugee governance arrangements (Foucault, 1978; Ferguson, 1990).

For this reason, it is relevant to emphasize that the case study approach enables an in-depth examination of these processes within their real-world context. Case studies are distinctly suited to analyzing complex social phenomena where institutional arrangements, spatial organization, and everyday practices intersect (Gerring, 2004; Stake, 2005). When immersing in the subject, this design allows the research to move beyond abstract policy analysis and to examine how governing rationalities are coordinated into urban environments, such as Nairobi, under conditions of legal uncertainty and limited protection. As outlined, Nairobi was selected as the empirical case due to its long-standing role as a major site of refugee settlement in Kenya, in spite of historical encampment policies, and its prominence within contemporary governance frameworks that emphasize self-reliance and reduced reliance on assistance. In light of the aforementioned, the Kenyan capital city provides a relevant setting for examining how responsibility for economic survival connects to subaltern forms of protracted temporariness in which individuals are permitted to remain but not to fully integrate, sustaining a condition of suspended inclusion (Agamben & Sacer, 1998).

Yet, it is crucial to consider that qualitative research is frequently criticised for the limited scope of its empirical claims, particularly in relation to generalisability and the interpretive role of the researcher. These concerns are relevant to this study, as it is grounded in a single case (Warren & Bell, 2022). The aim of the research, as indicated above, is not to derive universal conclusions about refugee livelihoods and within this methodological orientation, the relevance of the study rests on the transferability of its analytical insights (Warren & Bell, 2022). This is supported through a detailed engagement with the institutional and spatial context of Nairobi, as well as through careful articulation of how empirical observations relate to the study's theoretical framework. By situating findings within clearly defined governance dynamics, the research enables the potential to assess the

extent to which the analysis may resonate with other urban refugee settings characterized by informality and limited legal inclusion.

Kenya constitutes a critical case given its ongoing transition from encampment towards an area-based and inclusion-oriented model, which greatly influences Nairobi. The Shirika Plan for Refugees and Host Communities signals a reconfiguration of refugee governance through its emphasis on integrated service delivery and shared development planning between refugees and host communities (Republic of Kenya, 2023). On this basis, examining these developments through a single case allows for sustained analysis of how participation is institutionalised across scales of governance.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population of this study consists of the mechanics of the humanitarian-development nexus: the actors within international organizations (IOs) and NGOs involved in the design, coordination, and implementation of refugee livelihood programs or policies in Kenya. This includes technical advisors, program managers, field-level practitioners, and refugee practitioners. This specific focus on non-governmental actors is theoretically grounded in the work of Ferguson (1990) and Hyndman (2000) – significantly, these actors are viewed not merely as individuals with personal intentions, but as nodes within a bureaucratic machine that generates patterned institutional effects. It pinpoints the role of perception, recognizing that individuals understand and assign meaning to reality in different ways (Yanow, 2014).

A purposive sampling strategy (Patton, 2015; Bryman, 2015) was adopted to identify respondents whose professional remits involve the implementation of any program or project that assisted with refugeehoods. Adding to this, multiple spheres shape how livelihoods are understood and approached, including advocacy, health, gender, and queer issues; accordingly, the interviews spanned a range of areas. Given the study's focus on institutional rationalities and governance practices, respondents from NGOs, international organizations, and refugee-led organizations engaged in policy formulation or program implementation were considered eligible. To navigate the institutional gatekeeping inherent in high-level policy environments or highly sensitive settings that needed more trust-building, snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) was utilized. This approach is operative for accessing the layered structures of development institutions that often exceed the plans of any single actor constellation of actors responsible for the administrative rationality and management of refugee governance in Kenya, inspired by Ferguson (1990). The sampling strategy was designed to ensure representation of the discursive formation of development across different NGO categories. The study sought to capture a range of perspectives across different sectors involved in refugee governance, recognizing that livelihood interventions are approached differently depending on organizational mandates and areas of

expertise. To make the analytical focus clear: while some interviewees were refugees, they were engaged in practitioner capacities; refugees as non-practitioner subjects were not included, as the unit of analysis is not lived experience but rather the institutional rationality and patterned effects produced by organizations themselves.

3.3 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The study relies on two principal qualitative methods: semi-structured interviews and document analysis. These methods are combined in order to examine both institutional discourse and stakeholder perception. While interviews capture how institutional mandates are understood by governance actors, documentary sources reveal how it is codified within formal policy architecture. Together, by triangulating the sources, the study examined how the humanitarian-development nexus is both codified in formal architecture and interpreted through professional practice.

3.3.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews constitute the primary source of empirical material. This format is suited to research concerned with institutional reasoning, as it allows respondents to articulate how mandates are interpreted and how constraints are navigated within their professional remit (Adeoye-olatunde & Olenik, 2021). The interviews were guided by open-ended questions, as this format allows for an exploration of power asymmetries are steered within the professional remit (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006).

The interview guide ensured thematic consistency while allowing space for unanticipated insights to emerge. Interviews were recorded with consent and transcribed verbatim (see: Appendix 1; Appendix 2). Theme emergence during analysis was grounded in citation density across interviews. The number of citations attached to a given theme informed its prominence within the findings chapter. Frequency alone did not determine importance, but patterns of repetition across stakeholder categories were used to identify areas of convergence and contestation. This mode ensured that themes were empirically anchored in interviewee perception. In particular, sustained repetition across institutional positions signalled the presence of stabilized governing rationalities, including those consistent with what Ferguson conceptualised as the anti-politics machine, through which refugee precarity is reframed as a technical problem of optimisation rather than a political condition.

Table 1: Profile of Participants Interviewed

Participant	Stakeholder Group	Role in Refugee Governance
Interviewee 1	International Organization	Livelihood program coordination
Interviewee 2	NGO	Executive leadership, refugee rights and legal protection

Interviewee 3	NGO	Conflict mediation and peace advocacy in urban refugee contexts
Interviewee 4	RLO	Youth-led governance, education and social integration
Interviewee 5	NGO	Legal aid and refugee protection services
Interviewee 6	NGO	Peace-building and social justice programming
Interviewee 7	International Organization	Country-level management, livelihood program oversight
Interviewee 8	NGO	Women and girls' entrepreneurship and economic inclusion
Interviewee 9	International Organization	Donor-side engagement, localization strategy
Interviewee 10	RLO	LGBTQ+ refugee advocacy and community representation
Interviewee 11	RLO	LGBTQ+ refugee advocacy and community representation
Interviewee 12	RLO	Refugee rights strategy and locally-led displacement solutions
Interviewee 13	International Organization	Health programming and migrant assistance
Interviewee 14	International Organization	Protection, rights, and inclusion for displaced populations

3.3.2 Document Analysis

To contextualise and triangulate the practitioner accounts collected through semi-structured interviews, a structured document analysis was undertaken of the principal policy instruments that constitute the formal architecture of refugee governance in Kenya. Three documents were selected on the basis of their direct relevance to the governance conditions examined in the findings chapters.

Table 2: Core Refugee Governance Framework Documents

Document	Year	Scope	Relevance to Participation
Shirika Plan for Refugees and Host Communities	2023	National	Framework redefining refugee-host integration and governance participation mechanisms
Refugees (General) Regulations	2024	National	Provides an operational framework for the 2021 Refugee Act
Refugee Act (Kenya)	2021	National	Legal basis for refugee rights and governance structures

Source: Republic of Kenya (2021; 2023; 2024).

Three dimensions were also examined across all three documents: i) how refugee rights and entitlements are formally defined; ii) which institutional actors are recognised as responsible for their delivery; and, iii) how the distribution of responsibility between state, international, and non-governmental actors is codified. These dimensions map directly onto the research questions answered in the findings chapter, allowing the analysis to move between what policy documents formally prescribe and what practitioners describe as operational reality. By the same token, it engages with what Gammeltoft-Hansen and Tan (2017) conceptualize as a protection gap between

codified rights and their practical enforceability, while extending that concept to ask not only where the gap exists, but how the formal architecture renders it invisible.

3.4 Information Processing Techniques

A thematic analysis was employed to analyse the empirical material generated through semi-structured interviews, documentary sources, and researcher field notes. Such an approach was selected because it allows for a systematic examination of how recurring interpretive patterns emerge across actors operating within a common governance environment (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is adequate for research concerned with institutional practice and policy interpretation, as it facilitates the identification of recurring patterns while maintaining sensitivity to variation across organizational positions (Nowell et al., 2017). At the same time, this method has been criticised for the potential fragmentation of findings when themes are insufficiently grounded in the data. An additional risk lies in overemphasizing frequency at the expense of structural significance, thereby privileging commonly articulated concerns while overlooking less frequently voiced yet analytically important dynamics (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

These risks were addressed by adopting a structured and iterative coding process grounded explicitly in the empirical material. Data collection continued until interviews no longer yielded substantively new institutional patterns consistent with the theoretical frameworks. This decision was not based on numerical targets but on analytical judgement informed by repetition across interviews. Themes were selected and consolidated based on their frequency of mention throughout interviews, where references appeared across different organisational categories. Frequency was treated as an indicator of shared institutional concern, then divergent or minority perspectives were retained where they illuminated tensions within the governance environment (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To ensure analytical rigour, the study followed a phased approach to thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2006). First, the researcher became familiar with the data through repeated readings of interview transcripts, field notes, and institutional documents, all of which were transcribed or reviewed shortly after collection (Phase 1). This facilitated early engagement with emerging patterns and informed subsequent data collection. Second, initial codes were generated through close reading of the material, with particular attention to language used by practitioners to describe how responsibility is assigned and delimited within institutional practice (Phase 2). These codes, in turn, were informed by the study's post-structuralist and post-development framework, allowing theoretical concepts to guide interpretation without imposing fixed categories. Third, related codes were grouped into provisional themes that captured recurring ways in which refugee livelihoods were problematised and governed within urban Nairobi (Phase 3). These themes were subsequently reviewed and refined

through iterative comparison across interviews and organisational contexts (Phase 4), leading to clearly defined themes aligned with the research questions (Phase 5). Finally, the findings were written up using empirical examples drawn from interviews and field observations to substantiate the analysis (Phase 6), in line with qualitative research best practice (Creswell et al., 2007).

3.5 Positionality, Ethical Considerations, and Potential Limitations

This research is attentive to questions of ethics, positionality, and reflexivity, given the unequal power relations that structure development research in humanitarian settings. As a foreign researcher (*mzungu*) conducting fieldwork in Nairobi and affiliated with a Swedish university through the MFS Sida program, I am encapsulated within the same transnational knowledge and funding infrastructures that shape the humanitarian–development nexus under study. These positional asymmetries are particularly significant in Kenya, where international research and humanitarian intervention have a long-standing institutional presence. Such dynamics may be further reinforced by the power asymmetry inherent in the interview process itself, especially through the researcher’s ability to lay out the interview agenda (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Development research in the Global South has long been criticised for reproducing extractive forms of knowledge production, particularly when research subjects are positioned primarily as sources of data rather than as actors embedded in complex political and institutional systems (Scheyvens & Leslie, 2000; Kapoor, 2004; Ferguson, 1990; Escobar, 2011). Acknowledging these limitations is therefore a necessary ethical starting point instead of a procedural afterthought, including how I have not lived personally through the challenges presented while still engaging directly with them as a researcher (Wibben, 2016).

Conscious of such challenges, the study deliberately focuses on practitioners working within NGOs, IOs, and RLOs, instead of directly interviewing refugees. This choice is grounded in an ethics-of-care approach (Tracy, 2010), aimed at avoiding the risk of re-traumatisation in a context marked by displacement, protracted vulnerability, and overlapping humanitarian intervention (Nalule, 2023). Hence, engaging refugees directly would risk reproducing extractive research practices or prompting the recounting of traumatic experiences without offering meaningful benefit or protection (Tracy, 2010). By focusing on institutional and practitioner perspectives, the study does not seek to attribute responsibility for livelihood precarity to humanitarian or NGO actors. On the contrary, many of the practitioners interviewed operate within, and often in spite of, restrictive federal regimes that delimit refugees’ legal presence and economic possibilities in Kenya. Similar approaches have been adopted in critical refugee and development research to reduce the risk of re-traumatisation while still generating analytically meaningful insights into policy and institutional practice (Mackenzie et al., 2007; Clark-Kazak, 2017).

Focusing on humanitarian professionals and organizational actors does not imply neutrality toward institutional power. Examining practitioner perspectives therefore allows the analysis to trace how livelihood governance is negotiated within these constraints, in lieu of assuming that institutions possess the authority to resolve them. While the study deliberately avoided interviewing refugees in their capacity as aid recipients, for the ethical reasons outlined above, several participants were themselves refugees employed in practitioner or coordination roles within refugee-led organizations (RLOs). Their perspectives are therefore included in the analysis as institutional actors rather than as research subjects defined by their displacement. These participants offered insights into livelihood governance from a position of both professional embeddedness and lived experience of the legal and material constraints the study examines. For these respondents in particular, my outsider positionality may have carried additional weight, and care was taken to frame questions around their organizational and professional experience rather than their personal circumstances (Nalule, 2023).

All participants were informed about the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of the research prior to participation. Informed consent was obtained either in written or verbal form, depending on practical constraints and participant preference. Written informed consent is obtained prior to each interview, depending on participants' availability and preferences. Given the professional roles of most respondents, anonymisation is applied consistently to remove organizational identifiers and personal markers during transcription and analysis. Furthermore, interview recordings and transcripts are stored securely and accessed only by the researcher. These procedures follow established qualitative research standards for ethical conduct and data protection (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative case studies are often criticised for limited generalisability. This concern is acknowledged. The purpose of this research is not to derive universal claims about refugee participation (Flyvbjerg, 2006), but to generate analytically transferable insights regarding how participatory governance is structured under conditions of legal ambiguity and institutional reform. By situating the analysis within clearly defined policy frameworks and actor perceptions, the study allows readers to assess the extent to which its findings may resonate with comparable refugee governance contexts.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and subsequent analysis are organized around the three sub-questions that structure this research. The first section examines how administrative and management practices produce structural exclusion. The second addresses the consequences of these dynamics for refugee livelihood strategies. The third explores how these conditions are normalized through self-reliance discourse.

4.1 How does the refugee documentation system function in Nairobi, Kenya?

4.1.1 Documentation as a gatekeeping mechanism

The function of documentation within refugee governance in Nairobi extends well beyond its nominal administrative purpose of verifying identity. As practitioner assessments make consistently clear, the refugee identity document constitutes the operative threshold between legal existence and institutional invisibility within Kenya's increasingly digitalised governance environment (Interviews 2; 3; 9). This includes the cascade of secondary credentials it unlocks, including business permits, KRA PIN registration, SIM card ownership, and formal banking access. In an attempt to rectify this polarization, the Refugee Act 2021 signalled a reform in Kenya's approach that later advanced the Shirika Plan (Ginn & Tang, 2025). The first prepared the country to start moving away from a policy of encampment, which had confined the majority of refugees to Kakuma or Dadaab, with only a small proportion permitted to reside in urban centres under special dispensation, toward an integration-oriented model that grants refugees access to the labor market and the right to establish businesses (Halakhe & Kara, 2025). Although even with these advances, it is important to bear in mind that the Shirika Plan's predominant initiative was to turn the camps into new municipalities (Interviews 2; 4; 5), and not to necessarily facilitate moves to urban cities. As Escobar (2011: 108) notes, documentary practices are far from being 'innocuous' and as will be shown in greater detail, these organizational processes are connected to many power networks.

In any case, this legislative reorientation stood out as a substantial measure to prioritize self-reliance over humanitarian dependency. Considering policy revision, Interviewee 3 noted that now "*the bigger percentage of the responsibility of issuing documentation has moved through government and not UNHCR*", interpreting this as evidence of institutional maturation. The legal and administrative responsibility for refugee registration and documentation has formally transitioned to the Department of Refugee Services (DRS), consolidating the change from international oversight to state-led sovereignty. However, this formal relocation of authority has not translated into a reduction in precarity (Ferguson, 1990). Through this prism, Interviewee 3 continued remarking that despite structural adjustments, "*nothing much has changed*" in the material conditions of the displacement regime. Practitioners, instead, describe delays in documentation and uncertainty regarding legal status

continue to function as technologies of government that regulate access to the formal economy, including banking and public services (Feldman, 2015). As Interviewee 1 articulated in a similar vein, while the policy may state that “*documentation should be issued in three months*”, in practice, the process remains a “*nightmare*” of bureaucracy that restricts growth and limits the “*pathways to identity*”. By stating pathways to identity, it inadvertently captures the Butlerian condition of how recognition is seldom a neutral administrative act. The frame through which a life is made intelligible to institutions determines whether the precarity of that life can acquire political weight, or whether it dissolves into the background noise of a governance problem to be technically managed. Documentation, therefore, does more than confirm presence when it governs whether the suffering attached to a life can be perceived as unjust and not as simply inevitable (Spratt, 2022).

Beyond the work permit, access to the most basic economic infrastructure remains contingent on identity documentation that the system itself withholds. Interviewee 8, described her mother's phone being closed at a Safaricom¹ outlet despite national policy having changed, illustrating the gap between gazetted provision and outcomes: “*It will tell you that with the new localization, refugees are allowed to register with Safaricom, but that's not practically what is happening*”. The queer refugee advocate, Interviewee 10, described how documentation denial is instrumentalised as a mechanism of forced repatriation by stating “*it is an adamant result that the people in the Directorate of Refugee Services are doing to deny our people the documentation, so that at the end of the day, they will choose voluntary repatriation.*” By maintaining refugees in a condition of perpetual near-recognition, the refugee subject produced within this arrangement is neither included nor excluded in any categorical sense, ergo, suspended within an administrative limbo (Hyndman, 2000).

Likewise, Butler (2016) argues that ungrievable lives are not simply unrecognized in these instances. They are lives whose destruction registers as negligible because the frame within which they exist has already constituted them as inhabiting a prior condition of loss (Polychroniou, 2021). In parallel, what makes the Nairobi documentation context fit in this framework is precisely the near-recognition it produces. Policy entitlements exist on paper and fail at the counter, which makes refugees occupy a subject position in which their exclusion is perpetually narrativised as progress toward inclusion.

4.1.2 The urban–camp registration divide

A second layer of documentation-related exclusion emerges through what practitioners consistently described as the spatial fixing of legal identity. While formal refugee status is presented as nationally valid, in practice it is territorially bounded, since registration is tied to a specific site – most often a camp – and thereby delineating mobility as an unlikely occurrence. The disjuncture between the

¹ Safaricom is the largest mobile network operator in Kenya and its 3G network covers 94% of the Kenyan population (Safaricom, 2021).

portability of rights and their spatially constrained bureaucratic enactment is exemplified through understanding that *“if they are registered in Nairobi, they are complete to stay in Nairobi. Their movement out of Nairobi even has to go through a government process”* in Interview 5. As Jaji (2012: 221) argues, refugee encampment in Kenya is premised on the deliberate “tethering of people to specific territorial spaces”, functioning as a mechanism of physical separation between refugees and citizens.

Jaji (2012) observes that this tethering risks producing refugees as what Turner (1967) called undifferentiated raw material, a population whose social coordinates have been stripped to the point where individuation becomes institutionally impossible. Butler's (2004) framework adds a further dimension to this observation. Populations constituted through monolithic group identity are, in her terms, both hypervisible and individually unknowable. The mass category absorbs the particular life, such that vulnerability can be acknowledged at the group level while remaining unaddressable at the level of the person. In the registration context, this absorption happens through the bureaucratic designation of a site (Kakuma, Nairobi, Dadaab), which becomes the operative identity of the person it anchors.

In effect, documentation operates to fix refugees within administratively designated zones, recasting mobility as an exceptional and regulated act rather than an intrinsic component of livelihood strategies. The encampment thus marks ‘the first curtailment of self’ (Goffman, 1961: 14 cited in Jaji, 2012), or in Agamben and Sacer's (1998) terms, a reduction to bare life, or preconditions for refugee adjustment to the administered environment of the camp. For refugees originally registered in camps such as Kakuma, this spatial fixation generates pronounced forms of urban precarity. Interviewee 8 described how individuals who relocate to Nairobi for education or employment remain administratively *“tied to their family back in the camp,”* such that their legal identity does not correspond to their lived location. This produces a condition of bureaucratic incongruence when refugees are physically present in the city while remaining institutionally positioned elsewhere.

To sum up, the process of transferring or updating documentation to reflect urban residence is both procedurally opaque and institutionally restrictive, giving rise to a recursive dynamic in which formal recognition is a prerequisite for accessing the mechanisms that would enable such recognition. The urban–camp registration divide thus operates as a self-reinforcing bureaucratic loop, systematically producing a population that is simultaneously incorporated within the national refugee framework and excluded from its urban articulation. As one practitioner at a Kenyan NGO observed, refugees registered in Nairobi are legally bound to the city: *“their movement out of Nairobi even has to go through a government process until they are given a travel permit”* (Interview 4). Butler (2004) argues that the frame governing grievability determines not who is physically present, but whose presence is

institutionally registered and therefore whose precarity can be politically addressed. In *Frames of War*, she poses the question of what constitutes a life in terms of its recognisability within existing systems of apprehension. For the refugee residing in Nairobi while administratively positioned in Kakuma, that question has a concrete answer. Their urban life is formally unnoticed, not because the state is unaware of their presence, but because the registration architecture has not produced the document through which that presence can generate a claim (Butler, 2004). The frame, here, is bureaucratic rather than visual, but its effects on grievability are assembled identically. Additionally, shown in Figure 1, this operates across a zoned geography of selective regulation, in which different areas of Nairobi carry distinct enforcement densities and exposure profiles for refugees.

4.1.3 Legal liminality: asylum seekers, citizenship, and differentiated enforcement

A third dimension of documentation-related precarity emerges through the unstable distinction between asylum seekers and recognized refugees, a differentiation that practitioners described as both legally consequential and operationally blurred (Interviews 11; 13). While the refugee label ostensibly confers a defined legal status, the asylum seeker designation still remains provisional as it is highly susceptible to administrative interpretation. The asylum seeker whose determination locates the person within a subject position from which their suffering cannot make a fully legible claim on the protection regime, because the regime has not yet decided whether they qualify for one. Polychroniou (2021), reading Butler on refugee subjectivity, describes this as the performative paradox of precarious existence, in which the unresolved nature of legal status prevents demand articulation that the institutional framework could grasp as legitimate.

Interviewee 11 identified this ambiguity as a central source of risk, noting that *“the lack of difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker is also another risk or problem, because many of them are still asylum seekers but they call themselves refugees.”* This statement points not only to a semantic slippage but to a higher severance between formal classification and lived identity. The interchangeable use of these categories reflects, on the one hand, the aspirational claim to recognition and, on the other, the opacity of the legal process through which such recognition is granted. In effect, this ambiguity creates uncertainty not only for the refugees themselves, but also at the institutional level, where authorities cannot provide protection or assistance in the same way. The consequences of this liminal positioning are intensified within enforcement contexts. Interview 2 described how individuals classified as asylum seekers are routinely subjected to detention practices that lack a clear legal foundation. In fact, even families with children are held in police transit conditions *“that are so inhuman,”* while awaiting transfer to camps – a process that may extend over several months (Interview 2). These conditions illustrate how the absence of definitive legal recognition enables

discretionary forms of governance in which procedural safeguards are inconsistently applied or entirely circumvented.

A final dimension of documentation-related exclusion emerges through the structural impossibility of transition from refugee status to citizenship, and the consequent foreclosure of long-term socio-economic security. Within the context of Nairobi, this impossibility is rendered markedly poignant, as prolonged residence and socio-cultural integration stand in stark contrast to the rigidity of legal status. Butler puts that the ‘emphasis on the grievability of some lives structurally necessitates the de-emphasis of the grievability of others’ (Spratt, 2022: 475). The prevailing citizenship impossibility in Kenya produces a version of this dynamic that is spatially specific and temporally extended. A life built entirely within the national territory, educated within its school system, socialized within its linguistic and cultural norms, and contributing to its economy, remains legally exterior to the political community that has materially formed it. The refugee who has done everything within their structural capacity to integrate, and who encounters a juridical boundary at the point of identity documentation, occupies an outside position (Spratt, 2022). Interviewee 4, himself born and raised in Kenya as a refugee, articulated this contradiction with notable precision: *“I think we almost have zero success stories, like someone who was a refugee and became a Kenyan.”* In the city, the expectation of eventual inclusion is pinned for. However, at the point of legal majority, individuals who have lived their entire lives as de facto members of Kenyan society encounter a definitive juridical boundary: the inability to obtain a national identity card. Put simply, an otherwise coherent sense of belonging is formally invalidated.

Practitioners described how this moment produces not only legal exclusion but also a reconfiguration of everyday social practice. In order to navigate urban life, young refugees often resort to strategic self-presentation, omitting or obscuring aspects of their legal status in interactions with authorities, friends, and other Kenyans (Interview 2). The citizenship impossibility shapes, in consequence, how individuals inhabit and perform their identity in the city and make livelihood opportunities harder. As Interviewee 1 explained, even in cases where refugees attempt to pursue longer-term economic strategies, such as property acquisition, they are constrained by legal prohibitions that require reliance on Kenyan co-signatories, arrangements that are widely perceived as insecure and open to exploitation, with instances of co-signatories *“running with the money.”* The inability to secure assets or stable employment pathways further installs a short-term orientation towards survival, rather than accumulation or advancement. Across Interviews 1, 2, 5, 11, and 12, police harassment emerged as a pervasive feature of refugee life in Nairobi. Practitioners consistently described encounters with law enforcement not as exceptional events but as routine mechanisms of extraction. Interviewee 11 recounted how police officers *“surround churches on Sundays”* to arrest Eritrean refugees, who are then required to pay approximately 5,000 Kenyan shillings to secure their release. Similarly,

Interviewee 1 reflected on their own experience: “*It happened to me once and I had to give the officer some money for me to be let go.*”

Another manifestation of the state of exception is found in the experiences of LGBTQ and queer refugees (Agamben, 2005). The connection between economic exclusion and sexual exploitation is dire among LGBTQ and queer refugees, who face a “*double marginalization*” (Interview 11), reflecting on established reliance on the ‘category-based nature of refugee law’ where sexual and gender identities are resistant to fixed labels (Dustin, 2026: 2). Interviewee 10 revealed that when formal economic pathways are blocked by documentation regimes and discriminatory hiring, survival economies expand out of necessity. Polychroniou (2021: 265) qualifies refugee vulnerability, in Butlerian terms, as the combined withdrawal of the layered ‘supportive plexus that preserves life’, encompassing not only the collapse of protection in the country of origin but the merging denial of rights, recourse, and recognition in the country of reception. For queer refugees in Nairobi, this withdrawal is simultaneous across every axis that Butler (2016; 2025) identifies as constitutive of a nongrievable life. These porous categories, simply put, run counter to and accelerate the erosion of already fragile conditions of recognizability for refugees, adding more burden to livelihood strategies as individuals are required to position themselves *somehow* within an unstable regime of legibility.

Far from being a choice, an estimated “*eight out of ten individuals are engaged in sex work, not as a matter of choice, but as a predictable outcome of constrained opportunity structures*”, sex work is a “*community-embedded survival*” strategy necessitated by the total closure of formal labor pathways (Interview 11). This group also faces the extreme threat of “*conversion practices*” and “*corrective rape*,” violence that is often ignored by civil society because it challenges the moral regulation of the host community as it is illegal to be queer in Kenya. Consequently, queer refugees are forced into “*underground systems*” and “*safe houses*” that operate through clandestine movements, governed by a logic of total invisibility. Locations are never disclosed without an invite, and beneficiaries are subject to rigorous sign-out procedures and emergency contact protocols. To evade raids by law enforcement, these systems utilize a strategy of staggered relocation, where individuals are rotated between different shelters to disrupt the regularities of their presence in any single neighborhood. This clandestine movement is a direct response to the arbitrary arrests and communal hotspots of hostility that characterize the urban landscape for those expressing non-conforming gender identities. Within these underground systems, “*cloud-based data protection*” emerges as a critical technology of survival (Interview 11). Recognizing that physical documentation acts as a ‘technology of government’ that can be weaponized during raids (Feldman, 2015), practitioners in these severe conditions have adopted the practice of burning physical files and bio-data after processing.

This is a radical inversion of the documentation regime (Agier, 2020); where the state uses documentation to exclude, the underground system uses digital erasure to protect. Butler (2016: 19) writes that ungrievable lives are those that already “inhabit a lost and destroyed zone”, such that their further destruction registers as the destruction of nothing. The underground system is the spatial form of a condition in which a population becomes ungovernable, where legal and policing institutions meant for protection become threats, forcing concealment and structuring life through institutional processes (Escobar, 2011).

4.2 How does it affect the refugees' livelihood strategies?

4.2.1 Nationality and cultural locus as livelihood determinants

A first point of differentiation within refugee livelihood strategies emerges through the role of nationality and culturally instilled economic orientations. Practitioners repeatedly emphasized that refugees do not enter the urban economy as undifferentiated actors; quite the contrary, they arrive with varying degrees of familiarity with market practices, distinct livelihood strategies and unequal access to community support systems (Interviews 1-14). Interviewee 1 provided a mapping of this differentiation in Nairobi: “*Somalis in Eastleigh are running really great businesses; Congolese in Kibera are in tailoring; Ethiopians in Parklands are in restaurants.*” This spatial concentration is not merely a coincidence, as it points to the replication of culturally specific economic practices in certain neighbourhoods, where networks of compatriots facilitate entry into established sectors. Nationality functions not only as a marker of identity, but also as a channel for economic positioning, influencing both the type of activities undertaken and the degree of success achievable within those activities (Escobar, 2020; Ferguson, 1990). Although the previous statement is not a specific phenomenon that happens only in Nairobi or with refugees, the current subsection will unpack the specificities in this case study.

Through this, other nationality groups were described as encountering more substantial impediments in reiterating their skills into urban livelihoods. People originating from Bantu farming communities, Interviewee 8 observed, tend to arrive with enterprise orientations that are relatively readily morphed into small business formation within the informal urban economy. By contrast, pastoralist communities from South Sudan arrive from livelihood systems structured around animal husbandry and seasonal mobility. These are economic forms that bear little structural resemblance to the kiosk economy, market vending, or skills-based self-employment that urban livelihood programs typically promote, such that “*they don't know what starting a business even means*” (Interview 8). This assessment links with Weima's (2026: 6) analysis of Hyndman (2000), echoing how the portrayal of “sustainability and outside-the-box thinking” also went along with the decline of “welfare solidarity” due to its substitution by business models that now focus on entrepreneurship activities.

These distinctions point to the uneven distribution of economic knowledge and market orientation that development institutions, for Ferguson (1990), flatten into a singular administrable subject. Albeit, the end here is not to reify cultural differences or to reproduce a developmental hierarchy between communities. But, crucially, this form of capital is not easily substituted through standardized interventions, visible in the limitations of livelihood programs that assume a baseline of entrepreneurial knowledge or apply uniform training models across heterogeneous populations (Interview 7; 4). Livelihood strategies in Nairobi, inarguably, are profoundly shaped by ‘home away from home’ sentiments, reflecting biopolitical clusterings where nationality serves as both a mechanism for protection and a site of surveillance (Agier, 2008). Still, Interviewee 7 also flagged internal heterogeneity disputes, observing that tribal and clan structures often produce economically consequential distinctions that external programming categories, which operate at the level of nationality (if at all), fail to register.

Escobar (2011) and elaborated by Zetter (2021a; 2021b) flag how development institutions generate categorical identities – ‘the refugee,’ ‘the displaced person,’ ‘the vulnerable household’ – that make populations administrable while simultaneously effacing the particular social formations through which those populations actually organize their lives and livelihoods. The Somali case occupies a distinctive position in this context. Interviewee 2, 5, and 7, shared that the Somali community operates through a dense architecture of clan-based capital that functions as both a financial and a protective infrastructure. Within Somali communities, “*the clan comes first, then the family*” (Interview 2). This follows a logic of solidarity that enables access to informal credit, housing, commercial space, and market networks that bypasses the documentation requirements and bureaucratic gatekeeping that constrain other communities’ economic participation. This solidarity fabric operates across generations, constituting a form of community governance (Agier, 2008), functionally simultaneously as security mechanisms and as an internally stratified site of inclusion and exclusion. Interviewee 5 documented this stratification through resource-based conflicts that emerge in congested commercial zones.

Interviewee 7 was also explicit about the scale of this barrier to mobility. To corroborate this idea, the risks attached to movement on public transport are not uniform across the refugee population. For specific communities, physical mobility through the city’s transport networks carries security dimensions that compound the economic costs of travel with the risk of identification, harassment, and arrest. This nationality-based visibility can carry risk, i.e., South Sudanese and Sudanese refugees are often subjected to hyper-visibility; their height and skin tone make them “*obvious targets for profiling*” in the public transportation system (Interview 9). In addition, for individuals whose gender expression is visibly non-conforming, the use of transport including *matatus* and *saccos* carries risks

of verbal and physical assault that many find prohibitive, plus frequently are the site of communal policing of gender and sexual norms. “*People, particularly trans women, have to present as their assigned birth sex*” (Interview 13), describing the coping strategy adopted by many: suppressing gender expression when navigating public space in order to reduce the risk of identification and harm.

What emerges here is a portrait of refugee livelihoods composed not only by what the state withholds, but by what communities carry. The cultural and social resources that refugees bring to Nairobi, or are denied the conditions to deploy, are not epiphenomenal to the question of livelihood when heeding practitioners perspectives (Escobar, 2011). Even so, this same constitutive role remains largely invisible within the formal programming apparatus, which continues to approach refugees through a framework of absence (Butler, 2016). For instance, the subject is imagined as lacking documentation, capital, and skills, and therefore requiring the technical provision of each in turn. In doing so, livelihood programming partially echoes an anachronistic developmental logic that obscures the unequal social and political conditions through which precarity is produced in the first place, resembling a kind of developmental *terra nullius*: an institutional imagination in which communities are treated as empty spaces awaiting technical insertion (Ferguson, 1990).

4.2.2 Informality and self-employment as the structural default

If the preceding subsection established that community of origin conditions form and orientation of refugee economic activity in Nairobi, this subsection examines the structural ceiling within which that activity is contained. The confinement of refugees to informality is an outcome produced by the intersection of legal restrictions on formal labor and a policy apparatus that frames entrepreneurship as evidence of resilience, all while withholding the conditions that would make formal economic participation possible. To this end, this articulation correlates with what Hyndman (2000) considers as ‘neohumanism’ via “neoliberal moral minimalism arrangements” (Weima et al., 2026: 6).

Specifically, the absence of nationally recognized identification makes formal employment inaccessible across Kenya's increasingly digitalized labor market. Interviewee 12, describing the economic activities previously observed at the now-suspended Eastleigh Community Wellness Centre, noted that refugees “*end up trying to do menial tasks, hand-to-mouth type of work.*” The specific forms enumerated are consistent across the interview dataset: domestic cleaning, house management, street vending, and hawking. These activities share their economic marginality and invisibility, as they generate no formal employment record, accumulate no social security benefits, provide no insurance coverage, and leave workers without legal recourse in cases of non-payment or exploitation (Omata, 2021). In Butlerian (2016; 2025) terms, it is the material expression of withheld recognition. Interviewee 12 connected this directly to health access, formulating that the absence of insurance

leaves refugees unable to access the Social Health Authority design that the Kenyan government has made the primary gateway to public healthcare services.

All in all, practitioner narratives frequently invoke the resilience of the displaced. For instance, Interviewee 1 contested narratives of refugee passivity, asserting that refugees are “*the most hardworking people out there*” who are constantly “*creating jobs for themselves*”. While intended as a recognition of agency, for Hyndman (2000), this celebration of industriousness serves to normalize ongoing precarity; the refugee is reconstructed as an entrepreneurial subject whose success or failure is detached from the failures of the protection regime. Perhaps most tellingly, Interviewee 2 cautioned that the push for self-reliance must not come at the expense of humanitarian relief, warning of a “*risk of relapse*” into absolute vulnerability if protection is prematurely withdrawn in favor of market-based inclusion.

Gender is an added axis of differentiation that crosscuts nationality and legal categories. Interviewee 6 recounted how forcibly displaced women who arrive in Nairobi having been separated from a partner – through death or disappearance – now bear sole responsibility for housing, food, school fees, and the informal accumulation of any savings or capital. As Interviewee 6 explained, “*during the escape from wherever they were coming from, something happened. The husband maybe did not make it, or they lost contact with each other and have never met.*” As a result, the economic strategies adopted by female-headed households are heavily concentrated in mobile vending and hawking. These forms of informal trade require no fixed premises, no business licence, and no documentation, but they expose women to a distinct and largely unacknowledged spectrum of physical risk. Building on this, Interviewee 7 described the specific vulnerability of women who hawk goods through Nairobi’s construction sites and residential compounds. Women are lured into buildings by men presenting themselves as customers and, in documented cases through Interviewee 7’s work, have been raped and robbed.

These crimes produce no formal record, no police report, and no legal remedy because the women involved lack the documentation required to substantiate a complaint and often lack confidence in the security forces, because of harassment patterns. She is apprehended as a body in urban space, but not recognized as a life within it (Butler, 2004; Hodge, 2015). Interviewee 7 asked rhetorically, “*Whom will you point? You do not know their name, you do not know them. If you bring the police tomorrow, they will say it was not me.*” In this way, the refugee woman hawker occupies a position in which her suffering remains unintelligible to government institutions nominally responsible for her protection (Butler, 2016). As Butler (cited in Willig, 2012) argues, when a life is refused recognition and deprived of legal standing, it is actively imperilled by that refusal. Specifically, a hierarchy of lives is present here, where exposure to violence does not translate into public injury and produces a social ontology in which the wrong done to her cannot accumulate into a claim (Butler, 2004; Hodge, 2015).

4.3 What driving forces underpin the refugee's documentation system?

4.3.1 Funding cuts and the self-reliance shift

A recent reconfiguration of the humanitarian funding landscape has generated practitioner narratives that consistently resist its framing as a developmental transition toward refugee self-sufficiency. The swap towards self-reliance is more accurately read as the depoliticization of a funding crisis through its reiteration into the language of individual resilience and community capacity (Omata, 2023) – a dynamic Ferguson (1990) would recognize as the operation of the anti-politics machine. Characterising self-reliance as “*the big thing*” in contemporary humanitarian-development discourse, Interviewee 2 explicitly connected its prominence to “*donor fatigue*”, entailing a long-term structural exhaustion with protracted displacement that has been compounding since the post-Covid fiscal contraction began to accelerate funding decline (Brown, 2021).

Interviewee 2 further situated the self-reliance shift within the longer history of Kenya's protracted displacement regime, noting that the funding decline did not begin with the current political moment. The current crisis is an acceleration of the trajectory that has been visible to practitioners for years (Interviews 2; 7; 9; 10), and to which neither the Kenyan government nor the international humanitarian system has developed an adequate response. Reflecting on the relationship between formal aid availability and refugee economic outcomes, Interviewee 4 argued that the correlation assumed by self-reliance discourse – that reduced aid dependency produces increased economic self-sufficiency – is empirically unsupported by anything observable in the Nairobi context: “*I don't really think even in the days when there was proper aid that it was really translating into more formal employment or better jobs*”. This observation turns the discrete temporal logic underlying the self-sufficiency argument invalid. To no surprise, if the period of abundant aid did not produce formal employment, then the withdrawal of that aid cannot be expected to produce it either (Omata, 2021). What it produces instead, in Interviewee 12's view, is the removal of a partial buffer that was dependency-producing and inadequately targeted, but nonetheless present, without any corresponding change in the documentation barriers.

The self-reliance rhetoric, in this formulation, is the latest iteration where the failure of structural reform is managed through the recalibration of expectation. Refugees, here, are redesignated as capable of self-sufficiency because the political and fiscal conditions for continued assistance have been exhausted (Vidal, 2024; Skran & Easton-Calabria, 2020; Escobar, 2011). This reorientation is experienced at the community level as the disappearance of programs whose effects in skills, in capital access, or in institutional connection were never fully consolidated, leaving populations in a condition of interrupted development that is, in some respects, more disorienting than the absence of programming would have been (Interviews 8; 13; 14). The partial investment, withdrawn before its

effects could compound, produces short-term funding cycle vulnerabilities that Interviewee 13 would later describe as incompatible with the long-term nature of the livelihood development machine (Ferguson, 1990).

One of the most keen extents of self-reliance materializes when its limits are pushed to the extreme, where *“the community has been pushed to the edge of the cliff, and the only option is to jump”* (Interview 13). As described by Interviewee 10, whose organisation also works across the region with LGBTQ+ displaced persons, *“this funding freezing has made our community the most vulnerable.”* A population that was already relying on sex work as a default is now doing so without access to the protective equipment or health monitoring that would reduce the risk of HIV transmission and sexually transmitted infection. Free condom distribution, HIV testing, antiretroviral drug provision, mental health counselling, and sexual reproductive health services are essential tools through which a population that Interviewee 10 estimated at 80% engaged in sex work maintained any form of health protection within that survival economy. These services are not programmatic luxuries or developmental add-ons but, in the most literal sense, survival infrastructure. *“A pair of a packet of condoms in Kenya is around 150 shillings,”* Interviewee 10 observed, *“and this one service provider who was giving them out for free is no longer doing this. But this one beneficiary cannot have 100 shillings – they cannot have one dollar a day.”* This configuration does not sustain livelihoods so much as it compels participation in a survival economy.

Consequently, this is a predictable effect of the conversion of a political condition into a technical problem, hence, the anti-politics machine's characteristic operation (Ferguson, 1990). Kohlenberger, Martin-Shields, and Easton-Calabria (2025) equally observe that behind the technocratic concept of self-reliance lie explicit political interests. Including, donor countries' use of self-reliance as a policy vehicle to reduce long-term financial commitments to refugee populations. Or, in addition, as a mechanism of geographic containment that keeps displaced populations in the Global South by framing local economic integration as a viable and sufficient alternative to resettlement (Escobar, 2020). The framing of funding withdrawal as empowerment, in Ferguson's (1990) terms, depoliticizes abandonment by narrating it as graduation. Cognitive dissonance, hereby, is demanded of actors within the machine (Ferguson, 1990). When practitioners who witness programmes closing and populations deteriorating are nonetheless required to boil down that deterioration into the terminology of capacity-building and community resilience, or when donors who have withdrawn the conditions for self-reliance continue to define its benchmarks, these become testimonies to this standard.

4.3.2 The Limits of Localization

If the self-reliance shift described in the preceding subsection reconfigures responsibility for economic survival at the level of the individual refugee subject, localization performs an analogous

operation at the organizational level. Redistributing the burden of program delivery downward through the humanitarian governance hierarchy without accompanying redistribution of the resources that would make that delivery substantively possible is a clear consequence of the refugee-in-the-machine (Ferguson, 1990; Hepner & Treiber, 2021). Important to remind us, localization composes NGOs and RLOs as governance nodes responsible for the implementation of a protection mandate whose terms and resource architecture remain determined above them (Interviews 5; 12; 14). The two processes together produce a double movement of responsabilization in which both the individual and the organization are made accountable for being “first aid responders” (Vidal, 2024: 6). No doubt, localization is attestation to the central logic of the anti-politics machine previously explained: political questions of redistribution are transformed into technical questions of implementation and capacity.

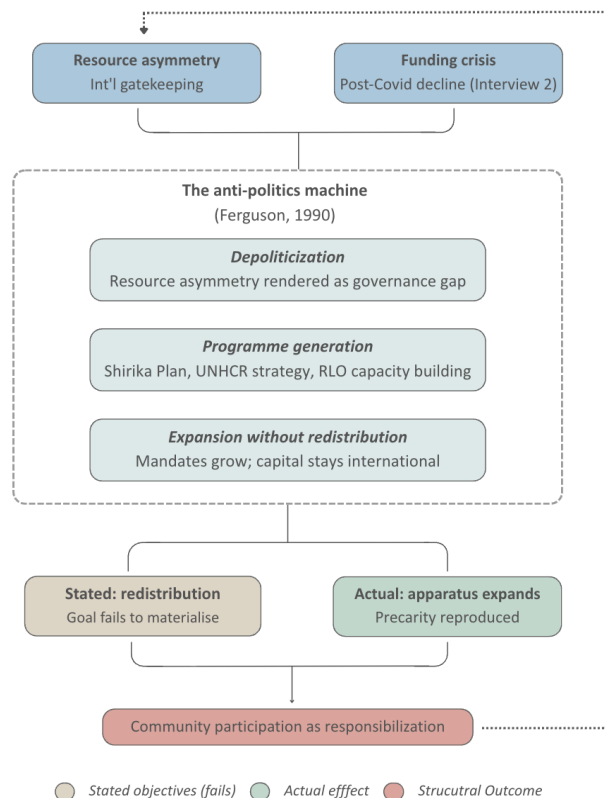


Figure 2: The anti-politics machine and the localization paradox. Source: Author's own, after Ferguson (1990).

Following that point, the present diagram maps Ferguson's (1990) anti-politics machine directly onto the localization process. The two blue input boxes represent the political conditions – resource asymmetry through international gatekeeping, and the funding crisis accelerated by post-Covid decline (Interview 2; Dromi, 2025) – that enter the machine. These are the conditions that the machine's first move transforms. Stage 1, depoliticization, is the core Fergusonian move with the

political problem of resource asymmetry being re-rendered as a technical governance gap to be filled by capacity reform. Stage 2, program generation, is where the apparatus deploys its interventions through the Shirika Plan, RLO capacity building, and so forth. Stage 3, expansion without redistribution, is how apparatus grows its bureaucratic reach downward to national and community actors, but the capital architecture does not follow. The machine then splits into two outputs, as Ferguson predicts. Redistribution fails to materialize, where the actual effect turns into the model expanding once more. Both outputs converge into community participation as responsabilization and the feedback loop shows the self-reproducing logic.

Hepner and Treiber (2025; 2021) go a step further in mapping the anti-politics machine into refugee governance through simultaneously advancing an ‘Anti-Refugee Machine’ framework. By blending Ferguson’s extensive conceptualization, which focuses on the downfalls of funneling issues into technocratic fixes envisioned by development projects, the authors further show that, in reality, this is not only the fault of Global North states. Refugee-hosting states similarly advance the fanciful promise of managed controlledness via containment, whereby the hosting model reframes refugee protection while relocating permanently the spatial endpoint of refugee trajectories (Brown et al., 2025; Hepner & Treiber, 2021). The dynamicity in Nairobi has historically torn into these wishful ambitions since the kinetic geographical locus goes against the containment paradigm. A major advance in the Anti-Refugee Machine framework, advanced by Brown et al. (2025), is the difference this entails when considering the distinction between containment and incubation. At its core, the first operates through a security-oriented rationality – seen through historical Kenyan state policies –, and the second, by contrast, represents a developmentalist rearticulation reframing immobility as productive and future-oriented. For Brown et al. (2025: 27), “[i]ncubation normalizes the failures of protection policies by absorbing refugees into institutionalized systems of poverty, marginalization, and labor exploitation that obscure the specificity of their experience as refugees”, expanding the refugee-in-the-machine anew. Incubation, within this insidious domain, equips the extraction of economic value from refugee populations under the guise of livelihoods integration and skill-building through forward-looking developmental narratives.

The localization framing is also presented as a democratization of the humanitarian space, as reflected in the emphasis on capacity training by Atputharajah and Wanga (2020). Plainly, it is a reorientation away from the donor-driven, internationally managed model of refugee assistance toward community or national anchored governance (Lavenex & Vaagland, 2025). The Shirika Plan for Refugees and Host Communities and the 2021 Refugee Act formalize this reorientation at the policy level, foregrounding inclusion, responsibility-sharing, and the integration of refugee and host community development planning as strategic priorities. At the discursive level, localization promises to shorten the distance between governance actors and the populations they serve while also redirecting

resources toward actors with sustained community presence (Atputharajah & Wanga, 2020). To that end, the relationship between localization as *discourse* and not as *resource reallocation* corresponds currently to mandates being transferred, but funding remaining concentrated.

Interviewee 2, of a national organization formally mandated on matters of refugee governance in Kenya, articulated this conundrum with directness by asking “*where is the funding going?*” They demanded, “*Funding is being taken to international organizations. The national actor within the localization agenda, we do not have access. But we are supposed to do this.*” This agenda, as summarized here, does not meaningfully disrupt the resource network of the international humanitarian system. Within this strand of thought, this is the anti-politics machine operating at the organizational level (Ferguson, 1990). The rhetoric of local ownership generates new institutional expectations and governance roles for national actors without altering the donor-driven financial hierarchies that determine what those actors can actually do. Hepner and Treiber (2025) extend this logic further, addressing these deliberate efforts and unanticipated side effects converging to serve agendas that work largely to the detriment of refugees and the institutions meant to protect them. The Shirika Plan, for example, does not yet produce the material conditions its own logic requires.

Interviewee 1 described their organization's transition away from capacity-strengthening models, chiding it as a popular localization tool when used solely, toward a relationship-based partnership with RLOs. The transition was motivated by the recognition that RLOs “*were already cognizant of what they wanted to do as an organization,*” and that capacity-building imposes repeatedly externally defined models on associations whose governance knowledge was already embedded in community practice. What this transition also reflects, nevertheless, is the fiscal reality that sustained institutional support – the kind that would enable RLOs to develop independent fundraising capacity or multi-year program continuity – requires resources that neither the transitioning organization nor the localization agenda has reliably provided. At the level of the RLO itself, this condition is experienced as a mismatch between institutional visibility and institutional capacity (Ferguson, 1990). That tension is visible when Interviewee 3, representing a RLO engaged in advocacy, digital skills training, and legal outreach, described the demand for their outreach activities constrained by transportation costs that prevented meaningful reach beyond the immediate neighbourhood.

The moral authority argument advanced by national actors also plays a part in the localization agenda. Interviewee 2 argued that national organizations possess capacity to challenge state power that international actors categorically lack: “*when a foreigner tries to do that, they become persona non grata.*” Moral and legal proximity to domestic political processes establishes advantages in the institutional arena. These signifiers, for Hyndman (2000), shows how power is exercised through the management of who is permitted to speak for whom, but the national actor who speaks with moral authority does so within a resource framework that international actors continue to determine. It is

worth noting that this dynamic was reflected in the composition of the interview dataset itself. Only two of the fourteen interviewees were positioned as international actors, with the remainder being Kenyan nationals or refugees working across IOs, NGOs, and RLOs. However, the legitimacy distributed downward through localization does not carry with it the fiscal sovereignty that would make that legitimacy politically consequential. What national organizations are granted, in this constellation, is the authority to implement and to advocate. A distinction that, as Butler (2004) would suggest, marks the outer limit of recognition without the structural conditions to act upon it.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Conclusion

The practitioners whose perspectives formed this research are not the architects of the system they described. Many are working, with considerable effort and genuine commitment, against structural conditions they did not design and cannot unilaterally alter. Taken together, the three sub-questions revealed a logic operating at different institutional altitudes: responsibility for refugee economic survival is perpetually redistributed downward, showing how refugee economic survival is established within Nairobi's humanitarian-development nexus. My objective, through this lens, was to draw attention to how each sub-question exposes a distinct register of the same operation. Including how, when read in sequence, they form an exposition of how the nexus in Nairobi governs not by refusing outright refugee participation but by adjusting the stipulations and expectations under which it can occur. In terms of development agendas, the findings carry direct implications for SDG 8 on decent work and economic growth, SDG 10 on reduced inequalities, and SDG 16 on strong institutions and access to justice.

Toward this end, the study adopted a case study design that combined 14 semi-structured interviews with practitioners working within the refugee livelihoods context in Nairobi, Kenya, with document analysis and relevant literature in a process of triangulation. As the participant working area was not limited to a single institutional domain, it allowed the research to acquire multiple strata of the convoluted landscape of how economic survival for the forcibly displaced is ordered in the capital city. As outlined above, this openness allowed the thesis to expand into different arenas not initially expected, showcasing how the governance apparatus requires refugees to remain legible as dependent and precarious subjects, while funding withdrawals simultaneously flatten any programmatic effort and make it harder to incorporate the different social components that would more efficiently amplify livelihood opportunities. This is why post-structuralist and post-development theoretical grounding was fundamental to this research. The former permitted the investigation to examine how meaning is applied to recent Kenyan refugee policies, and the latter illuminated how developmental interventions, instead of overcoming conditions of depoliticized abandonment, often work within and inadvertently reproduce them. Considered together, Ferguson's (1990) anti-politics machine was applied to analyze the humanitarian-development refugee nexus in Nairobi, and Butler's conceptualization of grievability were utilized to analyze the shaping of survival economies within refugeehood and whose precarity is recognized.

On the question of documentation management, it is possible to verify how intrinsic it is to understanding refugeehood and all that it entails. For livelihoods to be fathomable in the first place,

and to have the possibility of existing with dignity, separating identity from this landscape is not achievable. It is not, however, merely a question of identity construction; it correlates directly to what one can do with that selfhood. Across every interview, documentation emerged as the unanimous factor determining the reduced terrain of opportunities, which then agglomerates into the compounding exclusions disclosed throughout the findings. Institutional maturation is visible when considering the advancements in Kenya's state policies regarding refugees – corroborated through the Department of Refugee Services assuming responsibility for documentation, as a case in point. This constellation of developments represents how positive progress in documentation is now understood. Albeit, the absence of documents is not the whole representation of this conundrum, and three further dimensions surface from this question.

First, the identification document can be geographically tied to the camps, where the division between refugee and citizen is territorially bounded. In Nairobi that physical boundary dissolves, but the identity the document produces does not. Whether registered in Kakuma or in the city itself, the document confirms a categorically non-Kenyan status that the urban environment cannot override. Second, identification documents risk being entirely monolithic, compressing individuality into a single administrative designation and making the person less visible as an individual and, consequently, less grievable as one, in Butlerian terms. This produces a cycle in which populations are continuously grouped, as many interviewees acknowledged the distinct nationalities within Nairobi's refugee communities, yet programs rarely account for the capacity gaps that exist within and between them. If group identity is treated as uniform, one program can be deemed sufficient, and whoever cannot attain the same momentum to build on it is left behind. Third, the asylum seeker occupies a state of near-recognition, unable to access any form of work permit. Work permits for recognized refugees are recognized as tremendously difficult to obtain, seen through the interview dataset, and to utilize. Undeniably, they cannot be requested at all if legal refugee status has not yet been granted, so the asylum seeker is therefore suspended at the threshold. The group is then excluded not only from formal labor but from the very process through which formal labor might eventually become accessible.

The second sub-question traced how that determination cascades further into livelihood strategy. When immersing in the subject, what surfaces is not a uniform refugee economic experience but a differentiated field in which nationality, cultural capital, gender, and legal status intersect to produce sharply unequal exposure to informality's risks. The Somali community's clan-based financial infrastructure, the Congolese concentration in Kibera's tailoring economy, the South Sudanese encounter with market logics structurally alien to pastoralist livelihood systems are evidence that refugee economic agency operates within, and is shaped by, a governance apparatus that offers informality as the main permissible economic space. This sentiment was echoed across interviews

when seeing how the language of entrepreneurship and hardworking agency is deployed not to describe freedom but to describe the form survival takes.

The third sub-question revealed the institutional mechanism through which this condition is reproduced and legitimised. Depending upon the framing, the self-reliance shift reads either as a developmental transition toward refugee self-sufficiency or as the depoliticisation of a funding crisis through the language of capacity and resilience. The findings support the latter reading. The self-reliance discourse did not emerge from evidence that reduced aid dependency produces formal employment. As cited, Interviewee 4's observation that even periods of abundant aid failed to generate it foreclosed that causal logic entirely. Indeed, it emerged from donor fatigue and fiscal contraction, and it was sent downward through the localization agenda into a governance architecture in which mandates migrate toward national NGOs and RLOs while resources do not follow. This follows what Ferguson (1990) identified as the anti-politics machine's effect, and what Hepner and Treiber (2025) extend through the Anti-Refugee Machine framework: the political problem is re-coded as a technical governance gap, and the gap is filled by redistributing responsibility to actors whose institutional capacity has not been equipped to bear it.

At every level, the convergence of findings ultimately reveals how self-reliance is presented as the rational response to the altitude above. The international system, facing donor fatigue and reduced contributions, pushes toward localization. National NGOs and refugee-led organizations, inheriting that mandate, have been cultivating community-driven programming. And refugees, excluded from formal labor and abandoned by retreating services, generate their own survival economies. The litmus tests for inclusion in Nairobi's humanitarian-development nexus are plentiful. Whether documentation processes produce the recognition they formally promise, whether livelihood programs engage the heterogeneity of the populations they address, and whether localization transfers fiscal sovereignty alongside institutional mandate. Until those conditions are met, the governance architecture will continue to produce, at its base, a population whose precarity is administratively expected, discursively managed, and politically ungrievable.

Implications for Future Research

Several avenues for future research follow from the findings. A complementary study that centers refugee subjects would significantly consolidate the picture this research has begun to construct. I) The practitioner perspective illuminates the Fergusonian machine; the refugee perspective would feature what it is to be inside it. II) The Shirika Plan is at an early stage of implementation, and a longitudinal study tracking its material effects over the next three to five years would allow the gap between its ambitions and operational reality to be measured with greater precision than is currently possible. III) Moreover, several interviewees brought distinct organizational focuses that open research directions

this thesis could only gesture toward. One area concerns resource-based conflict among urban refugees in Nairobi. Camp settings have generated substantial literature on inter-community tension structured around ethnic, clan, and national divisions (Interview 6) – divisions that spatial segregation both reflects and reinforces. There is currently limited scholarship on how resource competition and spatial proximity jointly shape conflict dynamics among refugee communities in urban settings, and this represents a meaningful gap in the literature. Another concern is related to the climate dimensions of refugee movement to urban cities in Kenya. Several practitioners pointed, directly or indirectly, to the deteriorating environmental conditions in and around Kakuma and Dadaab – camps situated in areas of extreme heat that are becoming increasingly uninhabitable as climate change accelerates (Interviews 5; 7). The increasing movement of refugees toward Nairobi is not only driven by economic aspiration or legal reform; it is also a response to climate conditions that make camp life physically unsustainable. This positions urban refugee governance squarely within the literature on climate justice and climate-induced displacement. Lastly, future research that centers queer refugee experiences directly in Kenya and East Africa. This could engage with both theoretical literature on queer precarity and the policy literature on protection, the combination of documentation denial, criminalization of sexual orientations, systematic exclusion from formal economic participation, and the consequent reliance on sex work as a survival economy. Existing frameworks – built primarily around nationality, legal status, and gender in its binary form – do not adequately capture these dynamics concerning queer refugees.

References

- Adeoye-Olatunde, O.A. and Olenik, N.L. (2021). Research and scholarly methods: Semi-structured interviews. *Journal of the American College of Clinical Pharmacy*, 4(10), pp.1358–1367.
- Agamben, G. (2005). *State of Exception*. Translated by K. Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Agamben, G. and Sacer, H. (1998). Sovereign power and bare life. *Homo Sacer*, 1.
- Agier, M. (2008). *On the margins of the world: the refugee experience today*. Polity.
- Agier, M. (2020). Camps, encampments, and occupations: From the heterotopia to the urban subject. In: *Reflections on Life in Ghettos, Camps and Prisons*. Routledge, pp.14–26.
- Allen, T. (2015). Life beyond the bubbles: cognitive dissonance and humanitarian impunity in Northern Uganda. *Medical humanitarianism: ethnographies of practice*, pp.96–118.
- Atputharajah, A.K.A.L.Y.A. and Wanga, J. (2020). The impact of resource dependence on the localization of humanitarian action: The case of Kenya. *Local Engagement Refugee Research Network Paper*, 10.
- Barnett, M.N. (2013). Humanitarian governance. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 16(1), pp.379–398.
- Betts, A. (2009). *Forced Migration and Global Politics*. Oxford: John Wiley & Sons.
- Betts, A. (2010). The refugee regime complex. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 29(1), pp.12–37.
- Betts, A., Bloom, L., Kaplan, J.D. and Omata, N. (2017). *Refugee economies: Forced displacement and development*. Oxford University Press.
- Betts, A. (2021). Refugees and patronage: a political history of Uganda’s ‘progressive’ refugee policies. *African Affairs*, 120(479), pp.243–276.
- Betts, A. and Milner, J. (2019). Governance of the global refugee regime. *Global Governance*, 25(3), pp.337–346.
- Brankamp, H. (2019). Occupied enclave: Policing and the underbelly of humanitarian governance in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. *Political Geography*. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.02.00> (Accessed: 2025-10-01).
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77–101.
- Brown, H.J., Firoz, M., Peutz, N. and Riggan, J. (2025). Incubating futures: temporal violence, durable solutions, and the anti-refugee machine. *Migration and Society*, 8(1), pp.23–39.
- Brown, S. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on development assistance. *International Journal*, 76(1), pp.42–54.
- Bryman, A. (2015). *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Precarious life: The powers of mourning and violence*. verso.
- Butler, J. (2016). *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso Books.

- Butler, J. (2025). Bodies that still matter. In: Butler, J. *Bodies That Still Matter*. New York: Routledge, pp.177–193.
- Chimni, B.S. (2009). The birth of a ‘discipline’: From refugee to forced migration studies. *Journal of Refugee studies*, 22(1), pp.11–29.
- Clark-Kazak, C. (2017). Ethical considerations: Research with people in situations of forced migration. *Refuge*, 33(2), pp.11–17.
- Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2017). Thematic analysis. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 12(3), pp.297–298.
- Creswell, J.W., Hanson, W.E., Clark Plano, V.L. and Morales, A. (2007). Qualitative research designs: Selection and implementation. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(2), pp.236–264.
- Creswell, J.W. and Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Crisp, J. (2003). No solutions in sight: the problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 22(4), pp.114–150.
- Davitti, D. and Vankova, Z. (2025) ‘From Funding to Financing: Complementary Pathways, Refugee Finance and the Emergence of the Refugee Entrepreneur’, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies*, 23(1), pp. 62–76. doi: 10.1080/15562948.2024.2385980.
- DiCicco-Bloom, B. and Crabtree, B.F. (2006). The qualitative research interview. *Medical Education*, 40(4), pp.314–321.
- Dromi, S.M. (2025). Humanitarian aid after COVID-19: sociological directions for research in a transforming sector. *Sociology Compass*, e70133.
- Dryden-Peterson, S. (2016). Refugee education in countries of first asylum. *Theory and Research in Education*, 14(2), pp.131–148.
- Dustin, M. (2026). Putting people in boxes: Iranian exiles and queer identities. *Sexuality & Culture*, 30(1), pp.1–18.
- Escobar, A. (2011). *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Escobar, A. (2020). De/coloniality and displacement. *Socioscapes*, 1(1), pp.95–110.
- Fassin, D. (2007). Humanitarianism as a politics of life. *Reader in Medical Anthropology*, pp.452–466.
- Feldman, I. (2015). *Police Encounters: Security and Surveillance in Gaza under Egyptian Rule*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Ferguson, J. (1990). *The Anti-Politics Machine*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12(2), pp.219–245.
- Foucault, M. and Carrette, J.R. (2013). Sexuality and power (1978). In: *Religion and Culture*. Routledge, pp.115–130.

- Gammeltoft-Hansen, T. and Tan, N.F. (2017). The end of the deterrence paradigm? *Journal on Migration and Human Security*, 5(1), pp.28–56.
- Gerring, J. (2004). What is a case study and what is it good for? *American Political Science Review*, 98(2), pp.341–354.
- Ginn, T. and Tang, H. (2025). *Urban Refugee Policies and Legislation in Kenya and Uganda: 2025 Stocktake*. CGD Policy Paper 358.
- Halakhe, A.B. and Kara, A.Y. (2025). *Removing Red Tape to Get Kenya's Refugee Act Right*. Washington, DC: Refugees International.
- Harpviken, K.B. (1997). *The Third World Security Predicament*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Harrell-Bond, B. (1986). Imposing aid: The ethnography of displacement and its aftermath. *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers*, 100(1), pp.154–167.
- Haug, S., Novoselova, A. and Klingebiel, S. (2025). *Trump's assault on foreign aid: implications for international development cooperation*. IDOS Discussion Paper 4/2025. Bonn: German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.23661/idp4.2025>
- Hepner, T.R. and Treiber, M. (2021). The anti-refugee machine: a draft framework for migration studies. *Sociologus*, 71(2), pp.175–190.
- Hodge, P. (2015). A grievable life? The criminalisation and securing of asylum seeker bodies in the 'violent frames' of Australia's Operation Sovereign Borders. *Geoforum*, 58, pp.122–131.
- Hyndman, J. (2000). *Managing Displacement: Refugees and the Politics of Humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Hyndman, J. and Mountz, A. (2007). Refuge or refusal: the geography of exclusion. In: *Violent Geographies*. Routledge.
- Ikanda, F.N., Muhumad, A.A. and Kuhnt, J. (2025). Refugee securitization and formal integration challenges. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 13(1), p.5.
- Iltan, S. and Rygiel, K. (2015). "Resiliency humanitarianism": responsabilizing refugees through humanitarian emergency governance in the camp. *International political sociology*, 9(4), pp.333–351.
- Jacobsen, K. (2005). *The Economic Life of Refugees*. Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press.
- Jacobsen, K. (2006). Refugees and asylum seekers in urban areas. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19(3), pp.273–286.
- Jaji, R. (2012). Social technology and refugee encampment in Kenya. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 25(2), pp.221–238.
- Kapoor, I. (2004). Hyper-self-reflexive development? Spivak on representing the Third World 'Other'. *Third World Quarterly*, 25(4), pp.627–647.
- Kohlenberger, J., Martin-Shields, C. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2025). 'Managing' the paradox: refugee self-reliance and solving the problem of refugee policy discontinuity. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 38(3), pp.570–583.
- Kvale, S. and Brinkmann, S. (2009). *InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. London: Sage.

- Lacroix, M. (2000). The road to asylum: between fortress Europe and Canadian refugee policy: the social construction of the refugee claimant subjectivity.
- Lavenex, S. and Vaagland, K. (2025). Discursive and behavioural sources of regime erosion. *Journal of European Public Policy*, pp.1–26.
- Liontiris, M. and Ruano, A.L. (2026). Intersecting crises: a scoping review on the impact of underfunding, violations of international humanitarian law, and climate crisis on humanitarian action. *Journal of International Humanitarian Action*, 11(1), p.8.
- Loescher, G., 2001. The UNHCR and world politics: State interests vs. institutional autonomy. *International Migration Review*, 35(1), pp.33-56.
- Mackenzie, C., McDowell, C. and Pittaway, E. (2007). Beyond ‘do no harm’: The challenge of constructing ethical relationships in refugee research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(2), pp.299–319.
- Macrae, J. and Harmer, A. (2004). *Good Humanitarian Donorship and the European Union: Issues and Options*. Background paper prepared for an informal meeting of the Humanitarian Aid Committee, Dublin.
- Mbaka, A. (2025). Mudavadi: Kenya is receiving 20 refugees daily from South Sudan. *The Star*, 2 April. Available at: <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2025-04-02-mudavadi-kenya-receives-20-refugees-from-s-sudan-daily> (Accessed: 2025-05-27).
- McNamara, K.E. and Gibson, C. (2009). We do not want to leave our land’: Pacific ambassadors at the United Nations resist the category of ‘climate refugees. *Geoforum*, 40(3), pp.475-483.
- Milner, J. (2008). *UNHCR: The Politics and Practice of Refugee Protection*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Milner, J. (2014). Protracted refugee situations. In: *Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milner, J. (2016). When norms are not enough. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 29(4).
- Mixed Migration Centre (2022). *4Mi Cities: Nairobi City Report*. Mixed Migration Centre.
- Nalule, C. (2023). Refugee burden-and-responsibility sharing: Revisiting the debate on the right to compensation to refugee-hosting states. *Mich. St. Int'l L. Rev.*, 31, p.441.
- Njeru, T.N. (2025). Kenya relies on USAID famine warning system — what happens now that it’s gone? *PreventionWeb*. Available at: <https://www.preventionweb.net/news/kenya-relies-usaid-famine-warning-system-whathappens-now-it-s-gone> (Accessed: 2025-05-27).
- Nowell, L.S., Norris, J.M., White, D.E. and Moules, N.J. (2017). Thematic analysis: striving to meet trustworthiness criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 16(1).
- Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of social research methodology*, 11(4), pp.327-344.
- Omata, N. (2021). Refugee livelihoods: a comparative analysis of Nairobi and Kakuma Camp in Kenya. *Disasters*, 45(4), pp.865–886.

- Omata, N. (2023). The role of developmental ‘buzzwords’ in the international refugee regime: self-reliance, resilience, and economic inclusion. *World Development*, 167, p.106248.
- Pastor Vidal, P. (2024). Innovative finance for refugees? *Afronomics Law*.
- Patton, M.Q. (2015). *Qualitative Research and Evaluation Methods*. 4th edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Polychroniou, A. (2021). Towards a critical reconstruction of modern refugee subjectivity. *Open Philosophy*, 4(1), pp.252–268.
- Ramadan, A. (2013). Spatialising the refugee camp. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38(1), pp.65–77.
- Republic of Kenya. (2021) The Refugees Act, 2021. Kenya Gazette Supplement No. 210 (Acts No. 10). Available at: Kenya Law
- Republic of Kenya. (2023). *The Kenya Shirika Plan: Overview and Action Plan (Zero Draft)*. Department of Refugee Services, Ministry of Interior and National Administration. <https://refugee.go.ke/kenya-shirika-plan-overview-and-action-plan> (Accessed: 2025-09-20).
- Republic of Kenya. (2024). *Kenya: The Refugees (General) Regulations, 2024*, 20 February 2024, <https://www.refworld.org/legal/decrees/natlegbod/2024/147929> (Accessed: 2025-09-20).
- Refugees International (2024). *Lessons and Recommendations for Implementing Kenya’s New Refugee Law*. Washington, DC: Refugees International.
- Safaricom (2021). *2021 Annual Report*. Available at: https://www.safaricom.co.ke/annualreport_2021/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/kenya-connected.pdf (Accessed: 2026-01-25).
- Scheyvens, R. and Leslie, H. (2000). Gender, ethics and empowerment: Dilemmas of development fieldwork. *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 23(1), pp.119–130.
- Skran, C. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2020). Refugee self-reliance. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 33(1), pp.1–21.
- Spiegel, P. (2017). The humanitarian system is not just broke, but broken: recommendations for future humanitarian action. *The Lancet*.
- Spratt, T.J.R. (2022). Reconceptualising Judith Butler’s theory of grievability. *The Sociological Review*, 70(3), pp.474–488.
- Stake, R.E. (2005). Qualitative case studies. In: Denzin, N.K. and Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp.443–466.
- Tracy, S.J. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight ‘big-tent’ criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), pp.837–851.
- Turner, V. (1967). *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- UNHCR (2025) Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2024. Geneva: UNHCR. Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2024> (Accessed: 2025-09-20).

- UNHCR (2026). *Kenya Statistics Package — 28 February 2026*. Geneva: UNHCR.
- Wallis, W. (2025). Kenya's refugee influx challenges regional stability. *Financial Times* [online]. Available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/4fd49b57-d3b8-4beb-8cc8-d27d463beabe> (Accessed: 2025-05-27).
- Warren, V. and Bell, R. (2022). *The Role of Context in Qualitative Case Study Research: Understanding Service Innovation*. London: SAGE Research Methods.
- Weima, Y., Biorklund, L., Bose, P., Culcasi, K., Brankamp, H. and Hyndman, J. (2026). Jennifer Hyndman's Managing Displacement, 25 years on. *Political Geography*, p.103484.
- Werker, E. (2007). Refugee camp economies. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 20(3), pp.461–480.
- Wibben, A.T.R. (2016). Introduction. In: Wibben, A.T.R. (ed.) *Researching War: Feminist Methods, Ethics and Politics*. New York: Routledge, pp.1–15.
- Willig, R. (2012). Recognition and critique: an interview with Judith Butler. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory*, 13(1), pp.139–144.
- World Bank (2023). *Socioeconomic Profile of Refugee and Host Households in Nairobi*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Available at: https://www.jointdatacenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Socioeconomic-profile-of-refugee-and-host-households-in-Nairobi-PublishedOct2023_.pdf (Accessed: 2026-01-25).
- Yanow, D. (2014). Thinking interpretively. In: *Interpretation and Method*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Yüksel, M.U.C. (2026). Humanitarian funding cuts: power, prioritisation, and systemic injustice. Unpublished manuscript.
- Zetter, R. (1991). Labelling refugees. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 4(1), pp.39–62.
- Zetter, R. (2021a). Theorizing the refugee humanitarian-development nexus. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(2), pp.1766–1786.
- Zetter, R. (2021b). Refugees and their return home. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), pp.7–22.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

Introduction

Briefly introduce the study, its purpose, and its focus on refugee livelihood governance in Nairobi from an institutional perspective. Explain that participation is voluntary and confirm informed consent before beginning the interview. Clarify that participants may withdraw from the study at any stage, and may choose not to answer any question. Request permission to audio-record the interview. Inform participants that recordings and transcripts will be securely stored and deleted after the completion of the thesis.

Do you have any questions or comments before we start?

<i>Warm-up questions.</i>
Q1) To begin, could you briefly describe your role and the kind of work your organization does in relation to refugees in Nairobi? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - How long have you been working on refugee-related issues in Nairobi? - Has the focus of your organization's work changed during your time there?
<i>Theme: Institutional responsibility and organizational mandate</i>
Q2) What kinds of support does your organization provide to refugees in Nairobi? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - Are there limits to how long or how much support can be offered? - What shapes those limits (e.g, funding, policy, mandate, or something else)?
<i>Theme: Livelihood strategies and economic survival</i>
Q3) What economic survival strategies have you observed or supported among urban refugees? How do these strategies help them navigate their daily lives in Nairobi? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - How realistic do you think these strategies are given the living and legal conditions that refugees face in Nairobi?

- Do you see differences in how refugees from different communities or nationalities approach this?
Q4) In your organization’s work, are refugees actively directed toward particular programs, sectors, or income-earning activities, or is this largely left to the refugees themselves? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - How does your organization decide what kinds of livelihood support to offer? - Have you observed any tension between what refugees want and what programs make available to them?
<i>Theme: Governance, documentation, and structural barriers</i>
Q5) What kinds of security or livelihood risks do refugees face when making a living in Nairobi, and how are these risks addressed, if at all? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - Are some risks seen as unavoidable? How does their legal status impact these efforts? - Have you observed differences depending on where in the city someone is located or what community they belong to?
Q6) From your perspective, how do specific features of Nairobi – such as housing, transport, or community networks – also influence refugee livelihood strategies? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - Are there areas of the city where refugees face more or fewer restrictions in their economic activities? - How does access to documentation affect <i>where</i> refugees can work?
Q7) How are refugee-run businesses or income activities, and if not officially registered, usually handled by local authorities? <u>Potential follow-up questions:</u> - Does this differ depending on where in the city these activities take place? - Have you observed cases where documentation status directly affected how authorities responded?
<i>Theme: Self-reliance, funding, and programming frameworks</i>

Q8) How has your organization's approach to refugee livelihoods changed in light of recent shifts in humanitarian funding?

Potential follow-up questions:

- How do you understand the push toward refugee self-reliance within your organization's programming?
- Do you think the self-reliance framework is achievable given current structural conditions in Nairobi?

Finish the interview:

Is there something I have not asked about that you think is important for me to know?

Give information about the publication of the results and how findings will be anonymised.

Appendix 2: Informed Consent For Participation In A Research Interview

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research. This consent form is designed to inform you about the study and to outline the nature and purpose of your involvement.

This research aims to better understand how refugees experience and navigate livelihood opportunities in Nairobi, and how these experiences are shaped by urban conditions and governance practices. The information you provide will be used solely for the purposes of a master's thesis. The interview will be conducted in a semi-structured format. This means that the researcher has prepared guiding questions but may also ask follow-up questions based on your responses. You are encouraged to share your views openly. By signing this form you agree to the following conditions:

- The interview will be audio-recorded and later transcribed;
- The interview transcript will be used only for this research project;
- Upon request, you may receive a copy of the transcript and request corrections to any factual inaccuracies.

Confidentiality:

Personal data will be handled confidentially, and interview materials will be anonymised to ensure that participants cannot be identified in any publications or reports arising from this research.

Quotation agreement:

Parts of the interview may be quoted directly in the research. Please initial next to the option that applies:

- ☐ I agree to be quoted anonymously, using a pseudonym.
- ☐ I do not agree to my words being quoted directly.

By signing this form, I confirm that:

- My participation in this study is voluntary – I understand that I may decline to answer any question and/or I can stop the interview at any time;
- The interview transcript or selected excerpts may be used as described above for data analysis;
- I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation;
- I may request a copy of my interview transcript;
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the research and understand that I may contact the researcher in the future if needed.

Name and signature of the participant _____

Date _____

Name and signature of the researcher _____

Date _____

For further questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Millena Navega | navegamillena@gmail.com