



Best practices for data collection: refugee settlements in Kenya

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The context of refugee settlements in Kenya

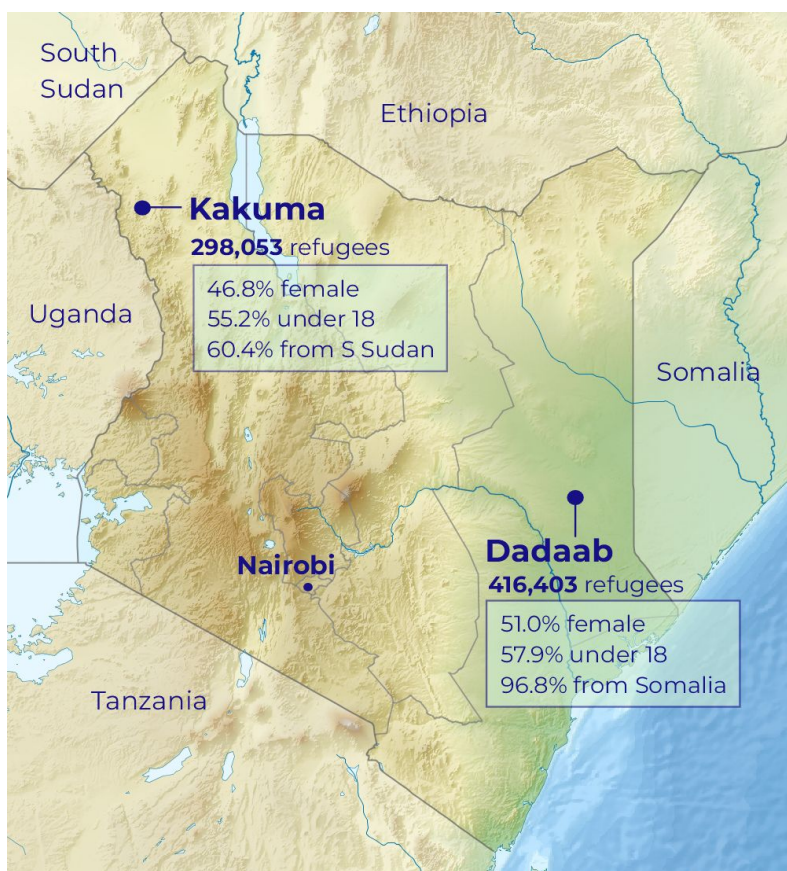
Over the years, East Africa has faced numerous conflicts and natural calamities that have led to widespread displacement. Many people fleeing crises seek refuge in countries considered relatively safe, with Kenya being a primary destination. Due to the high influx of refugees entering the country, the government pivoted from an integration policy to an approach where refugees primarily reside in designated camps. This change was made to minimize potential conflicts within the country.

The government selected the Dadaab and Kakuma camps to host a growing number of refugees.

Dadaab, established in 1991, is located in the eastern county of Garissa, near the Somali border. The camp is divided into three areas, Dagahaley, Ifo, and Hagadera, with the majority (96.8%) of its residents having origins in Somalia. The rest of the refugees in Dadaab are from Ethiopia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Kakuma, which neighbors the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, was established in 1992 in Turkana, a county on the northwest near the South Sudan-Uganda border. The camp is divided into four areas numbered 1 to 4. Refugees at Kakuma are mostly from South Sudan (60%), with populations from Somalia (13%), Burundi (8%) and DRC (8%), and about 10% from other countries.

The establishment of refugee camps often brings a variety of programs set up by aid agencies, religious organizations, NGOs, or governments and aimed at enhancing the living conditions of refugees. These stake-



Location of the Kakuma and Dadaab camps within Kenya.
Total numbers and demographics cf. UNHCR Kenya (2024)

holders rely on data to make informed decisions and assess whether the project objectives are being achieved. It is for this reason that researchers collect data in refugee camps.

Laterite Kenya has extensive experience collecting data in the Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, as well as in the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement. We have conducted phone surveys, household surveys, focus group discussions and in-depth interviews across various refugee groups, and key informant interviews with people involved in refugee support and operations. Through this work, we have gained valuable experience in refugee camp settings, and we would like to share some of the key lessons we have learned.

Assembling a data collection team

Hiring enumerators: in-person or phone interviews?

Assembling a team to conduct data collection in refugee camps, especially for the first time, can be challenging. One key issue is finding suitable enumerators. Bringing in a team from other regions of Kenya can be expensive, so hiring locally-based enumerators is often more practical. Additionally, local enumerators can add great value since they know the context better, speak local languages and can greatly help in logistical planning.

Strategies to recruit local enumerators:

- Placing posters on notice boards within and around the refugee camps.
- Seeking referrals from organizations already working in the camps, as this is often an effective way to identify qualified candidates.

After receiving applications and CVs, it's really important to conduct interviews. A common dilemma is whether to interview candidates in-person or by phone. Based on experience, face to face interviews are preferable, as they allow for a more comprehensive assessment, without the risk of network issues or rushed conversations. On the other hand, they can be more difficult to organize if the hiring team is not based in the camp. Time constraints are often tight for data collection projects, so allocating time to recruitment may not be ideal.

Who to recruit: refugees, host community members or a mix?

A mixed team composed of host community members and members of the refugee community offers advantages such as:

- Strengthened social cohesion
- Problem-solving and adaptability
- Greater data accuracy and relevance
- Enhanced trust and rapport
- Improved cultural sensitivity and contextual understanding

Engaging qualified individuals from the refugee community allows researchers to draw on their local knowledge and trust within the community, which can improve data accuracy, response rates, and sensitivity to cultural nuances.

For example, while planning field work in Kakuma 1, one of our refugee enumerators, who lives in that area, informed us that there was food distribution scheduled on a data collection day. This meant that many



residents would be away from their homes at the distribution center, so we adjusted our plan to begin data collection in another area without conflicting activities.

Involving host community members is equally valuable. They often bring academic knowledge and experience that enhance data quality. Their participation also promotes social cohesion by fostering collaboration between the host and refugee communities, which strengthens both the data collection process and community relations.

When recruiting enumerators for a refugee camp study, it's also important to reflect the diversity of refugees' countries of origin. For example, in Kakuma, most refugees are South Sudanese but there are communities from other countries. Hiring a team that fairly represents the population avoids tensions and builds trust with the stakeholders.

Similarly, when selecting enumerators from the host community, it's essential to consider local dynamics. In Dadaab, for instance, the host community is a Kenyan tribe of Somali ethnic descent and divided in various clans. Community and political leaders often expect fair representation of clans, so recruitment needs to take this balance into account. Ignoring these issues can hinder data collection, as clan leaders wield significant local influence.

It is also common that local political figures may try to interfere with recruitment, insiting, for example, that certain people are hired, regardless of qualifications. They can also try to influence how work is conducted. In one instance, after we dismissed an enumerator for misconduct, a political leader intervened, demanding the person be reinstated. The situation was resolved with a meeting involving all parties and additional training for the



enumerator in question. This example highlights the importance of navigating local dynamics carefully to maintain smooth data collection processes.

Enumerator qualifications

Laterite's standard procedure is to hire enumerators with at least a Bachelors degree and previous experience with data collection. It is possible to find candidates that fit all these requirements around Dadaab and Kakuma. However, the pool of potential candidates is not large and recruitment can be a challenge. This means that we may need to lower the minimum qualifications especially when we want to hire refugee enumerators. In these cases, our minimum requirement is a completed basic education, focusing the selection on previous data collection experience and interview performance.

Enumerator pay rates

Throughout our experience in Kenya, we have observed that standard pay rates for enumerators in refugee camps, such as Dadaab and Kakuma, are notably higher than in other parts of the country. This is largely because qualified enumerators can be difficult to find, so offering competitive pay helps to attract and retain skilled individuals. Another factor driving up rates is that many organizations working in these camps set enumerator pay based on international budgeting standards, which can inflate local pay expectations.

Language

Research tools are typically translated into English and Swahili, the official languages of Kenya. However, when developing data

collection tools, it is important to consider the various languages spoken in the camps and translate the materials into those languages as needed.

In Dadaab, for example, over 95% of the refugee population is from Somalia, so translating the tools into Somali is essential to ensure participation.

In Kakuma the dynamic is different. While Swahili serves as the common language for communication within the camp, and South Sudanese refugees often also understand English, there is more diversity in languages. To accommodate all respondents, it is crucial to build a team with enumerators that can speak Dinka, Nuer, and Juba-Arabic for those who do not understand English or Swahili.



Ethics approvals & permits: an overview

All scientific studies conducted in Kenya require approvals from an Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the National Commission for Science, Technology, and Innovation (NACOSTI). IRB approval is granted by accredited ethics bodies, based primarily at universities or other higher education institutions. NACOSTI, as the government authority regulating research in Kenya, issues the required research license.

Once these approvals are secured, the next step is to inform the Department of Refugee Services (DRS) about the study and potential visit to any refugee camp. Since the camps are designated as protected areas by law, DRS oversees access and a permit is required on entering. The process of applying for the permit can be found online. The permit is free of charge and processing takes at least five working days.

Field logistics

Security and accommodation

Security is a critical consideration when working in refugee camps.

Dadaab is considered a high security risk area, primarily due to the presence of the Al-Shabaab terrorist group, which has carried out numerous attacks in the region. Their tactics often include kidnappings and the placement of improvised explosive devices along the roads. Therefore, it is essential to have police escorts while working in Dadaab and to book accommodations in safe premises. Most visitors to Dadaab stay at the UNHCR guest houses. In our experience a team needs to engage four police officers for security escort, who charge a standard rate based on the time spent in the field.

In contrast, Kakuma presents less of a security risk and police escort is not necessary. However, it is important for visitors to leave the refugee camps by 6:00pm.

Transportation

The most convenient way to travel from Nairobi to the refugee camps is by air. The United Nations Humanitarian Air Service (UNHAS) operates flights for humanitarian staff to Dadaab and Kakuma. However, UNHCR and other UN agencies can arrange a ticket for authorized visitors who are not staff. The flights are often in high demand so it is advisable to book early. If traveling with UNHAS is not possible, the option is to take a commercial flight from Nairobi to Lodwar and then use road transport to reach Kakuma. For Dadaab,



the alternative is to travel by road from Nairobi to Garissa, where a security escort will need to be arranged for the last stretch of road to Dadaab.

Transportation within the camps is generally reliable. In Kakuma, the primary mode of transport is motorbikes, commonly known as Boda Bodas. While they are relatively inexpensive, they are not recommended due to safety concerns. The option is to hire a vehicle for safer transportation around the camp and settlement. In Dadaab, it is advisable to use four-wheel drive vehicles for transportation due to the terrain. Additionally, it is important to arrange transportation via local sources, rather than bringing your own vehicles, as this helps to prevent potential conflicts with the community.



The Kakuma settlement in Turkana, Northern Kenya. Credit: Matija Kovac, Wikimedia Commons.

Collaboration and stakeholders buy-in

It is essential to guarantee the support of local stakeholders, such as UNHCR and the Department of Refugee Services. Their involvement can help streamline processes, improve coordination, and facilitate data collection. Engaging local players also builds trust within the community. When stakeholders see respected organizations and community leaders involved in the process, they are more likely to trust the research. This in turn leads to higher participation rates and more accurate data collection. Local players often have established networks that can facilitate access to communities, resources, and information. Their connections can help identify potential enumerators and participants, as well as provide logistical support for research activities.

A key aspect of working in refugee camps is the strong spirit of collaboration and teamwork among the organizations active in the region. For instance, when we needed a venue to conduct focus groups discussions in Kakuma 4, the Danish Refugee Council kindly lent us a room in their local center. Or for example, if a study would benefit from the insights of people living with disabilities, organizations such as Humanity & Inclusion, which specializes in supporting disabled refugees, can support with finding potential respondents.

Know respondents' routines

Respondents generously share their time with our teams, and we aim to honor their goodwill by minimizing disruption to their daily lives.

Given the diversity of refugee backgrounds, it is crucial to understand the respondents' cultural habits and plan activities around their schedules. For example, most respondents in Dadaab are Muslim and take Friday as a day of worship. In practice this means that daily field plans should avoid Muslim households on Fridays. This respects not only the respondents' faith but also that of the enumerators.

Another aspect to factor in during planning is the camp's routine, notably food distribution schedules. Food distribution is conducted by the World Food Programme usually once per month. Refugees are notified in advance about the specific dates and locations for designated Food Distribution Points. On the day, long queues are to be expected and the activity can take several hours. Therefore, it's best to avoid data collection on food distribution days, since it is unlikely for respondents to be at their homes, and if they are, they will be either preparing to go to the distribution point or tired from queuing.

Similarly, it is important to consider school schedules when planning studies with the participation of students (from primary to college) or teachers.

Conclusion

Data collection in refugee camps can indeed be challenging. But we find that having the right combination of local knowledge, field experience and practical information can help to ensure a smooth data collection process.

Despite all challenges, conducting primary data collection in refugee camps is both rewarding and impactful. Without it, we would not have access to the voices of refugees, which give us insights that are essential for informed decision- and policy-making.

Key factors of success:

- Careful planning ahead of start
- Work with an experienced field team
- Obtain all required permits & approvals
- Make security arrangements and choose appropriate means of transportation
- Hire local enumerators and understand the refugee and host community dynamics
- Partner with organizations established in the camps for insights and local support
- Consider the camps' routines when planning

About Laterite

Laterite is a firm rooted in Africa and specialized in research for social impact. Our approach is structured, data intensive and embedded in the local context. We provide full-cycle data collection and research services in support of impact evaluations and development research.

Laterite was founded in Rwanda in 2010 and has since expanded to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Sierra Leone, with a support services office in the Netherlands. In 2024 Laterite took its first steps in Latin America and opened an office in Peru.

Our core sectors of expertise are agriculture, education, gender, livelihoods and public health. www.laterite.com

Reference:

UNHCR, 2024. Kenya Statistics Package 31 December 2024. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/ke>

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