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Localised refugee education: understanding nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps

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ABSTRACT
Research from displacement contexts globally has shown that refugees actively collaborate to establish learning centres in order to address educational service gaps facing their communities, such as lack of access or low-quality education. However, much of the existing research focuses on refugee-led educational initiatives that lack national accreditation. Less is known about nationally accredited refugee-led education initiatives – independently established, funded, and managed solely by refugees, especially in refugee camps. With this study, I contribute to the understanding of this lesser-known phenomenon. I examine the conditions underlying the emergence of nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps and what these schools do to improve education quality and their students' performance in national exams. I draw on six months of ethnographic research and virtual follow-ups between 2020 and 2022. In the context of the evolving localisation of humanitarian aid discourse, this study broadens insights into governance practices that yield effective service delivery, good quality education, and better results in national examinations. The case of the nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps teaches us that direct support to the state and refugees, rather than intermediary INGOs, can improve students' results in national exams and the quality of education overall.

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An evolving strand of research examines how refugee-led initiatives address various humanitarian and development needs within their communities in both ordinary times and times of crisis, particularly in protracted displacement situations.[1] These studies demonstrate that refugee-to-refugee support systems make crucial contributions to humanitarian and development efforts across the world, often filling gaps left by states and professional humanitarian organisations. Education is one of the areas where refugee community-led initiatives make crucial contributions. Existing research shows that refugee communities often organise themselves to independently establish some form

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of learning centres when external support is unavailable,[2] they are prohibited from attending host-country schools,[3] or they are unable to access them due to high tuition costs,[4] or they are dissatisfied with the quality or content of existing education systems.[5]

Educational interventions led and implemented by refugees are crucial in bridging existing gaps in educational services and mitigating the denial of refugees' rights to education. Nevertheless, these educational initiatives, like other forms of assistance provided by refugees-to-refugees (e.g. health services and social protection assistance), rarely receive financial support or recognition from donors and International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs) managing humanitarian aid.[6] This limitation is often associated with perceived deficiencies regarding the lack of evidence in the capacity of refugee-led initiatives to deliver services with quality, accountability, and effectiveness.[7] Furthermore, there are underlying power dynamics and interests that perpetuate this neglect, reinforcing the "top-down" approach to refugee assistance, which favours INGOs.[8]

Extant research on refugee-led educational initiatives provides valuable insight into the crucial contributions these initiatives make and the structural constraints that often limit their scalability, effectiveness, and sustainability. However, much of the existing research focuses on educational initiatives *lacking* national accreditation. Less is known about *nationally accredited* refugee-led education initiatives – independently established, funded, and managed solely by refugees, especially in refugee camps.

With this study, I aim to fill this gap to extend the empirical knowledge on refugee-led education initiatives. I do so by examining the case of nationally accredited refugee-led education initiatives in Kenya's Dadaab camps. I ask the question: what led to the emergence of nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps, and what do they do to improve education quality and their students' performance in national examinations? To address this question, I draw on six months of ethnographic research and virtual follow-ups between 2020 and 2022. Although I will present some basic statistical information to illustrate some differences between the UNHCR-funded and refugee-led schools, the goal is *not* to compare the operation of the two systems but to highlight what works well within the refugee-led system.

The nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps are analogues to private schools as they charge tuition fees. Essentially, these schools reflect the broader trends in Kenya in which there is a growing preference for private schooling across rural and urban areas. This is due to the perception that private schools provide better quality education and performance in national examinations compared to public schools.[9] The trend of private schooling is not unique to Kenya; it is also observed in other parts of Eastern Africa.[10] Nevertheless, in this study, I refer to these educational institutions as "refugee-led schools" rather than "private schools". This distinction is crucial for two key reasons. First, it removes any potential misconception that these schools are elitist institutions serving predominantly children from affluent families, which is not the case. These schools are attended by children from ordinary refugee families, many of whom are financially struggling. Second, this study aims to highlight *refugees' ownership* of these initiatives, thereby shifting the focus away from the financial or profit-making implications often associated with fee-paying schools.

The investigation into nationally accredited refugee-led schools is significant for several reasons. First, being nationally accredited means that these institutions follow the national curriculum and participate in national examinations, resulting in students

receiving certifications that are recognised both nationally and internationally. Their inclusion into the national educational framework implies that these schools are subject to regulation and oversight of national educational authorities. This reality challenges the mainstream perception within the global aid regime that refugee-led organisations lack accountability mechanisms and are operationally ineffective. Grounding on empirical evidence and a critical approach, this study contributes to the theoretical literature on the localisation of humanitarian aid.[11]

Second, by addressing the proposed research question, this study offers a deeper empirical understanding of the social and political conditions that have influenced the emergence and development of the nationally accredited refugee-led education system in the Dadaab camps. Additionally, it provides insights into their daily operations and governance. These insights not only enhance the empirical understanding of the specific case of the Dadaab camps but also shed light on the dynamics and similarities of refugee-led education initiatives across various displacement contexts.

Refugee-led education initiatives

Research has shown how refugee communities organise themselves to independently establish some form of learning centre in circumstances where external support is not forthcoming, they are prohibited from attending host-country schools or unable to access them due to high tuition costs, or they are dissatisfied with quality of existing education systems.[12] Countries that prohibit refugees from accessing public schools include China, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Burundi.[13] But even in countries where access to public schools is not formally prohibited, a lack of support can still create a gap in the education landscape. Brown shows how, in Cisarua, West Java, a small Hazaran refugee community has established and developed informal education centres to meet the educational needs of children in their community. These children would have otherwise gone without schooling because of a lack of intervention from the Indonesian government and formal humanitarian organisations. Brown argues that the rich existing capabilities of the refugee community, their social networks, and their freedom to organise themselves made these community projects possible. These learning centres not only provide education to young once, but also functions as community-hubs, providing much needed spaces for socialisation and to participate in community activities. The activities provide structures and hope to the lives of all those involved, including not only pupils and volunteers, but also parents and members of the larger community.[14]

Refugees often turn to free, or low-cost, informal education centres to meet their children's needs when they cannot afford the high tuition costs of formal schools. According to Dryden-Peterson, refugees of various nationalities, including Sudanese, Somali, and Congolese, resorted to establishing informal education centres in Kampala, Uganda, due to their inability to access the national education system because of high costs.[15] Although Uganda is one of the most successful countries at providing universal primary education to its citizens, the guidelines governing education in Kampala are different from those in the rest of the country. Schools in Kampala charge fees to subsidise the high local costs of electricity, water, and teachers' salaries.[16]

In addition to supporting refugee children's access to education, schools independently established and managed by refugees also strive to address the structural and

cultural discrimination inherent in the mainstream education system of host countries. Lucy Karanja discusses how Sudanese refugees in Nairobi, Kenya, have set up their own school in response to experiences of xenophobia and discriminatory practices that hindered their children's access to public elementary schools in the city. These children were also unable to attend private schools because of the precarious financial situations of their parents. Karanja also noted that the Sudanese community hoped that a self-managed school would give their children "a sense of belonging and community and enable them to maintain their culture".[17]

Localisation of humanitarian aid

The present debate over localisation within the domain of humanitarian aid is similar to earlier and present discussions on the role of local actors in the peacebuilding and development fields.[18] The localisation movement within the humanitarian sector evolved from growing discontent with *power* imbalances in the current global humanitarian governance structure, which is top-down, centralised, bureaucratic, Western-driven, and risk-averse.[19] Besides this observation about the humanitarian system, international humanitarian actors are also critiqued on *practical* grounds. They are accused of lacking knowledge about political power dynamics, cultural sensitivities, particular vulnerabilities, and expertise in operational contexts; of neglecting to listen to local perspectives; and of ignoring local needs and priorities.[20] Localisation is seen as a way to fix practical and power asymmetries in the global humanitarian aid governance system.

Localisation is understood as the process of devolving "humanitarian tasks (and, to a certain extent, funds) from international agencies to actors that are closer to the humanitarian situation, such as national and sub-national authorities of affected states, local non-governmental organisations, community initiatives, and the affected population themselves".[21] In 2016, the World Humanitarian Summit (WHS) strongly emphasised empowering crisis-affected people to make humanitarian intervention effective. This was in response to the 2016 High-Level Panel on Humanitarian Financing's presentation of the memorable statistic that, in 2014, only 0.2% of international humanitarian assistance reached local NGOs.[22] The WHS grand bargain committed signatories – including donor governments, UN agencies, and INGOs – to direct 25% of total global humanitarian aid to national and local responders by 2020. In 2020, only 13 out of 53 grant-giving signatories reported meeting or exceeding that target; that year, global humanitarian funds directed to national or local responders amounted to 4.7%, or USD 1.3 billion.[23]

There are a number of reasons why the local is often invoked rhetorically, even though the commitment to the implementation of the localisation agenda within the humanitarian aid sector is extremely limited. First, a widely highlighted challenge relates to the contestation over the definition and delimitation of the term "local".[24] In the context of protracted conflicts, for example, the operational environment is complex and involves diverse and conflicting actors as well as those from the humanitarian sector. Thus, implementing entities are often, out of necessity, compelled to make a value judgement on who is beneficial or detrimental to the delivery of aid or peace. This makes the notion of the "local" fluid and subject to rapid shifting.[25] Second, collaboration with local actors in an emergency response is often deemed to slow down life-saving actions. Third, the sector places an emphasis on upward accountability to donors, who have their own priorities

and perspectives on areas of need, at the expense of downward accountability to the affected people.[26]

Fourth and most critical is the seeming unwillingness of the aid establishment, which is dominated by Western governments, UN agencies, and powerful INGOs, to cede power and make huge financial sacrifices to implement the localisation project effectively. Humanitarian aid is a political enterprise as much as it is a technical act. As Slim suggests, successful implementation of the localisation project will have significant political and economic implications – a price that INGOs and aid-giving Western governments may be unwilling to pay.[27] In the political domain, localisation will represent the loss of Western nations' hegemonic power over international aid governance, thus weakening their ability to continue promoting Western ideals in an era of rising authoritarianism. While the West may not be prepared to give power to national or sub-national actors, political decision-makers in contexts of a centralised state may seek to strengthen their own power, contrary to the stated aim of localisation to rectify power imbalances in aid.[28] This suggests that power imbalances within the aid system are perpetuated not only by international actors but also by national actors in aid-receiving countries.

On the economic front, shifting the implementation responsibilities away from INGOs and forming equal partnerships with locals would result in drastic funding cuts and job losses within INGOs.[29] Slim contends that rather than viewing localisation as merely a process of increasing the effectiveness of humanitarian aid, it should be understood as a means of strengthening the political rights, justice, and self-determination of aid recipients and affected populations in order to foster humanitarian citizenship. Against this background knowledge, and using perspectives of localisation of aid debate, I now offer an analysis of the motivations behind the emergence of nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps and the practices these schools have adopted to improve education quality and their students' performance in national examinations.

Research context and methods

This study is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 15 May and 15 November 2019, at Dadaab camps in Kenya, and online follow-ups between 2020 and 2022. During the fieldwork, I stayed in Ifo Camp and visited schools daily, focusing on two secondary schools. One is independently established, funded, and managed by refugees and is thus referred to as a *refugee-led* school. The other is established and funded by the UNHCR and managed by Windle Trust International on behalf of the UNHCR.

As of 2023, there are 55 nationally accredited primary schools and 22 nationally accredited secondary schools in Dadaab camps. Of these, 22 primary and six secondary schools, which are tuition-fee free, were established and are funded by the UNHCR and managed by INGOs on its behalf. The rest, 33 *integrated academies*[30] (primary schools) and 16 secondary schools, are refugee-led, tuition-fee-paying schools. There is no standard tuition fee across all the refugee-led schools and grade levels. For example, in the integrated academies, lower classes – from nursery to sixth grade – often pay between 800 and 1000 Ksh, while upper classes – from sixth to eighth grade – pay between 1200 and 1500 Ksh. For secondary schools, Form One and Two fees often range between 2000 and

3000 Ksh, while Form Three and Four fees are between 3000 and 4000 Ksh. The first refugee-led schools to be established were Bushra Integrated Academy in Hagadhera and Liban Integrated Academy in Ifo Camp in the year 2008. In 2015, Bushra High in Hagadhera camp was established, becoming the first refugee-led secondary school.

I stayed in Ifo Camp during my fieldwork despite the security challenges in the camps and in the entire north-eastern region. It felt like returning home because I grew up in Ifo Camp and attended primary and secondary school there. Additionally, I was fortunate to have served as a teacher in the UNHCR-funded secondary schools on which I focused during my fieldwork. I share a culture, language, and nationality with the Somali community, which accounts for most of the refugees in Dadaab camps. These circumstances provided me with the confidence to live among the refugees and conduct my research with greater freedom.

As someone doing ethnography at "home", I continuously reflected on the opportunities and challenges that my insider experiences and identity could present to the research process. On the positive side, my long-term experience with the educational system in Dadaab camps as a student and a teacher may have enabled me to bring in a longitudinal perspective and new insights that outsiders may need a longer time and more resources to access.[31] Negatively, my insider positionality could deprive me of the curiosity advantage that an outsider enjoys – the ability to question and become interested in almost everything critically. An insider's vision is often regarded as blurred since everything appears normal to him/her.[32]

I adopted several strategies to manage the risks associated with my insider subjectivity and the ethical challenges it presents while also maximising the potential benefits. First, I decided to focus my research on two different school systems: refugee-led and INGO-run schools. I was familiar with the INGO-managed school since it is the same school I attended in my secondary education and later worked as a teacher. The refugee-led school was established in 2018, and no private secondary school existed in the camps when I lived there almost a decade ago. Second, I engaged in deep self-reflection regarding my experiences and perceptions of refugee camps and education systems.

Third, given that refugees, particularly young people, are a marginalised group, I made sure that I caused no harm during the research process. Therefore, I obtained *informed consent* from students as my focus students were over 18 years. However, I took extra precautions not to take their first consent for granted. Instead, I relied on an "iterative model", continually negotiating and renegotiating consent throughout the fieldwork process instead of merely requesting it once and assuming its existence for subsequent interactions.[33] Fourth, to navigate *power dynamics* and reduce the distance between myself and the informants, thereby cultivating trust,[34] I engaged with students during their breaks and prayer times. In the initial three weeks of my visit to a new school, I prioritised establishing familiarity and friendliness. Thus, in this phase, my data collection primarily focused on unstructured observations of the school's activities through interactions with students and teachers during their free time.

Data collection and analysis

During the daytime, I interacted with teachers, school managers, and students from different classes, and sometimes with parents, and I conducted classroom observations

in Form One classes. On some evenings, I interacted with students in the block I stayed in, who studied in different schools and across different systems – both UNHCR-funded and refugee-led schools. I also visited some of the students' homes so as to observe their evening routines of doing homework and prep. To supplement the observational data, I conducted semi-structured interviews ($n = 39$) with 19 ethnic Somali Form One students ($n = 14$), eight refugee teachers ($n = 6$), six Kenyan national teachers, and four Somali parents ($n = 4$). I conducted interviews with the secondary school students, refugee teachers, and parents in their mother tongue, Somali, audio recorded them, and then translated and transcribed them into English. I interviewed Kenyan national teachers in English, which I audio-recorded and then transcribed.

The data analysis in this study occurred in two stages: during and after fieldwork. While in the field, I reviewed notes, listened to interview recordings, and read some transcripts. This allowed me to incorporate progressive findings and observations into the interview protocols, seek responses from informants in subsequent interviews, and conduct follow-up interviews with previous informants. The post-fieldwork data analysis began with reviewing all transcripts completed by research assistants to ensure that translations and transcriptions were accurate. I took notes on interesting quotations and emerging themes during the review process. The themes identified were used to develop a codebook, which was eventually used to create NVivo codes (themes). The codebook laid the foundation for me to code all interviews systematically into NVivo software. The overarching themes that informed the writing of this article were coded under the categories of *private versus public schools*, where the former are refugee-led and the latter are UNHCR-funded; *challenges*; *relationships*; and *support*. Although I looked at data from the UNHCR-funded schools, for the purpose of this article I focused on information from the refugee-led schools. The interview data is supplemented by information from fieldwork notes, observations, and statistical data on students' Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examination results. The writing process involved the progressive interpretation of data.

The rise of refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps

The emergence of refugee-led, accredited, fee-paying schools in Dadaab camps is relatively recent. In the first part of this section, I discuss the circumstances that pushed refugees to establish the first integrated academies (primary schools). I then discuss a number of interconnected conditions that also paved the way for the establishment of secondary schools.

Refugee-led integrated academies

Several circumstances led refugees to establish the first integrated academies. In an interview, Omar Yusuf, the current director of Gedi Secondary School in Ifo Camp and one of the founders of the first fee-paying integrated academy, namely Bushra Integrated Academy in Hagadhera, underlined several factors that pushed them to start a fee-paying integrated academy. First, there was a growing call among refugees for an alternative system that accommodated refugee children's need for *affordable* secular and religious education. While many refugee parents would like their children

to have free access to both forms of education, the Kenyan National Curriculum, which is applied in UNHCR-funded primary schools, does not allow for this. Omar Yusuf and his colleagues were convinced that accommodating religious and secular education under one system could ease the financial burden on parents educating their children. The reality is that most parents cannot afford to pay for their children's expenses at religious and secular schools separately, given that even in UNHCR-funded schools, parents must still pay for school uniforms and most learning materials, such as notebooks and maths sets.

Second, *timewise*, children who study at the UNHCR-funded schools – particularly those in upper primary classes (from sixth grade), who attend school in the morning and afternoon shifts – cannot continue their Islamic education and also remain in these schools. Thus, when children reach the upper primary level, their parents must choose between sending them to *Madrassas* (Islamic religious schools) or exclusively secular schools. With the integration of the two educational systems, parents who want their children to receive both secular and religious education can obtain this through the integrated academies.

All integrated academies in Dadaab camps combine the Kenyan National Curriculum and an informal Islamic Religious Education Curriculum. They provide the regular five subjects in the Kenyan curriculum (listed below) as well as several additional Islamic religious subjects approved by the Kenyan government. Some of the additional religious curriculum subjects include Arabic, the Quran, Fiqhi (Islamic jurisprudence), Hadith (stories, traditions, and accounts of Prophet Mohamed), Islamic history, and Islamic behaviour and practices, along with several other subjects. From nursery to the seventh grade, pupils simultaneously study secular curriculum subjects and the above religious subjects. In the eighth grade, they exclusively study the five subjects tested in the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE): mathematics, English, Kiswahili, social studies, and Islamic Religious Education (IRE). IRE, in the regular Kenyan curriculum, is taught in English and is limited in scope in relation to the subject matters covered.

The possibility of integrated academies combining the Kenyan National Curriculum with an informal Islamic Religious Education Curriculum signifies a notable shift in *refugee-state* relations. This development indicates the Kenyan government's willingness to accommodate refugees' unique social, cultural, and historical needs and to engage directly with them, moving beyond the traditional intermediary role played by International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs). However, the emergence of refugees as educational providers bears significant implications for "the idea of the state".[35] It challenges the traditional idea of the state as the principal education provider, signalling a weakened capacity to fulfil this role. Nonetheless, despite delegating the implementation role to non-state actors, the state continues to exert its influence in educational provision through its regulatory functions, which include accreditation, examination, certifications, and oversight.

Refugee-led secondary schools

Several interconnected factors led to the establishment of refugee-led secondary schools. These included rising discontent with the deteriorating quality of education at the

UNHCR-funded schools, low performances, and recurrent cancellations of students' KCSE exams. Again, Omar Yusuf told me this while discussing why he and his colleagues thought it necessary to establish fee-paying secondary schools despite there being at least two free secondary schools in each of the three camps:

> There has been poor performance in the KCSE examination from across the three camps, Hagadera, Ifo and Dagahaly. For example, if 2,500–3,000 students sit for the KCSE examination, only four to five may qualify for university education, whether locally or abroad. Because of this problem, we have thought that the situation might change if we set up secondary schools that are managed by educated and genuine refugee youths. We have learned from integrated academies that through effort and a good administrative team in place, we have been able to outperform NGO-managed primary schools. In fact, we have been seeing the fruits of this bold initiative since 2016 because these days, most of the students who qualify for WUSC [the World University Service of Canada], local university scholarships or vocational training are students from private schools.[36]

The poor education quality for refugees is commonly associated with the dwindling global funds available for refugee education, as education is mainly funded through short-term emergency funds, which limits opportunities for long-term planning.[37] Specifically in Dadaab camps, the shortfall in funding has been causing a scarcity of learning facilities and trained teachers, an overreliance on untrained Form Four leavers to teach in primary and secondary schools, and an absence of teachers in classes. Furthermore, the growing insecurity in the camps and the entire northeastern province since 2015[38] has exerted additional strain on the efficiency of humanitarian services in these camps, education being a prime example.[39]

Ali Abdi, who is also one of the founders and former managers of Gedi Secondary School, told me that the education in Dadaab camps was adequately supported in the early years of the establishment of the camps. Students did better in the national exams and had higher literacy skills when they graduated from primary and secondary schools.

In fact, while it is true that funding for humanitarian operations in the Dadaab camps has generally been declining over the past decade, the better-quality education observed in the earlier years could also be related to the lower number of learners, especially those enrolled in secondary schools. Prior to 2009, only 120 students from each of the three Dadaab camps were enrolled in secondary schools each year, regardless of the number of candidates that sat for the KCPE examination. This number was then divided into three classes of at least 40 students. At present, there is a national policy of a 100% transition rate to secondary education, meaning that every candidate who sits for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) proceeds to secondary school. However, due to overstretched resources in the camps, this policy has led to class sizes exceeding the national guideline of a maximum of 40 students per class. I have noted a form two class in one of INGO-run schools accommodating 90 students. Thus, in the past, there was a reasonable balance between the available resources, the number of students, and the number of teachers. Moreover, in the early years of secondary school formation in Dadaab camps, most teachers were properly qualified; this is no longer the case and instead a high number of secondary school graduates are relied upon to teach secondary schools.

Meanwhile, on the security front, between 2015 and 2016, the infiltration and attacks by the Al-Shabaab terrorist group from Somalia caused many qualified and experienced

Kenyan teachers to flee the camps and the entire north-eastern region.[40] Consequently, refugee youths who were students during those years missed many months of learning as the regular operation of the UNHCR-funded schools stopped. This challenge has led to poor performance among students in this cohort and a decline in the number of students who are able to transition to universities.

The emergence of refugee-led secondary schools was also influenced by the *restricted physical mobility* of refugees, as well as the Garissa County government's resistance to a UNHCR – Kenya government deal that would have given refugee children who did well in the KCPE examinations the opportunity to attend national or regional schools. While discussing the challenges that motivated the establishment of Gedi Secondary School, Ali Abdi told me this:

> We initially used to get a slot from the national or provincial secondary schools for students who perform well in the KCPE examination. We benefitted from this programme several times. However, the Garissa County government, which we are geographically part of, blocked from us such opportunities. They claimed that they do not accept sharing their children's secondary school admission slots with refugees. Since students who studied hard and passed with high grades were denied access to national and provincial schools, we decided to establish a private secondary school where parents who can afford to pay tuition fees can get a better school for their children. And they will be able to control the quality of education. Also, the refugees' movement is restricted because the Kenya government does not allow refugees to leave the camps. For this reason, even parents who want to take their children to better national schools are unable to access them.[41]

Indeed, refugee-led schools have been successful in improving the quality of education and the overall performance of their students in the national examinations. In the national examinations, they often outperform the UNHCR-funded schools – and even the regional schools that some parents used to imagine sending their children to in search of quality education and high performance in examinations.

The initiative taken by the refugee community to establish and self-finance an alternative secondary school underscores the immense value they place on their children's access to good quality education and in shaping their collective education-based aspirations. The narrative of education as a pathway to prosperity, more freedom, and as an "exit license" out of camps is prevalent among refugees in the Dadaab camps.[42] Furthermore, these refugee-led educational endeavours serve as a testament to the refugees' practice of "active citizenship" despite their lack of legal citizenship status. Particularly noteworthy is the active civic engagement, a developed sense of belonging to the camp, and the sense of responsibility among the refugee youth who pioneered the establishment of these refugee-led schools. This demonstrates their commitment to their community and solidarity with the younger generation.[43]

In the next section, I present some statistical information to illustrate the performance gap between UNHCR-funded and refugee-led schools. I also discuss how refugee-led schools are succeeding in improving their students' access to quality education and securing better performance in national exams.

Improved education quality and student performance

As mentioned above, students in refugee-led schools have been outperforming their peers in UNHCR-funded schools on the KCSE examination, giving them greater access to post-secondary education opportunities. As Figure 1 illustrates, in the 2021 KCSE examination,

only 30 out of a total of 993 candidates (3%) from the six UNHCR-funded schools obtained the minimum grade of C + or above, which is required for university admission in Kenya. In 10 out of 11 refugee-led schools that conducted KCSE exams in 2021, 933 out of 1195 candidates (78%) achieved similar results. Additionally, 85 out of the 87 students who scored a B + and thus qualified for the tertiary education scholarships of the World University Service of Canada were from refugee-led secondary schools. A preliminary analysis of the 2022 KCSE results released on 20 January 2023 shows that students in the refugee-led schools made a greater leap (Figure 1). Four students at Gedi Secondary School set a new record by getting an *A-minus*, outperforming candidates in the entire north-eastern region and gaining the attention of the national media.[44] Furthermore, the best-performing student of the entire north-eastern region's schools in the 2020 KCSE examination was a student from Gedi Secondary School in Ifo Camp – a refugee-led secondary school. This student scored an A-minus with 79 points and was among the top 100 students nationally.

According to informants and my own observations, one strategy that is enabling refugee-led schools to succeed in improving both the quality of education and their students' performances in the KCSE examinations is their strict *administrative oversight*, which promotes effective service delivery. Teachers at refugee-led secondary schools, for example, finish the annual syllabus on time and teach all necessary

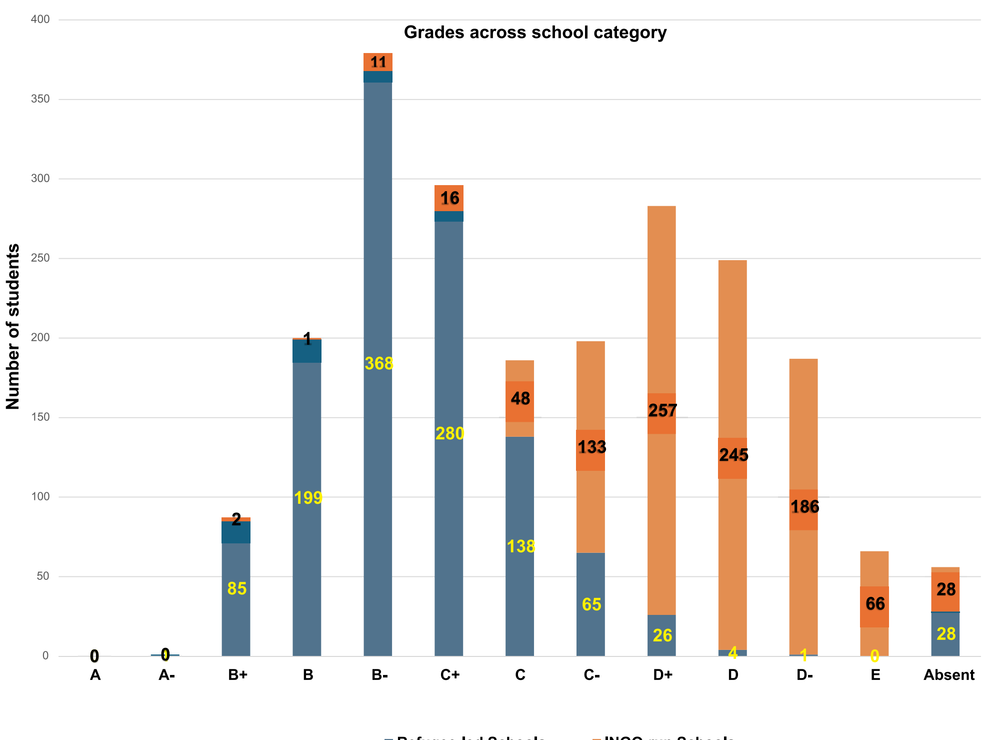

Figure 1. KCSE secondary examination grades across school categories (refugee-led vs INGO-run schools), 2021.[65]

Source: Compiled from data provided by Garissa County Director of Education.

practical lessons in the science subjects – chemistry, biology, and physics. Proper teaching of all the syllabus contents can boost students' self-confidence and their ability to answer questions in the national examination. National exams are set, conducted, and marked by an independent government body, and the questions frequently encompass information taught over the course of four years in secondary school. At Gedi Secondary School, for example, I observed that the director of the school, who is also the principal owner of the school, verifies that teachers attend to students as scheduled, making to-and-fro trips to classes. The school manager, who is a certified teacher, also inspects teaching standards on an ongoing basis and controls how often students' assignments are corrected. Most teachers across all levels complete the term syllabus in good time and provide revision and coaching for students ahead of examinations. Jamis, a Kenyan national teacher at Gedi Secondary School, told me this while discussing how he thinks that strict oversight supports the provision of quality service and education:

> Some teachers are so careless that they cannot observe the lesson time. For example, a teacher may have a lesson that starts at 10:40, but instead of attending class at 10:40, he wastes 20 minutes chatting in the staffroom and making noises. He attends that class when 20 minutes remain. And that is a waste to the students. However, here in Gedi Secondary School, you cannot waste even one minute. When the bell is almost to ring, Gedi [the school director] will come, and he will tell you, "Mwalimu, you have a class, can you go." He is the one who oversights that one. He makes sure that the services are offered well and that you are doing what you are paid for.[45]

While both the director and the manager of Gedi Secondary School are trained teachers, they are not part of the teaching team. Their exemption from teaching provides them with more time to conduct necessary oversight and other administrative duties. The principal and the deputy principal, who are part of the teaching team, also support the school administration. In addition to class masters, Gedi Secondary School has a receptionist who takes a roll call of all classrooms twice a day and contacts parents of absent students. The refugee-led schools are directly accountable to parents. Students also have a strong influence on their learning and day-to-day school management, as will be discussed in shortly. The combination of these factors does, in some ways, influence the strict administrative oversight that is a feature in refugee-led schools.

From the establishment phase and beyond, the progress that refugee-led schools have been making in improving their students' access to quality education can also be attributed to the *active collaboration* and *efforts* of key stakeholders: teachers, the school administration, parents, and students. In the next subsections, I demonstrate how direct accountability to parents and the strong influence that students are allowed over the day-to-day operation of the schools support refugee-led schools' provision of good quality education and better performances in national examinations.

Direct accountability to parents

Refugee-led schools are directly accountable to the parents of their students. The relationship of mutual accountability between parents, teachers, and the school administration influences the quality of education and service provision in these schools. The refugee-led schools actively engage parents in school administration, monitoring

children's attendance and performance in the exams and sharing this information with parents. The fact that parents who can pay their children's school fees do take them to refugee-led schools creates a sense of motivation for parents to ensure that their children get a quality education. It also creates a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the school. Hamida, a Form One student, told me this while reflecting on her perception of the relationship between parents paying tuition fees for their children and their sense of ownership and responsibility towards their children's learning:

> Imagine, if you help me with this shirt, or I buy it with my own money, when do I care for it well? When you help me with it, I doubt it, and when I buy it with my money, I will say I bought it and care about it a lot. So, the difference between paying school fees or not is like that. Parents follow up on their children's educational achievement at the fee-paying schools, and they help you with your education with interest.[46]

A similar sentiment was expressed by Sadiyo, also a Form One student:

> Education in private schools is good because both parents and teachers care a lot about children's education. The school administration is answerable to parents because they are the ones paying them.[47]

Hamida and Sadiyo's statements shed light on the perceived relationship between parents paying tuition fees and their active involvement in their children's education. However, it is crucial to clarify that their reference to "care" should not be interpreted as suggesting that parents who do not pay fees are less concerned about their children's education. Instead, the key message of their statements is parental influence, accountability, and bargaining power with the school administration. Existing research supports the view that there is a relationship between school fee payments and a higher level of parental participation in school governance and accountability.[48]

Ali Abdi, the former manager of Gedi Secondary School, told me the following while discussing how they involve parents in the school administration:

> Parents will first register the child, and they have an obligation of signing the school rules and regulations. Parents have the role of following up their children's learning and getting information about any progress or changes in the school. Also, when issuing examination results, parents are required to come and get the students' results themselves. In addition, we suggest that parents should bring the school fees so that the relationship between us becomes transparent.[49]

The way in which refugee-led schools are directly answerable to the parents of their students serves as a testament to the democratic governance practices[50] of these schools. Parents' voices are not only heard, but they are also kept informed about changes, significant decisions, and outcomes related to their children's learning. Direct accountability is a cornerstone of good governance practice, as it fosters trust and transparency among stakeholders.[51] Furthermore, the willingness of parents to exercise their power to hold the school administration accountable and to engage closely in their children's day-to-day learning also helps support effective service delivery in these schools. This highlights that accountability is a two-way street, requiring reciprocal engagements, actions, and acceptance of responsibilities on the part of parents, teachers, and school administrators.

Students' strong voice

Students at refugee-led schools have a strong influence on both their learning conditions at the classroom level and the school administration. They are empowered to individually or collectively report to the administration any teacher whose teaching they do not appreciate. Moreover, the school administration often takes students' concerns very seriously and addresses reported matters quickly. Any teacher whose teaching students report dissatisfaction with faces inspection from the school manager, who is in charge of quality assurance. While discussing how he thinks students' exercise of their power influences their learning and performances in the exams, Zaki, a Form One student, told me:

> Gedi Secondary School is a private school; an individual owns it. If you feel that a teacher is not teaching you well, you report to the office. Because of students' motivations to report bad teachers and through our hard work, we manage to perform well in the exams.[52]

Refugee-led schools' sensitivity to students' dissatisfaction with their learning – together with the students' proximity to the final decision-makers – influences students' sense of power. All decision-makers are present in the school compound; there is no complex bureaucratic system or process to be followed to address students' complaints. Abdullahi, a Form One student, said the following while discussing his perception of student – administration relationships at Gedi Secondary School:

> We have a good relationship with our school administration. If we want to complain about a teacher who did something wrong or does not teach us well, we go directly to the manager's office and report him or her.[53]

It might appear problematic that students have the power to report teachers to the administration without fear of reprisal. However, research show that in hierarchical schools where teachers have more control over students and the administrative oversight is weak, students' voices are often silenced, and teachers may not always live up to their responsibilities, resulting in poor-quality education.[54] Yet, even when students in the refugee-led schools report poor teaching to the administration, it does not imply that it will always have negative consequences for teachers.

Students at the refugee-led schools also benefit from a powerful, democratically elected student government. The student government functions as a bridge connecting students, teachers, and the school administration. It ensures that students are consulted before any new decisions or amendments are made. The student government is also in charge of coordinating all extracurricular activities through the heads of different clubs. Sadiyo, a Form One student, said the following while discussing what the student government means to the students:

> It shows that we are respected and appreciated in the school and that teachers will always share any new decisions that will be implemented or changes to be made. We get consulted for any amendments to the school rules and regulations.[55]

The student government also serves as a system of support for students in relation to their learning and general wellbeing. For example, its members emotionally support their peers in difficult times, such as after the loss of a family member. I also noted that the student government at the refugee-led school I visited operates as a humanitarian

organisation through which students extend assistance to their colleagues and students in other schools. For example, I observed an instance where students at Gedi Secondary School contributed money for a student at another school who had been diagnosed with cancer. Student governments coordinate visits to peers who have been hospitalised and sometimes extend financial support to them. This robust, student-to-student support system showcases how refugee-led schools strive to foster students' greater independence and civic responsibility – both now and in the future.

Conclusion

This study explored the motivations underlying refugees in Kenya's Dadaab camp to establish nationally accredited schools and what these schools do to improve education quality and their students' performance in national exams. Building on emerging research in refugee-led education initiatives,[56] this study identifies several interconnected factors that motivated the emergence of nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps. These include a growing demand for an alternative system that meets refugee children's needs for affordable secular and religious education, the declining quality of education at the UNHCR-funded schools and low-performance levels, as well as massively recurrent cancellations of students' national exams, especially the KCSE. The study also shows how refugee-led schools are succeeding in improving education quality and their students' performance in national exams by fostering strict administrative oversight and active collaboration of key stakeholders, including teachers, school administration, parents, and students. Furthermore, these schools emphasise direct accountability to parents and empower their students to have a strong influence on their learning and school administration. These findings suggest several empirically and theoretically significant issues for the debate on the *localisation* of humanitarian aid.

First, this study presents the case of the nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps as evidence that direct support to the state and refugees – rather than relying on intermediary INGOs – can enhance refugees' access to quality learning and better outcomes. This argument aligns with the goals of localising humanitarian aid to enhance effectiveness and strengthen the political rights, justice, and self-determination of aid recipients, including refugees.[57] The existence of 33 nationally accredited integrated academies (primary schools) and 16 secondary schools that are refugee-led in Dadaab camps is further evidence of refugees' resourcefulness, entrepreneurial spirit, and capacity to contribute to humanitarian and development actions.[58]

Second, the phenomenon of a nationally accredited refugee-led education system highlights refugees' *dual role* as both providers and recipients of aid.[59] However, the international aid regime often overlooks the scale of refugee-to-refugee assistance. The lack of acknowledgement of refugees' contribution to humanitarian and development efforts has several implications. First, it reinforces the conventional narrative of refugees as merely aid recipients and victims while downplaying their capabilities for self-help and self-governance. Second, not recognising refugees as aid providers undermines the effectiveness of global aid governance and its practical implementation.[60]

Third, the notable success of refugee-led schools in Dadaab camps, as demonstrated by their students' better academic achievement compared to their peers in INGO-run schools, strongly indicates the effectiveness of governance practices within these schools. This

success is arguably supported by strict administrative oversight, which ensures efficient and effective educational and administrative activities. Additionally, the active collaboration and efforts of teachers, school administration, parents, and students play a crucial role in this success. Empowering students to influence their learning and school administration not only promotes their active engagement and participation but also cultivates leadership qualities and a sense of responsibility.[61] These practices indicate a shift towards a more participatory and collaborative governance approach. Power is distributed among various stakeholders, including parents, teachers, students, and school administrators. This approach represents a significant departure from the centralised, top-down power relationships that characterise the global humanitarian aid and development systems.[62]

Fourth, by emphasising direct accountability to parents, these schools demonstrate their commitment to downward accountability in governance. These refugee-led schools are also accountable to Kenyan government, which provides them accreditation, thereby creating a *dual accountability* mechanism: upward to the Kenyan government and downward to the refugees themselves. However, donors and INGOs often use the perceived lack of accountability mechanisms and capacity to deliver services effectively to deny refugee-led initiatives for international recognition and funding.[63] In contrast, INGO-run systems frequently prioritise upward accountability to donors, whose priorities, and perspectives on areas of need may differ, often at the expense of downward accountability to aid beneficiaries.[64] The case of nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Dadaab highlights the importance of balancing upward and downward accountabilities to better meet the needs of aid beneficiaries.

The emergence, mass development, and success of nationally accredited refugee-led schools in Kenya's Dadaab camps highlights the transformative potential of refugee-led initiatives. Acknowledging and supporting these initiatives in line with the goals of the localisation of aid agenda can make humanitarian aid more humane, affirmative, and impactful. Future studies should focus on conducting a comparative mixed-method analysis to investigate why refugee-led students outperform those in UNHCR-funded schools, especially in the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) examinations. Understanding this is crucial because it can provide insights into the underlying factors that may enable the effectiveness and success of these schools, including governance, pedagogical practices, and the socio-economic background of learners.

Notes

1. Alio et al., "By Refugees, for Refugees"; Betts, Easton-Calabria, and Pincock, "Localising Public Health"; Nilsen et al., "Community-Led Education."
2. Brown, "Building Resilience"; Nilsen et al., "Community-Led Education."
3. Palik, "Education for Rohingya Refugee Children."
4. Dryden-Peterson, "I Find Myself as Someone."
5. Karanja, "The Educational Pursuits and Obstacles."
6. Betts, Easton-Calabria, and Pincock, "Localising Public Health"; Nungsari and Chuah, "Refugee Community-based Organizations."
7. Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, "The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation," 2021.
8. Khan and Kontinen, "Impediments to Localization Agenda."
9. Bold, Kimenyi, and Sandefur, "Public and Private Provision of Education"; Zuilkowski et al., "Parents, Quality, and School Choice."
10. Gandrup and Titeca, "Reproducing the State?"; Vokes and Mills, "Time for School?"

11. Roepstorff, "A Call for Critical Reflection"; Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, "The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation"; Mac Ginty, "Where is the Local?"
12. Brown, "Building Resilience"; Dryden-Peterson, "I Find Myself as Someone"; Karanja, "The Educational Pursuits and Obstacles"; Palik, "Education for Rohingya Refugee Children"; Nilsen et al., "Community-Led Education."
13. Palik, "Education for Rohingya Refugee Children," 1.
14. Brown, "Building Resilience," 171–2.
15. Dryden-Peterson, "I Find Myself as Someone."
16. Bonfiglio, *Learning Outside the Classroom*, 14.
17. Karanja, "The Educational Pursuits and Obstacles," 149.
18. Barakat and Milton, "Localisation across the Humanitarian-Development-Peace Nexus"; Schierenbeck, "Beyond the Local Turn Divide."
19. Elkahlout et al., "Localisation of Humanitarian Action," 2.
20. Roepstorff, "A Call for Critical Reflection," 287.
21. Spandler, Roepstorff, and Maitra, "Localization and the Politics of Humanitarian Action," 1.
22. Gómez, "Localisation or Deglobalisation?" 1347.
23. Metcalfe-Hough et al., "The Grand Bargain at Five Years," 52.
24. Barakat and Milton, "Localisation across the Humanitarian-development-Peace Nexus"; Roepstorff, "A Call for Critical Reflection"; Jung et al. "Navigating through Depoliticisation."
25. Barakat and Milton, "Localisation across the Humanitarian-development-peace Nexus," 154.
26. Roepstorff, "A Call for Critical Reflection," 288.
27. Slim, "Localization is Self-determination."
28. Jung et al., "Navigating through Depoliticisation," 13.
29. Slim, "Localization is Self-determination," 2.
30. *Integrated academies* are primary schools that offer both secular and religious education in a unified system.
31. Chavez, "Conceptualizing from the Inside."
32. DeLyser, "Do You Really Live Here?"
33. Mackenzie, McDowell, and Pittaway, "Beyond 'Do No Harm'."
34. Liamputtong, *Researching the Vulnerable*; Lokot, "The Space between Us."
35. Gandrup and Titeca, "Reproducing the State?"
36. Interview, Omar Yusuf, Director of Gedi Secondary School.
37. UNHCR, "Missing Out Refugee Education in Crisis."
38. Anderson and McKnight, "Understanding Al-Shabaab"; Haider, "Conflict Analysis of North Eastern Kenya."
39. Ahmed, "The Impact of Terrorism."
40. Ibid., 33.
41. Interview, Ali Abdi, a founder and former manager of Gedi Secondary School.
42. Aden, "Hoping against the Odds."
43. Aden, Edle, and Horst, "From Refugees to Citizens?"
44. Otsialo, "Refugees Top 2022 KCSE Exams in North Eastern."
45. Interview, Jamis, a Kenyan national teacher at Gedi Secondary School.
46. Interview, Hamida, a Form One student.
47. Interview, Sadiyo, a Form One student.
48. Lesne, "School Fees, Parental Participation and Accountability."
49. Interview, Ali Abdi, a founder and former manager of Gedi Secondary School.
50. Papadopoulos, *Understanding Accountability in Democratic Governance*.
51. Bellver, Mendiburu, and Poli, "Strengthening Transparency and Accountability."
52. Interview, Zaki, a Form One student.
53. Interview, Abdullahi, a Form One student.
54. Skerritt et al., "Student Voice and the School Hierarchy."
55. Interview, Sadiyo, a Form One student.

56. Brown, "Building Resilience"; Dryden-Peterson, "I Find Myself as Someone"; Karanja, "The Educational Pursuits and Obstacles"; Palik, "Education for Rohingya Refugee Children"; Nilsen et al., "Community-Led Education."
57. Slim, "Localization is Self-determination"; Gómez, "Localisation or Deglobalisation?"
58. de la Chaux and Haugh, "When Formal Institutions Impede Entrepreneurship"; Tavakoli, "Cultural Entrepreneurship of Sahrawi Refugees."
59. Malkin, "My Brother's Keeper."
60. Horst, "A Monopoly on Assistance"; Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, *The Global Governed?*
61. Aden, Edle, and Horst, "From Refugees to Citizens?"
62. Slim, "Localization is Self-determination"; Jung et al., "Navigating through Depoliticisation."
63. Pincock, Betts, and Easton-Calabria, "The Rhetoric and Reality of Localisation," 2021, 732.
64. Roepstorff, "A Call for Critical Reflection on the Localisation Agenda in Humanitarian Action."
65. The chart draws on Aden et al, "What Can We Learn?"

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