

THE SHIRIKA PLAN:

KENYA'S BOLD APPROACH FOR REFUGEE INTEGRATION

By Natasha Lulia

The Shirika Plan is a multi-year initiative aimed at transforming refugee camps in Turkana and Garissa into integrated settlements, ultimately establishing two new cities in Kakuma and Dadaab. Kenya has upheld an open-door asylum policy, hosting over 700,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Somalia, South Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, due to ongoing regional conflicts. Despite its innovative approach, the plan faces significant questions regarding its feasibility and implementation.

Building on the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan (KISED) and the Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan (GISED), the Shirika Plan aligns with key national and regional frameworks, including County Integrated Development Plans (CIDPs), Vision 2030, the Bottom-Up Economic Transformation Agenda, and the Global Compact on Refugees. Its core objectives include redesigning camps into integrated municipalities, mobilizing financial, technical, and material support to ease the burden on host communities, and transitioning from humanitarian aid to long-term development through the humanitarian-development-peace nexus. This shift entails government-led service provision for refugees while fostering socio-economic inclusion, self-reliance, and resilience among both refugee and host communities.

The plan is structured around six pillars: systems building, integrated service delivery, human capital and skills development, climate action and natural resource management, sustainable economic growth, and durable solutions with complementary pathways. It will roll out in three phases: the transition phase from 2024 to 2027, stabilization from 2028 to 2031, and resilience from 2032 to 2035.

700,000

Refugees and Asylum seekers



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KEY CONCERNS



Legal and policy gaps: Legally, while it builds on the Refugee Act of 2021, several ambiguities remain, particularly regarding refugees' rights to work, own businesses, and acquire land or property. These rights are further constrained by bureaucratic hurdles, such as the lengthy process of obtaining a Class M permit. Additionally, restrictions on movement under the encampment policy could conflict with the plan's integration goals. However, the proposal includes a pathway for East African Community (EAC) citizens to change their status to East African migrants. It is also crucial for the plan to account for evolving national policies, such as the transition from NHIF to SHIF/SHA. Addressing these legal challenges through a comprehensive Refugee Policy could provide clarity and structure.



Financing is another major challenge. The transition phase alone requires an estimated \$943 million, covering education, healthcare, livelihoods, and infrastructure. To secure funding, the plan proposes a dedicated fund alongside a resource mobilization strategy leveraging multilateral development banks, public-private partnerships, and private sector contributions. However, heavy reliance on donor funding raises sustainability concerns, particularly as major donors, such as the United States, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands, scale back development aid and re-align their strategic interest. This uncertainty prompts discussions on whether or not to proceed with the implementation of the Plan and explore alternative funding models, urging the government to reassess its resource mobilization strategy.



Security considerations also play a critical role. The encampment policy was originally implemented due to national security concerns, particularly following claims that the 2013 terror attack was orchestrated from within the Kakuma camp. On a broader scale, ongoing regional instability continues to drive asylum seekers into Kenya, a factor the plan does not fully account for. While the initiative aims to enhance refugee management, it may inadvertently attract more displaced individuals, further straining resources. Some have proposed setting a cap on the number of asylum seekers and refugees that can be accommodated, as Kakuma, Dadaab, and Kalobeyei already exceed their intended capacity.

Additional concerns include **limited community engagement**. Both host and refugee communities have expressed dissatisfaction over inadequate involvement in shaping the Shirika Plan. Restricted access to information on policy changes affecting them has hindered public participation, reducing transparency and accountability.

Environmental sustainability and natural resource management are also critical but often overlooked. The camps are situated in arid and semi-arid lands that already struggle with harsh climatic conditions. High deforestation rates, largely due to reliance on firewood, have exacerbated environmental degradation. Sustainable resource management strategies are essential to ensure equitable access for both refugees and host communities. Moreover, integrating refugees into national climate frameworks is vital as they remain highly vulnerable to climate shocks.

CONCLUSION

The Shirika Plan presents a bold vision for refugee integration in Kenya. However, its success hinges on effectively addressing the challenges of legal frameworks, financing, security, community engagement, and environmental sustainability. By tackling these issues, Kenya can set a precedent for a regional model for refugee management that addresses both the needs of refugees and host communities while promoting long-term and sustainable resilience.

