



POLICY BRIEF 2026



PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION IN KAKUMA MUNICIPALITY

CHALLENGES AND PATHWAYS TO PEACE





Introduction

Kenya ranks the fifth largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and 13th globally, with approximately 849,625 refugees as of 30th April 2025 (DRS, 2025)¹. Kenya's role as a host nation for refugees has deep historical roots, extending back to the colonial era, serving as a significant destination for both economic migrants from across the continent and forcibly displaced persons within the region. The large influx of refugees over the years has placed considerable pressure on Kenya's resources and infrastructure, creating complex social dynamics within the surrounding host communities.

Kakuma Municipality is located approximately 120 km from Lodwar and 130 km from the South Sudan border in Turkana County. The camp hosts approximately 305,421 refugees from over 22 nationalities, and remains one of the world's most complex and protracted displacement refugee camps, confronted with many challenges such as environmental degradation, resource scarcity, cultural clash, and insecurity. It also presents a complex social landscape characterised by tensions between the refugee and host communities. The Turkana community ranks as Kenya's poorest, with over 88% of its

residents living below the poverty line. The long-standing marginalisation predates the refugee presence and remains a key factor influencing social cohesion in Kakuma Municipality.

Kenya enacted the Refugees Act of 2021, representing progressive strides in its approach to refugee protection and integration. The Act domesticates the three durable solutions to refugee crises, including local integration, resettlement, and voluntary repatriation, ensuring Kenya's full compliance with international conventions such as the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.

Against this backdrop, the National Cohesion and Integration Commission (NCIC) through the support of the Auschwitz Institute for the Prevention of Genocide and Mass Atrocities (AIPG) undertook a research study, aimed at examining the conflict drivers prevalent in Kakuma Municipality, and proffering policy recommendations for enhancing social cohesion and promoting sustainable conflict resolution among refugee and host communities.

¹ <https://refugee.go.ke/sites/default/files/2025-05/Kenya%20Statistics%20Package%20%20-30%20April%202025.pdf>



The study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm using a mixed methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Data collection involved key informant interviews with experts and focus group discussions with a diverse range of participants, including women, youth, members of the business community, local peace stakeholders, community leaders from both host and refugee communities, as well as relevant state and non-state actors. A total of 435 questionnaires were administered to members of the refugee and host communities. Qualitative data was analysed thematically, while STATA and Principal Component Analysis were employed for quantitative data analysis.

KEY FINDINGS

Findings testify that refugee-refugee tensions in Kakuma Municipality exceed refugee-host tensions, an indication that the host community is not the primary barrier to refugee integration. Data reveals that cultural clash, resource competition, and historical trauma from countries of origin generate more friction than host-refugee dynamics. However, the latter remain substantial and require targeted policy attention.

Social cohesion in Kakuma Municipality is affected by several factors:

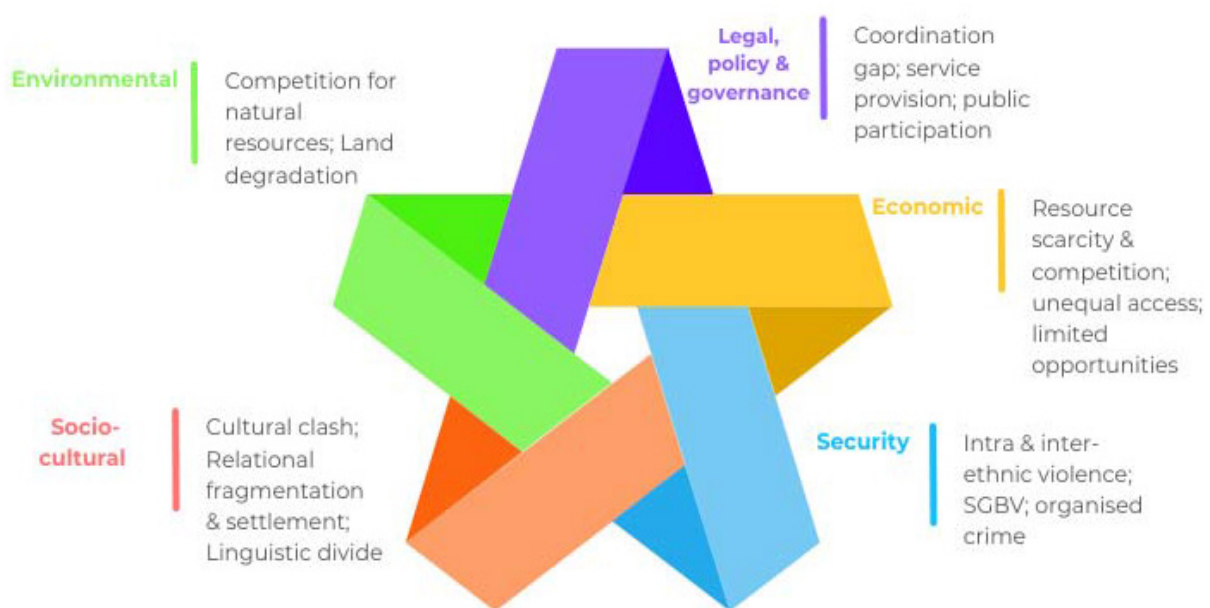


Figure 1: Factors affecting social cohesion in Kakuma Municipality

Socio-Cultural Factors

Socio-cultural dynamics in Kakuma Municipality manifest in various ways, including cultural clash, intermarriages, relational fragmentation, and communicative barriers that fuel inter-communal tensions. The convergence of over 22 nationalities within the camp generates cultural friction, as divergent norms, values, and practices create misunderstandings that escalate into conflict. Inter-communal relationships remain strained by historical grievances imported from countries of origin, with ethnic and clan-based loyalties often superseding solidarity, thereby reinforcing segregation and reducing the ties essential for cohesive community formation. The findings reveal that 72.45% of refugees report feeling unsafe among fellow refugees, out of which 74.63% attribute this to inter-communal cultural differences.



Legal, Policy Frameworks and Governance Factors

Kakuma has been recognised for its humanitarian efforts. However, there is evidence that various legal, policy and governance factors continue to hinder the establishment of lasting peace. Governance and policy deficits, including limited knowledge and understanding of key policies have exacerbated tension and conflict among the refugees and between the refugees and the host community. The introduction of the Differentiated Assistance (DA) programme created significant tension, with 97.39% of respondents from both communities arguing that the aid categorisation has brought major problems contributing to the lack of social cohesion. Both host and refugee communities have joined hands in opposing the DA model, recognising that its implementation disenfranchises them. The Shirika Plan, designed to transform refugee camps into integrated municipalities, has caused anxiety and unrest among residents due to lack of consultation. When asked about their feelings regarding government policies, 80.61% of respondents articulated that these policies have instilled fear and uncertainty among the communities.



Key concerns regarding public participation on key policy formulation and implementation were identified, including inadequate communication of information, poor formal channels for involvement, language barrier due to low literacy levels, and limited community engagement. Gaps in service provision between national and county governments, perceptions on inequality in access to services, and lack of coordination among peace actors directly contribute to social tensions and undermine efforts towards harmonious coexistence.

Environmental Factors

Kakuma Municipality lies within a fragile, semi-arid ecosystem where natural resources are highly susceptible to overuse and degradation from human activity. Environmental pressure forms a critical foundation of many host-refugee tensions. Water scarcity is a particularly serious challenge, as the available seasonal rivers and limited boreholes cannot meet the needs of both refugees and host populations. Further, both the host community and refugees rely on the land for grazing livestock, cultivating crops, and constructing shelters. Members of the host community expressed feelings of having been forcibly displaced from their ancestral lands to make way for the settlement of refugees. When asked about their concerns regarding land damage, both the host community and the refugees expressed similar levels of apprehension, with 77% demonstrating significant concern about the state of their environment. In contrast, 23% indicated moderate to less concern, demonstrating the common challenges faced by both groups in relation to environmental degradation.

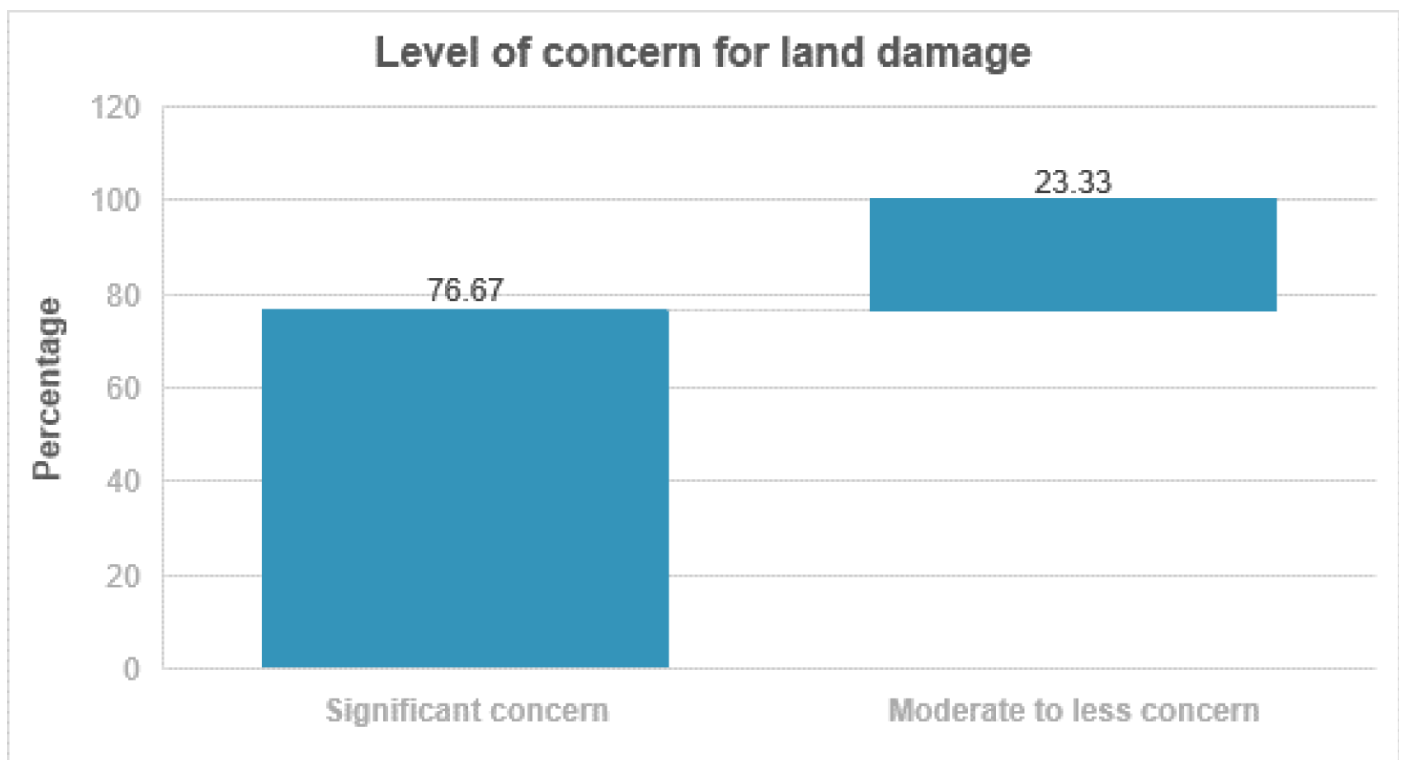
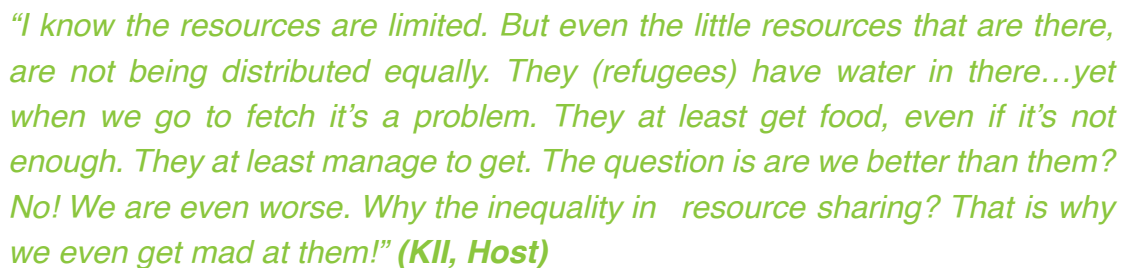


Figure 2: Representation of survey respondents' level of concern over land damage in Kakuma

Economic Factors

Economic hardship exacerbates vulnerabilities for both communities. The study reveals a perception of unequal treatment in resource allocation, with 76.92% of host community members arguing that aid provision is not distributed fairly and is primarily focused on refugees. Additionally, 72.88% of host community respondents indicated that they have less access to job opportunities because of the presence of refugees, a perception that generates daily friction between and within communities, as voiced by one of the participants:



"I know the resources are limited. But even the little resources that are there, are not being distributed equally. They (refugees) have water in there...yet when we go to fetch it's a problem. They at least get food, even if it's not enough. They at least manage to get. The question is are we better than them? No! We are even worse. Why the inequality in resource sharing? That is why we even get mad at them!" (KII, Host)

The perceived disparities between the refugees and hosts undermine the potential for collaboration, further worsening feelings of mistrust and overall well-being of both the refugee and host communities.

Security Factors

The Municipality faces challenges related to criminality, particularly with the rise of youth gangs. The increase in gang activity is fueled by high unemployment, poverty, and lack of opportunities for youth. Gangs engage in theft, assault, extortion, and reports of murder and armed break-ins. Drug trafficking and widespread substance abuse have also emerged as significant concerns, contributing to insecurity.

Study findings show minimal open violence between the host community and refugees, with isolated incidents of violence related to robberies. However, 77.95% of host communities perceive an increase in crime incidences, making them feel unsafe in the presence of refugees. Similarly, 73.2% of refugees expressed that they too perceive an increase in crime.

The most common form of insecurity within the camp is infighting between the South Sudanese Nuer and Dinka communities, who bring their longstanding conflicts from South Sudan into the Kakuma environment. Whenever tensions arise in their home country, these same issues manifest in the camp, leading to violence and discord.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant source of conflict and insecurity, affecting both refugee communities internally and the relationship between refugees and host populations. GBV plays out in various forms, including rape, physical violence, domestic violence, trading sex for food, and forced early marriages. Women face acute physical and protection risks, particularly while accessing basic resources such as water and firewood.

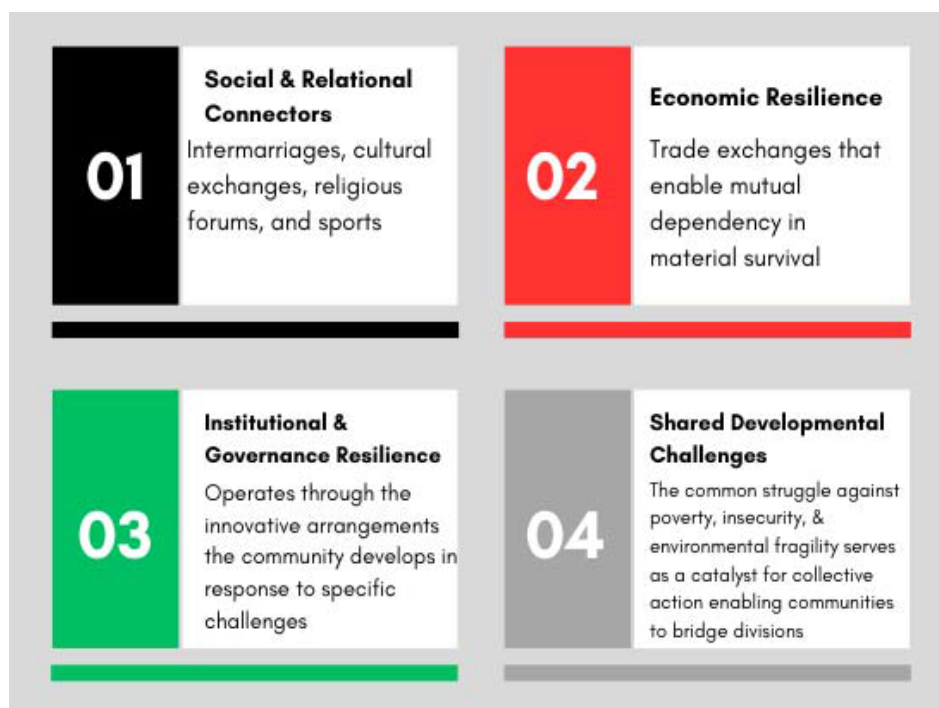
Impact of Conflict on the Community

While conflict permeates every aspect of life, the nature and extent of its effects differ substantially among specific populations, leading to unique vulnerabilities and responses. Although the whole-of-society is affected differently, there exists varied experiences and challenges faced by different demographic groups within the community, as shown below:



Figure 3: NCIC’s representation of the impact of conflict on various groups in Kakuma Municipality

Nevertheless, the study documents important connectors and resilience factors that sustain cooperation and prevent overall disintegration amongst communal members, as demonstrated in the figure below:



The Commission acknowledges that while these mechanisms do not erase tension, they function as important buffers that absorb shock and forestall the escalation of everyday friction into sustained violent conflict.

Emerging Issues

This study brings to the fore several issues that affect social cohesion in Kakuma Municipality, shedding light on the complexities and challenges that host and refugee communities grapple with in their day-to-day lives.

Intra-refugee issues outnumber refugee-host conflicts

Intra-communal conflicts/tension between refugee and refugees are more than inter-conflict between the refugee and the host community. Some tensions reflect unresolved conflicts from countries of origin, especially within South Sudanese communities. At the same time, internal issues arise caused by cultural diversity struggles stemming from faith practices, linguistic barriers, societal norms and values that govern how they live and relate. However, this does not imply that refugee-host issues are absent; they primarily revolve around resource competition, as the hosts often feel sidelined and believe that refugees enjoy better living conditions. Despite these tensions, the Turkana community do not harbor animosity toward the refugees.

Gaps in governance and service provision are key contributors to conflict in Kakuma Municipality

Over 15 years post devolution, Turkana County has the highest poverty index in Kenya, accounting for 82.7% (KNBS, 2024). Residents expressed frustration over the worsening state of life and their overreliance on the little aid that comes to the refugee community. The study findings demonstrate that this cyclic dependency exacerbates existing tensions, as both groups compete for the limited resources available, particularly in light of the new AID Model of Differentiated Assistance introduced due to budget cuts.

The Shirika Plan, a forward-looking document but lacking the Host and Refugee Buy In

Several progressive legal and policy frameworks exist at global, regional, and local levels within Kenya to guide refugee management and integration. Despite these advancements, numerous structural and operational challenges persist, threatening the intended cohesion benefits in Kakuma Municipality. Inadequate grassroots consultation prior to Shirika plan's rollout, as well as the absence of continuous civic education to explain why it is a beneficial policy for the community has harbored misconceptions about this policy framework, leading to widespread opposition against it

Minimal Focus in Peacebuilding Efforts and Weak Coordination Framework

The study identifies significant gaps in institutional architecture, specifically the absence of an organisation specifically mandated for peacebuilding actively working within the region, and the fragmentation of civil society efforts that duplicate initiatives and undermine collective impact.





POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study findings, NCIC recommends urgent action across multiple stakeholder levels to address the identified conflict drivers and strengthen social cohesion in Kakuma Municipality.

National Government

- ❖ Allocate adequate funding and comprehensively strengthen the Directorate of Refugee Services (DRS) to ensure it becomes effective and its impact is felt by actors, hosts, and refugees.

County Government of Turkana

- ❖ Scale up access to services, infrastructure, and development initiatives that spur growth for the host community
- ❖ Promote equity in access to services for all - refugees and host communities alike
- ❖ Enhance citizen participation to gather needs and concerns and translate them into policy interventions
- ❖ Leverage initiatives such as the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan (KISED P) by proactively partnering with investors to ensure consistent provision of basic services

Directorate of Refugee Services

- ❖ Design and execute genuine civic education and sensitisation programmes that reach grassroots levels, utilising trusted messengers including religious leaders
- ❖ Actively promote programmes that create shared economic opportunities and access to services for both populations

National Cohesion and Integration Commission

- ❖ Step up the role as the peacebuilding apex institution mandated by the NCI Act CAP 7N to rally all actors within the Municipality
- ❖ Facilitate the development of a clear coordination framework that addresses the needs of local target groups while deepening stakeholder collaboration
- ❖ Provide programmatic interventions aimed at dismantling cultural barriers and promoting robust inter-communal relationships



National Police Service

- ❖ Establish formal liaison committees comprising police, refugee representatives, and Turkana host community leaders to facilitate early warning and early response
- ❖ Encourage transparent reporting mechanisms for police misconduct to rebuild trust eroded by alleged corruption and other abuses

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

- ❖ Prioritise joint projects that address shared resource challenges, particularly water, energy, and land management for both refugee and host communities.
- ❖ Establish a participatory review process for the Differentiated Assistance Programme with regular consultations and feedback mechanisms
- ❖ Ensure communities are well consulted from design to execution stages of all programmes Kenya National Commission on Human Rights and the Commission on Administrative Justice
- ❖ Launch a comprehensive investigation into allegations of injustice and discrimination in service delivery and ensure accountability for violations of basic human rights

Civil Society Organisations

- ❖ Advocate for transformative change in good governance, equity and fairness in service provision and social justice

Ministry of Health

- ❖ Collaborate with other institutions to provide psychosocial support that stabilizes acute distress through offering trained community counselors, safe spaces for women and youth, and accessible referral pathways to clinical mental health services

The political class

- ❖ Resist the temptation to instrumentalise the refugee plight for personal gain, to avoid amplifying ethnic tensions, and perpetuating the structural violence likely to keep these populations in dependency and despair.



CONCLUSION

The people in Kakuma deserve to live peacefully and with dignity, irrespective of their status as refugees or members of the host community. Sustainable peace in Kakuma Municipality cannot be achieved through fragmented, single-mandate interventions. It demands a multi-agency convergence where government agencies, international organisations, refugee-led organisations, civil society, and grassroots community structures work together to dismantle the structural foundations of conflict. The surge in crime, intra- and inter-ethnic conflict, and social fragmentation is not merely a law-and-order problem but the consequence of deeper systemic failures, including unequal resource distribution, governance gaps, economic exclusion, and cultural alienation.

The Commission recognises that only through intentional partnership can structural issues be tackled at their roots, to realise an environment where diverse, displaced, and marginalised populations co-exist peacefully. NCIC calls upon all stakeholders to embrace the principles of inclusive coexistence, mutual respect, and shared responsibility that underpin successful refugee-host community relations.

This policy brief is based on the NCIC Report on Promoting Social Cohesion in Kakuma Municipality, Turkana County: Challenges and Pathways to Peace. The full report is available on the Commission's website.