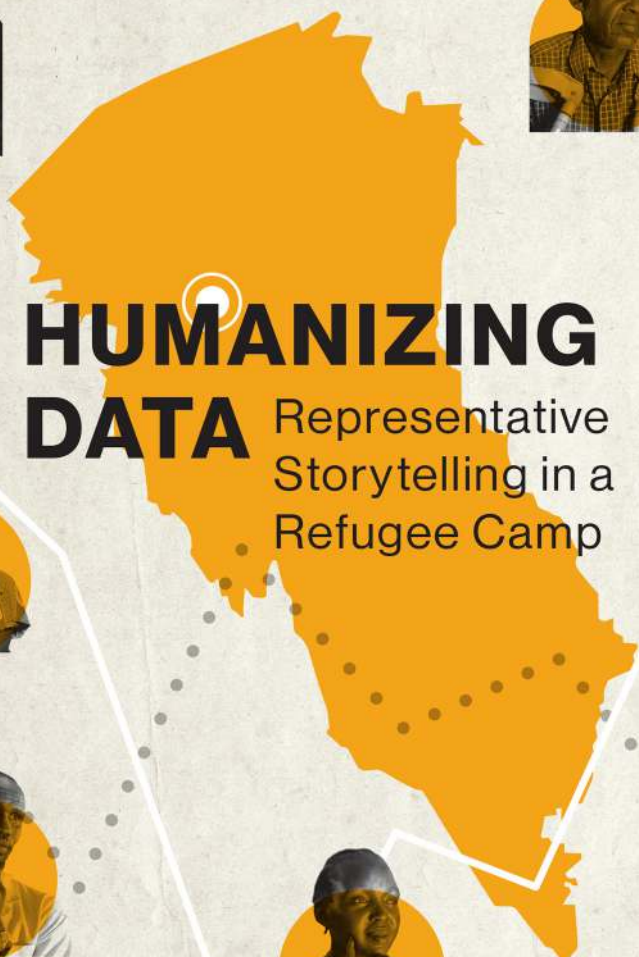


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# HUMANIZING DATA

Representative  
Storytelling in a  
Refugee Camp

OLIVIER **STERCK**  
MADISON **BAKEWELL**  
RAPHAEL **BRADENBRINK**  
ALEXANDER **BETTS**

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
546 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10036, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2026942722

ISBN 9780197916407

DOI: 10.1093/9780197916391.001.0001

The manufacturer's authorized representative in the EU for product safety is  
Oxford University Press España S.A. of Parque Empresarial San Fernando de Henares,  
Avenida de Castilla, 2 – 28830 Madrid ([www.oup.es/en](http://www.oup.es/en) or [product.safety@oup.com](mailto:product.safety@oup.com)).  
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Cover image: Still photography by Raphael Bradenbrink.

# Preface

The number of refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) is growing globally, reaching nearly 120 million in 2025. With wars, authoritarian governments, and the impact of climate change, millions of people across the planet are forced to leave their homes and, sometimes, flee their countries. Most forcibly displaced people are from conflict-affected low-income countries and seek refuge in the immediate neighbouring states. Only a minority travel onwards to Europe or North America.

Around the world, public narratives about forcibly displaced people are usually based on storytelling at the extremes, in which refugees are portrayed as villains, victims, or heroes. People forced to flee are often stereotyped as opportunistic jobseekers, unwelcome competitors, and violent criminals. Alternatively, they may be represented through outlying examples of extreme hardship or even success against the odds—the refugee athlete or the refugee entrepreneur. These stereotypes may be shared by the media, politicians, or advocacy groups.

These accounts may be authentic but, because they only portray the extremes, they risk skewing public understanding about the everyday realities faced by the majority of forcibly displaced people. More than 85 per cent of the world's forcibly displaced people live in low- and middle-income countries. The African continent hosts the largest number of forcibly displaced people, where around two-thirds live in camps. Most members of the public, including key policymakers, will never travel to major host countries in Africa, such as Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya, let alone visit a refugee or IDP camp.

The aim of this book is twofold: first, to address the way refugees' stories are often distorted or selectively represented in media and political discourse by providing an alternative approach to storytelling that is both academically rigorous and accessible; second, to offer a more representative account of what it is like to live in a refugee camp.

We focus on Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya, the second-largest camp in Africa, which hosted more than 300,000 refugees by the end of 2025. It is located close to the border with war-torn South Sudan and hosts refugees from

several unstable neighbouring countries. Like other large camps around the world (such as Kutupalong in Bangladesh, Zaatari in Jordan, or Bidi Bidi in Uganda), it is located in a remote border region, offers limited opportunity for refugees to access employment, and is served by humanitarian aid organizations. In theory, refugee camps are intended to be temporary facilities built to provide emergency assistance, but in practice, they often last decades, resulting in people living in them for many years.

We developed and implemented a new research methodology that we call ‘Representative Storytelling.’ As social scientists, we usually have two main tools available to us: qualitative and quantitative research methods. Qualitative methods study rich narrative accounts of people’s lives, but the question is always how representative these stories are. Quantitative methods can be representative, but they can be complex, dry, and dehumanizing, reducing people’s experiences to a few statistics. Representative Storytelling proposes to integrate these approaches in a novel and complementary way. It seeks to humanize data by linking statistics to real stories and to contextualize stories by situating them within representative data.

We implemented this methodology in Kakuma between 2022 and 2024. We first collected representative quantitative data on the camp population, interviewing a sample of over 1,000 refugee households whose characteristics mirrored those of the entire camp. We then rank ordered the households in the data according to their income level and invited the households at each decile (ten percentage-point intervals) for in-depth, on-camera interviews. These conversations were conducted with the household member who identified as the most knowledgeable about their situation to understand their lived experience of life within Kakuma. Rather than being chosen because they represent a sensationalist story of triumph or disaster, they represent a particular income level within the broader population.

Rose, Celina, Malual, Thijin, Elizabeth, Ayen, Nyaliak, Abdirizak, and Maker are those nine refugees, whose income levels sit at the nine deciles of the income distribution. In this book, their stories are told in their own words, edited with their input. To reach a broader audience, short video portraits of each are also available on the project’s website: <https://www.refugee-stories.com>.

We have selected and sequenced the household stories based on income levels, both as a way to study and illustrate income inequality in Kakuma and as a means to highlight that income alone does not reflect the diversity of lives in the camp. In each chapter, we situate the experiences of

the nine selected refugees against the backdrop of broader population data. How are their experiences of food security, health, and access to employment representative—or not—of the wider camp population? Our hope is that this approach will enable readers to build a broad, representative understanding of what everyday life is like in the Kakuma refugee camp.

This book is based on the Refugee Stories project, which we began at the University of Oxford in 2020. The project is part of the Refugee Economies Programme, a wider research programme that has studied the economic lives of refugees for nearly a decade, with a focus on East Africa. Our team is interdisciplinary. Professor Olivier Sterck is an economist, who led on quantitative research, and managed data collection and analysis. Madison Bakewell is a geographer and the programme manager, and contributed significantly to field research. Raphael Bradenbrink is a political scientist and filmmaker who led the fieldwork and film project on which the book is based. Professor Alexander Betts is a mixed-methods social scientist and director of the overall project.

A key feature of the Refugee Economies Programme has been its use of participatory methods, working with members of the refugee and host communities at different stages of the research process. Many people have collaborated on the project.

First, and most importantly, we wish to thank the participating households. We have built a long-term relationship with each of them, returning to see them, and involving them in reviewing and offering feedback on the edited interviews both one and two years after initial filming. Their engagement, feedback, and friendship have been crucial to this project.

Second, an important feature of this project has been the filming of household interviews. This has enabled us to capture the interviews accurately as well as to develop a multimedia platform through which to share the research more broadly. In order to do this, we worked with Kakuma-based filmmakers Christian Baobab, Joseph Lopir, and Mbarushimana Salum. Their involvement went far beyond filming. By supporting community engagement, facilitating interviews, and organizing fieldwork logistics, they shaped the practical and interpersonal dimensions of the research in important ways.

Third, we thank Vittorio Bruni, Andhira Kara, and Patrick Mutinda, who worked as lead research coordinators during our fieldwork in Kakuma and Kalobeyi. Pascal Zigashane Bahati worked effectively as our field coordinator, assisted by Fahren Aden, Samuel Binja Cimanuka, Christine Achola Dominic, John Amany Simon, and Betty Zekira Valeirano, to manage data collection.

During survey implementation, we were privileged to work with an excellent team of enumerators and interviewers. We are especially grateful to Dominic Pasquina Abalo, Khalid Abdikadir, Feysal Abdi Abdirahman, Awak Duot Ajang, Sirak Eshetu Alemu, Rami Hessen Almarat, Ntagahoraho Anicet, Sabrino Musa Anur, Mayen Aguer Arok, Mary Awak, Delphin Lwaboshi Balazire, Niyungeko Antoine Bazahica, Michael Kuany Bol, Abdirashid Burhan, David Chol, Chubaka David, Ghak Atem Ghak, Arkanjelo Ogwalu Hillary, Abdifatah Abdirahman Hussein, Zaituni Ali Hussein, Islam Ahmed Ismail, Sahara Khalif Jama, Dau Dave Jima, Orifa Joseph Jinaro, Daniel Kabala, Abubakar Rugumba Kabura, Buay Kangach, Tunda Emmanuel Ladu, David Reeth Lual, Esther Nakuju Mauro, Ifrah Mohamed Mohamud, Oriama Simon Oliya, Nyanchieu Paul, Hellen Nakeny Peter, Dak Simon Riek, Piyo Ongoro Sebastian, Abdi Sharmake, and Final Jendiya Taban. Our coordinators and enumerators took on important tasks beyond administering and monitoring surveys. They contributed to the development and refinement of our survey instruments, led household interactions during both quantitative and qualitative interviews, and provided translation and culturally grounded interpretation of concepts and situations that would otherwise have been difficult for us to understand.

Fourth, we have been privileged to work with several partner organizations. The Gapminder Foundation worked with us on the initial stages of the project, including providing some funding. An exploratory conversation about adapting their Dollar Street Platform to a refugee camp context provided initial impetus for our research. We also thank the Government of Kenya for providing permission for us to undertake the research, particularly the Department of Refugee Services. Our field operations and logistics during data collection were supported by the World Food Programme.

Ideas, comments, and suggestions were kindly provided by Stéphane Baele, Renaud Foucart, James Gerrans, Emily Kerr, Lisa Martin, Nour Moussa, Naohiko Omata, Jade Siu, Maria Stierna, Sophie van Caloen, and Verena Wiedemann in ways that shaped the design of the study and the writing of the book. We are also grateful to the Refugee Studies Centre, the World Economic Forum, and the London Design Biennale for creating opportunities for us to present and receive feedback on the work on which this book is based.

Finally, we wish to thank our funders. The project was generously funded by the John Fell Fund at the University of Oxford and the IKEA Foundation.

The book is, of course, based on the independent research of the authors and does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of our funders and partners.

*Olivier Sterck*  
*Madison Bakewell*  
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*Alexander Betts*  
*January 2026*

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# Introduction

Our biggest global challenges are generally understood by the public through the prism of human stories. From climate change to pandemics, wars, and crimes against humanity, people make sense of global events through the stories of distant strangers they encounter via their phones, screens, and newspapers. Every day, we navigate a constant stream of tales of hope and despair produced to appeal to our emotions, grab attention, steer political support, and generate revenue.

Humans are uniquely wired for stories—a trait that has co-evolved with our brains over tens of thousands of years ([Barnard, 2016](#)). Our ability to imagine, narrate, and believe in stories sets us apart from other animals ([Gottschall, 2012](#)). Stories have long served as tools for transmitting knowledge, shaping collective beliefs, and enabling large-scale cooperation ([Harari, 2014](#)). Neuroscientific research shows that emotionally engaging narratives activate brain regions linked to empathy, memory, and moral reasoning ([Mar, 2011](#); [Johnson, 2012](#)). Such stories can influence not just feelings but also behaviour: emotionally intense content increases levels of cortisol and oxytocin ([Zak, 2015](#)), fosters generosity ([Barraza & Zak, 2009](#)), and predicts real-world outcomes such as public responses to health campaigns ([Falk et al., 2012](#)).

Sometimes, we are presented with data alongside stories: a graph, a trend, a percentage. But often, these stories are utterly decontextualized, with no explanation of how they relate to broader trends within the relevant population. They often represent the extremes, the outliers, the people who face the worst or the best of circumstances or who achieve unusual success against the odds. Organizations, whether businesses, governments, or non-profits, have strong incentives to focus on the extremes. Because extreme stories tend to provoke stronger emotional reactions, they are more likely to be remembered, shared, and acted upon ([Bartsch & Viehoff, 2010](#)). A newspaper generating readership needs eye-catching stories. A politician campaigning for election needs strong narratives to elicit an emotional response from voters. A non-governmental organization (NGO) that is fundraising needs to show human suffering at its worst or people thriving within its programmes.

Within a crowded media space, sensationalism generates audiences (Grabe et al., 2001; Dobeles et al., 2007; Blom & Hansen, 2015; Lamot, 2022). But it also has consequences, both for public understanding and for the voices and perspectives that are marginalized. If audiences only encounter the extremes, and they are not properly contextualized, the public will develop a distorted understanding of reality. If it is only the extremes of vulnerability and success that receive coverage, the lived experience of the majority ‘in the middle’ risks being effaced.

### Victims, Heroes, and Villains

Migration has become one of the key challenges of our time and, as a result, is highly susceptible to sensationalism based on extremes (De Haas, 2023). Immigration and refugee protection are political issues that polarize public opinion (Baker & Edmonds, 2021; Ollerenshaw & Jardina, 2023; Schneider-Strawczynski & Valette, 2025). Humanitarian organizations, anti-immigration political parties, and advocacy and lobby groups all have a significant stake in shaping the public narrative relating to migrants and refugees, whether to promote progressive or restrictive values.

Refugee protection is especially susceptible to sensationalism (Greenslade, 2005; Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). Across the globe, media, political, and advocacy portrayals of refugees tend to focus on the extremes (Wright, 2014). High-profile humanitarian crises resulting from authoritarian rule in Venezuela, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan, the military coup in Sudan, and Israel’s military action in Gaza and Lebanon all highlight examples of major events in world affairs that have given rise to recent refugee movements. In these contexts, the portrayal of refugees is rarely neutral. Refugees are frequently presented to public audiences in ways intended to strategically influence them, elicit emotional reactions, or reinforce dominant stereotypes (Chouliaraki, 2010; Chouliaraki & Georgiou, 2022). Across the political spectrum, it is rare to find representations of refugees’ lived experiences that are not mediated by the values and interests of the narrator (Sigona, 2014).

The dominant mode of storytelling in literature and popular culture tends to focus on ‘victims, heroes, and villains’ (Anker, 2005). And the framing of refugees too commonly follows this logic, often highlighting vulnerability, capability, and threat through visual representation or written stories (Nawyn, 2011).

The ‘victim’ narrative is often deployed by humanitarian organizations and advocacy groups (Ongenaert & Joye, 2019; Ongenaert & Soler, 2024). By representing people as vulnerable and needy, international organizations and NGOs may seek to legitimize their role and attract additional funding (Morris, 2021). The media also often amplifies and exploits this framing through a narrow set of powerful images. Images of Alan Kurdi,<sup>1</sup> crowded dinghies with amorphous groups in orange life jackets, lines of tents in camps, or people waiting in queues for food assistance are common tropes exploited by the media to accentuate people at the extremes of vulnerability (Amores et al., 2019; Hellmueller & Zhang, 2019; Hayden, 2023). In the refugee context, the victim narrative often perpetuates a sense of poverty, destitution, and hopelessness, sometimes stripping away humanity and political agency in ways akin to Giorgio Agamben’s notion of ‘bare life’ (1998), adapted from the work of Hannah Arendt (1958, p. 24).

The ‘hero’ narrative is sometimes used by humanitarian organizations to counter victimhood and focuses on outliers who represent stories of success (Ongenaert & Soler, 2024). By representing people as successful outliers, organizations can advocate for particular policies and interventions that focus on the pathways to success—development programmes, investment in business, or expanding opportunities for resettlement. Highlighting success stories is also used as a strategy to showcase the effectiveness of particular aid programmes and attract funding. The ‘refugee entrepreneur’ is one example of how refugee stories of success are frequently celebrated, often focusing on the minority who achieve high income levels (Hanna, 2022). The media and humanitarian organizations also often tell stories of academic, sporting, or musical success, revealing ways in which, against the odds, refugees can sometimes thrive and do extraordinary things (Heinkelmann-Wild et al., 2019). From ‘Einstein was a Refugee’ posters to footballer Alphonso Davies and pop star Rita Ora, the celebrity refugee is commonly deployed to challenge assumptions about refugees’ vulnerability and offer a sense of hope. Showcasing outlying success can be a positive thing; the challenge comes when it is decontextualized and audiences—including refugees seeking sources of inspiration—have no sense of how relatively representative such examples actually are or of how those who fail to meet these unrealistically high standards face demonization or exclusion.

The ‘villain’ narrative depicts refugees as criminals or burdens for host countries. Asylum seekers in particular have been criminalized in media and

<sup>1</sup> Alan Kurdi was a two-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea in September 2015.

political narratives (Baker & McEnery, 2005; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Wirz et al., 2018; Amores et al., 2019). High-profile stories of terrorists who entered target countries through the asylum route or images of people clinging to the underside of lorries, scaling razor wire fences, or occupying temporary urban accommodation are often presented in the media in ways that reinforce narratives of threat by playing on the connection between refugees and insecurity (Wodak, 2015; Elsamni, 2016). Many right-wing politicians also build their communication around stories of migrants, usually framed as ‘illegal’, connected to human smuggling networks, and seeking to abuse social security systems. In these stories, refugees are frequently depicted as faceless masses, shown in boats, camps, or behind barbed wire, with their individual identities obscured. This dehumanizing portrayal serves various political purposes, such as diminishing empathic responses, amplifying perceptions of refugees as threats to national sovereignty and security, and increasing support for anti-refugee policies (Bleiker et al., 2013; Azevedo et al., 2021). By representing people as burdens, threats, or illegal migrants, news media can attract clicks and revenue, and politicians win votes. Tabloid newspapers and news channels have been able to sell more, and achieve more engagements, through negative sensationalism (Davies, 2011). The story of the ‘refugee terrorist’, however statistically unlikely, or the refugee criminal, however distorting of probabilistic trends, sells because it plays on the reinforcement of assumptions and pre-existing political biases. Scapegoating serves a political function for both corporate news media and opportunistic politicians seeking to narrate asylum and immigration as a cause of citizens’ day-to-day challenges (Cochrane & Nevitte, 2014; Goodfellow, 2020).

Each of these stereotypical tropes can be found in photos, videos, or news stories. This is the case not only in Europe and North America, where migration has become increasingly salient and divisive in media and political discourse, but also in major refugee-hosting countries across the world. In Kenya, where the data for this book were collected, refugee representations frequently reproduce the same three narratives: refugees living in catastrophic conditions, refugee entrepreneurs succeeding against the odds, and refugees associated with terrorism and insecurity.

The point is not that any of these narratives does not have some element of truth. Notwithstanding the rise of generative artificial intelligence (AI),<sup>2</sup> the stories and images are usually real. Indeed, refugees represent a diverse

<sup>2</sup> An interesting example of an AI-generated image that went viral is the ‘All eyes on Rafah’ graphic from 2024. The image was shared over 45 million times on Instagram in order to express solidarity with people in Gaza but was widely viewed as unrepresentative of the context (Oscar & Fahd, 2024).

cross-section of humanity. Isolated stories can usually be found to illustrate any preconceived ideas.

The problem is that, in each case, they usually relate to the extreme outliers and are not contextualized as such. When the unrepresentative extremes are narrated as though they are the norm, public understanding becomes distorted. Rarely do humanitarian organizations, the media, or politicians take the time to narrate the experience of the majority, of those people ‘in the middle’ whose lives may be less dramatic but no less significant. Stories of the common majority are seldom deemed interesting, newsworthy, or useful from an advocacy perspective. And yet, all stories need to be considered to build a representative understanding of how refugees live and develop policies based on evidence rather than anecdotes.

It matters not only whose stories are picked but also how these stories are framed and presented. Labels within stories shape emotional responses and public attitudes. Research shows, for instance, that referring to refugees and asylum-seekers as ‘illegal immigrants’ in media coverage increases prejudice and support for punitive policies (Augoustinos & Quinn, 2003; Rucker et al., 2019). Storytelling at the extremes, through decontextualized outliers and labels, we suggest, risks being harmful storytelling, from whatever political vantage point it comes. Of course, this challenge also applies to many other contexts in which human stories are commonly deployed for political, advocacy, or financial purposes—global health, international development, human rights, or climate change, for example.

## **Representative Storytelling**

Our aim in this book is to explore whether there might be a novel way to portray the diversity of refugee stories in a representative and contextualized way, beyond extremes and labels. Can we support refugees in telling their stories while still contextualizing them for the audience and showing whether and to what extent they are representative of broader trends?

We argue that answering this question requires bridging the qualitative–quantitative divide.

Qualitative research draws on non-numerical data to explore and interpret the perceptions, meanings, and experiences of individuals and groups. Its epistemological foundations rest on interpretivist or constructivist paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, participant observation, and the analysis of texts and visual materials are among

its core methods. Qualitative research is central to anthropology, sociology, and interpretive strands of political science. Rather than aiming for statistical generalizability, qualitative researchers often use purposive sampling to access ‘information-rich cases’ (Patton, 2002). Instead of determining sample size based on a statistical formula, researchers collect data until saturation—that is, when new data do not bring new information (Guest et al., 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Qualitative researchers embrace subjectivity, and stories—often drawn from fieldnotes, transcripts, or personal reflections—are central to qualitative analysis and argumentation (Gubrium & Holstein, 2009). The main critique of qualitative methods relates to the difficulty in assessing the representativeness of observations and narratives (for an excellent discussion of case selection in qualitative research, see Small, 2009).

By contrast, quantitative research relies on numerical data—typically derived from surveys, administrative records, or experiments—to describe population-level trends or test hypotheses. It is grounded in positivist assumptions of objectivity and replicability and is dominant in fields such as economics, demography, epidemiology, and parts of political science. Sampling strategies aim to achieve representativeness through probability sampling, and causal inference is pursued through randomized controlled trials and quasi-experimental methods (Angrist & Pischke, 2009; Imbens & Rubin, 2015). Quantitative research often eschews stories, viewing them as anecdotal, subjective, or unscientific, and instead focuses on statistics, such as averages, regression coefficients, and *p*-values. The reduction of social realities to a few numbers, however, can render findings abstract, oversimplified, decontextualized, and disconnected from the lived experiences they aim to describe (Heath & Heath, 2007; Merry, 2011). Quantitative data are also often presented in ways that may appear overly complex or dry, making research outputs less accessible to broader audiences (Dilnot & Blastland, 2010) and contributing to the poor public perception of statistics (Hand, 2009).

Our book seeks to introduce a novel methodology to integrate qualitative and quantitative methods and enable data-driven storytelling. In simple terms, our aim is to develop a new means to bring quantitative data to life through human stories and—conversely—to contextualize human stories by situating them within representative data.

Our book is therefore inspired by—and contributes to—the growing literature on mixed-methods research, which seeks to combine the strengths of quantitative and qualitative approaches (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2011; Creswell & Clark, 2017). Methodological approaches within this growing tradition are diverse, ranging from sequential designs to fully integrated analyses

(Small, 2011). While mixed-methods studies are becoming more common, this trend is primarily driven by certain fields, such as educational research and nursing (Timans et al., 2019).

In the disciplines most central to our book—such as economics, anthropology, and political science—genuinely integrated mixed-methods research remains the exception rather than the rule (Timans et al., 2019). Even in migration studies, where the complexity of human mobility might seem to demand methodological pluralism, mixed-methods research remains relatively rare (Carling, 2024). Across these fields (especially in economics), researchers, institutions, and journals often operate in methodological silos, with disciplinary norms encouraging specialization in either qualitative or quantitative approaches. And even when both types of data are collected within a single project, the integration of qualitative and quantitative evidence is often limited in scope (Carling, 2024). Qualitative researchers may incorporate basic statistics to frame the scale of a problem, while quantitative researchers might engage in limited qualitative fieldwork to inform study design, understand local context, or triangulate results. However, in many disciplines, it is still uncommon for qualitative and quantitative methods to be equally valued or integrated throughout all stages of research—from formulation to data collection to dissemination.

Our methodological approach, which we term Representative Storytelling, aims to genuinely integrate qualitative and quantitative traditions, seeing them as complementary tools for addressing the challenge of refugee representation. From qualitative research, we draw on storytelling and the importance of contextual nuance. From quantitative research, we adopt a commitment to representativeness and statistical inference. Stories are used to humanize data, while representative data are used to select and contextualize stories.

Representative Storytelling follows a sequenced, three-part approach, which we elaborate in detail in the following section. The first step involves the collection of quantitative data from a representative sample of the population of interest. The representativeness of the sample is key for the next two steps. In our case, we conducted a household survey with a representative sample of 1,030 refugee households in Kakuma—the second largest refugee camp in Africa, home to over 300,000 refugees by the end of 2025.

The second step consists of the collection of personal stories from a selected subsample, chosen to reflect the diversity of experiences within the population. In practice, we ranked the 1,030 households based on a comprehensive measure of household income and selected the nine households that are the deciles

of the income distribution—thereby capturing the full spectrum of economic situations: not only the poorest or richest groups but also the ‘missing middle.’ These households belong to Rose, Celina, Malual, Thijin, Elizabeth, Ayen, Nyaliak, Abdirizak, and Maker. In 2022, we spent two or three days with each participant, engaging in extended conversations to learn about their lives and hear their stories. These encounters were filmed. Over the next two years, we revisited each household twice, returning to document changes in their situation, share the results and videos we had produced, and invite their reflections as part of an ongoing process.

The third step involves narrating the selected stories and contextualizing them using both qualitative and quantitative data. In this book, we present the stories as told by the participants themselves, preserving their voices and perspectives. But we also situate these narratives within the broader context, drawing on multiple sources: the quantitative survey data; our video-recording and field notes; over 250 additional qualitative interviews conducted with refugees, business owners, and humanitarian workers as part of our broader research agenda; and extensive contextual knowledge accumulated over more than ten years of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork in Kakuma. To reach a broader audience beyond academia, we also produced a series of short video documentaries, each featuring one of the selected refugees. These are available on the project website: <https://www.refugee-stories.com>.

## **A Lens to Study Inequality and Diversity**

Representative Storytelling offers a lens through which we can study inequality and diversity in refugee settings. Within refugee studies, inequality remains a relatively underexplored dimension. In our project, we decided to rank households according to a comprehensive measure of income. In Kakuma, most refugees live in extreme poverty, and access to resources is a key factor shaping refugee lives. By sampling across the income distribution and documenting life stories within each income decile, we are able to examine how material resources shape people’s opportunities, choices, and constraints.

But we are also aware that income is only one of the multiple variables that shape refugee lives, and our methodology allows us to go beyond income differences. Income inequality is not only a structuring device but also a lens. Ranking households by income enables us to investigate both the differences that emerge across income levels and the diversity that exists within them. Even among households with similar resources, we observe distinct

life strategies, coping mechanisms, family structures, and aspirations. Our qualitative and quantitative data together reveal that income matters, but people also live their lives in complex, context-dependent ways that cannot be reduced to income alone. At the same time, we find common threads across the income spectrum—shared vulnerabilities, structural constraints, and institutional dependencies that shape the lives of all refugees in Kakuma. In this sense, using income as an organizing frame allows us to go beyond income itself. It offers a structured way to explore both variation and convergence across income levels.

Crucially, storytelling and filmmaking play a complementary role in this process. As a research method, storytelling allows us to capture not only material differences between households but also how refugees make sense of these differences and what they try to do about them—their perceived agency to navigate opportunities, constraints, and trade-offs at different points along the income distribution.

At the same time, our use of participatory filmmaking introduces a mode of data collection and representation that is accessible across differences in income, education, and literacy. Everyone in our sample had watched television, but few had read academic writing. Through visual storytelling, we are able to capture and portray inequality and diversity in ways that quantitative data or written analysis alone often cannot. Film makes visible what is otherwise difficult to convey: the atmosphere of a household, the emotional tone of aspirations and anxieties, and the agency that each refugee expresses despite extreme constraints. Each story becomes not only a datapoint but also a medium through which participants communicate their lived realities on their own terms. Film also allowed us to gather direct feedback on how participants were represented, something that would have been more difficult through traditional academic writing. By combining rigorous sampling with participant-led narrative and film, Representative Storytelling expands both the means and the forms through which we study and communicate about inequality and diversity.

## Connected Literatures

Our book connects to and contributes to several strands of literature. First, it engages with research on refugee socio-economic lives and livelihoods, which has developed along two largely distinct methodological lines: qualitative studies rooted in anthropology and sociology and quantitative studies grounded in economics. The early work of Karen [Jacobsen \(2005\)](#)

was foundational in documenting the economic lives of refugees through field-based, comparative qualitative research. Her work, along with that of others that followed (e.g. [Campbell, 2006](#); [Horst, 2007](#); [Werker, 2007](#); [Lindley, 2009](#); [Hammar, 2014](#); [Carrier, 2017](#); [Omata, 2017](#)), provided rich insights into the various constraints refugees face and the diverse strategies they adopt to navigate markets, aid systems, and restrictive policy environments.

In the past decade, economists have increasingly turned their attention to forced displacement, introducing quantitative methods that allow for broader comparisons and causal inference. Much of this work has focused on two questions: the impact of refugee populations on host communities (e.g. [Maystadt et al., 2019](#); [Verme & Schuettler, 2021](#)) and the evaluation of humanitarian and development programmes targeted at refugees ([Rozo, 2025](#)). Economists tend to prioritize causal identification over descriptive research ([McKenzie, 2018](#)), and as a result, rigorous quantitative studies of refugees' everyday lives and experiences remain relatively rare. Notable exceptions include work by [Alloush et al. \(2017\)](#) on refugee–host economic interactions in Rwandan camps, multi-context research in East African camps and cities by the Refugee Economies Programme at the University of Oxford (see [Betts et al., 2023](#) for an overview), and the Syrian Refugee Life Study (S-RLS), launched by [Stillman et al. \(2022\)](#) to track the socio-economic trajectories of Syrian refugees in Jordan. In addition, UNHCR and the World Bank have developed various initiatives to improve data collection and harmonization across refugee and host populations (e.g. [UNHCR, 2024b](#); [Wieser et al., 2024](#)).

Our work combines and complements these traditions by building on their respective strengths: contextual depth and storytelling from qualitative work and representative breadth from quantitative research. In doing so, our book contributes to the mixed-methods literature ([Teddle & Tashakkori, 2011](#); [Creswell & Clark, 2017](#)). It also builds on and contributes to the long-standing tradition of case study research in the social sciences ([George & Bennett, 2005](#); [Gerring, 2016](#); [Yin, 2017](#)). Case studies involve the in-depth empirical exploration of one or a few people, social groups, organizations, or events—typically using qualitative methods. They are widely used in political science and sociology to explore complex phenomena, trace causal processes, and generate theory.

A key challenge in case study research is case selection. Scholars have developed a range of strategies—including typical, extreme, deviant, diverse, and crucial case designs—each aimed at ensuring that ‘cases are more or less representative of some broader phenomenon’ ([Gerring, 2008](#)). Our method of selecting nine households based on income deciles builds on a systematic version of the ‘diverse case’ approach.

Critiques of the case study method often centre around its limitations for causal inference and generalizability. One concern is that the limited number of ‘degrees of freedom,’ that is the limited number of cases compared to possible explanatory variables, constrains the ability to make robust causal claims (King et al., 1995; Levy, 2008). Case selection is also seen as vulnerable to selection bias, especially when cases are chosen based on theoretical priors or known outcomes rather than independent criteria (Geddes, 2003). Another common critique is that case studies offer limited generalizability since findings derived from a small number of cases may not apply to broader populations (King et al., 1995).

Representative Storytelling aims to circumvent these limitations by integrating rich quantitative data to guide a systematic process of case selection and contextualize the insights derived from the nine ‘cases’ by using representative data. Unlike conventional case studies, which often seek to explain causal processes or propose theoretical propositions, our goal is primarily descriptive: we aim to tell representative and contextualized stories and capture how households across the income distribution experience, navigate, and make sense of displacement.

Finally, our book also contributes to the literature on refugee representation, which critically examines how refugees are portrayed in political, humanitarian, and media discourses, as well as academic outputs—and what political, ethical, and epistemological stakes these portrayals carry (Sigona, 2014). Scholars have long noted that refugees are often depicted through reductive narratives of victimhood, passivity, or threat, which obscure their agency and diversity (Malkki, 1996; Rajaram, 2002; Nyers, 2006). Such representations can serve political or institutional purposes but risk reinforcing stereotypes or depersonalizing the subjects they seek to protect. In response, a growing body of scholarship has called for more participatory, reflexive, and inclusive approaches to knowledge production—ones that recognize refugees not merely as objects of inquiry but as co-constructors of meaning and narrative (MacKenzie et al., 2007; Krause, 2017; Fiddian-Qasmieh, 2020). In line with this call, Representative Storytelling invites refugees to narrate their own lives—on film and in their own words. Our book sits alongside a growing body of non-fiction works that aim to make refugee camp life, including in Kenya, accessible to a broader public readership.<sup>3</sup> It is also connected to the literature examining how refugees increasingly engage with social media to

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Deng et al. (2015) for an autobiography of Sudanese refugees who fled to Kakuma and were resettled in the United States, Haji & Uraizee (2024) for an autobiography of a Somali woman who fled to Kakuma and was then resettled in the United States, Rawlence (2016) or Jamieson and Mohamed (2020) on life in Dadaab refugee camp, or Wamariya (2018) on fleeing Rwanda and living in several refugee camps in Africa.

tell their stories in real time (Godin & Doná, 2016; Godin & Ghislain, 2024; Marino, 2024). While these platforms can provide new forms of visibility, such accounts often remain individualized and decontextualized.

## Why This Matters beyond Academia

Representative Storytelling offers a way to contextualize human stories and also a means to bring data to life through human stories. It offers a novel way to integrate quantitative and qualitative research methods and make representative data exciting and engaging. In this book, we apply the method to study one important question: how do refugees live in one of the world's largest refugee camps? But the methodology could as well be used to study many other themes, populations, and questions. As a methodology, it may play at least three roles beyond academia.

First, public—to serve as a public engagement tool for understanding unfamiliar contexts. Most people will never visit a refugee camp in a low- and middle-income country. Representative Storytelling can offer a way to be introduced to some of the people who live in the Kakuma refugee camp to learn what is similar and different about their lives, but to do so in a way that can be contextualized, enabling the public to understand how representative those stories are.

Second, policy—our approach allows evidence to be delivered to policymakers in an accessible way. Descriptive data are crucial for understanding trends and making policy decisions. But they are often unpersuasive and uninteresting unless connected to human stories. Whether for academics or policymakers, our approach offers a way for descriptive quantitative analysis to be packaged in an interesting and engaging way, connected to lived experience.

Third, purpose—there is an ethical aspect to our work. How stories are told has consequences for the framing of people's lives. On issues such as refugees and migration, this is consequential for how people are treated. Our approach aims to contribute to a debate on what is meant by 'good' storytelling. It is not that we are claiming that any one approach is universally right or wrong, simply that different approaches to narration serve different purposes. If your purpose is simply to highlight victims, heroes, or villains, you will probably choose to cherry-pick and sensationalize outliers. But if your purpose is to enable understanding and recognize complexity and nuance, then you need a means to contextualize and situate the stories within a wider context. We hope that our Representative Storytelling approach can make a contribution in that regard.

Beyond refugee stories, we envisage other possible applications of Representative Storytelling. Across a range of global challenges, quantitative data and individual stories are often widely used to make sense of trends. International development has a similar challenge of how to connect quantitative socio-economic data to individual and household-level experiences. Global health faces the challenge of relating global datasets to ‘patient cases.’ The units of analysis could also be communities, businesses, or nation states, depending on the thematic area or policy field. In climate research, for example, qualitative case studies might focus on the community rather than individual or household level, enabling audiences to situate how a particular community’s adaptation response to a given shock compares to that of other communities.

## Scope and Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the scope and limitations of this book from the outset, both to manage expectations and to clarify the purpose of our contribution. As with any research project, our methodological choices, practical constraints, and positionalities shaped what we were able to observe and analyse and how we did it.

First, this study is geographically limited to the Kakuma refugee camp in northwestern Kenya. Kakuma is one of the largest refugee camps in the world, and it shares important structural similarities with other refugee camps in East Africa; most notably, its protracted encampment model, remote border location, heavy dependence on food and cash assistance, limited formal employment opportunities, and governance by UN and government agencies (Betts, 2021; Betts et al., 2024). These structural features shape refugee lives in broadly similar ways across camps in the region.

At the same time, Kakuma also has particularities that may affect the extent to which our findings can be generalized. Its population composition is particularly diverse, with sizeable South Sudanese, Somali, Congolese, Sudanese, Burundian, and Ethiopian communities living side by side. The establishment of the Kalobeyei settlement introduced a unique policy experiment aimed at promoting self-reliance and closer interaction with host communities (MacPherson & Sterck, 2021). More generally, Kakuma’s long history of humanitarian presence has generated distinctive market and social dynamics that may differ from newer or smaller camps.

Our findings may therefore not be generalizable to all refugee camps in the region, let alone other refugees elsewhere. The African continent hosts

the largest number of forcibly displaced people globally, and a majority live in camps. On other continents, forcibly displaced people are predominantly urban and face different constraints and opportunities.

The temporal scope of the study is also limited: our primary data collection took place in 2022, with additional visits in 2023 and 2024. Since then, the situation has deteriorated, particularly due to reductions in humanitarian aid (Bruni & Sterck, 2025a) and a switch to a differentiated assistance model (Bakewell et al., 2025). In parallel, Kenyan authorities have also begun implementing the Shirika Plan, a development-oriented initiative aimed at promoting refugee self-reliance and deeper socio-economic inclusion with host communities. These changes, which occurred after our fieldwork, have reshaped camp dynamics and further affected the lives of camp residents.

Second, our focus on representativeness also led to certain trade-offs. While the sample of our quantitative survey covered South Sudanese, Congolese, and Somali refugees, eight out of the nine stories we present are drawn from South Sudanese households. This largely reflects their greater presence in the camp. By focusing on representativeness, we have not foregrounded minority voices or more exceptional cases (Omata, 2019). Another consequence of our methodological choice to give equal weight to each income decile is that some stories may feel repetitive. The choice may serve refugee representation well but poses challenges for storytelling and reader engagement. This, however, reflects the reality of everyday life in protracted displacement, which we aim to portray.

Third, neither our framing nor our methods are without limitations. Our analyses, though grounded in fieldwork and participant voices, remain shaped by our interpretive lenses and subjectivities. Quantitative researchers may feel that some stories are anecdotal and not necessarily representative of population trends, while qualitative researchers may argue that our quantitative methods, though rigorous, cannot fully capture the depth and complexity of human experience. Our questionnaires are shaped by our subjective knowledge of the context and literature, and our descriptions, representations, and interpretations are also necessarily subjective. By choosing income inequality as a structuring device, our study places emphasis on one important dimension of refugees' lives. But income differences and inequality are, of course, not the only important variables, and others might be prioritized by other researchers using similar methods. Future research could explore other dimensions, especially in other contexts where income may play a less important role.

Fourth, our positionality has shaped this project in important ways. This book is authored by four European researchers based at the University of Oxford. Refugees have contributed in profound and essential ways to every part of this project—not only the nine participants whose stories form its backbone but also the refugee enumerators, field coordinators, filmmakers, translators, and research assistants who carried out the data collection and helped shape our understanding of life in Kakuma. We returned to the field twice to share preliminary results and videos and receive feedback from both participants and team members on how their stories were being represented and contextualized. Still, the final writing and interpretation remain ours, and so does the resulting responsibility. We do not present this as a flaw to be concealed but as an inherent feature of this project and a reminder of the broader power dynamics that frequently shape knowledge production in refugee research.

Finally, the implementation of this project—and the Representative Storytelling methodology more broadly—required substantial resources in terms of human capacity, time, and funding. Our project demanded a multidisciplinary research team, including expertise in both quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as skills in documentary filmmaking (for which we partnered with local filmmakers). In addition, effective collaboration with refugee enumerators, translators, and field coordinators from diverse communities was essential to ensure both the rigour and the inclusiveness of the research process. The financial cost of data collection was significant, particularly for the quantitative survey component, while the production of films added further logistical and resource demands. The project was also time-intensive: producing videos as researchers was relatively new for our team and came with a steep learning curve; returning to the field to share preliminary outputs and revise these based on participants' feedback also required sustained engagement. That said, variations of this methodology can be adapted to different contexts and resource constraints. For example, the approach can be layered onto existing quantitative data collection efforts to reduce costs (this is what we did), and while film adds a valuable dimension, it is not an essential component of the approach.

Despite these limitations, we hope our book represents a meaningful step towards a more representative account of refugee lives. Rather than focusing only on exceptional or dramatic cases, our mixed-methods and multimedia approach allows us to document the full spectrum of life in Kakuma and—we hope—open new avenues for studying and understanding inequality and diversity in different contexts.

## Structure

Our book is organized as follows. The next chapter introduces the context of Kakuma refugee camp and offers a detailed description of Representative Storytelling—our methodology.

The core of the book is structured around the nine refugee stories, which are presented in three parts. Part I focuses on households at the bottom of the income distribution and includes five stories of families who rely entirely on humanitarian aid for survival. Part II features two large households in the upper-middle segment of the income distribution, who have limited access to alternative sources of income beyond aid. Part III focuses on the upper end of the income distribution, with two single refugees who sustain themselves through entrepreneurship or employment.

The final chapter draws together the main insights from the project. We reflect on differences across income deciles, commonalities across stories, and the extent to which material resources shape refugee lives. We also propose directions for future research.

# Methodology

In this chapter, we explain our Representative Storytelling methodology and how we implemented it in Kakuma. Before diving into the details, however, we first provide a brief tour of the camp and how its key features shaped how we applied our approach in practice. We keep this descriptive overview intentionally concise because the wider economic, social, and political context of Kakuma is explored in much greater depth through the nine refugee stories that form the core of this book.

## Kakuma

In October 2022, when we started our field research, Kakuma was home to about 250,000 refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup> It was the second largest refugee camp in Africa. While the media and politicians tend to focus on the ‘refugee crisis’ in rich countries, the majority of refugees—74 per cent in 2022—are in fact hosted in low- and middle-income countries (World Bank, 2023). Looking at forcibly displaced people more generally (i.e. including internally displaced people), 85 per cent live in low- and middle-income countries. The African continent hosts the largest number of forcibly displaced people, where about two-thirds live in camps. With rising numbers, declining humanitarian assistance, and a growing number of countries expelling migrants or reducing the number of refugees admitted, looking in-depth at Kakuma offers a means to shine a light on the situation of refugees around the world, beyond the European and North American context on which rich-world audiences often focus.

The Kakuma refugee camp was founded in 1992 in response to the arrivals of the ‘Lost Boys of Sudan’, a group of about 10,000 Sudanese children who were displaced during the Second Sudanese Civil War. It was established in the

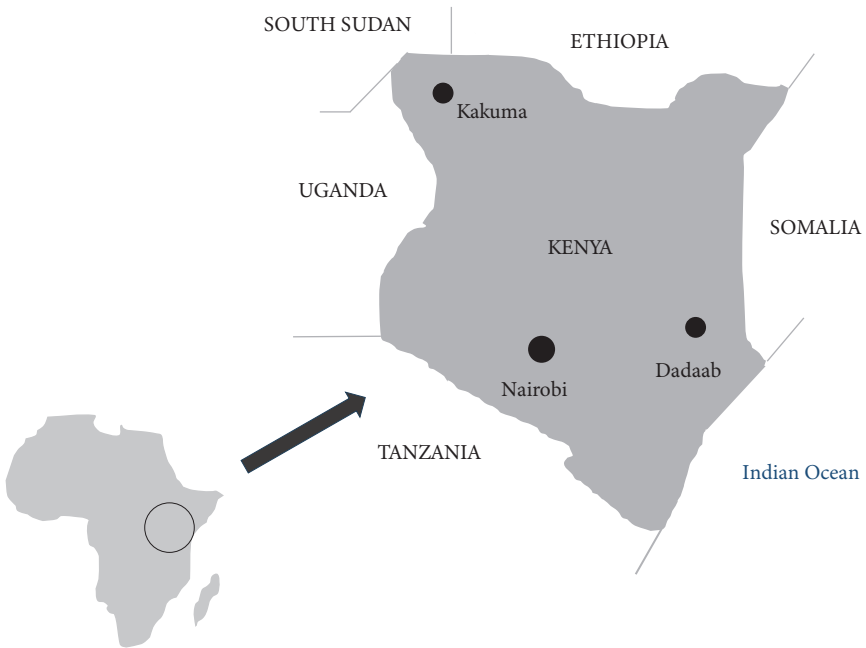
<sup>1</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data extracted from UNHCR’s data portal in October 2022. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/97047>.

arid Turkana County of northwestern Kenya, next to the then small town of Kakuma (Figure 1). Both the Kakuma refugee camp and Kakuma town have grown over time. Kakuma town is now home to more than 50,000 Kenyans from diverse backgrounds, a ten-fold increase in population size since the establishment of the camp (Jansen, 2018). The town has many shops, bars, restaurants, and even a small airport.

The economies of Kakuma camp, Kakuma town, and the wider Turkana region are deeply intertwined. Most retail shops in the camp purchase their stock in Kakuma town (Betts et al., 2019), while the main banks operating in the town are also expanding their activities inside the camp (Schipani, 2021). Turkana traders regularly sell charcoal, wood, livestock products, and other goods in the camp, and refugees frequently travel to the town for shopping, services, social visits, or business (Vemuru et al., 2016; Rodgers, 2021a, b). At a broader regional scale, Kakuma is connected by daily transport links to Lodwar and Nairobi, with frequent movements of traders, students, non-governmental organization (NGO) staff, and remittances flowing in and out of the camp (Omata, 2021; Betts et al., 2023). Alix-Garcia et al. (2018) show that the presence of the camp has had positive spillover effects on host populations by increasing labour demand and altering prices in agricultural and livestock markets.

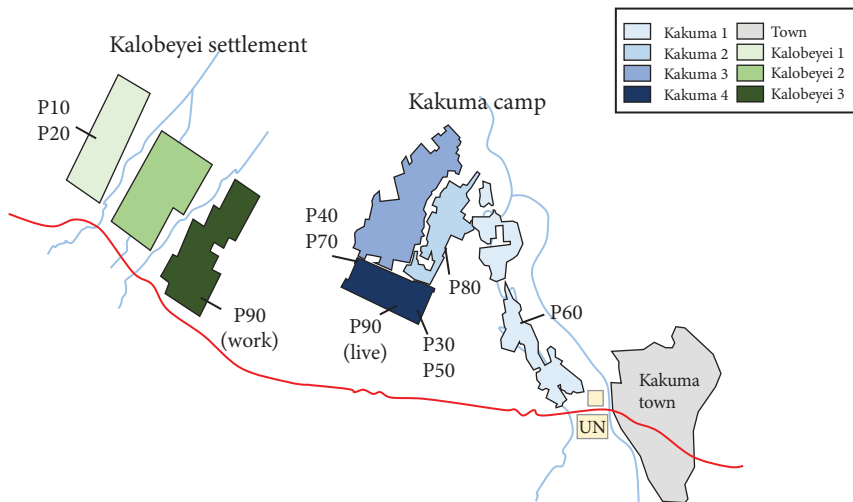
In 2016, Kakuma refugee camp was hosting more than 180,000 refugees; it had grown so big that it was considered to be full. A new site, the Kalobeyei settlement, was therefore established a few kilometres away to accommodate the continuous flow of refugees fleeing violence and natural disasters in South Sudan (Figure 2). The Kalobeyei settlement was labelled as a ‘settlement’ by humanitarian organizations and local authorities because it aimed to pilot a new approach to refugee assistance (UNHCR, 2018).

For decades, assistance to refugees in Kakuma had followed the humanitarian model, which assumes that refugee situations are temporary, implying that assistance can simply focus on emergency relief, shelter, and protection while crises are being resolved (MacPherson & Sterck, 2021). This assumption was, however, flawed. Only 2.5 per cent of refugee crises are resolved within three years, meaning that most refugees live in a situation of protracted displacement (Cosgrove et al., 2016). The Kalobeyei settlement was established to propose a radically different approach, which would transform ‘the humanitarian model of assistance for refugees towards the development-oriented solutions that enhance the self-reliance of refugees and host communities’



**Figure 1** Location of Kakuma in Kenya and within East Africa

Source: Authors.



**Figure 2** Map of Kakuma refugee camp, Kalobeyei settlement, and Kakuma town, with locations of the nine households

Source: Authors.

and ‘boost the local economy’ (UNHCR, 2018). To achieve this objective, organizations working in the Kalobeyei settlement are promoting investments in education and livelihoods and replacing in-kind food rations with cash transfers.

Consistent with the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees and Kenya’s 2021 Refugee Act, the Kenyan government, in collaboration with UN agencies, has recently pushed this agenda further through the Shirika Plan. This initiative aims to transition from a humanitarian to a development approach to refugee assistance and to promote greater social and economic integration of refugees and host communities in Kenya. The progressive implementation of this plan started after our main period of data collection.

The place we call Kakuma in this book therefore consists of three adjacent but distinct sites: Kakuma town, the Kakuma refugee camp, and the Kalobeyei settlement (Figure 2). Kakuma has become a diverse community, with refugees from nearly twenty countries, including South Sudan (60 per cent), Somalia (13 per cent), and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (8 per cent), living alongside the host community.<sup>2</sup> With about 250,000 refugees and more than 50,000 Kenyans, Kakuma can be considered as the eighth largest city in Kenya.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it has historically lacked access to the national electricity grid, a consistent water supply, or decent road infrastructure.

If you consider the extremes, you will find people doing amazing things in Kakuma. Half of the Refugee Olympic team at the 2016 games in Rio came from Kakuma.<sup>4</sup> A few international media outlets have written about the heroes of Kakuma. *The Guardian* wrote an article on Mesfin Getahun, an Ethiopian entrepreneur in Kakuma, with the headline, ‘They call him the millionaire: The refugee who turned his camp into a business empire’ (Halais, 2017). *Vogue* used the title ‘Meet the South Sudanese rising star model who’s looking to make a difference’, for an article on the supermodel Agi Akur, born in Kakuma (Okwodu, 2020). SBS, the Australian semi-public news service, portrayed the life of the Kakuma-born soccer star Awer Mabil in its article ‘From refugee to Young Australian of the Year: Socceroos star Awer Mabil’s incredible story’ (Brancatisano, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR data, accessed in September 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Population by urban centre and sex from the Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS). Online resource accessed on 28 August 2024.

<sup>4</sup> International Olympic Committee (IOC) Refugee Olympic Team Rio 2016. Online resource accessed on 28 August 2024. <https://www.olympics.com/ioc/refugee-olympic-team-rio-2016>.

Representations from UN agencies and NGOs often oscillate between two extremes. Refugees are sometimes presented as ‘victims’ to raise awareness or fundraise, as seen in articles like ‘Hungry for help: Refugees in Kenya feel the effects of recent food cuts’ (UNHCR, 2015). More recently, UN agencies and NGOs’ communications have evolved to highlight success stories and emphasize the potential of refugee–host cohabitation and economies. For instance, a recent World Bank and UNHCR report entitled ‘Yes in my backyard?’ emphasized that refugee presence has a beneficial and lasting impact on Turkana’s economy, boosting the region’s income by over 3 per cent (Sanghi et al., 2016). Another report—commissioned by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and entitled ‘Kakuma as a marketplace’—goes further, portraying Kakuma as a vibrant informal economy with more than 2,000 businesses flourishing in a US\$56.2 million (KSh 5.8 billion) market (IFC, 2018). Recent stories on UNHCR Kenya news feed highlight the inspiring journey of a disabled refugee advocate, refugee students embarking on university journeys in Canada, and an athlete preparing for the Paris Olympics, among other success stories (Maalim, 2024a, b; Nzomo, 2024).

In sharp contrast with these framings, Kenyan newspapers and politicians often portray refugee camps as ‘incubators of subversive activities’ (Brankamp & Glück, 2022; Ikanda et al., 2025). Following Al-Shabaab’s terrorist attacks in Kenya, the Somali community more generally has been particularly targeted by such framing (HRW, 2016; BBC News, 2017).

What is lacking from these stories is where they sit within the wider context of the camp.

Academics have studied life in Kakuma using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Anthropologists have produced insightful qualitative studies on the camp’s informal economy (Oka, 2011, 2014), security and policing (Brankamp, 2020), refugee–host relationships (Rodgers, 2021a, b), the design of camps and humanitarian aid systems (Jansen, 2018; Rodgers & Nabeny, 2023), and access to education (Bellino, 2018; Bellino & Oka, 2023), among other themes. As in the broader literature, economists working on Kakuma have primarily focused on impact evaluations—either assessing the effects of refugees on host populations (Alix-Garcia et al., 2018) or evaluating the impact of humanitarian and development aid on refugees (MacPherson & Sterck, 2021; Siu et al., 2023; Delius & Sterck, 2024; Bakewell et al., 2025; Bruni & Sterck, 2025a, b). We complement these literatures by providing a rigorous descriptive study of life in Kakuma, building on the respective strengths of qualitative and quantitative research methods.

## Step 1: Quantitative Data Collection

The first step of Representative Storytelling is to collect quantitative data on a representative sample of the population of interest—refugees living in Kakuma in our case. The quantitative data are to be used for two main purposes: (i) to select the people whose stories will be narrated and (ii) to situate these stories in the context in which they are collected. These objectives can only be achieved if the quantitative data are collected among a representative sample of the population of interest using probability sampling.

In Kakuma, we collected data on 8,333 refugees living in 1,030 households in October 2022. Our survey focused on the three largest nationalities at the time: South Sudanese, Somali, and Congolese. Together, these nationalities represented 82 per cent of the camp. To select our sample, we randomly selected households on the list of all refugee households registered in the camp (Bruni et al., 2024). This list, maintained by UN agencies, is considered reliable in this context because it determines eligibility for food assistance. It is updated monthly through a proof-of-life procedure in which households must confirm the identity of at least one member via biometric verification to continue receiving assistance. Refugees therefore have strong incentives to ensure that their household is included and up to date on the list.<sup>5</sup> While registration lists in Kakuma are well maintained, they do not include households that recently arrived and live at the registration centre. Addresses are also not always up to date, primarily for households that relocate within the camp.

We implemented a stratified random sampling design. Stratification served two purposes. First, it ensured sufficient statistical power to analyse key differences across nationalities of origin and place of residence in the camp. Second, stratification reflected practical considerations related to survey implementation: different nationalities and ethnic groups speak different languages, and enumerators were assigned to strata based on their linguistic and cultural competencies. We therefore stratified our sample by nationality and location and by ethnicity for South Sudanese refugees. In Kakuma, we sampled South Sudanese, Somali, and Congolese households, covering 85 per cent of the camp population. In Kalobeyei, we covered South Sudanese refugees only, covering more than 70 per cent of the settlement population.

<sup>5</sup> We relied on the household-level list and not the list of individual household members for two reasons. First, the list of individuals is more likely to be incomplete: households have incentives not to report members who temporarily leave the camp to ensure continued access to food assistance. Second, our analysis focuses primarily on the household level.

Our final sample includes 622 South Sudanese households (260 in Kakuma and 362 in Kalobeyei), 216 Somali households in Kakuma, and 192 Congolese households in Kakuma. In each household, we interviewed the person in charge of the last food purchases. Sampling weights are accounted for in the different steps of the research. First, sampling weights are used to ensure that the nine households selected in step 2 below were drawn with probability proportionate to their representation in the camp population. Second, all descriptive statistics and figures based on our survey data apply these weights to recover population-representative estimates within each stratum.

We trained a team of twenty-three refugees, who worked with us for four weeks to find the households and, if they consented to participate in the survey, interview them in their own language.<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire included questions on a wide variety of themes, including education, employment, income, health, assets, debt, shocks, food consumption, and purchases. Although the initial instrument was drafted by the research team, it was subsequently refined through extensive discussions with the refugee data collection team and our Kenyan and refugee coordinators. Their feedback led us to adjust question wording, clarify locally specific categories, and add items that better captured the realities of camp life. This participatory process shaped our own understanding as researchers and allowed us to improve several survey modules. Surveys took about one hour per household. The team of refugee and Kenyan coordinators also facilitated access to households and monitored data quality throughout the fieldwork.

We therefore have a rich dataset, with thousands of variables and thousands of observations, which will help us in contextualizing the nine stories we will discover in the following chapters. If someone was recently robbed, while another had malaria, and a third struggles with massive debts, we use the data to describe how frequent these issues are in the entire population of interest.

To study inequality and diversity, we also examine how patterns vary within and across income deciles and examine correlation with other important demographic characteristics. For example, are the poorest households more or less likely to receive remittances from friends and family abroad? Are women-headed households more likely to be food insecure? Which households are more likely to have access to water, electricity, or education? Our rich dataset can be used to answer these questions as well as dozens of others.

<sup>6</sup> The questionnaire was prepared in English and translated into Dinka, Juba-Arabic, Nuer, Somali, and Swahili.

The quantitative dataset is also essential for the second step of Representative Storytelling: the selection of individuals who will participate in qualitative interviews and narrate their personal stories.

## Step 2: Qualitative Narrative Selection

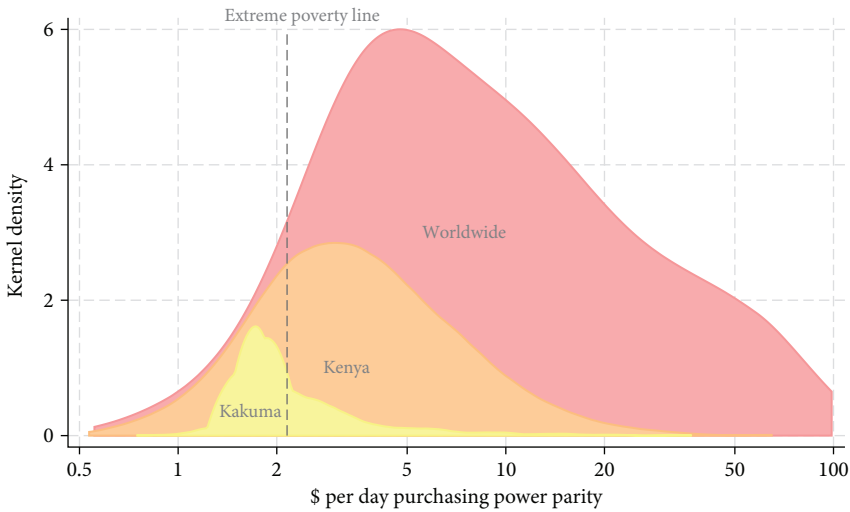
The objective of Representative Storytelling is to narrate contextualized stories that represent the diversity of situations in the population of interest; not just extremes; not just victims, heroes, and villains.

How this diversity is captured depends on the research question. Our research examines how refugees live in Kakuma. To capture the diversity of socio-economic situations in the camp, we decided to focus on the distribution of incomes because resources—or the lack thereof—are central to refugees' quality of life. By income, we do not simply mean how much people earn from work—only a limited proportion of adults have access to employment in the camp. We also include resources from humanitarian assistance and remittances (i.e. transfers received from family and friends abroad). Despite its limitation, income remains the main indicator used in the study of global poverty, inequality, and shared prosperity (Milanović, 2005; Ravallion, 2015; Kraay et al., 2023). The stories in our study show that income is one of the most salient variables shaping refugees' choices and opportunities.

But our method also acknowledges that income does not explain everything.<sup>7</sup> Other dimensions—correlated or not with income—are important to examine. Our rich questionnaire allows us to go beyond income inequality and explore other dimensions that matter. Income inequality is both a structuring device and a lens through which we examine diversity and similarity in terms of other important dimensions.

The distribution of household income expressed per person is represented in Figure 3. The horizontal axis measures income and ranges from 0 to \$100 per day per person. The vertical axis describes how frequent certain incomes are: the higher the curve, the higher the likelihood that a household has that income. For the sake of comparison, we also represented the distribution of

<sup>7</sup> Other researchers applying 'Representative Storytelling' might make different choices about the most salient variable on which to rank order a population of interest, both within refugee studies and in other domains. For instance, researchers working with people with HIV/AIDS could focus on a measure of disease progression (e.g. the CD4 count); those studying autism could look at an autism spectrum scale; while those working in prisons could, for example, use the number of years already spent behind bars. Selecting two (or more) variables is also technically possible and would offer a way to illustrate interactions between the selected variables.



**Figure 3** Income distribution for the world, Kenya, and Kakuma (2017—\$ purchasing power parity)

Source: Authors.

per person incomes in Kenya and worldwide. And to ensure this comparison is meaningful, incomes are expressed in dollars and adjusted for purchasing power parity, to account for price differences in different countries.<sup>8</sup>

If we look at the global income distribution curve, we can see that the global daily median income was around \$7.6 per person per day in 2022, when we collected the data. For Kenya, it was around \$3.3 per day. Based on our quantitative data, we find that the median income was just \$1.8 per day in Kakuma, below the World Bank's \$2.15 extreme poverty line.

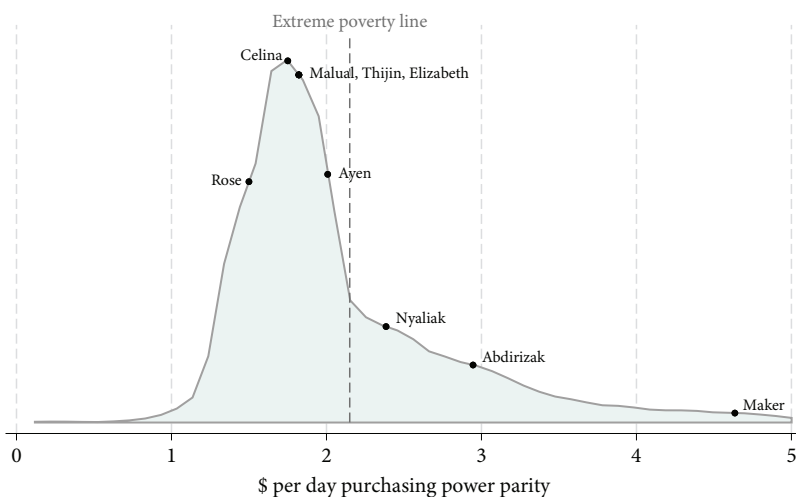
In this figure, we can see that there is some variation in the income distribution of refugees within Kakuma. There is, though, significant 'clustering' around the middle of the distribution (between \$1.5 and \$2 a day) because many households in Kakuma rely almost entirely on food assistance and therefore have very similar levels of income per person. Reflecting this pattern, we find that inequality is moderate in Kakuma. The Gini coefficient is 0.32 in Kakuma, compared to 0.40 in Kenya as a whole and 0.62 globally. We reach similar conclusions using the average inequality ratio, which has a simpler interpretation and is more distribution sensitive: the expected ratio of

<sup>8</sup> Amounts in Figures 3 and 4 and related paragraphs are expressed in 2017 international dollars. World Bank data from the Poverty and Inequality Platform are used for the distribution of incomes worldwide and in Kenya (estimates from 2019).

two randomly selected individuals is only 1.3 in Kakuma, compared to 2.7 in Kenya and 3.7 globally (Kraay et al., 2023; Sterck, 2024; Moramarco & Sterck, 2025). If Kakuma were a nation, it would rank among the most equal countries in the world, alongside Belgium and Finland. Yet, inequality in Kakuma is low not because incomes are high and evenly distributed but because many households depend almost entirely on humanitarian aid.

Our method seeks to move beyond extreme cases and instead capture the stories of refugees across the full spectrum of the income distribution. To achieve this, we selected the households that split the income distribution into ten equal parts—which are called deciles. We focused on the nine deciles as it was the maximum we could afford given budget and logistical constraints, and it seemed a reasonable number given our objective to write a book. Researchers with different objectives and constraints could consider covering fewer or more quantiles. This selection process and the nine deciles are illustrated in Figure 4.

The first decile in our sample—the poorest—is the household of Rose. We also refer to Rose’s household as the tenth percentile, to reflect the fact that 10 per cent of households have a lower per-person income. Rose fled violence in South Sudan in 2017 and is living alone with her four children in the Kalobeyei settlement (see the map in Figure 2). She had no job when we first met her and was fully reliant on humanitarian aid. She survives on US\$0.5 per person per



**Figure 4** Position of selected households on the Kakuma income distribution curve (2017—\$ purchasing power parity)

Source: Authors.

day, or \$1.5 when accounting for purchasing power parity, well below the \$2.15 extreme poverty line.

At the other end of the spectrum, Maker is the ninth decile or ninetieth percentile, among the richest. Also from South Sudan, he fled when he was a teenager to look for opportunities and education. He is now working as a pharmacist and lab technician in the Kalobeyei settlement, earning about US\$100 per month. Between these two extremes, we find Celina, Malual, Thijin, Elizabeth, Ayen, Nyaliak, and Abdirizak.

After identifying these nine households in the quantitative data, we revisited them to ask whether they would agree to do a second interview (a qualitative one this time), during which we would listen to their stories. The second interview was much longer and was video recorded. We worked with Kakuma Film Team, a group of freelance refugee filmmakers from Kakuma. Christian is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mbarushimana from Burundi, and Daniel, and later Joseph, from South Sudan, and together they developed a business to produce video content for organizations working in Kakuma. To guide qualitative interviews, we also had a questionnaire covering the same themes as the quantitative questionnaire, but the questions and interview protocol were much more open, leaving ample space for refugees to tell us the stories that mattered to them. We also moved with the households to discover the places that are most important to them. The qualitative interview and filming process took approximately two days per household.

The recruitment and consent process followed several steps designed to ensure voluntary and informed participation. Households were first contacted by a trained enumerator and asked whether they would be interested in hearing more about the Refugee Stories project (which includes the book as well as a documentary film series). For households expressing preliminary interest, members of the research team met them in person and introduced the project in detail. We also provided a written Participant Information Sheet and explained its content in a language understood by the participants.

Participants were shown examples of previous reports, documentary films, and the Dollar Street website<sup>9</sup> to ensure that they clearly understood what filming, photography, and online publication would entail. Households were given a few days to consider participation and discuss it with family members before making a decision. Several households declined at this stage, in which case we approached the closest households on the income distribution. Participants

<sup>9</sup> Dollar Street is a project of the Gapminder Foundation. It uses photos as data to show what life looks like at different income levels. We worked with Gapminder during the initial stages of the project to adapt their Dollar Street platform to a refugee camp context.

were able to choose separately whether they agreed to (i) being quoted, (ii) having their real name used, (iii) being photographed or filmed, (iv) having their face visible, (v) filming in their home or surroundings, and (vi) publication of materials. During the consent process, we didn't disclose that there would be reimbursement until we believed people were genuinely interested in participating. This was to make sure people were not driven by the financial aspect.

During interviews and filming, participants were repeatedly reminded that they could decline to answer any question and could withdraw their consent at any time without consequence. Parents or guardians provided consent for any children appearing in interviews, photographs, or videos. Over time, we built trust with each household, visiting them again in 2023 and 2024. During these visits, we shared the interview clips we had filmed. With the support of translators, we also read draft versions of the book chapters out loud to each participant. Participants were given the opportunity to correct information and to reaffirm or withdraw consent prior to publication.

Refugee participation was essential in this step, not only as a means of giving refugees 'a voice' but also as a process that shaped the research itself. Refugee colleagues from Kakuma Film Team and from the team of survey enumerators and coordinators actively contributed to this phase of the project, far beyond technical filming and translation. They helped refine the qualitative instrument, advised on how best to approach households, and offered insights that influenced the way we collected and understood the stories. Given language diversity and cultural nuances, they usually guided the consent and interview processes and acted as the primary interlocutors between selected households and the research team. Their interpretations, follow-up questions, and real-time judgements about what mattered in respondents' narratives shaped the direction of the conversations.

In our research, we decided to film qualitative interviews. Doing so allowed us to work closely with Kakuma Film Team so that the refugee stories were collected and co-produced with refugees. Our main objective was to create short documentaries to reach a wider audience that may not necessarily read books. Such a multimedia approach has pros and cons and is optional. Video outputs are accessible and can be shared even in contexts with low literacy levels, crossing language barriers effectively. Videos readily convey body language, facial expressions, and tone, which may affect the meaning of what is being said but can typically be lost in written transcripts or quotes. Films can be powerful tools to stimulate learning and convey emotions. Many people reading this book will never go to Kakuma, so seeing a video might be their

only chance to go there, virtually. Videos also serve as an archive, which was extremely useful when writing this book. We went back multiple times to the videos to re-immersive ourselves in the context of the interviews before writing visual descriptions. However, video recording requires human and financial resources, it may not be adapted to all contexts, and it may influence how people tell their stories. This latter point is not necessarily negative. In our research, many participants seemed to be stimulated by the presence of a camera, using the opportunity to show us objects, places, activities, or people we may want to film.

The selection approach outlined above can be easily adapted to other research questions and populations of interest. In short, researchers should first identify one variable that can be used to characterize the spectrum of situations in relation to their study context. This variable should be measured in the quantitative data as the next step is to rank order observations in the quantitative dataset according to this variable. Researchers can then select particular quantiles of the distribution and collect their stories. Once selected, the researchers can return to the field to re-interview selected survey respondents, enabling them to fully narrate and tell their stories in their own words. To guide this, researchers might use semi-structured interviews involving a flexible interview guide or unstructured interviews allowing for free-flowing conversations. The focus of the interviews is to allow an exploration of themes of interest and to provide individuals and households with the space to describe their lived experiences related to these thematic areas. With full and informed consent, the interviews may be recorded, and possibly filmed, to bring these individual and household stories to life for a wider audience.

### **Step 3: Integrated Storytelling**

The third step of Representative Storytelling aims to bring the quantitative and qualitative data together to create representative narratives that are contextualized and accessible to a wider public audience.

The challenge in this step is to consider how stories can be narrated to be genuinely ‘representative.’ Narration—adding an explanatory and contextual voice—can be positive in enabling audiences to make sense of unfamiliar worlds. It can play a role in mediating between subjects and wider audiences to ensure contextualization. However, narration can also be distorting, especially in the context of significant power asymmetries between the researcher and the research subjects. [Byrne \(2017\)](#), for example, highlights the problematic

nature of representation and ‘giving voice’. Meanwhile, many researchers have argued that social science and humanities researchers need to be cautious about the ways in which personal narratives are used and ‘narrated’ by researchers or ‘storytellers’ for external audiences (Linde, 1986; Elliott, 2005).

The aim of Representative Storytelling is to allow individuals and households to tell their own stories, in their own words and based on their lived experiences. In that regard, the role of the external ‘narrator’ should be minimal. Therefore, in the following chapters, the stories of refugees are reproduced as they were narrated during qualitative interviews, with very limited editing. The only adjustments we made relate to the re-ordering of some questions to improve coherence, the deletion of our voices to centre the stories on the refugees themselves, and (in rare instances) the deletion of a few sentences to reduce repetitions (for filming, we sometimes had to re-ask the same questions) or protect the interviewees.<sup>10</sup>

But some form of narration is inevitable, whether those stories are represented through text, film, or multimedia. And the key is to be clear on the function of the narrator. Within our approach, the role is confined to one of contextualization. It involves situating the story within the broader representative data and sometimes describing the context in which the interviews have taken place. Of course, we recognize that contextualization is a complex and challenging question, which has been the subject of debate, especially in anthropology and critical discourse analysis.

In our book, we use three approaches to contextualize stories. First, we use the quantitative dataset to compare the situation of interviewees with that of other refugees in Kakuma. Rose, for example, told us about having a huge debt. But how large is this debt compared to the debt of other households? How does indebtedness vary in different deciles? Why are so many refugees indebted? These are the questions we can rigorously answer using the quantitative dataset because it is large and representative of the population of interest. When relevant, we also use data our research group collected in Kakuma and Kalobeyi between 2016 and 2019 as part of other research projects (Pozuelo et al., 2023; Siu et al., 2023; Betts et al., 2024; Delius & Sterck, 2024).

Second, we offer visual descriptions of interviewees, their activities, and their environment to immerse readers in the Kakuma camp and in the atmosphere of the research. While the images are based on our experience

<sup>10</sup> The story of Maker (ninth decile) had to be edited more than others because the interview was particularly long and conducted in English, which is not his mother tongue, and several sequences had to be redone. In other stories, we deleted a few sentences when we thought publishing the full text could harm the interviewee.

in the camp and the videos we recorded, the descriptions themselves are necessarily partly subjective. They reflect how we, external researchers, perceived and then described the situations we experienced. To complement these visual descriptions, we also produced videos with each household, allowing readers to directly see the environment in which they live. These videos are available on the project's website: [www.refugee-stories.com](http://www.refugee-stories.com)

Finally, we use our knowledge of the Kakuma context to provide more information about the themes that are shaping the socio-economic lives of refugees in Kakuma. Why are so many refugees fleeing South Sudan and Somalia? What happens when asylum seekers arrive in the camp? How is food assistance delivered to refugees? What do they eat? Can refugees access health care? And education opportunities? The selection of the themes we cover in the book is partly driven by what Rose, Maker, and others decided to tell us in their stories. But it is also partly driven by our own subjective choices during the research and writing. We have done research in Kakuma since 2016. The questionnaires of the quantitative and qualitative surveys focused on themes we deemed important based on our expertise. But other refugees and other researchers may have selected slightly different themes or may address the same themes differently. Contextualizing is (partly) subjective. We use different sources of data to contextualize the stories. Of course, we use the quantitative data, our video recording, and our field notes. In 2022 and 2023, we also conducted over 250 additional qualitative interviews with refugees, business owners, and humanitarian workers as part of our broader research agenda. We also use extensive contextual knowledge and different datasets collected over more than ten years of qualitative and quantitative fieldwork in Kakuma.

We returned to Kakuma twice in the two years following the initial interview to meet with participants. Our goal was to show them the videos and draft chapters to check for consistency and fill in any missing information, but also to ensure that they were satisfied with how they were represented in the book and documentaries. In this phase as well, our collaboration with Kakuma Film Team and with refugee enumerators and coordinators was essential. They not only helped us navigate the camp and facilitate interactions with households but also contributed to interpreting explanations that might otherwise appear ambiguous to outsiders. We describe some of these encounters in the following chapters, explaining how refugees' situations changed over the two-year period. We encourage readers to look at videos and photos on the website of the project to construct their own subjective images of the camp.



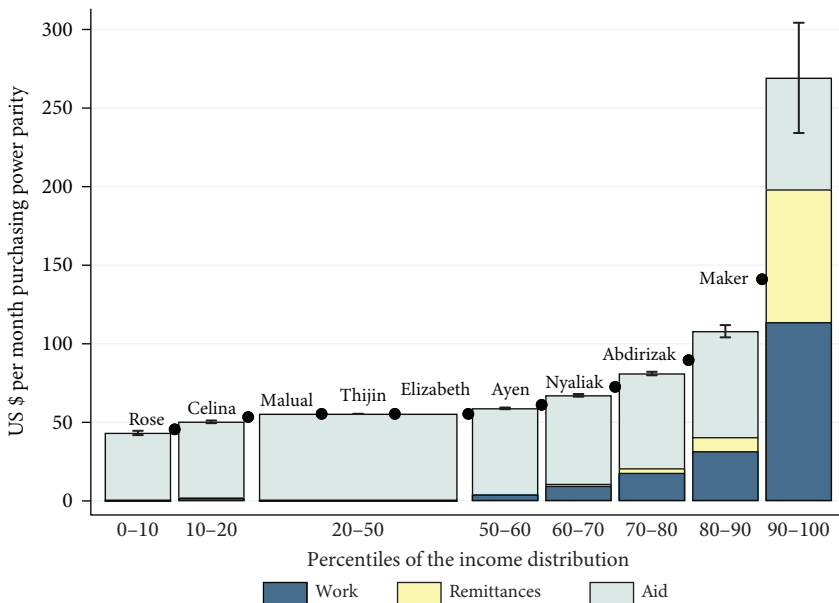
# PART I

## AID-RELIANT HOUSEHOLDS

### Percentiles 10–50

This first part of the book follows five households situated in the bottom half of the income distribution in Kakuma and Kalobeyei—families who survive entirely on humanitarian assistance without access to work income or remittances (Figure 5). About 57 per cent of all households in the camps rely solely on humanitarian aid. The situation is especially stark in Kalobeyei, where that figure rises to 81 per cent.

We will meet Rose and Celina in Kalobeyei, where aid is delivered in the form of cash transfers by the World Food Programme (WFP). Their stories



**Figure 5** Income distribution and sources of income

Source: Authors.

show how this system, while intended to offer flexibility and dignity, can inadvertently entrench debt and dependence—especially when cash assistance is delayed. In Kakuma, we meet Malual, Thijin, and Elizabeth, who receive a combination of in-kind food rations and restricted cash transfers.

Despite different modalities, all five households face similar constraints. Each of these families is headed by a South Sudanese woman raising children alone, having fled violence or floods in South Sudan. Their husbands were either killed or remained behind in South Sudan. Across their stories, we encounter recurring themes: chronic food insecurity; overcrowded and insecure housing; limited access to health care, water, and electricity; and the burden of debt—often incurred just to survive the weeks between transfers.

In addition to facing challenges, each of the protagonists demonstrates agency in the face of adversity. All stories highlight how households attempt to manage scarce resources over the monthly aid cycle, prioritizing their children's nutrition and education and finding hope through faith and community.





# Rose

## Tenth Percentile

We drive to Kalobeyei on a warm October morning in 2022. We are on our way to meet Rose, a refugee from South Sudan. Her story will be our first ‘Refugee Story’. This will be the third time we have visited Rose. A month earlier, we had interviewed her as part of our large representative survey of more than 1,000 refugee households. After ranking all the households according to their income, we determined that Rose and her four children were located at the tenth percentile of the income distribution: exactly 10 per cent of refugee households in the camps are poorer than her family and 90 per cent are richer. We then visited her again—a few days ago—to invite her to be part of the Refugee Stories project. After carefully listening to our proposal and asking some questions about what the interview and filming process would look like, she called us from her neighbour’s mobile phone to agree.

A Turkana man sells charcoal at the street corner; it is a calm morning in Kalobeyei as we move from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, each marked with a distinctive white and blue sign, until we reach Rose’s home. We stop in front of a modest stone house, and there stands Rose, waiting in the doorway. The fact that Rose’s house is made of stone suggests that her family participated in the Cash for Shelter programme in Kalobeyei. Along with around 4,000 other families, Rose received between US\$1,000 and US\$2,000 from the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), to turn the makeshift shelter she received upon arrival in Kalobeyei into a robust and permanent stone house. In front of Rose’s house stands a water tank, half buried in the ground to prevent it from being stolen, a common issue in Kalobeyei. Cables run between Rose’s house and her neighbours’ roof, a visible sign of the availability of electricity. Outside the door, under a veranda made from corrugated iron sheeting and held up by timber poles, ducks peck at kitchen waste that Rose and her children had scattered on the ground earlier. A blue sign above her door displays a combination of letters and numbers; her address in Kalobeyei. One of her children brings a plastic chair over from their neighbour’s house, and they invite us to sit next

to the kitchen area, where a single beaten-up pot, black from the smoke, is simmering on an open wood fire.

The film crew begins unloading the Land Cruiser. As we carry our equipment from the car to the house, Rose's neighbours watch curiously, intrigued by the unusual activity. A few heads peek out from nearby homes, and soon a small crowd starts to gather. Fortunately, our interpreter, Betty—a South Sudanese refugee and community spokesperson who lives just a few streets away—steps in. She explains what we're doing, and after a few minutes, most of the onlookers disperse, realizing there's not much to see.

Raindrops begin to fall as we are about to start the interview. Rose invites us to continue the interview inside her house instead. We follow her inside. Her house comprises one single room—small and dimly lit by the diffuse sunlight falling through the door. Wooden beams, draped with clothing, hold up the roof and a large red and beige patterned piece of fabric stretches over the stone walls.

Rose sits down and pauses for a moment. No one has asked her to tell her story in a long time.

*My name is Rose. I am from Juba, South Sudan. I came to Kakuma in 2017 when I was thirty-eight years old. My journey came as an emergency. My husband saw that the conditions were getting worse. He told me that he was going to the village to sell our cows so that I could depart with the children and go to the camp. He sold them all; he sold them to other people in our tribe who had money to pay. I don't know how much we sold them for, but it was enough to get us here.*

*I travelled with my children and some other people. We travelled from Juba to Torit safely. But on my way here from Torit, one of my brothers, who was travelling from Nikush to Juba, was killed. I had to stop at a place called Narus to mourn with my sister. I stayed there for one week, and then I crossed the border to Nadapal. From there, I was brought to Kakuma. I felt relieved because I was going to a camp. I was just thinking about getting my children somewhere safe where they can go to school.*

*My husband did not travel with us. We are still married to each other. But moving to the camp has separated us. He does not want to come to Kenya. He lives alone in Kapoeta in South Sudan. He stays there to look after our house, but he is not happy; it's a very dangerous place. The war is long, and it won't end. He visited two years ago, but I haven't seen him since. I will not go back; I will*

*always be here. He calls sometimes and we talk, but he cannot offer support because he is unemployed.*

*I don't have any other family back there. They died in South Sudan during the conflict. First, I lost my dad; someone killed him. I also lost my mum; she was killed too. I was young when they passed away. They were attacked by criminals in the village. My elder brother is living in Uganda. He has his own responsibilities and wants to live in Uganda instead of here. He left South Sudan because of the conflict too. I don't know why he chose to go there. I don't visit, but we sometimes speak on the phone. I just ask how he is holding on. I ask how he is doing in Uganda. We talk about the well-being of our children. I also speak with the people from my village, sometimes.*

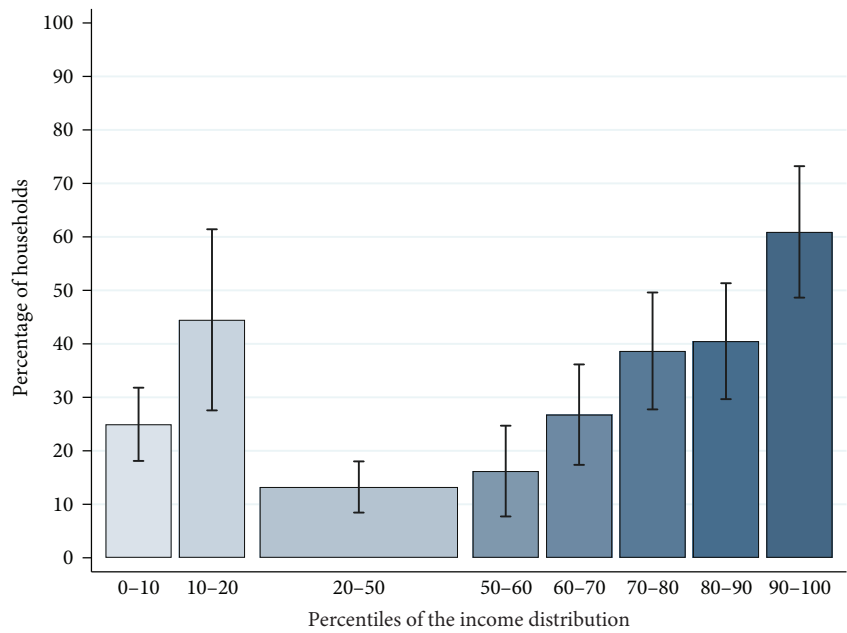
*When we arrived here, we were assigned this plot in Kalobeyei. We were given a tent, but after some time, we built a house with money we received from UNHCR. We got the money in three phases. First, I received half on my bank card so we could build the foundations and half of the walls. Then, someone from UNHCR came to check the progress. They provided the next payment, which we used to buy stones and timber for the walls and iron sheets for the roof. It took one month to build. The final payment was used to pay the construction workers and labourers.*

*I like my house. What I do not like is how hot it gets. Sometimes, I have trouble sleeping because of the heat. It's also loud! The heat makes the iron sheets crack very loudly. And they bang against each other when it's windy. When I hear this in the night, I am always afraid someone is breaking in.*

*Since this year, we also have electricity, which we use for lighting. I pay 50 Kenyan shillings per month [about US\$0.4],<sup>1</sup> which is a lot, but it helps the children to read and study in the evening. Sometimes, it does not last until the end of the month.*

Rose gestures at a solitary lightbulb and a double power socket, serving as the sole source of light and electricity in the house. Electricity is still a novelty in Kalobeyei and is very unevenly distributed (Figure 6). Only 28 per cent of refugee households have access to electricity. As part of the promotion of self-reliance in the settlement, UNHCR and the Kenyan government

<sup>1</sup> Throughout the stories, we use the exchange rate of 120 Kenyan shillings per US dollar, which was the exchange rate at the time of data collection in October 2022.



**Figure 6** Access to electricity

Source: Authors.

are partnering with donors, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and private companies to build a solar mini-grid, connecting streets one by one, in an attempt to provide a reliable power source for the community. The mini-grid is managed by community members, and customers are charged according to their consumption.

Those who cannot access electricity at home often rely on small stands to charge their phones. These stands, like many shops, boast distinctive names in order to attract attention. During one of our walks through the camp, we came across the ‘Oxford Phone Charging’ stand. It was nothing more than three sheets of corrugated iron and a solar panel, yet it served as a vital hub for keeping phones powered in the absence of a formal electrical grid. ‘Everybody knows the Oxford Dictionary—we want to be known, too,’ the shop owner said, explaining his choice of name.

*In the morning, we drink something like porridge. I then sweep the compound, wash the cooking utensils, and start preparing food once my children leave for school. I cook once per day. By the time they come back from school, the food will be ready. Mostly, we eat beans, yellow peas, and sometimes small, dried*

*fish. On very special occasions, like Christmas and World Refugee Day, we eat duck. I have three ducks. I love those ducks because I can eat them or sell some to buy clothes for my children.*

*There are things I miss from South Sudan, like meat and fish that I used to eat all the time freely. I would love to eat things like meat and pasta, but I'm unable to. I just eat the common food that is here. I have never eaten in a restaurant.*

*Cooking takes up most of my time. Once I place the pot of beans on the stove, I have to watch the fire all the time to make sure it does not go out. I have to push in the sticks slowly to keep the fire burning. But sometimes, while cooking, I run out of water and I have to walk all the way to Kalobeyei Village 2 to look for water. When I return, the fire may have gone out, so I have to start cooking again.*

*I don't have any work that provides money for me and my children; I just stay at home. The job that I like doing most is taking maize to the grinding machine. The rest of the time I look for water and, if I have dirty clothes, I'll wash them. If there is completely nothing for me to do, I rest—I like sleeping in my free time. Sometimes, I go to my neighbour's house to watch TV with them.*

*At the end of the day, I shower using one of the jerrycans and a bar of soap. I do not have a bathroom. The shed I used as a toilet and to wash myself in was destroyed in a storm. The neighbours put up plastic sheets in a tree; this is where I shower now. Then we sit outside for a while before we go to sleep.*

Rose points at a single mattress on the concrete floor, explaining that this is where she sleeps with her four children. As with other households in the poorest 10 per cent, Rose owns very few items. She does not own any furniture, except for two plastic chairs. Outside, by the stove, are a couple of cooking pots, a plate and cup per person, and the yellow jerrycans she uses for fetching water. Inside, a few small bags hold the rest of her belongings. Wealth inequality in Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement is visible: the per capita value of assets in the poorest 10 per cent is nearly seven times lower than in the richest 10 per cent.

Yet, Rose was able to get a couple of ducks, which one-third of other households in Kalobeyei also own. Ownership of small animals is higher in the Kalobeyei settlement than in the Kakuma camp as this type of activity is supported by NGOs and international organizations as part of their promotion of refugee self-reliance in the settlement. Back in South Sudan, Rose's

family was raising cattle for a living. In Kalobeyei, Rose could be killed for raising larger animals, like goats, camels, or cows. Refugees can only own small animals, such as chickens, ducks, or doves. The host population—the Turkana people or ng’iturkana—are traditionally pastoralists (Rodgers, 2021a, b). The Turkana people rely on livestock and the sale of charcoal and firewood for their livelihood and have set up small settlements close to the camp so that they can live nearby and benefit from the opportunities offered by the camp economy. As a result, the Turkana tolerate and trade with refugees, provided they stay away from their traditional livelihood, and are allowed to access camp services such as health care and education. But refugee–host coexistence isn’t always peaceful: everyone in the camp knows stories of women being raped by the Turkana and men being killed for fetching firewood outside the invisible boundary of the camp. The deadliest encounter occurred in 2003 when 12 people died and 30,000 people were displaced within the camp following a cattle-rustling incident sparked by the theft of a Turkana cow by Sudanese refugees (IRIN News, 2003; UN News, 2003).

*I do not work, and I am not involved with any community-based organizations. I don't have the strength to join those kinds of initiatives. You can join such initiatives when you're able to read and write. If I could, I would like to spend my time farming. I used to farm in South Sudan. There was a time when the UN [United Nations] was registering people who were interested in farming in Kalobeyei, but there was not enough space for me. If I could get a space like the other people, I would spend my day there. Now, I don't do any work. I just depend on the food and support I receive from the UN. I depend on Bamba Chapaa.*

*I used to receive KSh 7,500 per month [US\$63]. Things used to be cheap, and I was able to save KSh 500 per month that I could use to buy charcoal. But now things have changed. The shopkeeper has reduced the amount I receive to 6,000 because of the debt I have. It's not enough. It used to be enough some years back, but now it's not enough to buy food because prices have risen. I have to take more debt to be able to afford enough food. I used to keep my Bamba Chapaa card at home and manage it well, but now I have to leave it in the shop so that I can take debt. Sometimes, when the shopkeeper denies debt, we sleep hungry. I decided to leave my card there because the food I receive is never enough. My only solution is to take debt because I need firewood and charcoal. Right now, I have a debt of three months.*

*I can choose what I get from the shopkeeper. He gives me everything according to the money I receive on my Bamba Chapaa card. For example, if I want maize, he will give me maize. However, he decides the price, and he keeps record. Myself, I don't keep a budget. He doesn't give me money, just food, like cooking oil, maize, and other things I need that he has, like books for my children. But I can't get firewood from him, and I don't receive firewood from UNHCR. So, when I need cash to buy firewood or something different for my children to eat, I sell the food he gave me. For example, if I need vegetables or tomatoes, I trade the food I was given back to the shopkeeper in exchange for money. However, the value is usually not the same. I get less money when I trade back the food.*

*Another thing I need money for is the education of my children. They need pens. Sometimes, their uniforms get torn, and I have to take debt to buy them a new one. Just a few days ago, my daughter needed a pen for her exams. We had to use the money from Bamba Chapaa. When they need something for school, I have to use the food budget. My children have nineteen schoolbooks between them. My wish is to pay for my eldest son's secondary education. Nobody sends me money. Now I'm worrying a lot because my only option is to take more debt from the shopkeeper. If he allows this, I'll be able to register him in secondary school.*

Rose did not go to school, like 44 per cent of South Sudanese women in Kalobeyei. Finding work is very difficult, especially for uneducated women. In Kalobeyei, only 11 per cent of adult men and 9 per cent of women work. Among adults without education, barely anyone works.

Rose's household entirely depends on the assistance provided by international organizations and NGOs operating in Kalobeyei. Like Rose, the poorest 57 per cent of households in Kakuma and Kalobeyei rely entirely on humanitarian aid, without access to other income sources. Dependency on aid is even higher in the Kalobeyei settlement, which was less than ten years old at the time of fieldwork and, despite the promotion of refugee self-reliance, economic activities are less developed than in the neighbouring Kakuma camp.

Since the early 1990s, UNHCR and its partners have been providing services for refugees living in the region. While the Kenyan government officially oversees the camp and handles security, the primary coordination of humanitarian and development programmes is led by UNHCR. International and local NGOs implement these programmes, ranging from food distribution, health, water, and hygiene to shelter, education, and business development. But with reducing aid budgets, donor fatigue, and inflation, support is diminishing.

Rose's main source of aid comes from food assistance, which is delivered monthly by WFP, the world's largest humanitarian organization. It is the food assistance branch of the UN, working to address global hunger and food insecurity by providing emergency food aid and nutrition support and promoting long-term solutions for sustainable food security. WFP provides blanket food assistance support to all refugees living in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. A household's location in the camp determines the mode of assistance received. In Kalobeyei, where Rose lives, food assistance is delivered through a cash-transfer programme called Bamba Chapaa.

Bamba Chapaa means 'Get your cash' in Swahili slang. When we interviewed Rose, in October 2022, WFP was transferring about KSh 2,000 or US\$17 per month to each refugee living in Kalobeyei. WFP calculated that this amount should be sufficient to afford 2,100 calories per person per day. Rose's household is 'size 5'. In the local jargon, this means that they receive food assistance for five people, and her household should therefore receive US\$85 per month.

About a week before the transfers are distributed, WFP requires one member from each household to verify their presence in the settlement using their fingerprint. The verification is called the 'Proof of Life' exercise. The full Bamba Chapaa amount is then transferred to a single ATM card, which should in theory be held by the head of household. Bamba Chapaa is an unrestricted modality of cash transfers in the sense that refugees can use the money to purchase any items they want.

In theory, Rose should also receive cash transfers from UNHCR for hygiene products and firewood. Refugees prefer the shorter and more intuitive name 'soap money'. This programme considers two categories of beneficiaries: women and girls of reproductive age (between eleven and fifty years) and 'others', meaning men, boys, and women and girls who are not of reproductive age. Under this programme, Rose should receive KSh 357 per month—about US\$3—for sanitary pads, underwear, soap, and firewood. Others should receive KSh 117 per month (about US\$1). The cost of this 'essential basket' was calculated by running quarterly price surveys on food and non-food items.

All in all, Rose's household is expected to survive on less than US\$100 per month, which means less than US\$1 per person per day. This is in theory.

In reality, the situation is worse. Assistance from WFP and UNHCR is frequently curtailed because of funding problems. In 2022, for example, only 58 per cent of UNHCR's funding needs in Kenya were met ([UNHCR, 2022](#)).

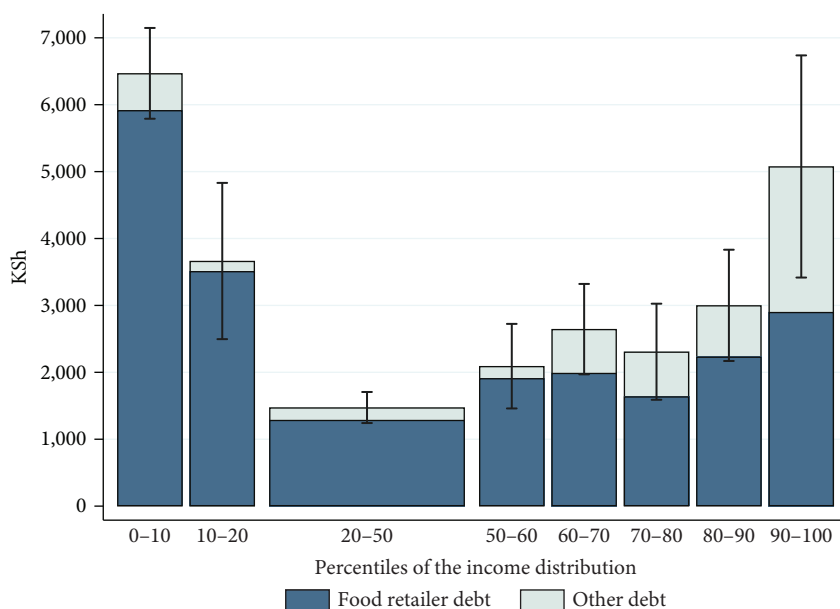
Because of limited resources received from donors, WFP's assistance to refugees in Kalobeyei was reduced to about 50 per cent of a full ration between October 2021 and September 2022, when it was increased to 80 per cent, thanks to a donation from the United States (WFP, 2021). Rations were again reduced to about 50 per cent of a full ration in July 2023 because of funding issues (WFP, 2023). Similarly, soap money has been infrequently disbursed, and amounts have varied over time. The programme was discontinued in April 2023 because of lack of funding.

Delays in humanitarian assistance also contribute to food insecurity and indebtedness in Kalobeyei (Bruni & Sterck, 2025b). While households are supposed to receive their cash transfers around the tenth of each month, our data show that transfers are delayed on average by thirteen days.

The cuts and delays in assistance put extreme pressure on refugees' already tight budgets and contribute to a massive issue of debt in Kalobeyei. When cash transfers are delayed, households' stocks of food run low, leading to widespread food insecurity. As all households face the same issue, at the same time, traditional support mechanisms that typically rely on neighbours and peers cannot provide relief in these times of hardship.

Delays in transfers also affect shops. Before transfers, traders fill their shops as they prepare for the surge in sales that typically occurs when transfers are made. Seeing no other option, refugees in desperate need of food beg shopkeepers to give them food on credit while waiting for transfers to be made. Shopkeepers generally agree to this with one condition: the borrower should give away their Bamba Chapaa ATM card and their PIN number as a guarantee. Then, when the delayed transfers are finally disbursed by WFP, the shopkeepers who turned themselves into informal lenders can simply withdraw WFP money and reimburse themselves.

Over time, this type of debt has accumulated in Kakuma and Kalobeyei (Figure 7). Like Rose, 97 per cent of households in Kalobeyei were indebted towards their main food retailer in September 2022, when we interviewed Rose for the first time. The average level of debt in Kalobeyei was KSh 6,764 per person [US\$56], which was equivalent to more than three months of food assistance. Debt levels are particularly large among the poorest households, like Rose's and other households in the lowest 10 per cent of the income distribution. Shopkeepers keep the ATM cards of most of their customers, most of whom have forgotten their PIN over time. As a result, instead of receiving monthly cash transfers from WFP, households are actually receiving food rations from their shopkeepers.



**Figure 7** Per-person debt in Kenyan shillings (KSh)

Source: Authors.

Initially, this debt system came as a relief. Given widespread difficulties in Kalobeyei, debt was the only way to cope with delays and other shocks affecting households' resources and needs. Over time, however, over-indebtedness has fuelled dependency on shopkeepers and undermined market competition. Without their ATM cards, households cannot shop around, they lose their negotiating power, and they are subjected to higher market prices.

Rose admits that she has accumulated about three months of debt. In the local jargon, this means that she would need to put aside three months of food assistance from WFP to reimburse her shopkeeper. Rose feels she will never be able to repay the debt.

Indebted refugees face a double burden. First, they have no choice but to agree to the high prices presented by their shopkeeper. With cash, Rose explained, 1 kilogramme of wheat flour would cost about KSh 80 [US\$0.7]. However, because of accumulated debt, Rose does not have access to her ATM card. She is completely dependent on her shopkeeper and is forced to pay KSh 150 for 1 kilogramme of wheat flour [US\$1.3]. Our data show that indebted refugees face prices that are about 16 per cent higher than if they could pay in cash (for details, see our separate report on the topic, [Bruni et al., 2024](#)).

Second, indebted households have no other option but to resell food at a reduced price if they need cash, for example, to buy goods that are not typically sold at the shops to which they are indebted (e.g. charcoal, firewood, or clothes); pay school fees; or if they need to pay for a medical emergency.

Rose stresses that the food she receives from the shopkeeper is not enough to have a balanced diet. They usually eat two meals per day. In the morning, she eats uji, a fermented porridge made from maize and sorghum. To save resources, Rose's children often skip breakfast as they receive lunch at school. WFP provides children in primary school (ages six to fourteen) with free school meals comprising maize and beans. Many families have to rely on this support and report struggling during the school holidays, when children have to depend more on the food available at home. In the evening, they all share supper. The day before we met, they had ugali (a typical dish made of maize flour) with murere (a local variety of greens). Rose and her children never eat fruit and rarely eat meat or fish, except on special occasions, such as Christmas. Only 7 per cent of households in the poorest 10 per cent reported eating fruit the day preceding our survey (versus 25 per cent in the richest 10 per cent), and only 12 per cent reported eating meat or fish (versus 37 per cent in the richest 10 per cent).

*We experience a lot of challenges. First, water. I cannot access water in my compound. I have to look for water in Kalobeyi Village 2, it takes one hour to walk there, and we can only carry two jerrycans at a time. I carry one and my daughter carries one. I try to go twice per day, but it's dangerous in the dark. Someone manages the waterpoint, but I don't know that person. The water is not always reliable. Yesterday, I was only able to get one jerrycan. Some households didn't get any. We cooked with it and there was no water left for drinking. If I didn't go and look for water today, my children could have stayed without drinking water for a whole day. When there is no water, I go up to the village to look but, like with food, when it's finished, it's finished.*

*Another risk is thieves. When you leave your water tank outside, they steal it. They steal from people on the road when you are going to Kakuma alone. Those are the worst things. They might even kill you. There was a night, while I was sleeping, thieves came and stole our water tank. They stole everything with the water tank, except for two ducks. Because the two ducks had slept in a separate house, that is how the two got lucky. I cried and shouted that night, but no one came to the rescue. People are so scared.*

*However, in this compound where I stay, I don't have any problems with any of my neighbours. We help each other. We are happy even though we experience those challenges. I pray for my life and my children's life as well; I pray that we always stay happy.*

Forty-two elevated water tanks tower above Kakuma and Kalobeyei, each holding up to 140 cubic metres of water. On the ground, long pipes, reaching up to 500 metres, weave through the camp and branch off to public taps. Each tap is designed to cater for 250 people during the two two-hour windows that the taps are turned on each day. Refugees access about 17 litres on average per day but supply in the camp is unequal. Tap vandalism, breakages, low-pressure pipes, prolonged drought, and queues of up to two hours without guaranteed water are causing water insecurity in various areas of the camp. Water wastage is also a huge issue. Up to 35 per cent of water gets lost to pipe bursts, illegal connections, and leaks. The tap in Rose's community was broken when we visited her, and she reported having to walk for up to one hour to fill her jerrycans. The inadequate amount of water leads many, like Rose, to travel to neighbouring villages, putting themselves at risk of violence. When water is lacking, households have to make difficult decisions about their water usage: whether they drink or cook with it.

Two years later, in September 2024, we see Rose again. We are back in Kalobeyei to show the short videos we made to Rose and other participants. Few things have changed in Kalobeyei. The tarmac road now extends into the village, and more poles stretch electric cables across the rooftops. Rose and her neighbours now have a fence made from large thorny branches that surrounds their homes—a common method of protection against wild animals and thieves. Yet, living on the outskirts of the camp still feels unsafe to her. Inside the fence, we sit down in the shadow cast by her house. Ducks still peck at the ground near our feet. Next to her house, she has built a new small hut from sun-dried mud bricks. Her now teenage sons live there. *'When we got the house in Kalobeyei, I had small children, but now my daughters and sons are becoming adults. We can no longer share a single room',* she tells us.

We hand Rose a tablet with the video we filmed during our last visit. As the video begins, her son joins us. Rose leans forward, tilting the tablet so they can both watch. The moment is somewhat interrupted by the onset of rain. Rose laughs, exclaiming that *'Oxford always brings the rain'*. We move inside, gathering clothes off a barbed wire line as we go. Once the video ends, we talk about her life over the past two years. She explains that she started working as a cleaner and cook at another refugee's home. She earns KSh 1,500 [US\$13]

per month. The house Rose cleans is too far from her home to commute daily, so she stays with her cousin in the Kakuma camp from Monday to Saturday. She returns to Kalobeyi on Saturday evenings and spends Sundays with her children. Rose leaves the food provided through Bamba Chapaa with them to prepare and only takes a small portion to her cousin's place. Her children, now aged between fifteen and eighteen, are alone during the week. '*God is taking care of them*,' Rose explains.



# Celina

## Twentieth Percentile

*Kikilai was a peaceful homestead, but it quickly became unsafe. Insecurity and conflict forced us to seek refuge in Kakuma. I perfectly remember when I arrived here—it was in 2017. We came during the rainy season; the villagers were farming.*

*We were happy. But then my husband was shot. I had no choice but to leave immediately since no one from his family wanted to support me and the children. My father sent me to Kenya. Since then, I have lived as a widow, and I have no intentions of getting into another relationship. My father planned it all, and he paid for everything. He asked my cousin to accompany me all the way to Kenya since she was familiar with the route and could help with interpretation and translation on the way. All we heard is that if you don't know how to speak for yourself, they will confiscate your belongings and take everything you have.*

Celina, like Rose, is from South Sudan—the world's youngest country. Yet, more than a decade after being officially recognized as an independent nation, South Sudan still struggles with the scars left by the civil war. Ongoing violence as a result of intercommunal clashes and cattle raids is also hindering the emergence of lasting stability and economic development. And so, South Sudan is one of the least developed countries in the world, sitting at the bottom of the global rankings in the Human Development Index.<sup>1</sup>

The nation's path to independence was both long and violent.<sup>2</sup> South Sudan gained independence from Sudan in 2011, after more than two decades of civil war between the Sudanese government and a guerrilla movement from the southern provinces—the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). The civil

<sup>1</sup> This composite index measures a country's achievements in key areas of human well-being, including gross domestic product (GDP) per person, educational access, and life expectancy.

<sup>2</sup> For excellent references on the conflicts in Sudan and South Sudan, see e.g. [Collins \(2008\)](#), [Natsios \(2012\)](#), [Ottaway & El-Sadany \(2012\)](#), [Johnson \(2016\)](#), [Martell \(2019\)](#), [Berridge et al. \(2022\)](#), and [Roach \(2023\)](#).

war started in 1983, as the SPLA fought against the imposition of Islamic law over the entire country by the then president, Gaafar Nimeiry. The battle lines were drawn not just over religious imposition but also over the control of lucrative oil fields, discovered in 1978 near the border between the north and the south. This wealth in natural resources fuelled the conflict, with both factions vying for control over these areas.

Ethnic violence, a tragic offshoot of the broader conflict, led to widespread militarization among communities. Soon, self-defence groups, initially created to protect civilian communities, became perpetrators of ethnic violence. The civil war resulted in 2 million deaths and 4 million people being displaced (Maystadt et al., 2014). By 1992, the Kakuma refugee camp was established as a response to the increasing number of people fleeing to Kenya. The war concluded in 2005 with the Comprehensive Peace Agreement, outlining the division of power and oil revenue sharing for a six-year interim, culminating in a referendum for independence for the southern provinces. South Sudan became independent in 2011, after almost 99 per cent of participants in the referendum voted for it. Sudan lost one-third of its territory and three-quarters of its oil in the partition.

Yet, violence did not stop with independence. Fighting between the Sudanese and South Sudanese continued over the control of oil fields located in areas near the new border. Within South Sudan, where tribal authorities still dominate, the authority of the new government in the capital city, Juba, quickly became contested. In 2013, President Kiir accused his former vice-president, Riek Machar, of attempting a coup d'état. Again, violence erupted, largely following ethnic divisions. The largest ethnic group in South Sudan—the Dinka—backed President Kiir, while the second largest group—the Nuer—were fighting for Machar. Inter-communal violence was often committed by child soldiers, and sexual violence was widespread. About 400,000 people are estimated to have been killed in the South Sudanese civil war, and 2.5 million fled to neighbouring countries, especially Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Kenya. After several failed attempts, a peace deal was signed by both parties in 2018, and Machar became vice-president of a unity government in 2020. Despite the official cessation of the civil war, South Sudan continues to struggle with internal political and tribal conflicts.

Celina and her husband, both part of the Didinga tribe, lived in Kikilai, a small village near Chukudum in the South Sudanese state of Eastern Equatoria. In the shadow of the Didinga mountains, with lush green land, the village was home to many cattle keepers and farmers. In Eastern Equatoria, cattle are not merely livestock; they are a symbol of wealth and status, deeply embedded

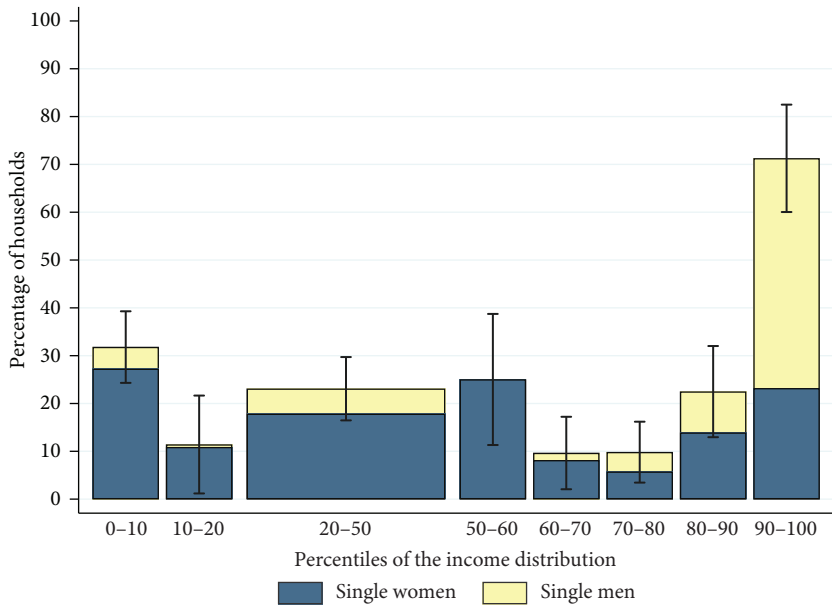
in the cultural and economic practices of the communities. The pastoral life, however, is marked by an age-old rivalry, particularly between the Toposa and Didinga tribes, both known for their cattle-herding traditions, resulting in a long-standing history of violent attacks against each other, including brutal killings, cattle raids, torching of villages, and the abduction of children and women.

While Celina was still in South Sudan, tensions were growing, and cattle raiding was prolific. Her husband was killed while herding cattle; his cows were stolen. Losing her husband, the family's source of income and anchor in society, Celina had no other choice but to flee the country.

*We left in a hurry. I travelled with my children. We were lucky to survive all the way. If it were just men fighting, it would have been better, but seeing children being killed too has tormented us. We started our journey in a small town of Chukudum and travelled to Kapoeta. We spent the night there. The following morning, we boarded a bus, but it broke down halfway to the border. We were almost killed by the hostile tribe of Toposa. The driver had to call for help from Kapoeta. No one came, but he was instructed over the phone on how to fix the vehicle. We immediately left when it was fixed, tossing kids into the bus like piling stones. We had to run for our lives. It was a traumatizing experience. At that very moment no one really cared for the kids' safety because no one was in their right mind at gunpoint. They really had bad intentions towards us because even after we left for the nearest town of Narus, they followed us, and we also had to leave Narus for Nadapal, Kenya.*

*I was really scared. It is through God's grace that I made it. So many people lost their lives along the same route. It depends; either you're lucky enough to survive it or you get to be a victim at any moment. So, I had to put my faith and trust in God that I would be safe and protected until I reached my destination. I thank God that we arrived safely.*

*I travelled with my four children and was pregnant with my fifth at the time. Later, I fostered my niece. I had my sixth child after I arrived in Kakuma, which further brought my family size up to seven. I had to raise my children on my own after the death of my husband. Being a widow has made it difficult to fulfil my responsibilities as a mother. So, seeking refuge in Kenya was the only choice I had, it was also an opportunity for my children to go to school. I hope that they go to school, so they can help me in the near future.*



**Figure 8** Percentage of women- and men-headed single-adult households

While Celina tells her story, her daughters are playing just outside the front door. They are engrossed in a game of Bao, a traditional strategy board game. Instead of a board, they’ve dug rows of holes in the ground and use small stones as game pieces. The two girls move the stones from hole to hole with intense concentration. As Celina goes to continue her story, her baby starts to cry. Not minding our presence, she cradles him and begins to breastfeed.

With six young children, Celina constantly balances her chores with child-care. Female-headed households are common in the camp due to women either being separated from their husband when fleeing or losing their husbands during conflict (Figure 8). The stories told by Rose, and by Malual (who we will meet next), highlight the other main reasons for living separated: husbands remain in the origin country to keep the land and assets safe or to fight as soldiers. As a result, more than one-quarter of households in Kalobeyei are composed of children and a single adult, who is usually a woman (87 per cent). Women-headed, single-adult households are 76 per cent more likely to be in the bottom 10 per cent than other households.

Living as a widow in such a context is dangerous. There is a constant risk of being exploited, robbed, or raped. Very few programmes currently target their specific needs. Like Rose, Celina never went to school, she does not work, and she heavily depends on humanitarian aid. Celina is very much living a

'get what you are given' life; she has no control over the food she receives and lacks the education or empowerment to manage her own household budget. She often feels exploited by the shopkeeper, a source of constant distress for her.

Embedded within South Sudanese culture, there is an expectation that women will continue to be cared for by their husband's family following their husband's death. It is common for women to be 'inherited' by their brother-in-law, especially if that family had paid a dowry. The pair will not usually have a romantic relationship and not get married. However, they may continue to have children in the deceased husband's name. While Celina is living alone as a single mother, she is receiving some protection and support from her brother-in-law. She nods towards the goat skin draped on the wall of her stone house, signifying that he provided meat for her family last month. Although her brother-in-law has his own wife and family, and rarely visits Celina, he also became responsible for her family, and the pair have one child together.

This is not always the case; some women can choose to repay the dowry to their deceased husband's family and remarry, and other women do not receive any support from in-laws. With only themselves to rely on, many women have adopted illegal or risky strategies to support their livelihoods. Some single mothers are involved in the distillation of chang'aa, an alcoholic drink made from fermented grains such as millet or maize. This illicitly brewed spirit often has a very high alcohol content. If brewers are identified by the police, they risk being taken to the police station and fined US\$65. Other women turn to sex work, putting them at increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, pregnancy, and gender-based violence.

Celina does not engage in these risky activities but, with no other income, she relies heavily on aid and support from her extended network.

*When I arrived, I was extremely happy and healthy. You should have seen my photos during the early years of my arrival in camp. I was excited that my children could go to school, have enough to eat, and have nothing to worry about. My life drastically changed in a positive way, and I became more optimistic than I ever was in South Sudan. I was happy because everything was still affordable and I could buy food with Bamba Chakula at a low cost. I could change our diet consistently because back then, I could buy rice, spaghetti, and sometimes meat. Nothing was out of my reach; it really made me happy.*

*What really makes me happy is when there is enough food in the house. Christmas Eve is a time when all the children get to enjoy getting dressed*

*in new clothes and enjoy a different meal. This day is important to me as well as the kids. I want to make them happy and proud, and most importantly, make the day memorable. But it stresses me. At Christmas, the prices go up for children's clothes. And for food, too! I always wonder if we are going to eat beans like every day. When my kids see the neighbour's new clothes, they will ask me for new clothes too. And then, what am I supposed to do?*

*As the years passed, the situation changed and prices hiked, which forced us to sometimes spend the night without a meal. We would sleep without eating. It is really hard for me as a single parent because I have to provide for them; I have to put food on the table, buy them uniforms and books, and anything they need is my responsibility. If only their father was still alive, he'd have helped. Now, I have to be there for my children. I just hope that God will help me.*

*I receive my money via Bamba Chapaa. The shop owner is in charge of everything; I just go every month to collect food from the shop. I don't really know the exact amount sent to my Bamba Chapaa; when I do not receive enough food, I take food on credit. I've never been to school. I am a villager, which really says a lot. I only know how to count on my fingers, and I don't know how to write numbers. I know I have credit piling up, but I don't know how much. I don't know what to do. I just need food.*

*The shop owner doesn't care about anything. He keeps my card because of the credit I have accumulated. I have extended my credit to a grace period of four months now. If only things could have been cheaper like before, then things could have been easy for us. Now, it's a routine for me because I cannot afford to pay the four-month debts, so I have to continue adding to my debts whenever the food is depleted in the house. I go to the Bamba Chapaa shop twice a month. Sometimes, I have to buy food with soap money and, in most cases, we have to take food on credit.*

*My sister recently passed away. She died in South Sudan. I wish I could have been with her. Her death really affected me both emotionally and mentally because she was still young and healthier than me. If she had received early treatment, she would still be here, but nothing can change that. I've accepted the fact that she is gone. I did not find out that she had died until one of our family friends informed me by phone. As usual, we traditionally have to pay her last respects. I had to borrow KSh 5,000 [US\$42] from a friend to finance the*

*wake. I have not paid back the full amount yet. The lender is an understanding friend, and now I've started paying it back in monthly instalments.*

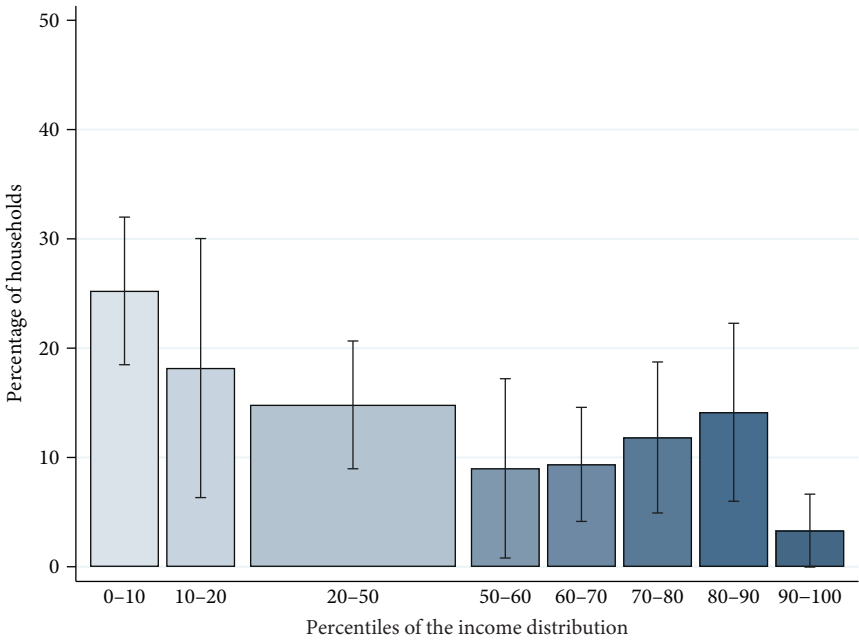
As with Rose, Celina has accumulated unsustainable levels of debt, not only towards the owner of the shop where she goes shopping but also towards her extended network. A large majority of indebted households in Kalobeyei started accumulating debt because they needed to purchase food for their family. Although recognized as an imperfect solution, poverty and food insecurity compel them to adopt this survival strategy. In Kalobeyei, food insecurity is often blamed on increasing prices and delayed transfers (Bruni & Sterck, 2025b). These reasons can be linked to the fact that food assistance in Kalobeyei is provided in cash only, implying that households are very exposed to price fluctuations. This is less the case in Kakuma where part of food assistance is distributed in kind.

From the time Celina arrived in Kalobeyei in 2017 to the time we interviewed her in 2022, we estimate that the median price of one kilo of wheat flour increased by 44 per cent, the median price of one kilo of rice increased by 50 per cent, the median price of one kilo of beans increased by 115 per cent, and the price of one litre of cooking oil increased by 91 per cent. Cash assistance did not follow these inflation trends as it is largely dependent on what the World Food Programme (WFP) receives from donors. Therefore, with reduced purchasing power, households are forced to take debt to maintain household food levels.

Apart from the necessity of purchasing food, debt often originates from the need to cover medical or education expenses or—as Celina explains—contributions to ceremonies such as funerals. Theft is also a significant concern in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, with one in seven households reporting theft incidents during the four weeks preceding our survey (Figure 9).

Households turn to borrowing from shopkeepers as their primary coping mechanism in case of unexpected expenses or shocks. To study the differences between households' resilience to shocks, we asked them if they would be able to access KSh 1,000 [US\$8] in a time of need. Households like Celina's, that are fully dependent on humanitarian assistance, are 66 per cent less likely to be able to raise this amount. And even among those that say they could, virtually all of them report that they would need to borrow from family members, friends, or neighbours or resell food in order to do so.

*Back home, we didn't have to get food on debt or borrow like we do here in the camp. Food price inflation here in Kenya really scares me. If given the*



**Figure 9** Prevalence of theft during the four weeks preceding the survey

*opportunity, I would not hesitate to go back home where I could access things freely, where I could get things without worrying about my financial status.*

*I miss the sweetness of my home. I miss my independence. I could collect firewood without being chased away. I could grind maize by myself or walk to the stream to fetch water. I could also walk a few kilometres to pick wild vegetables. And more importantly, I miss my hometown. We were farmers. Rainy seasons brought us joy, except when the dry season cut it short, leaving us with devastation and smaller yields. Some farmers kept livestock which occasionally led to cattle raids by neighbouring tribes. Despite all that, we were not stressed like we are here in the camp. Anything I needed I could get from the farm. The only things we purchased from the market were salt and other spices. I was always busy.*

*I also miss wearing our traditional beads. [Celina points to a traditional Didinga belt made from colourful beads.] This belt is one of the few items I brought with me when I left. We would wear them when we host our traditional dance festival. My children love to watch our dances. But we are the only Didinga family in our neighbourhood, my children have no one to practice with, and I have no one to dance with anymore.*

*Here in the camp, we don't do much, and being idle tends to exhaust my muscles. Instead of staying idle, I try to keep busy, for instance I like moulding the cracks on the kitchen surface because my body needs movement. This is the part of the day I enjoy most—when I'm working on the house while singing to myself. I really love this activity. But I am ageing now, and I wish I could go back in time to when I was still young.*

Two years on, contacting Celina proves difficult. Unable to reach her, we decide to go directly to her house. We find Celina lying on the floor, weak and feverish with malaria. She had recently visited the hospital and still had a cannula sticking out of the back of her hand. Her young daughters are at her side, tending to her as best they can. It wasn't the joyful reunion we were anticipating. We sit for a while to check she's okay, offering some juice and water. Celina asks us to return a week later. It's a bleak moment; on our way back to the hotel, we feel helpless.

Celina is not the only person we met during our stay who was acutely sick from malaria. In September 2024, the Kenyan Health Information System revealed a sharp rise in malaria cases across Turkana.<sup>3</sup> With the end of the rainy season, people in the camp suffer from the epidemic, putting young children's lives at particular risk.

A week passes, and when we visit again, Celina is feeling better. She welcomes us, still tired but with more excitement. Unfortunately, however, her children are now sick with malaria, too. Unlike Rose, Celina is still not working. However, together with neighbouring women she has begun growing greens along the bank of the nearby river. She says she enjoys the farm work because it keeps her busy and provides more food for her children. The crops she grows last throughout the year because she dries some of it to sustain her family until the next harvest. She buys seeds whenever she can, planning for future harvests.

As the video plays, Celina watches intently. After days of illness and caring for her sick children on her own, she's clearly enjoying this interruption. But when the video ends, Celina grows quiet, her eyes welling up. Watching herself talk about the struggles she faced two years ago, along with the hopes and dreams she once had, is clearly difficult. Some problems might have faded, but others remain. 'Look at me', she says, 'I was so healthy then. I've been so sick the last years and I'm so skinny now.'

<sup>3</sup> The Kenyan Health Information System reported 76,516 cases of malaria across Turkana between June and July 2024 (<https://turkana.go.ke/2024/09/02/county-health-to-combat-malaria-uptake-using-data-driven-strategies/>). It is not clear whether refugees suffering from malaria living in Kakuma refugee camp or Kalobeyei settlement are included in this figure.



# Malual

## Thirtieth Percentile

We are about to meet Malual, the head of our first household in the Kakuma refugee camp. As our driver navigates through the camp, we observe the distinctive character of each neighbourhood, each shaped by its own unique history and community.

The camp's origins trace back to 1992, a pivotal year when 10,000 young Sudanese refugees arrived in Kenya. They were part of the so called 'Lost Boys of Sudan', a group of children from the Nuer and Dinka tribes who were displaced and orphaned during the Second Sudanese Civil War. Families were decimated or split during the systematic and genocidal attacks in the southern part of Sudan. Many children avoided capture or death because they were tending cattle away from their villages. Survivors began to gather and organize themselves to flee the country. They travelled mostly by foot for hundreds of miles and, with no other possessions but their clothes, they depended on the generosity of the villages they passed during their journey. Initially, most of the fleeing boys went to Ethiopia. However, when the Ethiopian Civil War broke in 1991, the 'Lost Boys' were forced to flee again, this time to Kakuma.

After its establishment in 1992, the Kakuma refugee camp rapidly grew as a result of ongoing violence in Sudan, Ethiopia, and Somalia. By the end of June 2022, the Kakuma camp alone (excluding Kalobeyei) was hosting nearly 200,000 refugees, around a half from South Sudan, a quarter from Somalia, and the rest from Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, Burundi, and other nearby countries.

The Kakuma refugee camp is divided into four areas. Kakuma 1—the oldest part of the camp—is very distinct. This dense neighbourhood hosts the liveliest markets in the camp. At the Somali market, Ethiopian market, and Hong Kong market, you can find almost anything—from solar panels and TV screens to mobile phones from China, second-hand clothes from Europe, locally crafted wooden furniture, smoked fish from Uganda and Lake Victoria, coffee from Ethiopia, fruit from Eldoret, and even ice cream from a struggling freezer. The Ethiopian and Somali markets are named after the communities

that first established them, and those communities still live in the surrounding neighbourhoods. In these areas, houses, shops, and restaurants made of corrugated iron sheets are tightly packed together, leaving little space for shoppers, boda-bodas,<sup>1</sup> and the occasional white United Nations (UN) Land Cruiser. The neighbourhood's name 'Hong Kong' originates from the Chinese action movies that were once popular in the small cinemas—simple sheds equipped with a TV and VHS or DVD player—that lined the streets in this part of the camp during the 1990s and early 2000s, long before smartphones and Hollywood movies reached Kakuma. Other neighbourhoods, such as 'California' and 'Miami', are named after places that people hope to be resettled to. The relative disorganization of Kakuma 1 appears to reflect the fact that the camp was established in a hurry, when high numbers of refugees arrived in the camp while humanitarian organizations were still embryonic in the region.

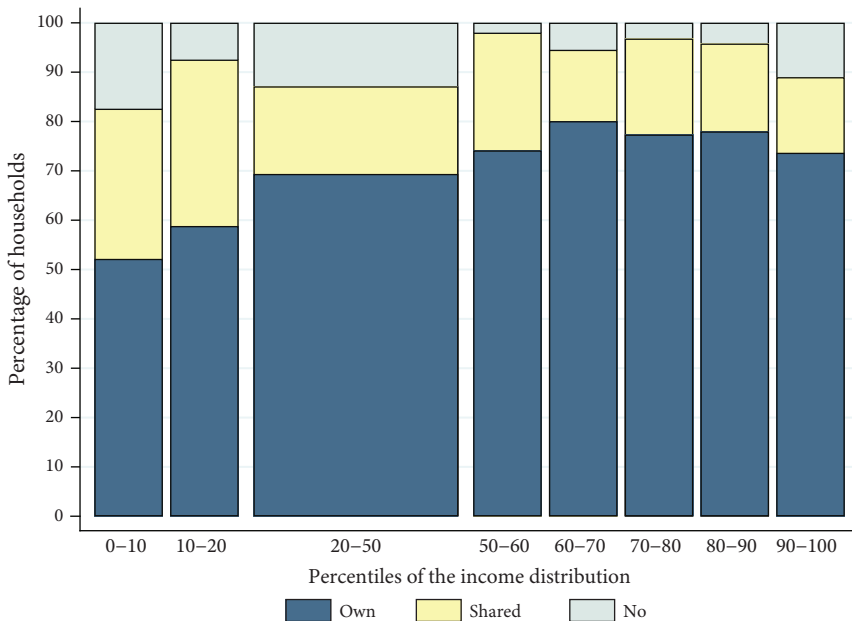
In contrast, Kakuma 3—where Malual lives—is newer and organized like a chess board. Parallel streets neatly divide houses into blocks, and limited construction materials mean that the buildings are almost identical. Each property, fenced by thorny bushes or iron sheeting, measures 10 × 15 metres and holds between one and three 3 × 6 metre buildings, depending on household size. The buildings are built from mudbricks, made in the camp, that support an iron sheet roof. They offer greater structural stability than the temporary shelter initially provided upon arrival in the camp, yet they are more improvised compared to the stone houses that people build in Kalobeyei through the Cash for Shelter programme. Concrete, steel, and glass are too expensive and therefore not used. Besides the economic resources available, cultural differences also influence the choice of building materials as people bring their various ways of constructing homes to Kakuma. As a result, when moving through the camp, you can spot the rather compact Congolese houses with flat roofs and the tall, pointy roofs typical of many South Sudanese houses. Somalis, when they have the resources, often build high, iron-sheet walls around their compounds, shielding their homes from the view of passers-by.

Our driver drops us at a cross-section as the road becomes too narrow to drive down. We get out, unload our equipment, and begin to walk. The dusty path is lined with fences of woven branches. After a few moments, we arrive at a small opening, where a makeshift gate is left open. Malual spots us and welcomes us into her home. Her family remains seated below white UNHCR sheets that have been stretched across wooden poles at the edge

<sup>1</sup> A 'boda-boda' is a term commonly used in East Africa to refer to motorcycle taxis.

of her home. Her household comprises two buildings: one for sleeping and the other for cooking. Both buildings are dug down one or two steps into the ground, a common practice among some South Sudanese households to increase the distance from the floor to the hot metal roof, keeping their buildings cooler. Neither building has a floor, meaning there is no escape from the desert dust that covers this northern part of Kenya. With no toilet on the property—as is the case for about 10 per cent of households in the camp—family members seek privacy in the surrounding bush to go to the bathroom (Figure 10).

Inside Malual's house, a mobile phone balances precariously on a plastic bucket next to an old mattress that fills much of the room. We had discussed the interview arrangements a few days earlier and, given the already harsh light from the morning sun and the growing bustle outside, we agreed to record Malual's story in her bedroom. Malual shifts aside a mound of clothing, creating space as she settles onto a discoloured plastic chair. Her appearance carries distinctive cultural markers: she is missing her lower incisors and carries ornamental scarification on her face, a common practice among some South Sudanese Dinka and Nuer tribes to enhance beauty and show tribal identity (Pinchi et al., 2015).



**Figure 10** Toilet facilities

Source: Authors.

*I am Malual, forty-five years old, I am from Ayod in South Sudan.*

*Ayod was once a nice place, where people would spend most of their time farming. People depended on the huge maize fields and the milk and meat we got from the cattle. Back home, I used to have cows and goats; they were my source of income. Whenever I wanted something, I would either take a cow or a goat to the market, sell it, and buy whatever it was with the money I received. Besides that, I was a farmer. I grew a lot of produce on my farm. We didn't have to worry about food. But all these pleasures and privileges are no more since I came here. I seriously miss them.*

*There wasn't hunger or violence until the war broke out in South Sudan. This forced many out of their villages, including us. The other reason we left was because of the heavy floods. We went to Juba, then the UN [United Nations] brought some of us to this place. In fact, there were actually three tragedies that forced us out of our village: it flooded, there was war, and there was no education for the children in South Sudan. Even if there were no floods or war, one would wish to relocate to another place in search of education for their children.*

*I was forty years old when I left Ayod. We travelled through Wech Bual, Touk, Nyithor, Riak, and Bor Town before arriving in Juba. We stayed in Juba for a long time before proceeding to Kakuma in 2021. It was a difficult journey but, like it or not, we didn't have the choice. We couldn't stay. When something bad happens, you don't think twice, you just run for safety. That was the situation we were in. The whole area was flooded with water. We had not planned to leave our village. Even far beyond our villages people fled in a rush. Look around, all the people here are those who fled the war and floods.*

Floods in South Sudan have been a recurring phenomenon since the 1960s. However, their frequency and severity have escalated in recent years, in part due to climate change and inadequate infrastructure to mitigate impacts. Major rivers, including the Nile and its tributaries, are criss-crossing the landscape, providing a vital source of water for animals and agriculture but also bringing death and despair when they overflow following heavy rains. Ayod—where Malual comes from—is in one of the most flood-prone regions of the country; its mostly flat terrain lies along the course of the White Nile and its tributaries. During the rainy season (typically from June to October), intense downpours lead to swollen rivers and widespread flooding. In 2021, the year Malual arrived in Kakuma, South Sudan experienced its worst flooding in

sixty years. More than 4,000 square kilometres of land were flooded, including Ayod. Homes, health facilities, schools, water points, and markets were submerged, disrupting livelihoods and impeding access to essential services. More than 500,000 people were forced to flee.<sup>2</sup>

*I left Ayod with five of my co-wives, our children, and our husband. A brother of one of my co-wives paid for us to travel to Juba, where he works. I could never forget our journey. First, we fled north. It was tiresome because we had to walk from Ayod to Fangak. It took three days. It was not easy walking long distances with the children and without food. We stopped in four or five villages along the way, where we were given food and could rest. From Fangak, we took an army boat to Juba via Bor Town. It took more than one week. I did not feel well throughout the journey. We were very tired and hungry. We stayed in Juba for a long time. No one helped us. After a while, I went to the UN office and they paid for me to get a public bus to the border. I travelled with two of my co-wives and our children. The other three co-wives and their families stayed in Juba with our husband. At the border, I was injected with the Covid vaccine. Then, the UN brought me to Kakuma in a lorry.*

*I prayed throughout the whole journey, asking God to guide me and my family to a safer place, which he did. I was also hopeful that if I made it to the camp, the UN would issue us our ration card so that we could receive our ration monthly and that the UN would give us shelter.*

*When we arrived in Kakuma, we first spent two days in the community. We stayed with our first co-wife, who was already living in Kakuma. Then we went to the reception centre to register as asylum seekers. While we were waiting, I would just wonder what kind of help we would get from UNHCR and how long we would get it for. In the reception centre, I was worried about food. They would serve sorghum and cowpeas every day, which we weren't used to. It was stressful not having fresh fish, milk, and meat to eat.*

In one section of the camp, chicken wire fences contain dozens of white tents. On the gate, a large blue sign reads 'Kakuma Reception Centre', the first destination for refugees looking for a new life in the camp. All new arrivals seeking asylum in Kakuma must first report to the Camp Manager's Office, which redirects them to either Kakuma or Kalobeyei Reception Centre. According to

<sup>2</sup> International Crisis Group (2024). Floods, displacement and violence in South Sudan. <https://southsudan.crisisgroup.org>, accessed 3 March 2024.

UNHCR, the verification and registration process takes around three weeks, followed by a five-week wait in the reception centre. In practice, however, waiting times can be much longer.

Malual spent three months in the reception centre after arriving in Kakuma in 2021. Most refugees report that life in the reception centre is hard. There is no shade in the queueing and waiting areas. Food is basic, services are limited, and men and women are housed together. Access to water is a serious problem, and asylum seekers may go for days without bathing. Fights around the water taps are frequent, with misunderstandings and tensions frequently occurring between people from different origins. Several people said that when a fight breaks out, security personnel arrive and beat everyone present, regardless of whether they were involved. Multiple people also reported becoming sick from the water during their first months in Kakuma. Women, in particular, complained about a complete lack of privacy and security. Some therefore try to leave the reception centre early and seek shelter with friends or relatives in the camp while they wait for their status confirmation.

With growing numbers of arrivals, the reception centre is becoming overcrowded. In 2023, UNHCR predicted that they would receive 25,000 asylum seekers in total, but the reception centre had already welcomed this number of people by June. This influx of asylum seekers is increasingly made up of onward movers—refugees who were originally registered in another country, such as Uganda—who are now trying to register in Kenya. Reasons for coming to Kakuma vary, but large aid cuts in Uganda and relatively good access to education in Kenya certainly play a role. To curb this trend, Kenyan authorities decided not to register any new onward movers in Kakuma in 2023. This decision left 5,000 asylum seekers stuck in the reception centre without a solution. While UNHCR tried to move them back to their first country of asylum, this is only possible if the refugees agree to move, which is often not the case. These developments are causing the reception centres to become even more overcrowded.

Upon leaving the reception centre, humanitarian organizations provide families allocated to Kakuma with building materials and iron sheets. The allocation of shelters is based on family size at the time of arrival, with a general rule of four people per shelter. Single individuals are asked to share housing with others. Some new arrivals prefer to join existing households, usually with relatives or friends. UNHCR allows this and reportedly carries out checks on the house beforehand to confirm that it is suitable. Malual lives with her four children. When she arrived from South Sudan, she had very few belongings with her.

*When we left the reception centre, me and my co-wives were given different homes by the UN and different ration cards. We were also given buckets for water, utensils, cups, plates, spoons, and a saucepan. Originally, I was allocated a space in Block 13. It was hard for me being alone with my children, especially with my health problems. One of my co-wives lived in Block 5, and her son lived alone in the house next door. He kindly relocated so I could move here with my family. We just asked the block leader if it was ok, and they allowed us to move our building materials and iron sheets here from the original plot. We then built another building. My other co-wives live in Kakuma 2. We sometimes visit each other's families.*

*I married my husband when I was eighteen. We met in a very formal way. He took interest in me and had to follow our traditional marriage rites. He had to ask my parents for my hand, and then he paid the bride price to them. Since then, he has been the man I call my husband. He is currently in Juba, South Sudan. For my children, I am thankful for the fact that their father is still alive, even though he is not with us. We rarely communicate, at times twice a month or even once a month. I am the one making the phone calls in most cases.*

*We do talk about our future plans for the family, and he often consoles me, helping me cope with the hardships I face with our kids in the camp. I encourage him to stay strong as well, knowing he is also in harsh conditions as a soldier. He also talks to his children and advises them to take their education seriously and to persevere with the little ration we receive from the UN. I'm always lost in thoughts because of the situation my husband is in. The only thing I can do is to be prayerful and ask God to bring an end to the endless war in South Sudan so that my husband and the rest of the soldiers can come back to their families.*

Malual reaches over to a fabric bag, unzips it, and hands one of her children fifty shillings. She asks him to go over to the woman standing at their gate and buy two-and-a-half bunches of greens. Malual received this money after selling some of her in-kind food ration earlier in the month. Lacking any savings, the poorest households frequently have to resell food when they need cash. Households fully reliant on humanitarian assistance, like Malual's, are 44 per cent more likely to report reselling food to access cash. Prices in the resale market are significantly lower, meaning Malual loses money when reselling food.

*Now in the camp, my economic situation is very poor. We rarely eat twice a day because of the little food we receive from the ration centre. We usually receive maize, cowpeas and rice. I'm usually the main cook in my family but my daughter cooks too at times. I serve all the boys together, then the girls together, and I then serve myself. I sometimes share food with the co-wife who lives next door. Most of the time we eat once a day so that we can have a meal for the next day.*

*I'm not able to get the food of my heart's desire because of the condition that we are in. We just eat cowpeas or asida [mashed maize] all the time, and that's why I look this way physically. I have even developed vision impairment due to this unbalanced diet. Back home, I would eat our local foods like wal wal [South Sudanese porridge], fresh milk, kop [steamed maize flour balls], and fresh fish from the lake. I am not able to get fresh cow milk here; the last time I drank fresh milk was in Juba, two years ago.*

*My family also receives Bamba Chakula. All we do is to leave our Bamba Chakula SIM card in the shop and go to get the food and other things when the shopkeeper tells us the transfer has been received. We are usually not given the money; you cannot get cash if you have debt. Instead, we take the food and items we want. I usually get onions; Royco (stock cubes); small, dried fish; wheat flour; beans; and soap. But it is not enough. We only get food worth KSh 3,000 a month [US\$25]. How I spend it is up to me. For example, sometimes I get food and sandals. Other times, I have to trade food for cash to pay for emergencies. When I can, I try and leave KSh 500 [US\$4] at the shop for future use.*

As with Rose and Celina in Kalobeyei, a large number of households in Kakuma—51 per cent—fully depend on humanitarian assistance (in Kalobeyei, it is 81 per cent). Malual's household is among them, receiving no income from work or remittances.

Since 2015, refugees in Kakuma refugee camp have been entitled to a combination of in-kind food assistance and cash transfers distributed by the World Food Programme (WFP). Upon leaving the registration centre, families settling in Kakuma are given a ration card and a Bamba Chakula SIM card. The ration card gives them access to in-kind food distribution, which happens during the first week of each month. At the distribution centres, Lokado and World Vision, WFP's implementing partners, organize the distribution of food to families, one household at a time. Throughout the week, families are allocated specific days, depending on their household size, with larger

households invited first. Only one person from each household is allowed in to collect the food on behalf of all family members.

Food distribution starts at 8am. Hundreds of people line up outside the distribution centre, carrying empty jerrycans and sacks. In Kakuma, food distribution is a routinized choreography of control and logistics, almost an industrial process. Yet, even within this austere setting, moments of informality emerge, challenging overly simplistic images of humanitarian aid delivery. As crowds wait in the scorching heat, a policeman with a baton forces them to crouch on the ground until they are called into the distribution centre. Amid this scene, a DJ hired by the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) managing the distribution blasts upbeat music through loudspeakers. While Shaggy sings 'It Wasn't Me', mixed with shouting policemen, a young boy moves between the crouching rows, selling ice lollies from a red plastic bucket for ten shillings apiece.

Eventually, people are called inside in groups. They enter through a wire doorway, into the 'waiting shed', a cage-like structure lined with wooden benches. The contents of the month's rations are written in English, Swahili, French, Nuer, Dinka, Arabic, and Somali on the wall: rice, beans, and vegetable oil. Each household member, no matter their age, gender, or other sources of revenue, is entitled to the same quantity. In October 2022, each refugee was entitled to 210g of rice, 60g of beans, and 35ml of oil per day. The contents of in-kind rations slightly vary, depending on what WFP receives from donors. Most often, refugees receive rice, wheat, or maize, with cowpeas or beans, and oil. They never receive vegetables, meat, fish, or other types of fresh food.

Eventually, refugees are guided through a turnstile and enter a large white canvas tent. WFP staff sit behind desks in the centre. One by one, refugees approach WFP staff and hand over their ration card. The barcode is scanned, and their thumb prints are verified. Still holding their empty containers, they walk through an enclosed metal corridor and arrive in the distribution tent. White sacks and metal oil cans pile high. One of the many staff ushers individuals down one of six walkways, depending on their household size. They walk through like a conveyor belt, collecting each precisely measured item as they go. Women, their clothes splattered with oil, pour vegetable oil through funnels into jerrycans; further on, maize is scooped into sacks. At the end of the line, the refugees arrive at a scale. Again, each type of food is weighed, double-checking the correct amount is received: nothing more, nothing less. Over the course of the week, nearly 2,000 tonnes of food and oil will have been distributed. Outside of the distribution centre, young men in high-vis jackets

offer to help carry items for a small charge to boda-bodas or family members waiting outside the gate.

Until 2015, households in the Kakuma refugee camp only received in-kind food rations from WFP, but over time, new market-based initiatives were rolled out. As a result, in 2015, WFP introduced a new cash-based intervention, called Bamba Chakula, which means ‘get your food’ in Swahili slang. Cash transfers are offered in addition to in-kind food assistance to families living in Kakuma. In theory, Bamba Chakula should contribute 50 per cent of the food assistance received. In practice, what refugees receive is highly contingent on whether WFP received enough donations. In October 2022, each refugee in Kakuma was entitled to KSh 850 per month—about US\$7. This amount was reduced to KSh 450 or about US\$4 after July 2023 because of funding gaps in WFP’s budget.

The transfers are distributed electronically on SIM cards that households receive when leaving the registration centre. All transfers for one family are sent to the same card. In contrast with the Bamba Chapaa programme in Kalobeyei, the Bamba Chakula programme in Kakuma is ‘restricted’. Refugees can only spend the money on food items (excluding alcohol and tobacco), and food can only be purchased in one of the 225 shops contracted by WFP to accept Bamba Chakula payments.

*I have huge debts in my Bamba Chakula. We’ve eaten three months ahead. The food is not enough. The food from distribution runs out after ten days. We then have to wait another ten days until Bamba Chakula is received. Long ago, we would receive enough to last the month, we would sell quite a lot of food so we could use the cash to buy non-food items. Now it is hard to do this, but sometimes we exchange rations with Turkana for firewood.*

*If needed, I can ask for assistance from my family and friends like my co-wife’s family next door. I mostly receive food from them, which I reimburse once we receive ours. If someone comes to ask for help and assistance from me and I have whatever they are asking for, then I give it to them. But if I have nothing to give out, I have to say I can’t help. Food is the only thing that most people ask for from each other.*

*We, as refugee women, also have some innovative plans that help us cope in times of need. For instance, here, in our block, we have a church group. Our church group supports people with the rations we receive from the UN. It is not a regular group, but elders from the church move around the community to*

*see if anyone is suffering. If they find people in need, they announce it to the church and then ask one person to move from home to home asking for a small donation. I received support once, and I sold all the food. I then used the money to cater to some of my needs. For example, my children's stationery, firewood, airtime, and other expenditures. If I had more money, I would open a small shop just within my compound and facing the road so that people could buy things from me. If God touches someone's heart on my behalf and helps me financially, I could do it.*

*I definitely have good and bad memories throughout the years. First, when I got married, God blessed me with my first child, but sadly, he passed away. Not long after, God blessed my husband and me with three more children. These three also became seriously ill and had to be admitted to the hospital. Thankfully, God allowed them to recover and live to this day, and I'm grateful that their father is also still alive, even though he is not living with us. Secondly, this year, my daughter became pregnant. On her due date, she endured a painful labour that almost led to surgery, but once again, God helped her through, and she gave birth naturally. I am very thankful to God for all these experiences, as He always fights my battles. To me, these are good memories.*

*Unfortunately, I recently lost my aunt, and I really wanted to attend her burial in South Sudan, but I didn't have the money to pay for transport to go back home. This has happened three times now. First, my brother fell seriously ill in Malakal and was taken to a hospital in Khartoum, where he passed away. I couldn't go there to be with him. Then, my brother's wife had complications during childbirth in Khartoum, and she needed surgery. Tragically, both she and her child passed away, and again, I was unable to attend their burial. Lastly, this year, I lost my aunt, and once again, I couldn't return home due to financial constraints. All I could do was pray for the deceased and ask God to console my family, both here and back home, for the loss of our loved one.*

*The thing I enjoy most is serving the Lord. I feel truly happy when I'm praising and praying to my God. Just knowing that I serve a living God, who is above all mankind and the creator of heaven and earth, is enough for me. Every afternoon, I join the women's fellowship, and I spend an hour each day in church. I also enjoy sweeping my compound, cleaning utensils, and cooking meals for my family. When my family is satisfied and my compound is clean, it brings me joy. But above all, what I love most is going to church.*

*The most important of all my items and objects in my household is my Bible. As you can see, I have vision impairment meaning I can't read anything, so during my free time I call upon someone that can read my Bible to me and make me understand the word of the Lord. I received this Bible from my church [she says while holding up the book]. I love it dearly because I get guidance on how to tackle all the hardships that I face in the camp and in the world in general. When I'm heartbroken or happy, I turn to it to seek comfort from it for I know I'm still alive because of Him.*

In September 2024, when we returned to Kakuma, we showed Malual the video of her interview and read this chapter out to her. No one, she then replied, had ever asked to hear her story, just to learn about her life. 'Thank you for telling it', she said. 'These are the things everyone here is going through. I'm glad you have written it just how I said it, in my words. It's not easy to watch yourself, but it's my story. You reminded me of my own story. Thank you for keeping my story in your hearts when so many don't.'





# Thijin

## Fortieth Percentile

We arrive in a small, fenced community in Kakuma 4. The family we are visiting lives in three buildings in an enclosed compound that is shared between neighbours. People are busy carrying jerrycans and hanging laundry. A group of young children hold hands and spin in a circle before dizzily collapsing on the floor and laughing. Thijin's daughter sees us enter and, recognizing us from our earlier visit, takes us over to Thijin. She is sitting on a blue plastic chair, leaning over a wood-burning stove. These stoves have become common in Kakuma since UNHCR began distributing them in 2017 ([UNHCR, 2017](#)). Using a mug, Thijin pours white batter onto the top of a large flat metal pan that rests on the stove. The smell of the fermented mixture fills the air as she spreads it in a circular motion with a spatula. As the batter cooks, the edges begin to dry and lift from the surface of the pan. Thijin sits back casually, allowing us to watch how the kisra, a traditional South Sudanese paper-thin bread, is prepared. She says she will be ready to be interviewed once it is cooked. Without rushing, she lifts a knife and slides it under the thin sheet of bread, flips it quickly, and places it on the stack of kisra that sits beside her. Her daughter then takes Thijin's place as she prepares for the interview.

*I am Thijin. I am fifty years old, and I live here with eighteen people. I am from a place called Panyang in Nyirol County, Jonglei State, South Sudan. Nyirol was a green and fertile place. We farmed crops, and kept cattle for milk and meat, and used their skin, too. We also fished from our rivers. The women got to grow stronger and more fertile, and the children were healthy and strong. Local musicians would play our beautiful cultural songs, and the youth would dance. Everyone from the community would join the celebrations.*

*But I'm no longer in my homeland. These good memories belong to the past. They have all vanished. Nyirol became a war zone. Gunshots were heard day and night, and that is the reason we fled. We also faced droughts and floods. We were unable to farm on the watery ground and, as much as we tried to fight the*

*floods, it led to the death of some of our animals, our main source of living. It also led to the death of many people.*

*When I left Panyang, it was raining. I was feeling unwell. I couldn't drink water or eat porridge during the last few days in my hometown. But I had planned to leave with my son. I was so ill. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even say goodbye to my family. I just waved because it was so difficult for me to utter a word.*

*After we left, our village was invaded by the Murle tribe, our long-time rivalry. A big war erupted between my tribe—the Nuer—and the Murle tribe. They took everything they could carry and burned down what remained.*

*I left on foot from Panyang to Padiet. It took three days. This was the worst part of my journey. Padiet was flooded, so I could no longer walk on foot. There I went to the hospital, but my sickness got worse. Luckily, they managed to organize an emergency plane to Juba. The clinic in Padiet paid for my flight. I don't remember much, just how they pulled me on the plane. I was so ill. I was unconscious for much of the journey. Only in Juba I got better and was able to eat something. From Juba, I took a car to Kakuma.*

*We travelled via Kapoeta, Narus, Nadapal, and Lokichogio. My relatives paid for the journey. The whole journey took five days from Nyirol to Kakuma. My journey experience was quite difficult and tiresome; I wasn't at peace while coming here. But I believe it is always good to be positive about situations, so when I left home, I kept everything in God's hand. I stayed positive and just focused on the new place that I was heading to. I believed that God was going to settle me in a more peaceful place.*

Like Thijin, more than 2 million South Sudanese have left South Sudan for bordering countries, and a further 2 million are internally displaced within South Sudan (UNHCR, 2023c). Thijin narrowly escaped the attack in her village, and she does not want to return. The enduring tribal conflict between the Murle and Nuer, sparked by disputes over resources and livestock raiding, is one of the most violent communal disputes globally.<sup>1</sup> Cattle rearing is central to the nomadic lives of the Nuer tribes living in Jonglei state. But progressive warming over the past thirty years has prolonged the dry seasons,

<sup>1</sup> Climate Diplomacy (2024). Conflict between Lou Nuer and Murle in South Sudan. Accessed 18 March 2024. <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/conflict-between-lou-nuer-and-murle-south-sudan#fact-sheet-toc-conflict-history>.

forcing Nuer communities to move closer to Murle territory in search of water for their livestock. This is exacerbating existing conflicts over land use and ownership.

Thijin's village, Panyang, is in the same northern province as Malual's (thirtieth percentile) and was also heavily affected by the recurrent floods in the area. The province experienced several years of heavy rain during the wet season, causing the White Nile to overflow, leading to the destruction of crops, farms, and homes. In 2022 (the year Thijin arrived in Kakuma), the United Nations (UN) estimated that 1 million people were affected by flooding in South Sudan (UN Humanitarian, 2023).

*I felt at ease when I arrived in Kakuma, especially because my children were able to settle in school, and we could collect a monthly food ration from the UN. I also felt much peace within Kakuma compared to my home village in Nyirol, where gunshots were heard everywhere. When I arrived, I was given a house by UNHCR. It was already built with iron sheeting and wooden poles. We did build some mud walls, which was free to do. But since then, I have not been able to renovate my house. The roofing and timbers are wearing out. Whenever a heavy wind blows, I get worried that it might be blown away. If that ever happens, it will be a huge burden to me because I don't have money to repair it. My neighbour built the fence between our houses. We couldn't afford to pay, but the fence provides us with security too. I like living in this block, it is a safe neighbourhood.*

*Each morning when I wake up, I sweep my compound. Then I go and fetch water. After that I clean my utensils and prepare food for my family. Preparing food isn't easy. We have our meals twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. The children in primary school are also given lunch at school. The food that I love most in my life is our local delicacy, wal wal [South Sudanese porridge], with milk. Once I eat it, I really feel great, but it's rarely eaten in Kakuma. It's been three years since I last enjoyed wal wal. Most of the time, I prepare cowpeas with our local food kisra, and at times, when the family gets tired of eating cowpeas, I sell some of the maize that we get from the ration centre so that I can buy some vegetables to cook with the kisra. I am the one that cooks because I'm the only elderly person. I cook for my children and my nieces and nephews. My brothers and sisters, who are still in South Sudan, trust me to look after their children, so I make sure that I cook for them. We all eat together. I serve our food in an orderly manner. First, I put the men's food in one pot and give them their plates so they can serve themselves. I then put food in another pot for the*

*teenage boys and give them their plates so they can serve themselves. Lastly, I serve myself, the other women, and the little ones.*

*One of the challenges of living in Kakuma, even though it is not experienced by everyone, is the low living standards faced by the less fortunate, like me, who entirely depend on food assistance. I have had no source of income since arriving in Kakuma. No one sends us money. No one is working, all my children are jobless, and that's why we entirely depend on UN food. We go through a lot daily compared to those who have jobs, businesses, or people to support them. You can tell from the way they build and decorate their homes and their luxurious lifestyle that their families are living well. Seeing all this comes with much pressure. We too would love to live as they live, but we are less fortunate. But we shouldn't envy them. I believe everyone has his or her blessings from God and, when that time comes, we too can upgrade our lives. It's just a matter of time.*

Despite having a dozen adults in her household, none of them reported earning any income during the one-year duration of our study. Although markets are slightly more developed in Kakuma compared to Kalobeyei, in 55 per cent of households nobody is earning an income to complement humanitarian assistance (compared to 81 per cent in Kalobeyei). South Sudanese refugees are particularly affected by unemployment, with more than 70 per cent of households receiving no income from labour. As a result, the majority of South Sudanese households end up being fully reliant on humanitarian assistance.

*We receive Bamba Chakula. We purchase food with it. The amount keeps changing. We used to receive KSh 6,000 [US\$50], but then it was increased to KSh 9,000 [US\$75]. We usually leave the Bamba Chakula SIM card with the shopkeeper. We receive the transfer on the 25th of the month. The shopkeeper will not let us come before this date. He doesn't give us cash, only food, and you can choose to take it all or leave some for next time. All I do is check the calculations with the shopkeeper so that I know my balance. I try to keep a record of the budget. The only time I have money in my hand is when I sell my rations. Sometimes, my family situation forces me to sell some of our ration so we can have a different meal rather than the usual one.*

*The children also get their books and other stationery from our Bamba Chakula shop whenever the Bamba Chakula money has come. We used to get our firewood and soap money through an ATM card [issued by UNHCR]. This ATM money enabled me to get airtime and buy some clothes for my children. I have*

*never bought clothes or shoes for myself while in Kakuma. As for the firewood I use for cooking, I normally exchange rations with the Turkana women that sell firewood.*

*Hunger is a major challenge in my family; the food offered by the UN isn't enough to last a month. When hunger persists, I sometimes ask for help from my neighbours, who may lend me food, which I pay back once we receive our ration. Other times, we try to get our Bamba Chakula in advance.*

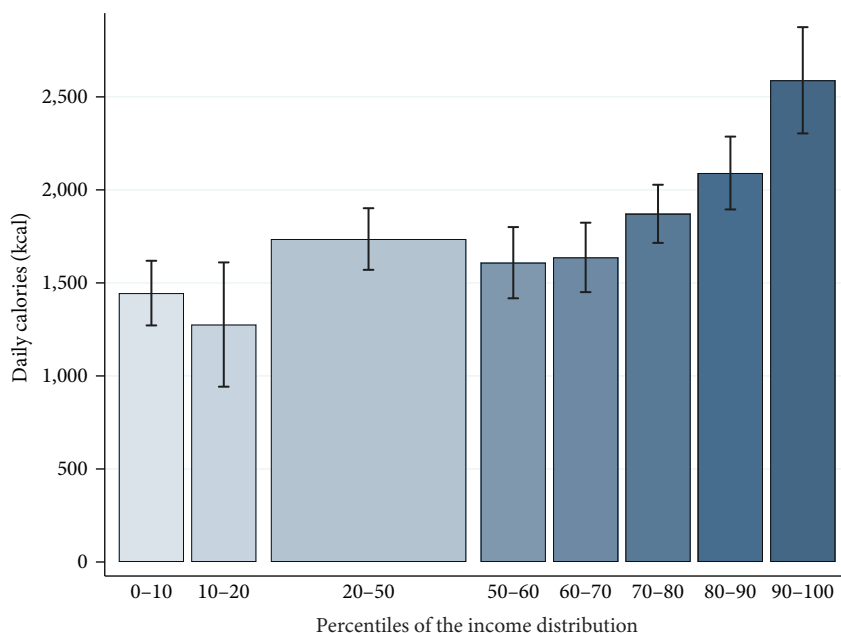
During the interview, her teenage son enters the house carrying a white sack of maize and a jerrycan of oil. He had just returned from Distribution Centre 4. We pause so Thijin can help him store the food. Her son had been out all morning. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with the bottom of his Manchester United shirt and pours himself a jug of water from a jerrycan as Thijin takes the items. She places the white sack on top of another sack in a dark corner next to the mattress. In Kakuma, most households do not have an indoor kitchen. Instead, each household has a dedicated space outside where they keep their stove, washing up bowls, pans, and firewood. For security and to stop food from spoiling, Thijin stores the food items inside. The amount of food her son brought is for one size-2 ration card. As Thijin lives with eighteen people, they pool together four ration cards and cook as one household. Her family struggles with food insecurity. She was worrying that they would not have enough food and reported often having to reduce quantities or skip meals altogether when there is no or little food left in stock. The day before our survey, conducted about a month prior to filming, everyone in her household had to skip breakfast. While the children received free lunch at school, half of the adults had to skip the lunch as well. That evening, they all shared a meal of rice, beans, and a small amount of onion.

Food insecurity is a massive issue in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. In our questionnaire, we used the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS) to measure food insecurity (Coates et al., 2007). The survey module has eighteen questions, which assess whether and to what extent households struggled with access to food over the four weeks preceding the survey. For instance, could they eat the food they preferred? Did they have to reduce or skip meals? The responses are then used to classify households into four levels of food insecurity. Aligning with Thijin's story (but also that of Rose, Celina, Malual, and other stories to come), we find that 82 per cent of households in Kakuma are classified as severely food insecure, the most extreme level. This increases to 91 per cent for households that entirely depend on humanitarian assistance. In

practice, this means that families are often forced to skip meals or eat smaller portions because food is lacking. We estimate that 28 per cent of households ate only one meal the day before our survey. Many survey participants also reported sleeping hungry or sometimes having to go a whole day and night without eating anything.

As a result, for most refugees, calorie intake is below recommended levels (Figure 11). The World Health Organization (WHO), UNHCR, and World Food Programme (WFP) recommend an average of 2,100 calories per person per day for a person with light physical activity. We estimate that in 69 per cent of households, people eat less than this minimum threshold. The median calorie intake over the course of our study was 1,765 and 1,583 calories per person per day among South Sudanese refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, respectively. Households that have no other resources than humanitarian assistance eat 19 per cent fewer calories per person on average than other households.

Dietary diversity is also extremely low. Like 89 per cent of households in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, Thijin's family did not eat any fruit the day before the survey. And like 84 per cent of households, they hadn't eaten any meat, fish, or eggs. For the majority of households, diets are limited to cereals (rice, wheat, maize, and sorghum); pulses (beans or peas); and some vegetables (mostly



**Figure 11** Daily calorie intake per person

Source: Authors.

onions, tomatoes, or greens) that are cooked with oil, salt, and other condiments. It is therefore not a surprise that most people we met are missing the food from their home country.

We find that poor diet is significantly associated with unhappiness, lower quality of sleep, and bad moods. As a matter of fact, Thijin didn't sleep well the night before our survey, and she reported feeling worried, rushed, angry, depressed, and tense.

*I had all my children with the same man. It has been my heart's desire to be married and have children with only one man. My husband is back home in South Sudan; we don't live together here. He is in Padiet, but he isn't working. We sometimes talk on the phone but not very often because I don't have much credit. It costs KSh 1,000 [US\$8] to have a good conversation. The last time we spoke properly was in July [about three months before the interview]. He would like to join us in Kakuma, but he cannot afford the travel.*

*Many friends and family members, including my sister, are also still back home. We don't have money to help them, and they don't have money to support us. But we have many plans for the future, just in case things turn out in our favour. Besides that, the most important thing for us now is to know the other is okay. I can only reach them over phone calls. It's quite difficult for me to visit them back home due to my financial constraints. In case I need to urgently contact someone at home, I sell a portion of our rations so that I can at least get airtime for KSh 50 [US\$0.4] and speak to them. When we do speak, we check on each other's condition. Sometimes, they want me to tell them about our experiences in Kakuma and the general living conditions in the camp. I get to tell them the positive side of Kakuma mostly, for example, the free education, health services, and a peaceful place with no war. They get overwhelmed with the good news they hear about the camp from me, and I get excited to hear about home from them too.*

*But my illness has been on and off. Whenever my chest complications attack me, the whole family gets affected because I can't do anything and, in these moments, I'm not able to cook for my children. I just lie down on the bed helplessly. I leave hard situations to God, it's all by His Grace that I get back on my feet, and sometimes I just persevere with the pain for the sake of my family and attend to my daily duties. My illness has been continuous and actually needs proper treatment, but I'm not able to treat myself; that's why I put everything in God's hand.*

*A challenge I recently faced was the news of my mother's sudden death this month. It really has given me a hard time to accept the fact that she is no more. My eldest son had to travel from Eldoret to here to come and share the news of my mother's death. I did not have money to go for my mother's burial in South Sudan, but my younger brother back home facilitated my son's movement from Eldoret to Kakuma and sent some money so we could do her farewell prayers here in Kakuma.*

For many refugees, staying in touch with family back home is both a lifeline and a challenge. The chaos of war and the turbulent process of fleeing often tear families apart, leaving relatives and friends scattered. Even when they know where their family members are, they may not have their phone numbers, phone credit, or any way to contact them.

Not far from Thijin's house, we visited a small, beige, stone building, enclosed by chicken wire and guarded by a Turkana man in a red vest reading 'Kenya Red Cross'. A sign outside reads: 'Restoring Family Links Antenna 1—Kakuma 4'. The disruption of families through forced migration becomes starkly visible in the need for this service. The Kenya Red Cross, in collaboration with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), operates the Restoring Family Links programme, which helps refugees in Kakuma trace family members with whom they've lost touch since arriving in Kenya. This free and confidential service allows refugees to provide any information they have about their relatives, which is then relayed to Red Cross offices in countries like South Sudan, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, and Ethiopia. Inside, a support officer sits behind a small wooden desk; in front of her is a small pile of 'calling cards' and a number of mobile phones. Once family links are restored, or if refugees have a phone number but no means to call, they are allowed to use the provided phones for free—once a month, for up to two minutes. Today, perhaps even more important than making a call is accessing the internet.

A notice board behind the desk reads:

*2024 Rules and Regulations when using Wi-Fi:*

- *Apps allowed: WhatsApp, Facebook, Messenger, Instagram, Google, Twitter, imo, Skype*
- *Minutes offer for every client: 15 minutes*
- *All apps allowed above are for communication purposes only*

In Kakuma, platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube are widely used as common sources for news and social media trends. Several

people have told us they are emulating Chinese farmers they watch on YouTube or draw inspiration from Instagram for their handicraft projects. Interestingly, LinkedIn—often seen as a corporate and impersonal platform in Europe—has emerged as a popular space for young entrepreneurs in Kakuma to market themselves to both regional and international audiences.

Refugees in Kakuma often rely on their personal networks to mitigate a lack of resources from work or humanitarian assistance. According to data we collected in Kakuma in 2016, nearly 50 per cent of households reported receiving remittances on a regular basis (Betts et al., 2024). Our research identified wide variation between nationalities when it comes to accessing remittances: 62 per cent of Somalis, 53 per cent of South Sudanese, and 38 per cent of Congolese households reported receiving remittances regularly. The median value of remittances also varies per nationality, with Somali households receiving about US\$600 per year, more than twice the amount received by South Sudanese and five times the amount received by Congolese (Betts et al., 2018). In short, Somali refugees are more likely to receive remittances and, if they receive something, they receive much more. Receiving remittances is highly correlated with having family members living in Western countries. Households that are, on average, richer in terms of work income are also more likely to receive remittances.

Because of Kenya's encampment policy, refugees cannot freely move beyond Kakuma town without the permission of the Department for Refugee Services. Yet, our research shows that refugees frequently move outside of the camp—17 per cent of Somali, 13 per cent of Congolese, and 8 per cent of South Sudanese refugees left Kakuma the year before the survey—one-third of whom did so without asking for a movement pass (Betts et al., 2018). Most of the trips are to Nairobi (the capital city), or Lodwar (the largest town in northwestern Kenya) and are done for family or health reasons.

*When I was back in South Sudan, I would spend most of my time farming. My family have always been farmers. The best time for cultivation was when it rained. We could harvest large quantities and feed off our produce. When I came to Kakuma, the climate was different; there was no rain, I couldn't farm here. Some women go to Hong Kong in Kakuma 1, near the lagga,<sup>2</sup> to grow vegetables, but this place is far from where I live. It's too hot to walk there, especially with my health issues. If there was more rain, I could grow vegetables at home. Farming has always been a part of me. It's so unfortunate that I can't farm here.*

<sup>2</sup> A 'lagga' is the local term for a river, or a dry riverbed, that floods easily during the rainy season.

*If I could farm vegetables, like onions and tomatoes, I could start a small business. If I got some money, I could also buy maize and flour to sell. I would love to have a small business in my compound so my neighbours could buy from me.*

Like Thijin, the majority of South Sudanese households come from rural areas, where they practised agriculture. Data from our 2016 survey indicate that 67 per cent of South Sudanese refugees who had an income-generating activity before fleeing to Kakuma were working in agriculture. However, most are now unable to utilize their farming skills and knowledge due to the harsh climatic conditions in Kakuma. Our data from October 2022 show that only 6 per cent of the households in Kakuma were involved in farming. The share was highest amongst Congolese households (12 per cent) and lowest for Somali households (2 per cent).

In Kalobeyei, farming is more prevalent because, since the creation of the settlement in 2016, international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have invested in the promotion of agriculture as a way to diversify diets and foster self-reliance. An impact evaluation we did in 2017 shows that these objectives were achieved, at least in the short run. Recent arrivals were much more likely to be involved in agriculture if they were living in Kalobeyei than in Kakuma (71 per cent versus 33 per cent), yielding positive impacts on dietary diversity and food security in the Kalobeyei settlement. However, participation rates have been declining over time because severe droughts, floods, and locust influx are making agriculture a precarious livelihood. In 2019, we recorded participation rates of 28 per cent in Kalobeyei Village 3. In October 2022, this had further dropped to 16 per cent across the whole of Kalobeyei and to 7 per cent in Village 3. Nearly all households involved in agriculture reported facing issues, with the most common problem being the lack of water.

Kakuma is located in an arid region close to the world's largest desert lake. Most of the time, water is scarce, with an average annual rainfall of 231 mm (Deltares, 2020). Most of the rain falls during the wet season, called the long rains, which occurs between March and May. Outside of this period, the area experiences prolonged dry spells, making agriculture particularly difficult. Temperatures remain high throughout the year, averaging 27.6°C, generating high evapotranspiration. While these factors contribute to water scarcity, it is worth noting that Kakuma is—paradoxically—located in a flood plain, where flash floods are also frequent (UN-Habitat, 2021). Seasonal rivers—locally known as laggas—weave through Kakuma and Kalobeyei. While these are most often dry, they can fill very quickly during the wet season, severely

impacting residents. Crossing the flooded riverbed is only possible via the one bridge outside the camp, heavily impacting in-camp mobility. Flash floods can occur in Kakuma, even without local rainfall, as rain in the high plateaus of neighbouring Uganda can cause water to flow into the area. When the laggas burst their banks, buildings can be destroyed, roads become impassable, and latrines may overflow, increasing the risk of waterborne diseases. At the time of writing this book, UNHCR reported that 23,000 refugees were displaced within Kenyan camps by floods in early 2024 (UNHCR, 2024a). When revisiting Ayen that year—a woman whose family we will introduce later in this book (sixtieth percentile)—we saw the destructive power of the floods firsthand. In her community, near the Hong Kong neighbourhood in Kakuma 1, forty-five houses were completely wiped out, and the residents had to be relocated to other parts of the camp. Her home, built around a beautiful tree and once at the centre of a lively community, now stands precariously on the riverbanks. Whether it will withstand another rainy season is uncertain.

UN organizations have been investing in various projects to manage water scarcity and excess. In the Kalobeyei settlement, WFP has collaborated with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to construct new forms of irrigation for farming. To encourage social cohesion, an equal number of refugees and local Kenyans were selected to farm on the 1,500 available plots (UNHCR, 2023a). While this activity seems highly profitable, the number of plots available remains relatively small compared to the total population of the settlement. Additional water reservoirs were also constructed for livestock, benefitting over 50,000 animals annually. Access to water increased by 60 per cent, thereby reducing the distance pastoralists had to travel with livestock to find water. UN organizations have also proposed to build a dam over the main lagga to control floods by capturing run-off water during rains and to improve access to water for domestic use, livestock, and agriculture during the dry season. Budgeted at US\$15 million, the project has not yet been implemented due to lack of funding.

*Kakuma is very hot, also making its nights uncomfortable. You sweat profusely and lose sleep. At times, the heat causes high blood pressure. But I shouldn't always complain, as there are moments that I get to feel some joy and happiness. For example, I am happy when I do my laundry, when I clean all my dirty clothes and those for the rest of the family, it makes me happy. Also, when I see my children happily playing and having a good time together after sharing our meals, it really brings joy to my heart.*

*Sunday is my favourite day. This is the day I dedicate to God. We are all Christians in this family. We go to a Presbyterian church, at least for now. I don't have a specific church for now as there are so many denominations within Christianity. I'm yet to fully settle in one church. When I was back home in Nyirol and even in Padiet, we never went to church and we didn't pray at home, but since I came to the camp, I have learnt how to pray. I am still learning a lot through Christianity. It's good to take your time and do your research on something before making a decision. I have never prayed. It's good to tell the truth. Even my children don't pray, but we do appreciate God's creation and His care over our lives. Sometimes, I talk to God heartily, but I have never gone to church to pray before people.*

*The most memorable thing is the joy that is felt by a woman immediately after childbirth. For any woman, having expected a child for nine months, and later giving birth to them, is really something worth remembering. I have always thought that sooner or later, my eldest son will come of age, complete his education, and hopefully bring in a bride into this family. Through his education, he will be able to work and take care of us. If my son brings a bride to the family, it will be a double blessing to my household as it would only be a matter of time before they too had children. But, to marry, he will be expected to pay the bride price to his future in-laws.*

*I always wish the best for my children. I know and believe that they will succeed in life, have their own families, and take care of me in my old age. And when they take good care of me and themselves, I will continue blessing them abundantly.*

When we returned to Kakuma in 2024, Thijin had just come back to the camp. She had travelled to Eldoret for medical treatment that she was unable to receive from the NGO-run hospital in the camp. Her family had to sell their rations in the lead-up to the trip to cover the cost of transport. Without a movement pass, Thijin relied on the Somali bus service, the Tosha Express, whose relationship with the police allowed her to pass through police checkpoints. During her five-month stay in Eldoret, she stayed with a friend to avoid accommodation expenses, and her family sent money—from their monthly Bamba Chakula transfer—via M-Pesa,<sup>3</sup> so she could afford food.

<sup>3</sup> M-Pesa is a mobile phone-based money transfer service, which is very popular in Kenya.

As the mother figure and primary caregiver of the household, Thijin's absence left a large void in the family. To fill this gap, her eldest daughter, who was living in South Sudan at the time, travelled to Kakuma with her newborn baby to take care of the family in Thijin's place. The daughter's husband, who paid for the trip, remained in Juba. Although Thijin recovered after a few months, she was burdened by medical debt and struggled to pay the US\$25 bus fare to return to Kakuma, forcing her to stay in Eldoret for much longer than planned. Seeing this situation when we returned to visit her, we decided to pay for the bus fare.

Now, the reunited family welcomes us warmly at her home. This is our third visit. As we sit down, she invites all the members of her family to watch the video with her. Afterwards, she shows us how parts of her house have changed since the filming. She also shares the story of those who have joined her family since 2022: most notably, she recently adopted a young boy from South Sudan—the brother of her daughter's husband—after he escaped abduction by the Murle tribe. He now lives with Thijin in Kakuma. On the car ride back, our interpreter, Buay, became emotional. Thijin's nurturing and welcoming spirit reminded him of his own mother. *'I grew up in Kakuma, my mother, a single woman, taking care of so many children, was always encouraging me to focus on my education to get a job . . . Now, I see Thijin doing the same. I see myself in the young children she's caring for.'*



# Elizabeth

## Fiftieth Percentile

We pull up outside a school in Kakuma 4, where Elizabeth and her daughter kindly agreed to meet us and direct us along various paths to their home. Elizabeth ushers us around a corner and through a metal gate. As the noise of the street fades, it feels as though we have left the camp. Hidden behind an unwelcoming thorny fence, her home emerges as an unexpected oasis. A narrow stream of water trickles between trees and bushes, flowers have been painted on the clay-plastered house. ‘My daughter painted these’, Elizabeth says in English with a hint of pride, gesturing towards the mural.

Elizabeth’s household sits at the fiftieth percentile of the income distribution: the median. In simple terms, half of households report lower incomes, and half report higher incomes. However, as we have seen, incomes are heavily compressed at the lower end of the distribution. There is little difference in terms of income per capita between Elizabeth’s household and households below her. Like Rose, Celina, Malual, Thijin, and 57 per cent of households seeking protection in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, Elizabeth’s household is fully dependent on humanitarian assistance. Her household earns the same income per capita as Malual and Thijin, who also live in Kakuma, and only slightly more than Rose and Celina, who live in Kalobeyei, where aid is provided in cash.

Many aspects of Elizabeth’s life are typical of this category of households: she is married but separated by distance as her husband lives in South Sudan, she lives with many children, she has debt and no job, she struggles with health issues, and she suffers from high levels of food insecurity and low dietary diversity. Yet, in contrast with many other dependent households, she has a comparatively high level of education and speaks basic English. In the past, she also took the initiative to start a small business, and although she had to stop it because of her responsibilities as a mother, she aspires to reopen it in the future.

We sit around a small table, laid with three glasses. Elizabeth slips inside her home and returns with two bottles of Coca-Cola. Among South Sudanese

families, guests are customarily welcomed with refreshments, even when there is little to spare. We thank her and sip from our glasses. The Coke is still cold. Elizabeth has no fridge; perhaps one of the children had just run to the corner shop as we arrived. Wearing her Sunday best, Elizabeth has dressed up for the occasion.

*My name is Elizabeth. I am twenty-six years old. We are family size 11, plus my newborn. He has not been added to our ration card yet.*

*I never planned to leave. I left in a rush, rescuing my children as our village was no longer safe for us. I am from Leer County in South Sudan. I have no good memories of that place anymore. Our home was once a peaceful and nice place. But it changed into a warzone, and that is the reason I fled here. I came with two of my sisters, my brother, and my children. I have been here with my family since 2014.*

*Our journey was quite tiresome. It was hot, and we had to walk from place to place, running away from the enemy that had invaded our village. We kept running, seeking refuge. It was difficult to survive in such warzone places. We sometimes fed on wild fruits, water lilies, and local vegetables along the way. It was easier travelling together though, especially with my siblings, who helped me carry my younger children, since most of our journey was on foot. To reach here, we walked from Leer to Bentiu. From Bentiu, we managed to get a lift to Juba, the capital city of South Sudan. The journey took three weeks. Living in Juba was a total disaster. There was much hunger, and I found it difficult to feed my children; we barely had anything to eat throughout the journey because we had no money. We were kept in an IDP [Internally Displaced Persons] compound, where we had no access to anything or anyone except the other IDPs. One time, they started firing bullets in the IDP compound. People were left dead. We had to leave.*

*From Juba, we travelled to Torit. While there, we ran out of money for transportation. We spent five days waiting to be assisted. Finally, we managed to get a bus to Nadapal, at the border. Again, we ran out of money but, luckily, we were assisted by a good Samaritan who helped us cross the border. When we arrived in Kenya, we were brought to Kakuma by UNHCR lorries. We were finally at ease when we made it here. When I arrived, I really thanked God for the journey, plus the food and free education that He had provided us through the UN. The rations we get from the food distribution centre are less than we*

*should receive given the number of people in our family. But again, I can say the situation here is much better than back in my home country, where we fled war and much hunger. I cannot tell if I will live in South Sudan again. No one knows what will happen. It is not safe; people are still fighting. The people of South Sudan have a lack of unity. My husband stayed in South Sudan. He is old and unemployed.*

A soft cry comes from inside her house. Elizabeth walks over and lifts her youngest child from a small mattress. She returns and sits cross-legged on the floor, holding him gently close to her body. She gave birth to him in Kakuma last year. As the child turns on his side, Elizabeth shows us a large swollen lump on his back.

*I went through a lot during pregnancy. I couldn't believe I survived. When he was born, he had a big swell on his shoulder. After following up with the doctors, they told me that the computer screening showed that he had watery fluids in his shoulder and back that needed to be drained. At the time, he was booked for an operation in Nairobi in three months' time. But he still hasn't been seen. Even today, my child is suffering. There is so much swelling. The healthcare system in Kakuma is very bad. It is free to access health care in Clinic 7, but they don't help you when you have problems. They only give you paracetamol and anti-malarial drugs. How does this help my child? This troubles me a lot as a mother taking care of her kids alone. Many people are dying because they cannot afford to access better health care.*

Kakuma does not have a neonatal intensive care unit. When complications arise during birth or in the first days of life, as they did for Elizabeth's son, babies are often referred to Nairobi, a thirteen-hour journey by road. Yet, referral does not guarantee treatment. Appointments can fall through, and the cost of reaching Nairobi can place treatment beyond a family's means. For households like Elizabeth's, specialist care in the capital may be formally available, yet practically out of reach.

The majority of babies in Kakuma are born in Kaapoka Health Centre in Kakuma 1 or the Ammusait General Hospital in Kakuma 4, known to most as Clinic 7. Both centres are funded and run by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and provide free health care to refugees and host community members. In Clinic 7, 'MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH CLINIC IFP' is written in bold capitals across one building in the hospital. Inside, tarnished hospital beds, laid with blue and white linen, line the walls. During

the one-year duration of our research, nearly 10,000 newborn babies were registered as refugees in Kenya.<sup>1</sup>

Clinics and international organizations continue to support new mothers following childbirth. For example, at the maternal health centre, mothers are taught feeding practices and are encouraged to bring their children in for monthly weight checks. Mothers are also given food supplements for their children, to complement breastmilk. All children aged 6–23 months are given SuperCereal Plus, a soy and cereal-based porridge. In addition, clinics offer ready-to-use supplementary food to mothers whose children are diagnosed with moderate acute malnutrition.

The main health care issues reported in Kakuma are malaria, diarrhoea, and respiratory diseases. The risk of malaria is especially acute during the two rainy seasons. During our research, malaria incidence among South Sudanese adults peaked around 15 per cent in November 2022, during the short rainy season, and around 13 per cent in June 2023, at the end of the long rains. In the first half of 2023 alone, there were over 23,000 malaria cases and 25 deaths in the camp due to malaria.<sup>2</sup> During our one-year survey, more than half of the working adults who were infected by malaria had to stop working, for an average of six days, while being treated.

Although there are eight medical facilities across Kakuma and Kalobeyei, access to healthcare is limited, with refugees commenting that clinics, hospitals, and healthcare centres usually have long wait times, are overcrowded, are understaffed, and have insufficient supplies. Consequently, some refugees resort to informal health care facilities that are established within the camp by refugees themselves. Unlike the care provided at the free non-governmental organization (NGO)-run clinics, which are recognized by the Ministry of Health, the quality of this care is unregulated. The increasing number of these in the camp highlights a deeper issue stemming from inadequate formal health care. Yet, while they tend to be well stocked with medication and can see patients more quickly than the free clinics, the quality of care remains a concern.

Illness and injury place immediate pressure on household resources. Our data suggest that about one-third of households faced medical expenditures in the month preceding the survey. Refugees' main strategy to cope with

<sup>1</sup> See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Kenya Refugee Statistics Packages published between October 2022 and September 2023 <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/what-we-do/reports-and-publications/kenya-operation-statistics>, accessed 19 June 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Julisha.info (2023). How to get treatment for Malaria in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. <https://www.julisha.info/en-us/articles/12955388400029>, accessed 19 June 2024.

unexpected health expenditures when family members fall ill is to accumulate additional debts, beyond those taken to cover food needs, with shopkeepers or peers. Elizabeth's child-care responsibilities due to her child's health have also affected her income and ability to work.

*When I arrived in Kakuma, I joined school with my children. I sat for my KCPE [Primary School Diploma] in 2017, and by 2021, I sat for my KCSE [Secondary School Diploma], but I'm currently still jobless. I'm jobless because I need to take care of my children. Taking care of my household chores as a single mother is not easy at all. From cooking to looking for a means of living are all on me. I would love the UN to help me by putting my kids into a boarding school where they can access quality education, so I would be able to look for a job and take care of the sick child. There is no support for single mothers. I don't have anyone within the camp that can help me out with my children. If I were in a good position financially, I would have brought my mother over to help me out with my kids. She is in South Sudan, but she got ill as a result of the war. She was traumatized by the killings she'd witnessed and, right now, she is mentally disturbed. The other person that I would have relied on would have been my husband. But he is facing financial constraints too, and he is not able to fly himself over here.*

*Before I gave birth to my youngest child, I would go to the market to run my small business. After my children finished school for the day, I would go to the market to sell food like cooking oil, cereals, and maize. I usually purchased these items from other refugees who sold their rations during the food distribution period. I also bought firewood from the Turkana and would sell it in my community. I sold these items for a fair price. For example, I would buy a kilo of rice for KSh 100 [US\$0.8] and sell it for KSh 120 [US\$1]. After, I could buy more food with the money I made. It didn't cover all my expenses, but it was helpful. Unfortunately, I don't run it any longer because of my youngest child's sickness. For a while, I would send the older children to help me sell, but they failed to get customers because the competition in the market is too high, and they are only young.*

*Before coming up with this business, my brother-in-law used to send us some cash from Juba. But he lost his job, and things got tough for us. That's when I started my business. I was still in school, as were my children. At times, we were requested to get school stationery, but I was not able to afford it. That's why I thought of starting up something that can generate money for such emergencies.*

*I started it way back in 2017. My business's starting capital came from selling one of my house's iron sheets. If my child gets better, I would like to restart the business, but it's hard. A few months ago, an organization was giving out loans, I think KSh 10,000 [US\$80] or something, to people to help them with their business. I registered, but I was not considered. The issue is the block leader; they were told to select people but, because we are not from the same county or village in South Sudan, they didn't consider me. They just gave it to people they knew.*

Many informal traders line the streets in the Kakuma 4 market. These traders, mainly women, sit below tarpaulin sheets beside white sacks of maize or other grains. Like Elizabeth did in the past, they purchased their stock from other refugees following distribution week. Distribution occurs once per month and provides food rations to refugees living in the four Kakuma camps. Indebted households and households in need of cash often have no other option but to resell the rations they receive from WFP. To access cash, refugees in Kakuma were also found to resell food purchased using their Bamba Chakula cards. The transfers made to SIM cards are restricted and can only be used to purchase food from selected food retailers. Beneficiaries are not able to formally withdraw cash. Like with food rations, this has led to a resale market, whereby goods bought using Bamba Chakula transfers are sold for cash. These practices are very common: our data suggest that 30 per cent of households in Kakuma and 59 per cent of households in Kalobeyei resold food in the month prior to the survey. In theory, households would not need to resell food in Kalobeyei as food assistance is distributed as cash transfers. Yet, because of debt, most households do not have their card anymore as these are kept by shopkeepers. Instead of cash, they receive in-kind food from the shopkeepers, which they also have to resell if they need cash, for example, to pay for health care, education, or transportation.

This resale market is highly favourable for buyers as households reselling food have to accept much lower prices, typically 18–38 per cent lower than those observed in Bamba Chakula shops (Siu et al., 2023). Prices also fluctuate over the month. They are typically low just after food distribution in Kakuma as supply is high and demand is low, and then increase throughout the month (Bruni et al., 2024). Traders like Elizabeth exploit these differences in prices, purchasing goods in the resale market when prices are low, typically during distribution week, and then reselling them in the market for a profit when prices are higher.

*A recent financial challenge that I have faced was that four of my kids just sat for national exams, two of them sat for the Grade 6 CBC exams [competency-based curriculum, end of primary school exams—new system] and the other two did their KCPE exams [end of primary school exams—old system]. I spent a lot of money to make sure that they were fully registered for their exams. I bought all the stationery they needed and made sure they had enough food. Because of this, I ended up with a lot of debt.*

*We have an ATM card for soap, firewood, and sanitary pads from KCB Bank and the Bamba Chakula card from WFP. We normally get KSh 2,500 [US\$21] from our ATM card and KSh 4,400 [US\$37] from Bamba Chakula. However, I borrowed so much to pay for the exams that the Bamba Chakula shop owner doesn't want to give us food until we can fully repay his money. I have to ask for assistance from my neighbours at times since I don't have relatives over here. But, again, it's quite difficult to ask for help because there are times even the neighbours don't have enough. I also sometimes just have to sell valuable items in the house and buy food with that. If the item is not sold, we just sleep hungry. That is the reason why we eat only once a day. Most of the time, we eat ugali. In the middle of the month, our ration finishes up, and we struggle for the remaining fifteen days until the next ration is distributed. Whenever my children cry because of hunger, especially the younger ones, I usually feel bad knowing that I am their mother, but I can't provide their basic needs like food. If I had the money, I would buy my children milk, meat, and fish. These are the meals we really like and miss. We last fed on those meals while back home in our village before the war erupted. But it's difficult to get them here because it requires you to have money to purchase these things from the market.*

*Theft is another risk in Kakuma, especially for women like me who are living alone with their children with no men or husbands in their compounds. The thieves within Kakuma mostly attack single-women homes because they know we are weak and vulnerable. That is the reason why I wish to fence my home when I get money to avoid theft. For example, last week thieves came to our home and broke the door and forcibly entered our house. When we tried to chase them away, they had knives and machetes, and we just had to let them take our things. So these behaviours horrify the nights in Kakuma. Whenever this happens, I usually run to church and pray.*

*I wish my kids a bright future. I would love to see them have enough to eat, complete their studies, and get their dream jobs that can help them and their*

*families. Being religious means a lot to me. I believe in God for everything that happens in my life, even if I have nothing, I always believe that God will provide it for me and my family, especially now that I'm here alone with my children. He's been my everything. When my children and I get sick, I pray to Him for good health and He surely heals us. Even if I need the Holy Spirit's guidance, I always pray, and God will send the Holy Spirit to show me what I can't see. He protects me and, because of all these things, I decided to be a believer.*

*In the future, I would like to get a job with UNHCR or another NGO, like the Red Cross. But working in the hospital has been my longtime dream job. I believe it will be possible because it's something that I'm passionate about. But first, I need to complete a computer course and other related courses which can enable me to work in the hospital.*

Elizabeth's eldest daughter joins her at the end of the interview. A gold cross hangs off the end of the necklace she is wearing. Elizabeth covers her eyes as her daughter recites a prayer. Elizabeth ends with, in English, 'Amen, Amen . . . our mighty father, I ask you will come to surround us so everything will be okay for us. Thank you for this interview. In the name of Jesus Christ, everything will be okay. Amen.' She looks down at the silver rings on her hand, reflecting on what she has told us, and sighs. She says that she hopes this interview will reach people outside of Kakuma, so the world knows what their life is like here and helps them.

PART II

LARGE HOUSEHOLDS WITH  
LIMITED RESOURCES

Percentiles 60–70

This second part of the book turns to households that still rely heavily on humanitarian assistance but manage to supplement it with limited income from work or occasional remittances. These families are not fully aid-dependent, but neither are they self-sufficient. Their lives are shaped by a fragile balance: what little they earn helps them cope with food shortages, school fees, and basic needs, but it is not enough to lift them out of precarity.

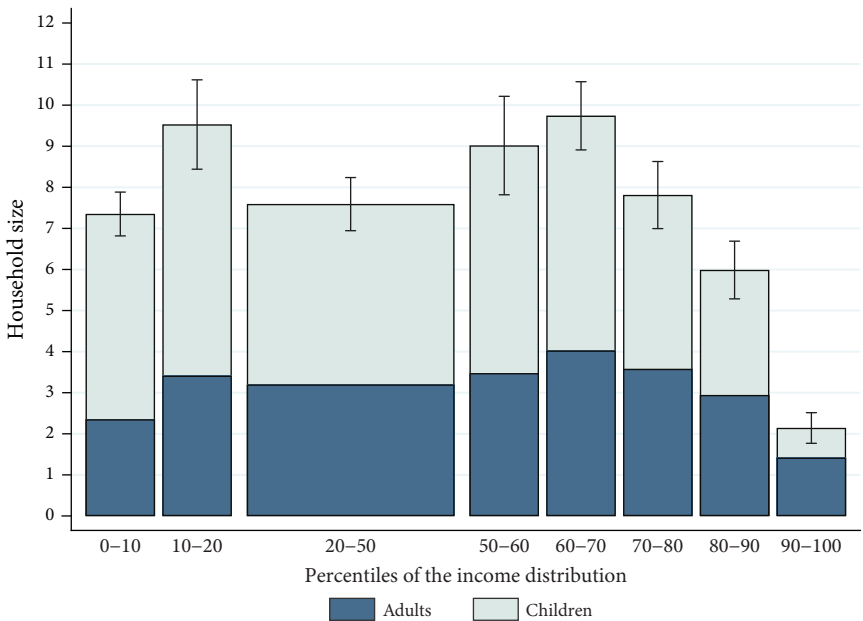


Figure 12 Household size

Source: Authors.

A defining feature of many of these households is their size (Figure 12). They are typically large and complex, bringing together multiple nuclear families or extended relatives under one roof to pool resources and strengthen communal protection. In Ayen's case, around thirty people share a single compound, bound together by kinship. In such households, only one or two adults may work, while the others—especially women—take care of children, the sick, or the elderly. Nyaliak's story offers a similar perspective. She lives with nine other adults and eleven children in a crowded home. Half of the adults in her household are enrolled in school, and one works as a teacher. These efforts reflect a shared belief in education as a path to greater agency and future stability.

Several themes emerge across these chapters. The first is the formation of 'fictive households', in which families join together as a way of coping with food insecurity, communal violence, and theft. Although these households are generally less burdened by debt than the poorest aid-reliant families, they still struggle with hunger, insecurity, and psychological stress. Trauma and mental health problems appear repeatedly, often untreated. Education also becomes a central aspiration, for adults as well as children, offering a possible route towards greater control over their lives.





# Ayen

## Sixtieth Percentile

People within Kakuma and Kalobeyi form communities, connected by a shared religion, language, or cultural identity, or proximity within their neighbourhood. These communities work together to provide what the camp often fails to deliver—most importantly, security. Our stay at Ayen's house revealed how the pervasive lack of safety within the camp influences people's quality of life, and how experiences of theft and violence can lead to debt in ways that may exacerbate poverty.

Our journey to Ayen's home leads us to one of Kakuma's equivalents of a 'gated community'. But, instead of CCTV cameras, electric gates, and neatly cut grass, think of fences made from thorny bushes and gates built from iron sheets. Over the last thirty years, the South Sudanese community in this old part of Kakuma 1 have done their best to fence their neighbourhoods. The trauma of village raids runs deep. Following a short footpath walled by thick, thorny bushes, we encounter a gate made from iron sheets. At night, the gate is closed and even manned, as we were told—a necessary but insufficient safety measure. An elderly man standing guard asks where we are going and tells a group of children playing near the gate to show us the way. Carrying our bags, camera equipment, and tripod, we find our way through more iron sheet-lined alleys that hide houses from view, until we reach a crooked metal door framed by a brittle fence, the entrance to Ayen's place.

Ayen's home is a compound comprising two small mud houses and a kitchen shed, with a beautiful, old tree providing shade for the many inhabitants. Upon entering, we see a scene different from other households. About thirty people live together in the same compound. Some women sit in front of one of the huts, preparing vegetables for lunch, while a younger woman washes clothes. Others rest under the large tree and a large group of children plays in its shadow. Then there is Ayen. Wearing a dress and a hat, she's holding herself up on two crutches. Her sister, Rachel, who is the 'head of the household', had to travel for family reasons and so, in her absence, Ayen is in charge of keeping the family running. She agrees to be interviewed in her place. The complex

family structure, with multiple families living together in one household and blending into the neighbourhood, means that over the course of the research project, various people completed the survey for this household.

With so many people being present, we spend a while getting to know them. We go around introducing ourselves and making sure that everybody knows that we will be filming. We then start looking for a place to set up the interview. Ayen shows us inside the two houses, but they are too small, both providing less than ten square metres of floor space. In one house, there is a bed with a mattress reserved for Ajak, the ‘man of the house’, and his wife, Rachel. Ayen usually sleeps on the floor next to it, sharing a sleeping mat and mosquito net with some of the younger girls. The floor and walls are covered with a plastic tarpaulin printed with a light blue tile pattern. A hole in the wall, though lacking glass, serves as a small window. In front hangs a crocheted curtain. Above the bedframe, a single page from a colourful calendar depicts Jesus Christ with praying hands, a four-storey mansion, and a red sports car. The other house is almost empty. Half a sack of lentils and half a sack of maize are stored in the corner. *‘This is all we have left until the next food distribution’*, Ayen says. Pointing at the floor, she adds, *‘Seventeen people sleep here’*. There are no mattresses or blankets, only a few thin mats woven from plastic or bamboo. When it gets too hot inside the windowless, dark room, the children sleep outside, in front of the house. *‘When it rains, people run to the neighbours for shelter’*, Ayen explains. *‘That’s how we are living in this homestead’*.

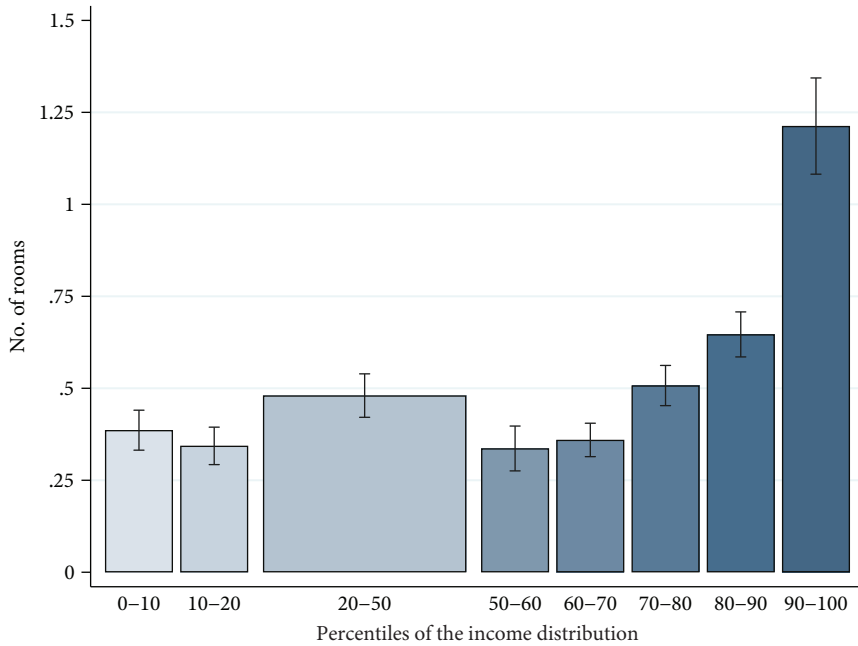
With the exception of the richest percentiles, most households in Kakuma live in overcrowded conditions like Ayen’s, with fewer than one room for every two to three people (Figure 13). By contrast, the average home in the United Kingdom has two rooms per person, and in the United States, the average is 2.4 rooms per person.<sup>1</sup>

Ayen sits down in front of her house, and we begin the interview.

*My name is Ayen. I’m fifty-four years old. I am living here with thirty-five people. We arrived in the camp separately: there are those who came early, in 2014; those who came in 2015; and those who came in 2018.*

*I come from South Sudan, from a place called Paliau. To get to Paliau, you would fly by plane and land in Juba. From Juba, you proceed to Bor Town, and then you travel by boat. Boats are being used now as people no longer use the roads. You would go and pass through Maar, and after that, you get to Paliau.*

<sup>1</sup> Data from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD’s) Better-Life Index 2017, extracted on 13 May 2025. <https://www.oecd.org/en/data/tools/well-being-data-monitor/better-life-index.html>.



**Figure 13** Rooms per person

*I miss Paliau because it is our hometown. I can't get many of the things that I miss from there here. Among the things I miss, there's fish, and there are Neem trees that surround the village. The people who are living there, I am missing them. Additionally, I would like to see the rowing boat and the cowshed too. I would like to know whether it has fallen down or if it is still standing.*

*I fled Paliau in 2014 when the Murle attacked us. I fled with my children. My journey to Kakuma was not straightforward. I stopped on the way. We fled; we ran to Madiing. And in Madiing, Nuer attacked us too. When I left, I went to stay in a place called Ikotos, in Equatoria state, because of a lack of transport. After some time, we travelled to Kapoeta, the home of the Toposa. We stayed there until UNMISS [United Nations Mission in South Sudan] came. They picked us up and brought us to Kakuma as they realized that we had no money for transport, and we were starving. They brought us here and we were taken to the immigration centre in Lokichogio. That's how I came. I arrived here in 2018.*

*We were exhausted, with sickness and many other issues. Nothing was good. When my children came here, they were young, but now they're grown up. At*

*the time, they were fifteen, thirteen, and twelve years old, and the youngest was eight years old. Another child, the oldest one, was a mother of two. They were young. Now they are a bit stronger; life has trained them. It is not like before.*

*My husband did not travel with us. The other men in the village wanted him to stay and fight. He fled on his own when the enemy came. I've heard he is in South Sudan. I know other people who are also still back home; I have one other relative there. We sometimes communicate, but it's hard to talk often.*

*Before coming to Kakuma, I didn't have friends here. I did hear about this place as a place of the UN [United Nations]. That's why I came. I didn't have any connections with friends or relatives.*

*People who are living in this compound are officially registered as different households. The reason why they are living here is because it's a family that embraces love; we love one another so much. That's why we stayed together. Before, some were settled very far away, in Kalobeyei, but they were assaulted. They couldn't coexist with the Nuer people from there, so they decided to come and stay with us. When they came, we built this one compound so we could all live together.*

People from more than 20 countries and 200 ethnic groups coexist in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. In this unusual mix of histories and cultures, and the traumas attached to them, refugees must live and share resources with communities that, in another time or place, might have been considered enemies. It is hardly surprising that tensions between communities sometimes flare up in the camp, often mirroring the ethnic divisions that shape conflict in their countries of origin.

Ayen belongs to the Dinka community, a pastoralist group that has historically clashed with the Nuer over access to grazing land and water.<sup>2</sup> Frequent cattle raids between the communities have fuelled a vicious cycle of vengeance and reprisals. Tensions between Dinka and Nuer exploded soon after South Sudan's independence in 2011. In December 2013, President Kiir, a Dinka, accused his former deputy, Riek Machar, a Nuer, of orchestrating a coup. The accusation ignited violent clashes between armed factions loyal to the two men, marking the start of the South Sudanese Civil War. The conflict soon descended into massacres and reprisals along ethnic lines, with both sides

<sup>2</sup> Online article on conflict between Dinka and Nuer in South Sudan. <https://climate-diplomacy.org/case-studies/conflict-between-dinka-andnuer-south-sudan>, accessed 19 June 2024.

committing gross human rights violations. Over six years, the war claimed more than 400,000 lives and displaced 4 million people, nearly 2.2 million of whom fled to neighbouring countries.

Ayen was one of them, together with about 32,000 Dinka and 29,000 Nuer refugees who also fled to Kakuma.

The conflict between Dinka and Nuer is regularly imported into Kakuma, where proximity between people, who are often severely traumatized, facilitates the spread of gossip and tension, which sometimes escalates into violence. Perhaps the worst episode of communal violence in the history of Kakuma occurred in 2014, a few months after the arrival of the first member of Ayen's household. Members of the Nuer community had accused a Dinka boy of assaulting and raping a nine-year-old Nuer girl (Kanere, 2014; Sudan Tribune, 2014; Voanews, 2014). Tensions erupted when the boy was released by the police, whom the Nuer accused of corruption. Armed with machetes and spears, the Nuer community took to the streets to seek revenge. The violence raged for several days and nights, resulting in the death of over twenty people. The situation calmed down after local authorities imposed a curfew and arrested hundreds of refugees, who were subsequently taken to court.

Over the years, continuous tensions and violent episodes have compelled many Nuer and Dinka households to move from their originally assigned houses to be closer to their respective communities for protection. This pattern is also evident among communities from other nationalities.

*When we wake up, the first thing we do is fetch water because the tap flows at 6am. After that, we sweep the compound, wake the children for school, wash utensils, and start cooking food. Once the children wake up, I tell them to brush their teeth, wash their faces, and I tell the young ones to go and play. The older children help with the chores. They wash the utensils and sweep the compound when there is no school. But when there is school, they wake up, get cleaned up and dressed, and go to their respective schools. Those are the things they do.*

*Today, we are cooking yellow peas, kudra [a traditional stew resembling cooked spinach], and kisra [a thin, fermented bread]. To make the kudra, you start by picking the leaves from the stalk of the jute mallow. After that, you boil water and add salt. Then you strain it and stir it properly. Then, you fry an onion with tomato, and pour in the leaves, and continue to stir until it is mixed. As for kisra, you ferment flour and dilute it in water, then cook it on a flat pan. In this home, we eat only once a day.*

*The men don't cook in our place; they don't know how to. It is the women who cook and bring it to them. Men do the work. For example, building fences like this one. [Ayen points at the fence surrounding the homestead.] They do outside work. For instance, if there is a shop, he would sell there. They work away and bring food home, but they do not work at home.*

*At night, we worry about the host community. Thieves can come and rob your things, taking the little food that you have, and if you talk, they kill you. It happened recently, in the month of September. They passed through the fence and broke into the house. They came in hard sandals to protect themselves against the thorny bushes and brought a hide [thick blanket made from goat skin]. They spread the hide on top of the fence so they could step over it into the compound. They broke in and robbed us, and we had no power to help ourselves. They had a machete. They took five litres of oil and one sack of rice. They took it while we watched. We feared they would stab us. So I did nothing. Only a few things remained for us to eat. They only left half a sack. I went and borrowed from the Bamba Chakula shop with my card. Things were hard, and the month wasn't yet over, so I had to go and borrow as we waited for the next distribution date.*

Violent theft is frequent in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. Stories of burglaries ending in killings are common. Refugees use their limited resources to protect their homes with bushes, fences, and padlocks. Yet, this is often insufficient to deter thieves and, when thieves come, victims have no other choice but to let them take everything they want. Our data show that as many as 10 per cent of households in Kakuma and 29 per cent of households in Kalobeyei were victims of theft in the four weeks preceding our survey. Perhaps surprisingly, poorer households are more likely to be victims, which could be due to the fact that they have fewer resources to protect their homes and usually live in more isolated neighbourhoods. Yet, refugees often have limited agency to report theft to police as they have a lack of trust in the officers present in the camp. Respondents reported instances of corruption and bribery, unjust arrests accompanied by high bail fees, and a general unwillingness to investigate violent crimes, let alone small-value thefts—even though a sack of rice is extremely valuable for a food-insecure family. Instead, victims tend to turn to their main shopkeeper or community to borrow money to replace stolen essentials.

*There are many needs that require money. Shoes need money; clothes need money; meat that you buy for food needs money. If you don't have money, you*

*just eat yellow peas. I see so many things in the shop, but many of these things are for those who are well off. We are limited in what we can buy; we have no money and no way to get these things, even though we need them.*

*As for now, Bamba Chakula is KSh 850 [US\$7] per person. Even when you come together, it still doesn't help that much. And if you go and take food items like wheat flour or borrow other things, like onions, Royco [stock cubes], and tomato sauce, the debt accumulates. You can also borrow soap and detergent. So, the debt becomes more and more.*

*I only go to a single shop for now. You can get arrested if you go to different shops. They can jail people. You don't go to someone whom you are not familiar with because your shopkeeper allows you to purchase on credit until the end of the month. We don't take much on credit to avoid annoying him. So, we only take the less expensive items, the things that can help at home, like soap.*

Like 87 per cent of households in the Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement, Ayen's household has taken on debt. Most households reported borrowing in order to purchase food following aid delays. Average debt levels, however, are much lower in Kakuma than in Kalobeyei. In Kakuma, average debt per person is KSh 1,380 [US\$12], compared with KSh 6,850 [US\$57] in Kalobeyei. The reason for this large difference relates to the modalities of food assistance. In Kalobeyei, food assistance is delivered entirely as cash on Bamba Chapaa ATM cards. In Kakuma, by contrast, only about 40 per cent of food assistance was delivered through cash transfers to Bamba Chakula SIM cards at the time of the survey. Because Bamba Chakula SIM cards in Kakuma and Bamba Chapaa ATM cards in Kalobeyei are used as collateral to secure debt, it is not surprising that refugees in Kalobeyei managed to obtain higher levels of credit as the expected value of their collateral is simply higher.

As Ayen explained, refugees burdened by debt face many challenges. First, they always have to go to the same shop, the one giving them credit. This means that they cannot shop around to find lower prices but find themselves compelled to accept inflated prices set by their shopkeeper. Our data reveal that prices for indebted refugees are approximately 16 per cent higher than for those paying in cash. The larger the debt, the larger the price difference.

Second, shopkeepers often restrict what indebted refugees can buy, limiting them to essential items only. As a result, when indebted households need cash (e.g. to pay for school or health expenditures or buy something different, such

as charcoal or firewood), they have no alternative but to resell food items at a reduced price.

*When you borrow, but then use up the things you have, the hunger makes you go back to the shop and borrow against future months. For example, I have already used the transfer for December in advance, so, when I go to borrow more money, I will borrow against January. It's a chain. I know how much money I'm in debt with. It's KSh 80,900 [US\$674].*

*Because of the debt, the shopkeeper increases my prices so it's more expensive than the other shops where I can pay in cash. The prices are higher, that's why my debt continues to increase. For instance, I buy a sack of maize, a bag of wheat flour, five litres of oil, and juice at different prices. As of now, he rarely allows me to buy other small things. Even onions, he refuses as he tells me that I have weakened his business. If I could get all the money that he is demanding, I would pay him back and do as others do so that he doesn't charge me higher prices anymore.*

For Ayen, asking for credit is the only way forwards, while being fully aware of the problems that come with it. Being in debt is not just an economic state; it is an emotional one, too. We ask her how she feels when going to the shop. 'Full of fear', she replies. 'Every day, I hope that the shopkeeper does not reject me.'

Understanding that we, as filmmakers, are trying to find images that tell her story, Ayen suggests, 'Let me show you the shop, so you can show it in the video. It is an important place for me.' Together we leave the compound and walk out of the neighbourhood. Ayen moves on crutches, slowed by an old injury she sustained during the tumultuous months after leaving Paliau. There were neither doctors nor time to treat it. Years later, she still struggles to walk.

We reach one of the main roads in the 'Hong Kong' neighbourhood, lined with small shops and vegetable stands. Boda-boda drivers shoot past, carrying people and goods. The shop is a small house made from iron sheets, with a shopfront opening onto the street. It sells the standard products found in similar shops in Kakuma: sacks of rice and beans, jerrycans of cooking oil, lentils, tea bags, tomato paste, washing detergent, and soap. As we arrive at the shop, Ayen suddenly becomes energetic, joking with the shopkeeper and telling him stories about the children she cares for.

We begin chatting with the shopkeeper, too. A South Sudanese refugee himself, he understands Ayen's struggle. He feels the pressure of being responsible

for people, but he says he cannot just give everyone credit; if he did, he would soon go out of business. He knows many who opened shops, only to then see their family and neighbours line up asking for credit. Unable to say no, they went bankrupt. He admits that saying no can be difficult. He knows people who accumulated large debts and then, when they were unable to repay them, left the camp—or . . . He falls quiet, contemplating whether to share more, then makes a gesture implying ending one's life. As we walk back, we ask Ayen again how she feels about the shopkeeper. *'Grateful! He is the reason I am still alive'*, she says.

When we return to her compound, Ajak, Ayen's sister's husband, joins us for the interview. He is forty-five years old and is the only person in the household with a job, making Ayen's household the first one in our sample with employment. Only 43 per cent of households in the Kakuma camp and the Kalobeyei settlement have an income-generating activity.

*I'm working in one of the food distribution centres. I am a security guard there. We keep watch of the food and computers in the compound. I like my job, and I'm doing it because I have a family and children. I work for two weeks a month. I do this work to help the community, and the little money I get becomes an advantage. I don't dislike the job. I wouldn't work there if it didn't satisfy my needs.*

*I earn KSh 3,000 per month [US\$25], but sometimes it can take up to three months to be paid. I'm living with four families here. You know, having a job affects people. When you work, you are tempted to borrow and end up having some debt. Now I have a lot of debt.*

*It is the delay of payment that led to the theft because I couldn't pay to repair the fence. The money didn't come, so the thieves saw an opportunity. Everything was stolen, the clothes, the bag, and even my work certificates. The children are starving now, and I can't pay their school fees either. When money comes, I will spend it on these kinds of things.*

*I stopped going to school a long time ago because I was in the military. When I grew up, I didn't have the opportunity to study. The only thing I want is for my children to succeed; that is why I am in a place like this. If it wasn't for them, I would have stayed in South Sudan. I'm here because of the children, because I don't want them to be like me. When you have children, you want the best for them and for them not to be like me.*

Ayen adds that Ajak also volunteers as a community leader in the neighbourhood, a role that, while not providing additional income, comes with a lot of responsibilities.

*His other work is being the youth leader of the community. He is very responsible.*

*In his job, he makes no money, very little: it is KSh 3,000 only [US\$25]. That's what he gets per month. When he receives money from his job, he gives some to the community if they need something—he can give them KSh 2,000 [US\$17] and me KSh 1,000 [US\$8]. He would then instruct me to buy shoes or meat for the children. After I buy shoes and meat, I might just have KSh 100 [US\$0.8] left. That isn't enough to repair anything in the house; can you hire any person with that? The fence would have been rebuilt if this money was enough.*

As we are approaching the end of the interview, we ask Ayen about other income-generating activities and opportunities.

*I do sew things, but they're not sold. There is no market for them because everyone knows how to stitch. Hence, no one will buy them. You either use it for decoration or give it out as a gift when one of your relatives or friends gets married. That's why they are made, nothing else. There is no money making here.*

*People are the same here in the camp, we are all facing almost the same problems. Even though you may have relatives, no one has anything to give to help other people. We all depend on little things we get from the UN. There is no other help. People are suffering all together.*

While we, as researchers, are still focused on wrapping up the interview, a few of the girls step forward and shyly begin to dance. They demonstrate a few moves, then run back laughing, hiding behind the corner of the house giggling. The adults encourage them to continue. The girls return, begin to sing, and spontaneously the household comes together dancing in a circle under the big tree, joined by neighbours who had heard the singing. As the afternoon sun dips toward the horizon and the treetop casts longer and longer shadows, our visit becomes a celebration. Ayen sits nearby on a plastic chair, observing the scene. With music playing from a single tinny phone speaker, everyone dances in a circle, and for a moment, collective joy radiates under the big tree.





# Nyaliak

## Seventieth Percentile

In the afternoon, children in colourful uniforms spill out of Kakuma's twenty-one primary and seven secondary schools. Among them are over-age learners enrolled in the Accelerated Education Programme, including Nyaliak. The course, funded by UNHCR and implemented by the Norwegian Refugee Council, provides primary education to adults who missed out on schooling, within a shorter timeframe. Nyaliak is currently in Class 8, the final year of primary school. She is learning English and Maths and studies Monday to Friday. For this reason, we meet with Nyaliak after school and begin the interview inside her home, sheltered from the afternoon sun.

*My name is Nyaliak, I am thirty-two years old. I am living in Kakuma with my family: my mum, my husband, my children, my niece, and my siblings. I also live with my brother-in-law's wife, who has a family of her own.*

*I was born in Khartoum in Sudan during the time Omar Bashir was given power. I stayed in Khartoum, and I got married there. I even gave birth there, twice. Then, I went to Bentiu in South Sudan in 2010. Before the civil war, Bentiu was a good place. We used to share everything with our Arab neighbours. When Sudan was divided and South Sudan was given independence, we had a good relationship with the Arab people from Sudan. But now that there is war, Bentiu has become a very bad place. The youths are killing each other every day. If it becomes known that there is a very educated child, some people will plan to attack that child and kill him or her. This is how they rob your family's future. People are acting like wild animals. There is no water to drink, and only a few people stayed. If you have a cow, it's better to sell it and use the money to come here, to Kakuma. Kakuma is much safer than there; there are no gunshots here. Here, we have opportunities for education and access to food. I don't miss Bentiu because the conflict is still getting worse, each and every day.*

*I came from South Sudan in 2014, during the civil war. When the conflict started, we thought it was only between the soldiers, until they started killing civilians. The soldiers were killing women and their children; they were not leaving anyone. There was a place that was built by the UN [United Nations] called UNMISS [United Nations Mission in South Sudan] in a neighbourhood called Thongpiny [in Juba], and we ran there for safety. We were just following people because we didn't know the direction. Nobody was thinking about carrying their belongings; everyone was just running for their lives. We left everything at home, my TV, my bed, and everything else. I don't know who has it now. When we reached UNMISS, there was a tall building next to it. Someone was up there and was shooting the people inside UNMISS with a gun. It was only by God's grace that nobody was killed.*

*Someone came up with a suggestion that we should go to Kenya to seek safety. We heard that some families were killed on their way there, but we didn't feel bad because we knew everyone was eventually going to die. We just convinced ourselves to carry on with the idea of going to Kenya because the war was becoming serious. We were travelling together with children and told ourselves that God would lead us to Kenya. I had just given birth recently. I had only spent fifteen days with my newborn when the war began. I had not been eating enough food, so I had to tie my stomach to have the strength to carry the baby.*

Nyaliak found refuge at the Thongpiny UNMISS base in Juba on 16 December 2013.<sup>1</sup> That day, heavy gunfire and mortar could be heard in Juba. The president, Salva Kiir, appeared on national television, accusing his former deputy, Riek Machar, of instigating a failed coup d'état ([BBC News, 2013](#)). The UN deputy special representative for South Sudan tweeted, 'Up to 13,000 civilians now inside @UNPeacekeeping #UNMISS bases in Juba' ([Aljazeera, 2013a, b](#); [Downie, 2013](#)). Nyaliak was one of them. Machar responded on 18 December, blaming Kiir for fabricating the coup and stirring ethnic tensions. He said his forces would maintain control of the country's oil fields. This was the start of the South Sudanese civil war, which would last for six years. The conflict pitted government forces against Machar's armed militia, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition (SPLM-IO).

From the beginning of the civil war, the government and the SPLM-IO targeted civilians, including those who were attempting to flee ([HRW, 2014](#)). Rape, abductions, and killings of civilians were widespread. By March 2014,

<sup>1</sup> For general resources on the conflicts in South Sudan, see e.g. [Natsios \(2012\)](#), [Johnson \(2016\)](#), [Martell \(2019\)](#), and [Roach \(2023\)](#).

nearly 100,000 internally displaced people were sheltering in UNMISS bases across the country (UN News, 2014). While the bases were supposed to provide shelter and security to displaced civilians, they often became targets for government and opposition forces (Amnesty International, 2014; UN Security Council, 2014a). The first serious incident occurred on 19 December 2013, when a UNMISS base in Akobo was attacked by 2,000 armed youths, who surrounded the base and killed two peacekeepers and 20 civilians. In April 2014, another incident involved armed assailants who came to the UNMISS base in Bor Town, pretending they were peaceful protestors and forcing their way into the protection site. They opened fire, resulting in scores of dead and injured. During the civil war, the UN recorded dozens of attacks against its personnel and facilities (UN Security Council, 2014b).

Nyaliak reported staying at UNMISS for about three weeks before leaving for Kakuma. Her family struggled to find transport to take them to Kakuma. She explained, *'There were not enough vehicles. The drivers were also running away to look for safety. If you don't have the power to put your children inside the vehicle you will remain behind, because it was like a tug of war. People were scrambling for the buses.'* It took her three days by road to reach Nadapal, the border town within Kenya, where she spent a further three days sleeping on sand in the bush. She explained, *'The people working for the UN helped us quickly and took our photos. They did all the immigration work for us.'* Then, UNHCR brought vehicles to take them to the reception centre in Kakuma, 120 kilometres away.

*We arrived in January. I travelled with my children and mother-in-law. Nobody knew where my husband was at the time. Even when we were asking people back home, they didn't know where he was. This made my mother-in-law stressed and depressed. She wasn't eating well. She would sometimes wake up in the morning and tell us that she had very bad nightmares about her son and kept saying, 'My son cannot die before me.' She would also say, 'I don't like the way you live here without the father of your children.' It started like that. Then she got really sick. We had to take her to the main hospital in Kakuma 1. She was tested and diagnosed with typhoid. She was then brought back home. At around 5pm, we were sitting and the children were playing football just next to us. She was startled by the children's noise and she fainted. Luckily, she gained consciousness and spoke to us. She told the children to go out and play. Just then, she fainted again. That is how she passed away. We took her to the hospital, but we were told that she was already gone. She passed away on the tenth of April.*

Tragically, her missing son—Nyaliak's husband—arrived in Kakuma just a few days later, on 13 April. When her mother-in-law passed away, Nyaliak explained how the community came together to support her and her family at this time, helping to dig the grave, cook food for the family, and give them the little money they had to support the funeral costs. Watching our interview with her on video in 2024 and hearing herself speak about the funeral, Nyaliak became emotional. She shared how her own daughter, only seven years old, had died from malaria in August. *'Losing a child is very hard'*, she said, grateful for the community's presence. They had come together once again to support her family, each contributing towards the cost of a goat for the funeral, ensuring that the young girl's life was celebrated properly.

*When we reached Kakuma, our fears went away, and our children were no longer scared. The war has traumatized our children; they were having nightmares during the nights. When we arrived at the reception centre in Kakuma 3, we found a much better life compared to where we come from. Our children started playing again. If we would go outside the reception centre, like to the Hong Kong market, our children would still be playing when we returned, none of them had been shot or had to run away. We found a very good life here in Kakuma compared to the life we had in South Sudan. When we left the reception centre, we were given shelters, and our children went to school. Nobody was thinking of going back. I have never been back to South Sudan since I came in 2014.*

*When times are hard, I go to church. What I like about going to church is that, even when you arrive stressed, there are some verses that you will read that can change your mood and your perception about things. They can also encourage you to be strong. They guide you on the right path. For instance, if you were thinking of using witchcraft to become wealthier, maybe because you have suffered so much, the Bible will guide you the right way. When we go to church, we get redemption, our perception changes, and we think in a way that shows hope. That is what I get when I go to church.*

Exposure to violence and socio-economic difficulties can lead to trauma, severely affecting refugees' mental health. As Nyaliak described, the disappearance of a family member can leave families in a traumatic state of uncertainty regarding their loved one's fate. The emotional suffering can be severe, intensified by the inability to mourn or find closure. The family is not only left in emotional turmoil but also pushed into economic and social hardship when

working adults disappear. Our research team conducted a separate study to better understand the links between violence exposure, mental health, and socio-economic well-being (Pozuelo et al., 2023). Between 2016 and 2019, we collected data from 8,996 refugees living in camps and cities in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia. For comparison, we also collected data on 7,612 members of the host population living in communities nearby refugee settlements.

In line with the stories narrated in this book, a staggering 62 per cent of refugees reported some exposure to violence; this question was not asked of the host population.<sup>2</sup> Male respondents from urban backgrounds reported significantly higher exposure to violence. We also found that 31 per cent of refugees suffered from moderate or severe depressive symptoms, compared with 10 per cent of the host population.<sup>3</sup> Statistical analysis showed that female refugees, older individuals, and those residing in camps were significantly more likely to report depressive symptoms. The prevalence of depressive symptoms was also positively correlated with the duration of exile, suggesting that untreated mental health issues may persist and accumulate over time. Our data show that many refugees, in contrast to the host population, struggle with everyday activities such as walking, doing their household chores, and socializing.<sup>4</sup>

Exposure to violence appears to have enduring effects on mental and physical health. Our research reveals a relationship between exposure to violence prior to exile and the prevalence of depression among refugees. Refugees exposed to violence were seventeen percentage points more likely to suffer from moderate or severe depressive symptoms and eighteen percentage points more likely to report functional impairment. Mental and physical trauma is therefore an unfortunate reality for a substantial proportion of refugees,

<sup>2</sup> To measure violence exposure, each refugee was asked whether they were ever (i) a victim of violence, (ii) a victim of torture, or (iii) a witness of violence or torture in their country of origin or in exile.

<sup>3</sup> We assessed the prevalence of depressive symptoms among refugee and host populations using the Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9). The PHQ-9 survey module comprises nine questions on symptoms of depression, including feeling down, having trouble falling asleep, and having low energy. Responses are combined to create a score that spans from 0 to 27, where elevated scores correspond to more pronounced symptoms of depression.

<sup>4</sup> To assess the physical consequences of trauma, our questionnaires also included six questions from the World Health Organization (WHO) Disability Assessment Schedule 2.0. Respondents were asked to describe the difficulty they experienced in performing six specific activities during the past thirty days, including standing for extended periods, managing household responsibilities, acquiring new skills, participating in community events, maintaining concentration for ten minutes, and walking long distances. Responses were aggregated into an index ranging from 0 to 24, where elevated scores correspond to greater levels of functional impairment. Our findings reveal that 62 per cent of refugees reported moderate or severe functional impairment, in contrast to 25 per cent of the host population. Functional impairment was significantly higher among females, older individuals, and those with extended periods of exile.

particularly among those who experienced violence before or during their exile. We also found that depression is correlated with lower wages, reduced life satisfaction, and limited dietary diversity. Causality, however, is difficult to establish. It is likely that pre-flight trauma, experiences in the camps, and poverty reinforce one another in complex ways.

While refugees are more likely to suffer from mental health problems, partly as a result of war-related trauma, access to mental health and psychosocial support is often limited by the shortage of accessible providers, as well as by cultural and language barriers. For refugees on the move, continuity of care presents additional challenges.

***‘You are not alone: Your family needs you: Your community needs you: Tomorrow needs you.’<sup>5</sup>***

This sentence appears in bold across the UNHCR support page for refugees living in Kakuma and Kalobeyi. UNHCR partners with ten different organizations to provide free psychosocial support to refugees in need (Tankink et al., 2023). These organizations run centres across Kakuma and Kalobeyi where people experiencing mental health issues can receive psychosocial support, including cognitive behavioural therapy and, in more serious cases, pharmacological treatment. While struggling with limited resources, these organizations try their best to run activities such as arts and crafts, gardening, embroidery, football, and volleyball. Yet despite the support available, refugees living in Kakuma rarely discuss mental health issues, largely because of stigma and a lack of awareness. Mental health conditions are often misunderstood, and those suffering from them are frequently labelled as ‘crazy’. Elizabeth, for instance, described her mother in these terms because she collected empty plastic bottles, wandered around aimlessly, shouted at people in the street, and often got lost in the neighbourhood—behaviours that were dismissed as madness. In the past, people living with mental illness in Kakuma have been isolated and restrained in healthcare facilities, deepening the stigma. As a result, those struggling with such conditions rarely receive appropriate care. Instead, the community tends to marginalize them, viewing mental distress through the lens of superstition or behavioural judgement rather than as a treatable condition.

Given the stigma associated with mental health treatment, many refugees find support through religion and churches. UNHCR says it is working to

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR Kenya (n.d.). Help Kenya. Mental health and psychosocial support. <https://help.unhcr.org/kenya/kakuma/mhpss>, accessed 26 June 2024.

increase community understanding and improve knowledge of mental health, in the hope of reducing discrimination against those living with mental illness.

*My husband is here. He joined after we arrived. I was ten years old when he gave me the ring and started paying the bride price. He waited for five years until I was fifteen years old. In Nuer communities, they sometimes delay dowry talks, especially when the girl is still young. He had paid the bride price, but my father insisted I was still too young. I went out for a walk like any other girl, and he eloped me. I stayed with him for one week. After a week, he went to my parents and told them, 'Don't go and look for her, she is with me.' Because the dowry talks were done before, there was nothing they could do. They begged for him to wait, as I was still young. He refused. 'Even though she is young, we will stay together,' he said. In the beginning of the year, February 2004, I was given off to him. Our wedding day is the day I felt I was someone who made my parents proud because they had the chance to witness that day. That is the day I remember.*

*I got pregnant in 2004 and gave birth to my first born in 2005. I live on good terms with my husband. But the conflict in my country has made him unemployed. He is just doing a short electrician vocational training course with Don Bosco [a vocational training school in Kakuma]. The good thing is that he is still with us and makes our lives better. My husband understands the situation; he does not complain. He encourages us by saying that, even though we are not eating nice foods, we are in a safe place where we can go to school and we should be grateful to UN for this opportunity. He also says that these hard times will be over some day, and we shall live a better life. He reminds us that life here is better because there is no war and fighting.*

Being 'unemployed' in Kakuma does not necessarily mean having no income. Although Nyaliak reported in the survey that there were no formally employed adults in her household, she later mentioned that her husband does casual labour for a Somali businessman, collecting loan repayments from small businesses. *'He is allowed to keep some of the interest paid'*, she said. She also said that, on occasion, he helps neighbours with electrical work—fixing lights, solar panels, and plug sockets—although this work is sometimes voluntary. Like many in Kakuma, his income is irregular, and Nyaliak does not think he earns very much. *'The problem with men'*, she said, *'is that they don't open up about what they do, or what they earn, so I don't know. He just gives me a small amount of money if I need it.'*

*When we were in South Sudan, I had opened a small hotel<sup>6</sup> where I would sell food and tea. I stopped this activity even before the conflict started because I gave birth. Then, when I came to Kakuma, I again opened a small hotel. The money I was getting from this business allowed us to buy firewood and food. But I stopped working there when I started school. I would love to start it again, but I am just waiting to finish my final exams.*

*I started school in 2014. To begin with, I went to an evening school for women run by the teachers at the school. We paid KSh 50 [US\$0.4] monthly. I did these adult classes until I reached Class 5. I then left and joined Don Bosco, where I learned basic and intermediate English for one year. Then I went to register myself again at the school for the morning classes. When I registered, I skipped Class 6 and joined Class 7. I was then promoted to Class 8, and I am waiting to do the national exams this year. I don't have to pay for the morning classes.*

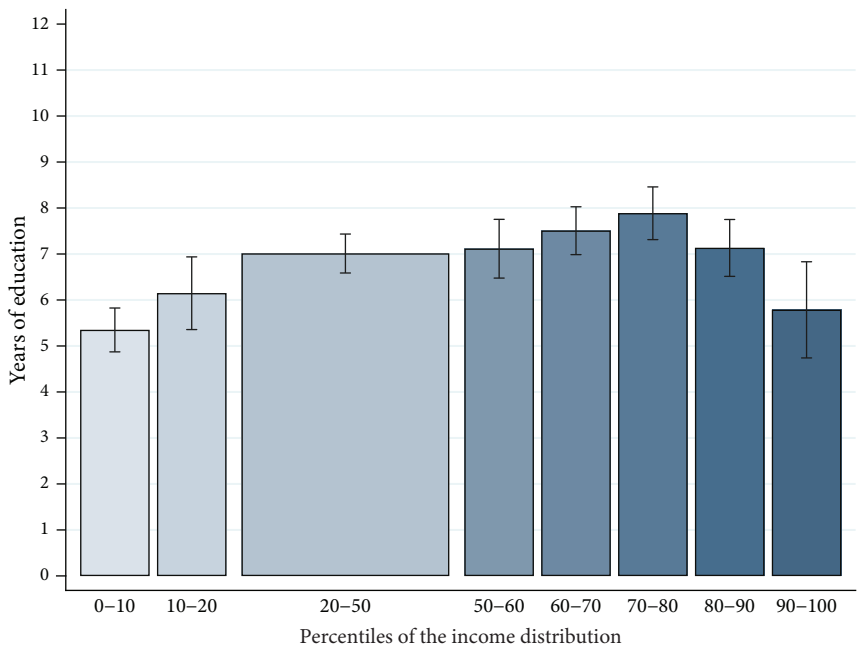
*What motivated me to go to school is that here everyone is given the opportunity to do something that can benefit them. Everything is being given for free. Nothing is stopping you. When we found out that adults were also allowed to go to school, rather than sitting at home doing nothing, we decided to go to school and learn, even if it is just to learn how to write your name or understand what the doctor has prescribed you. I know at my age, putting all my focus on education with the aim of doing something for myself in the future isn't the main issue. I know my children have a higher level of education than me, and I am not competing with them. My main reason for going to school is to be able to read and write, just in case I find myself in a situation that I have to speak for myself. I want to be able to respond to questions and be understood when I speak.*

Classrooms in Kakuma are packed. Students sit shoulder to shoulder, with some standing at the back of the class or sitting on the floor due to the lack of seating. It is not uncommon for classes to have hundreds of children taught by a single teacher. Nyaliak has to share a small desk with five adults. School enrolment rates are high in Kakuma, both among children and adults. For children, going to school is a way to get both an education and food, as free hot meals are distributed every day through the school feeding programme run by the World Food Programme (WFP). Our data suggest that 97 per cent of school-age children in Kakuma and Kalobeyei go to school.

<sup>6</sup> Restaurants are called 'hotels' in Kakuma.

Adult education is also an important activity in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. While jobs are scarce, education opportunities are many. According to our data, 36 per cent of adults in Kakuma and Kalobeyei are enrolled in general education or vocational training. About one-third of the adults in general education are enrolled in a primary school (usually Class 7 or 8), and two-thirds are enrolled in a secondary school. Among the ten adults registered in Nyaliak's household, five reported being enrolled in school. Before Nyaliak was formally enrolled at the primary school, she paid a small fee to join an evening class that was initiated by the teachers in the school to encourage women to join. Primary education in Kakuma and Kalobeyei is free and compulsory for children, but families are responsible for paying for uniforms, equipment such as books and pens, and exam papers. For secondary education, there is a fee of KSh 1,000 [US\$8] per term. This financial burden on families can pose significant challenges, impacting access to education. In October 2023, 14,630 students were enrolled at one of the seven secondary schools in Kakuma, but only 34 per cent of these students were female (Concina et al., 2024). Further, the majority (70 per cent) of students at secondary school in Kakuma are older than the typical secondary school age range of fourteen to eighteen years in Kenya as children and youth who have fled to Kakuma and Kalobeyei often miss the usual educational trajectory, resulting in them being held back and repeating grades. This explains why average education levels are relatively low despite high enrolment rates (Figure 14).

Beyond general education, a wide variety of vocational training programmes are available. We estimate that about 33 per cent of men and 17 per cent of women have done some vocational training (Betts et al., 2018). Don Bosco is one of the main providers of free vocational training courses in Kakuma. It offers both technical courses, such as tailoring, carpentry, masonry, and plumbing, and professional courses in accounting and business management. The technical courses take between eight and twelve months to complete. Refugees have also taken it upon themselves to offer training for other refugees. For instance, one of our survey team leaders started a refugee-led organization in 2020 that trains adults to repair computers and phones. Unlike the programmes run by international organizations, students have to pay a small fee of KSh 400 per month [US\$3] to enrol in the course. The money is primarily used to hire a trainer. Many similar community-based organizations offer training for refugees, targeting different nationalities and skills. Demand for these courses appears strong, and those we spoke to viewed them positively. However, distance remains an issue. Because the training takes



**Figure 14** Years of education

*Source:* Authors.

place in physical centres, students must either pay for transport or walk long distances. During the rainy season, roads can flood, preventing students from travelling to their classes.

Outside of vocational training opportunities, the higher education landscape in Kakuma is largely shaped by online learning. Some universities, like the University of Oxford or the Southern New Hampshire University, offer online courses designed for refugees.<sup>7</sup> While these courses reflect a commitment to accessible education in challenging contexts, the online nature of courses can make it difficult for students to enrol. Other opportunities and scholarships for further study in Kenya or internationally are available, including the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program and UNHCR’s DAFI Tertiary Scholarship Programme. However, application processes are often highly competitive, and places are limited.

<sup>7</sup> Some courses, such as the competence-based courses in Communications, Business Management, and Healthcare Management offered by US-based Southern New Hampshire University’s (SNHU) Global Education Movement (GEM), are hybrid, combining an online curriculum with in-person classes. In 2021, SNHU GEM provided educational programmes to around 100 students living in Kakuma. The Refugee Studies Centre at the University of Oxford—where our research team is based—also runs an online course, RSC Pathways, which has been designed for learners who have been affected by forced displacement.

*When we wake up in the morning, we all go to school. We come back at 12 noon. After we get back from school, I sometimes send one of my children to call my neighbour so that we can eat together at our home. Sometimes, we eat at my neighbour's house. We chat and do embroidery, a skill I learned back in South Sudan. I left the ones I made there in the house when the conflict started. Some of us also go to Nuer language classes in the evening. These were started by young men in the community to help us learn to write. We contribute chalk for the blackboard.*

*We only cook in the evening. We don't cook in the morning because we all normally go to school. We stopped cooking lunch, not because we don't have enough food from the distribution centre but because we are in school. When we come back from school, we wait until the evening until we go to our Bamba Chakula shop to get flour. Me and the two girls [Nyaliak's nieces], Nyanen and Nyakong, the three of us usually cook.*

*We don't receive any help from anywhere; we just get the food from WFP and Bamba Chakula. We are family size 16. Each one of us receives KSh 850 per month [US\$7]. Our cards are usually in the shop due to too much debt. When the money enters, the shopkeeper will take half of the money to pay the debt, and we use the other half to buy goods from him. This month, I went to take cash so I could purchase school materials and buy some food for us. We normally collect rations from food distribution on the first of each month, and our Bamba Chakula will enter around 25th or 26th. So, when the food from the ration gets finished, we get Bamba Chakula and buy food; that is how we balance them. When there is no Bamba Chakula and there is no money on the card, we normally go to our Bamba Chakula shop to take a debt. If they refuse to give us debt, we will take a small portion of the food we get from the ration and sell it so that we can purchase small things for the house. For example, if we want to eat something other than yellow peas, we exchange food so we can buy vegetables. Then we don't have to eat yellow peas. Meals are meant to be changed. Eating one type of food every day can be frustrating, especially if you can't provide the food that your child wants. You feel like you have failed as a parent. But if I continue selling this food so that I can provide the food that my children want, we will not reach the day of the ration distribution. The shopkeeper normally allows me to take as much debt as I want but with the condition of increasing the price of things. So, the more debt I take, the more prices increase. For instance, if the price of a soda is KSh 50, he will tell me it is KSh 60 because I am buying it with debt. That is what makes Bamba Chakula complicated.*

*I don't receive any other assistance. When I was in Khartoum, the only person I used to go to was my uncle. He was working in a petrol station and was not married. Since his death, I haven't received any support from anyone else. However, if we run short of wheat flour, we will ask for some from our neighbour. Maize flour and firewood, those are the things we share with our neighbours. We also share salt and Royco [stock] cubes for putting in the stew. That is what we share, nothing else.*

*I don't want my children to live the life I am living. I want to show them I am strong. Because if I show them that life is hard, they will be discouraged. If God wishes, maybe some day this hard life will change to be better. Hopefully, even if we stay in the camp, their life will change; they could get nice jobs and be able to take good care of their children and of me, their mother. Even if they don't go to developed countries, I am just wishing they become successful and stop depending on Bamba Chakula and on their father, who doesn't have a job.*

When we returned to Nyaliak two years later, there had been a new addition to the family. Sitting on her bed beside her mother and her newborn baby, three generations gathered together to watch her interview. Her other children crowded around too. When Nyaliak began speaking in the video about primary school exams, her son disappeared briefly before returning with a Kenyan Primary School Education Assessment paper he had completed only a few weeks earlier. 'Creative Arts'. As he flicked proudly through pages of questions and correct answers on drawing techniques, he told us about the lessons he enjoyed most.

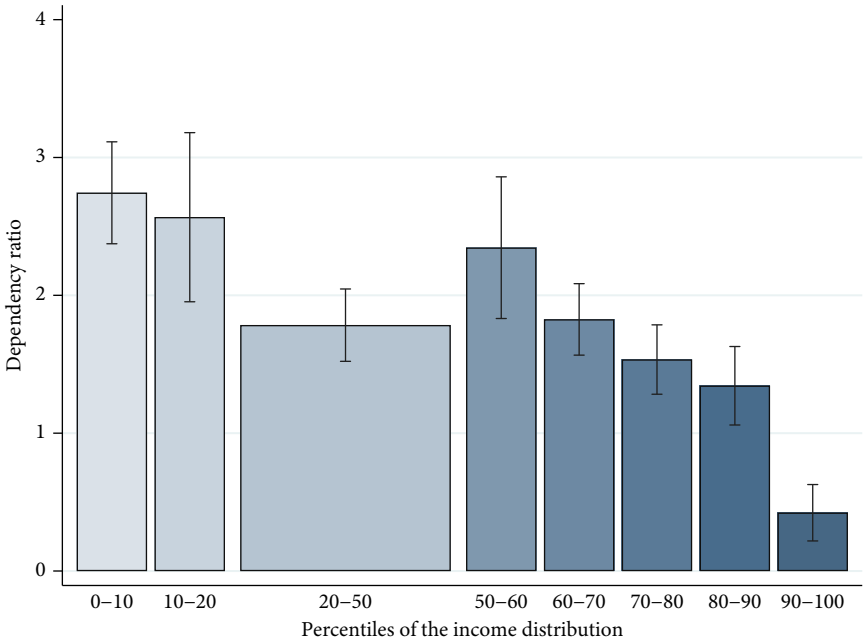
*The best day I remember is the day my son sat for his final exams and got good grades. He received help from the UN to get a scholarship. At first, I was worried he would not get it. They were told to fill out some forms, and I thought he might not be considered. I could not sleep well. I dreamt he would not get the scholarship. I even stopped going to school because I got so stressed. But he was lucky, and his name was shortlisted, and he got the scholarship. He succeeded. When I think about that day, I feel very happy.*

PART III

SELF-RELIANT REFUGEES

Percentiles 80–90

In this final part of the book, we turn to households that are partially or fully self-reliant. Unlike the majority in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, they are not dependent on humanitarian assistance for survival. Their members receive regular income through work or remittances, and their demographic profiles differ markedly from those of poorer households: smaller in size, with fewer or no children, and with nearly all adults engaged in paid employment. As a result,



**Figure 15** Dependency ratio (ratio of children to adults)

Source: Authors.

their dependency ratios—the ratio of children to adults—are low, and income per capita is significantly higher ([Figure 15](#)).

We will meet Abdirizak, a Somali entrepreneur who runs a small shop in Kakuma. He was shot during Somalia's civil war and now lives with a disability. His story opens up a conversation about the experience of living with a disability in the camp—facing both discrimination and community support—and the ways in which entrepreneurship can provide a path towards autonomy, even under constrained circumstances.

We will also meet Maker, a South Sudanese refugee who came to Kakuma as a child to pursue education. He now works as a trained lab technician at a private clinic. His story introduces us to a different side of camp life: one of ambition, professional identity, and engagement in sport, fashion, and music.

These stories highlight a different set of themes—business and employment, self-reliance, and the visible inequalities that emerge within the camp. But they also underscore a common thread across all three parts of this book: that education, work, and community remain key levers of hope for a better future.





# Abdirizak

## Eightieth Percentile

*They thought I was dead. I laid there for hours beneath six people they had killed. I was in so much pain, but I had to stay still. Eventually they left. They thought everyone was dead. This was in 1996. At the time I was shot, there wasn't the terrorist group that there is now. It was a tribal fight.*

Somalia has a long history of violence and insecurity.<sup>1</sup> In the late nineteenth century, Somali sultanates were colonized by the Italian and British Empires. After gaining independence from Italy and Britain in 1960, Somalia's attempts at building a parliamentary democracy were short-lived. Following a coup d'état in 1969, Major General Siad Barre established an autocratic regime that ruled Somalia for twenty-one years. During the 1980s, internal armed resistance movements emerged in reaction to Somalia's severe economic decline and Siad Barre's increasingly dictatorial rule. These movements were deeply rooted in family clans, which structure the Somali society.

Siad Barre belonged to the Darod clan, the largest Somali clan family in the Horn of Africa. Barre's regime sought to suppress opposition by targeting civilian populations from opposition clans. The brutal repression fuelled growing resistance, ultimately leading to the overthrow of Barre's regime in January 1991. Anarchy followed Barre's fall, as clan warlords competed for power in different parts of the country. Due to war and severe drought, half of Somalia's population faced starvation. The United Nations (UN) intervened in April 1992 to provide humanitarian aid and monitor a ceasefire, but the truce was mostly ignored. Armed groups disrupted relief efforts with attacks and extortion. In December 1992, in response to the UN's unsuccessful efforts and the devastating effects of famine and conflict on Somalia's civilian population, President George H. W. Bush authorized the establishment of a US-led

<sup>1</sup> For excellent references on the Somali conflicts, see e.g. [De Waal \(1997\)](#), [Harper \(2012\)](#), [Hansen \(2013\)](#), [Fergusson \(2014\)](#), [Harding \(2016\)](#), or [Clapham \(2023\)](#).

multinational force with a mandate to use ‘all necessary means’ to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid in Somalia.

However, UN peacekeepers and US military troops quickly became entangled in the conflict. In 1993, tensions between US and UN coalition forces and Somali militias erupted into violent confrontations, with heavy casualties on both sides. The infamous Black Hawk Down incident—and the public display of dead US soldiers dragged through Mogadishu’s streets—led to the withdrawal of US forces in 1994, while UN troops followed in 1995 (Bowden, 2010). Fighting between Somali clans persisted even after their withdrawal. During this period, Abdirizak was shot and almost killed in his hometown when a local militia attempted to recapture lost ground from an opposing faction.

Abdirizak asks if it’s okay to show us his wound. He lowers his trousers, revealing a scar that stretches down his left thigh. The bullet passed through his leg. Although it narrowly missed the bone, it caused permanent nerve damage.

*When I came to Kenya, I was an injured victim. When the government collapsed in my country, people were fighting for power. The major clans were attacking the minor clans. I am from a small clan; we were just farmers. We didn’t have weapons. After I was shot, I was being taken care of by my two uncles. They would carry me around in a wheelbarrow. Then they were both killed. When they were killed, people ran from the town to the bush day and night [to hide]. I couldn’t get any medical support in Somalia, so my wife told me to flee with a donkey cart. She helped me and took me to a place called Bardale. Then, she told me to go to Kenya.*

*In Bardale, I searched for a vehicle for two days. When I finally found someone to take me, I went to a place called Beled Hawo. I crossed the border by foot to Mandera. The Kenyan army didn’t stop me because I was injured. In Mandera, I searched for a vehicle that could take me to Nairobi. I travelled with a truck that carried vegetables. I was hidden inside with the vegetables. I was carried as a vegetable.*

*When I arrived in Nairobi, I didn’t know anyone. There were so many problems. I cannot say how difficult it was. I searched for the United Nations and when I found them, I received a paper. After the United Nations accepted me, I was given a paper every month. And then I got the national mandate: my refugee*

*identity card. I was forty-five years old when I was registered in Nairobi. Forty-five. That was ten years ago.*

*After I received the mandate in 2012, the authorities said that Somali people who were not civilians of the state would be taken back to Somalia. The UN sent me a message telling me to go to Kakuma or Dadaab refugee camp. They didn't help with transport though. I said to myself that going to Dadaab might be challenging, so I thought Kakuma might be better because the army there was less likely to forcefully move refugees back to Somalia.*

Abdirizak is one of nearly 300,000 Somali refugees living in the country. Somali refugees have been fleeing to Kenya since the onset of the civil war in 1991. The majority—82 per cent—reside in Dadaab camp, close to the Kenyan–Somali border. The rest live in Kakuma refugee camp or Nairobi (12 per cent and 6 per cent, respectively). In 2012, when Abdirizak fled to Kenya, Dadaab was the largest refugee camp in the world (UNHCR, 2012; Rawlence, 2016). He fled shortly after Kenyan and Ethiopian forces had entered Somalia to support the fight against Al-Shabaab. Al-Shabaab had emerged in 2006, following Ethiopia's invasion of Somalia, positioning itself as a force of armed resistance against foreign interventions. The Kenyans aimed to create a buffer zone following the abduction of two Spanish aid workers in Dadaab (Reuters, 2011).

The Kenyan intervention transformed the conflict, pushing Al-Shabaab to shift tactics. Unable to resist the joint firepower of the anti-Al-Shabaab coalition, the group started to engage in asymmetric warfare—retreating to rural areas and launching surprise attacks on soldiers, aid workers, journalists, and civilians in Somalia as well as orchestrating complex terrorist operations abroad. In response to the rising threat, Kenya's War on Terror began to significantly shape its refugee policies. On 18 December 2012—as Abdirizak recalled—the Department of Refugee Affairs announced that all refugees in urban areas must relocate to the camps in Kakuma or Dadaab, citing national security concerns.<sup>2</sup>

*DEPARTMENT OF REFUGEE AFFAIRS PRESS RELEASE: The Government of Kenya has decided to stop reception, registration and close down all registration centres in urban areas with immediate effect. All asylum seekers/refugees*

<sup>2</sup> IRIN (2013). Reprieve for urban refugees in Kenya, but fear persists, 24 January. <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5102748e2.html>, accessed 27 April 2026.

*will be hosted at the refugee camps. All asylum seekers and refugees from Somalia should report to Dadaab refugee camps while asylum seekers from other countries should report to Kakuma refugee camp. UNHCR and other partners serving refugees are asked to stop providing direct services to asylum seekers and refugees in urban areas and transfer the same services to the refugee camps. Signed Ag. COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEE AFFAIRS.*<sup>3</sup>

Camps were seen as spaces that threatened Kenya's national security. Perceptions of refugees worsened following attacks on the Westgate Mall in 2013 and Garissa University College in 2015 as the government claimed that these had been planned by terrorists operating out of the Kakuma and Dadaab camps (Brankamp & Glück, 2022). In 2016, the government alleged that Al-Shabaab used the camps as a centre to recruit and train refugees to join their cause. Following each of these events, the authorities threatened to close the camps, with little success. In 2021, the government again announced the closure of Kakuma and Dadaab, this time giving UNHCR two weeks to share a closure plan. Panic, loss of hope, anxiety are just a few of the words that refugees use when asked about camp closures. And yet, others ignore these threats, noting that they have lost faith in the government's words after multiple, failed attempts to close the camps.

After Abdirizak moved to Kakuma, he was allocated a space in Kakuma 2. Because of his disability, UNHCR built him a house. Inside, once-colourful mats, now faded and dusty, spread out over the dirt floors. Plastic bottles are stacked on a small wooden bedside table. Two wooden stools lean against the wall, and shirts, trousers, and a mosquito net hang low from the ceiling. A thin mattress lies on the floor; a wheelchair is pushed into the corner. The room is dimly lit by a single window. There is no electricity. A flashlight and batteries have been left on the floor. Most things, in fact, are on the floor. Standing and reaching for items is difficult for Abdirizak. Sitting on the floor mat, Abdirizak fiddles with a set of keys and unlocks a small lock on a worn rucksack. He pulls out a stack of papers and flicks through them. Then he holds up the laminated UNHCR mandate letter for the camera: *'This is to certify that the bearer of this letter is a prima facie refugee under the UNHCR mandate in Kenya. There are no persons listed overleaf.* It is dated 12 November 2012, meaning that Abdirizak had been registered as a refugee in Nairobi only

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Kenya. In the High Court of Kenya at Nairobi Milimani Law Courts. Constitutional and Human Rights Division. Petition No. 19 of 2013, Consolidated with Petition No. 115 of 2013. Accessed 9 June 2024. [https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related\\_material/PETITION%20115%20AND%2019%20OF%202013%20JUDGMENT%28FINAL%29.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/PETITION%20115%20AND%2019%20OF%202013%20JUDGMENT%28FINAL%29.pdf).

one month before the Department of Refugee Affairs issued the press release quoted above.

*I don't miss Somalia. I was born in a rural village, about 28 kilometres away from a town called Baidoa. We were farmers and we reared livestock. We grew so many things. Maize, nuts, sesame, potatoes, and grains, so many types of grains. But when the war started, the land was stolen. Property was ruined. People became jobless and started to migrate. We left the farms. I cannot miss it because I was displaced.*

*In 2014, I received news that my wife had been killed. She was told to get married forcefully, and she refused. She was asked why she didn't want to marry these people, the men who hide their faces [Al-Shabaab]. She said she has her own husband, who is still alive in Kenya, so she cannot marry them. Immediately, she was shot. The children cried, and they killed all of them too. The children were killed because they were crying. So, I cannot miss that place. My wife was killed, my son was killed, and my daughter was killed, and I was told that while I was here in the camp.*

Prior to the civil war, Abdirizak was living in Somalia's most productive agricultural region, situated between Somalia's two major rivers in the southwest of the country. Baidoa, the regional capital, was Somalia's wealthiest city. However, as the civil war spread, Baidoa earned the grim nickname of the 'city of the walking dead', while the broader area became known as the 'triangle of death' (Mukhtar, 1996). In January 1991, Barre's forces had retreated around Baidoa and pursued a scorched earth policy for almost a year, ransacking villages and stealing or destroying crops and animals. Agricultural activity ground to a halt. In 1991 and 1992, Somalia was also struck by a particularly harsh drought. After Barre's army was forced out of the country, Baidoa was looted once again, this time by another militia, which also prevented humanitarian aid from reaching populations. While estimates vary, most sources report that between 200,000 and 500,000 people died in the famine that followed (De Waal, 1997).

In 1995 and 1996, Baidoa was again a flashpoint in Somalia's ongoing civil war. The town had been recaptured by a militia and the local clan mobilized to resist it and reclaim control of the region. It was during this fighting that Abdirizak was shot and nearly killed in his hometown. Baidoa continued to change hands over the course of the civil war. In December 2006, it was captured by Ethiopian troops, who had entered Somalia to

support the internationally recognized transitional government against the Islamic Courts Union. While the political and judicial strength of the Islamic Courts Union collapsed following Ethiopia's invasion, one of its military wings, Al-Shabaab, progressively rose to prominence by presenting itself as a popular movement of armed resistance against the Ethiopian occupation. Al-Shabaab captured Baidoa in January 2009 as Ethiopia forces withdrew from Somalia.

Ethiopian troops re-entered Somalia in 2011 and recaptured Baidoa from Al-Shabaab in early 2012. Yet, rural areas remain under Al-Shabaab control, where the Islamist group collects taxes, controls access to key public services, and administers justice following strict interpretation of sharia law. It was in this context that Abdirizak's wife and children were murdered by Al-Shabaab in 2014. He has been on his own ever since.

*Kakuma was unfamiliar to me—it looked nothing like the place I came from. It took time, but I became familiar with the environment of Kakuma. Before, I faced so many problems. I am a disabled person and, when I arrived, I didn't even have these crutches that the UN gave me. I was walking with a stick. I wasn't able to enter the food distribution centre since it was very overcrowded. But when I received the crutches from the UN, I got my life back.*

*You know, in Kakuma, I have faced so many problems. I was jobless, and I used to move with my wheelchair. I used to beg people. I used to ask them to buy me credit for my SIM card so I could use my phone. People used to say that the 'guy is coming' and then chased me away. I went to this organization called NCKK [National Council of Churches of Kenya]. They gave me money, like KSh 4000 [US\$33]. Back then, there wasn't a place I could put things [on my wheelchair]. I therefore built a small table beside my wheelchair that I used to move around and sell small items.*

*Then, there was this organization, Humanity & Inclusion. They saw me at the market and told me to come to their office. When I went there, they gave me a new wheelchair, which has storage places to put items and a small table, which isn't heavy to move around with. In 2016, I opened the second shop. Before that, my wheelchair was my only shop. After working for some months, I used to save the profits, KSh 20, KSh 50 . . . and after I had reached a good amount of money, that is when I built this shop. That's how I started to work for myself, using that KSh 4,000 [US\$33], which helped me make a living since 2016, up to now.*

*I sell the things that people hate the most, cigarettes. I don't use them, but I sell them. Because I don't have a good enough income to sell better items such as sugar and wheat flour, which the big shops usually sell. I sell cigarettes, chewing gum, and sweets, which are cheaper. I don't smoke. I am not proud of selling these items, but I have to do it to get an income. Sometimes, a motorbike which belongs to a Kikuyu [Kenyan], comes here to sell their items. If he did not come, I would use my wheelchair to go to the wholesalers or shops in town. It does not cost me any transport.*

*In a month, I make a profit of KSh 3,000 [US\$25], sometimes KSh 2,000 [US\$17]. The small profit I make returns to business. It is not something you can save or even make your business grow. The market doesn't grow here.*

Abdirizak unscrews a plastic tub and reaches for the pack of cigarettes inside. He selects a few from the pack, wraps them in a torn piece of newspaper, and passes the small package through a hole in the galvanized fencing panel to a customer outside. His shop, a modest structure with corrugated metal walls, is accessed from his home. Packets of stock, washing powder, and Kenyan tea hang from the ceiling, and Abdirizak sits beside a table filled with plastic tubs full of lollipops, sweets, gum, and cigarettes; items he has recently purchased from a wholesaler in the camp.

Kenya is not known for its progressive refugee policies. Practical obstacles, such as the country's encampment policy and requirement for cumbersome and expensive work permits, significantly limit employment opportunities. And yet, businesses continue to operate across Kakuma, playing a crucial role in the local economy. There are over 2,000 businesses operating in Kakuma, from hair salons to food retailers and from motorcycle repair shops to solar fridge businesses. The World Bank estimates the consumer goods market in Kakuma to be worth US\$56 million (IFC, 2018). However, the market in the camp should not be exaggerated: most businesses tend to be small in scale, with very few, if any, employees. A few hundred shops, however, are much more successful than others: those licensed by WFP to accept Bamba Chakula payments (Delius & Sterck, 2024). Only these shops can access the US\$1 million in humanitarian funding that WFP injects into Kakuma and Kalobeyei each month. Because they are few in number, they can operate as an oligopoly and charge higher prices. This lack of competition is exacerbated by the fact that most refugees are indebted, leaving their SIM or ATM card to the shop owner as collateral. Our research shows that these shops have much higher revenues, by 175 per cent, and profits, by 154 per cent, than unlicensed businesses with otherwise similar characteristics.

The majority of food stores, 76 per cent, get their stock from one of five main wholesalers in the camp (Betts et al., 2019). These wholesalers are owned by four Somali-Kenyans and one Ethiopian. These two groups dominate the wholesale market and shape supply-chain relationships. Nationality and ethnicity also shape business relations. For instance, only 2 per cent of Somali shop owners buy their stock from the Ethiopian wholesaler, while 77 per cent buy from the Somali-Kenyan wholesalers and the rest from elsewhere. Gender also shapes participation in the local economy. In Kakuma, 69 per cent of shops are owned by men, with Somali men, like Abdirizak, and Ethiopian men the most likely to be involved in these businesses. Somalis also specialize in trade and are less likely than Congolese refugees, for example, to engage in manual labour. This pattern is not unique to Kakuma: across East Africa, Somalis are known for trading food and other goods (Betts et al., 2024).

*I am a size one. I am an elderly person, a disabled person, living a harsh life. I cook for myself and go to the distribution centre [to collect in-kind food rations myself]. I also receive Bamba Chakula, KSh 850 [US\$7]. It's not enough to live. I don't even receive the money in cash. I go to the shop, and I receive food items. Size one households, whether they are men or women, have big problems. For thirty days, they are given six kilogrammes of food items—either grains, maize, or rice—and 1 kilogramme of oil. Can I ask you, is six kilogrammes of food enough for the whole month? When I first arrived, our life was better than it is now. We used to get more food, but it keeps reducing. We are suffering when it comes to food items.*

*In the morning, I might eat mandazi [fried bread], a samosa, and some potatoes after the morning prayer. Then I start my job. During lunch, I eat if I can afford something. It might be rice, or spaghetti, or whatever God has given me. I spend most of my time in my shop. Sometimes I go to Kalobeyei for exercise, but it's hard in the scorching sun. In the evening, I go to the mosque to pray. After that, I cook for myself and go to sleep at 9pm.*

*It can be hard in Kakuma for people like me. One problem I have is people calling me names. They are calling me a disabled man. They give names to all people like me who are disabled or are missing body parts. If you are missing a hand, they call you 'One Hand', and if you have lost a leg, they call you 'One Leg'. If you don't have an eye, they call you 'One Eye'. It's painful. Before, I was a normal person and, like you, I didn't feel anything when disabled people were called by such nicknames. Now I have learned more about my condition and*

*to be called those kinds of nicknames, I have a big problem with it. But there is nothing I can do. I just accept this pain. They don't even acknowledge your actual name; they only call you by the nicknames they give you because of a missing part of your body. If I could, I would tell these people that ... if they could feel the pain I am feeling, they would understand that I am helpless. I cannot even carry a 20-litre jerrycan of water. It is hard for me to take myself to the toilet. They don't know how I am feeling. It is hard for them to understand until they experience it.*

*I work for VDPA [Voice for Disabled People Association]. They are a community-led organization that fights for the rights of disabled people. I go there to attend meetings and training sessions. If possible, I add my opinions and my comments. When there is mobilization in the community, I join them and give a speech. We ask if there are any children who are disabled and have a hard time in school, either because of their fellow students or because the doors of the school—sometimes they are too narrow. If students who are disabled are having issues accessing the school because, for example, the school or bathrooms are not accessible for people with wheelchairs, we complain about this. Some schools have made changes as a result, but others are still the same.*

*I joined this activity because there was this guy, who is now in Canada, who had been called for a meeting. He was told, 'We want to help disabled people, we want to give them training and we want the disabled people who use wheelchairs to be part of this.' 'Go find them', that is what he was told to do. We went, they took our photos, and they sent them to Geneva. They told us to find a teacher, and they would fund us. But we aren't the ones who are getting this money. They give us t-shirts, sweaters, shoes, and gate passes for the food distribution centre and the field post. There is nothing else one can gain from them. I just want to forget about it. Without disabled people, without us, nothing would continue in the group. They only use the names of disabled people to pull in funds that we don't really benefit from. No one really cares for the disabled.*

Life in a refugee camp is particularly challenging for people with disabilities. Pathways between houses are uneven, access to medical and support services can be insufficient, and a lack of awareness within the community can lead to discrimination and isolation. Abdirizak is the only person in his household, and he is self-employed. Whether by choice or due to societal stigma, he tries to be as independent as possible. However, given the conditions in Kakuma, he has to rely on others sometimes, for example, during distribution. Normally,

size 1 households collect their rations on the last day of distribution, but the process is different for Abdirizak. In Kakuma, people with disabilities are given a pass to skip the queues at the distribution centre. Even so, the narrow walkways and heavy sacks make it difficult for him to collect food on his own. A boy from the community helps him. Abdirizak accompanies him to the gate, provides his fingerprint, and waits outside while the boy collects the food. He does not pay the boy, but the arrangement benefits them both: the boy can collect food for his own household at the same time, rather than waiting until the end of the week or standing in long queues.

Some non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are providing limited support to Abdirizak. Humanity & Inclusion, for instance, started working in the camp in 2014 with a mission to improve education, employment opportunities, and political participation for people with disabilities. They provide wheelchairs to those in need and offer repair servicing, as well as train users how to repair their wheelchairs independently. Abdirizak is one of the beneficiaries of this programme and celebrated the mobility and self-sufficiency the wheelchair gave him: he started his business from it. Beyond this, however, he receives little further support.

Kakuma was not built to be accessible, and programmes often—unintentionally—exclude people with disabilities. Even essential services are often difficult to access. For example, Abdirizak described the difficulty he experiences collecting water, provided free in the camp. While he can transport a jerrycan, he said it can be hard to reach the tap, especially when there are crowds. Because of this, Abdirizak has no other option than to buy jerrycans of water from the Turkana host community.

*‘The only other support I have received is KSh 4,000 [US\$33] for racing,’* Abdirizak says, reaching into a large bag he has dragged over from the back of his room. From it, he pulls out a range of certificates. He selects one from the pile; it reads: *‘Kakuma–Kalobeyei Community Run’*. The run is held each year during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence event, which coincides with the International Day of Persons with Disabilities on 3 December. It has a special category for people with disabilities and invites anyone with any disability to participate. He grins proudly, leans over, reaches into the bag again and pulls out a huge golden plastic trophy cup. Smiling, he says, *‘In 2016, I came in first place. In 2018, I came in second place. [...] In 2020, there was no race because of Corona [COVID-19]. I would like to compete again.’*

*The thing that I consider most important is my wheelchair. Since I became disabled, it has helped me the most. I can use it to go to Kalobeyei and to Kakuma*

*town too. It doesn't cost me anything. I can even carry a jerrycan of water using my wheelchair. There is nothing in my life that has more importance than the wheelchair. I would get a wheelchair that is automatic if I had the money.*

Abdirizak's wheelchair is decorated with three plastic pinwheels, the kind children hold up to the wind. Three flags are also fixed to the chair: Somalia, Kenya, and the United States of America.

*The flags on my wheelchair stand for the love that I have for those countries. This one is where I came from [Somalia], the next one is Kenya, which has accepted me and gave me peace while living here. The last one is the United States of America flag. If I am still alive, I wish I could go there, if God says so.*

As Abdirizak heads off into the neighbourhood, the pinwheels spin and rattle and the flags flap in the wind. Our previous research found that 93 per cent of Somali refugees in Kakuma expect to move to a third country. But resettlement rates for Somali refugees in Kakuma are low, around 1.1 per cent annually, reflecting the limited opportunities available to refugees, especially after the US resettlement programme was curtailed during the Trump administration (Craig, 2017; Böhme, 2023).

When we returned to Kakuma a year later, Abdirizak was still there. Being resettled from Kakuma is like winning the lottery, and yet, while Abdirizak knew his chances of leaving were slim, his hope remained. Each day Abdirizak was watching videos on YouTube to teach himself English. Words and phrases he had learned were written in chalk across a blackboard that stood at the entrance of his home. UNHCR Kenya estimates that over 55,000 refugees living in Kenya—across Kakuma, Dadaab, and Nairobi—will be in need of resettlement in 2024. This figure includes women at risk, survivors of torture, and people living with disabilities, such as Abdirizak (UNHCR, 2023b). At the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, President Joe Biden committed to resettling up to 125,000 refugees in the United States each year, including 30,000–50,000 from Africa (US DOS, 2023; The White House, 2023). Yet, in 2023, only 1,341 Somali refugees were resettled to the United States, about 0.2 per cent of the total number of Somali refugees in the Horn of Africa. In 2025, the US government stopped the resettlement of Somali refugees, including from Kenya. Yet, the American flag still hangs from Abdirizak's wheelchair.



# Maker

## Ninetieth Percentile

*My father said, 'I know you are my boys. I am not sending you because I don't like you. I'm doing this for you, and I'm doing this for us. Focus, be patient, and don't worry about us. You may think of us, but worries can stop you from doing what you are supposed to do.' Every time I wanted to give up, I would remember these words.*

We meet Maker inside a refugee-run clinic in Kalobeyei. The simple hut, constructed from sturdy wooden poles and corrugated iron sheeting, has three empty beds with thin, worn mattresses. Intravenous drips hang from nails in the wooden beams above. In the corner, a table holds boxes of latex gloves and small glass bottles of fluid. Below it, a large box overflows with empty needle packets, discarded bottles, and unread consumer medicine information leaflets. The air is tinged with the smell of antiseptic. Every now and then, the wind carries exhaust fumes over from the diesel generator running behind the building. The iron-sheet roof cracks in the scorching heat. This is one of many informal health centres within the camp, set up to fill gaps in access to medical services. The clinic also has a makeshift lab and a pharmacy.

Maker works here six or seven days a week. He is among the wealthiest individuals in Kakuma, sitting at the ninetieth percentile of the income distribution. Because he spends most of his time at the pharmacy, he asked us to meet him here, rather than at his home, so we can talk to him while he works. At first, however, Maker's bosses do not want us to film the pharmacy: the lack of official general practice status makes them wary of attracting any unwanted attention. We sit down with his bosses for over two hours, discussing the project, our aims and answering all the questions they have. We explain that we are researchers trying to help people understand the realities of the camp, including both the problems refugees face and their capacity to fill gaps such as this one. They like the project and agree that images are needed to show people outside of Kakuma what health care and working conditions look like

here, especially given Kenya's tight restrictions on refugees' rights to work and run businesses.

Maker, still wearing his white lab coat and latex gloves, sits tall at the desk in front of us. He regularly checks the time on the stainless steel watch strapped to his wrist. We are mindful not to take too long. Unlike the other people we interviewed, Maker asks to tell his story in English. The interview becomes much more conversational than the others.

*My name is Maker. I am twenty-seven years old, and I live in Kakuma. I came here in 2012 [from South Sudan]. When I left home, I was eighteen. We had just gained independence, and life was good. There was no war, but I wanted to go to school. I wanted to learn. We didn't leave in a rush, it was something planned by the elders, like especially my parents. They sat down and they said, 'We're gonna send these kids.' We were all ready for it and excited. I was only eighteen and, you know, I was given that privilege: 'You need to go study,' they said. I was given a plane ticket to move from Malakal to Juba. I had never been in an airplane before, and then I get that chance. You know, it was like, 'Yeah, I'm somebody right now.'*

*When we left our home, we were two: me and my cousin. We were both under age, like he was sixteen and I was eighteen. He was the only family I had. He was my bloodline. I wasn't feeling alone. I was feeling like I have somebody. I don't call him a cousin anymore because he was the only brother that I had by my side. He would bring me his smile on his face and then it would be like we had understanding. We always smiled. We always laughed together. I felt like I have a hand whenever I need it.*

*But the moment I reached Kakuma, it was like I arrived in hell. I thought it would be like Nairobi or Kampala. But that's natural. You know, when you get to a place it will always look different from where you came from, even if it's much better. So, I took it as an experience, I was like, 'Oh, it's okay, I will get used to it.'*

*Also getting a ration card was stressful for us. Everything here was hard. The first day, we went to the UNHCR compound; we spent like twelve hours there. We didn't get what we wanted, and then the next day we went back. It took us like three days to get the ration card. Life was hard during the first six months for us because we were used to a house where our parents cooked for us, and they brought us water. Our only responsibility was to go to school, come back,*

*and do minor things that we were asked to do. If they sent us to the market, we would go. But here, we had to do everything ourselves.*

*It was also hard because I missed my friends and family back home, but I speak with them on the phone. Communication can be hard, but thanks to social media, we can talk. I try to talk to them when I get the chance. Whatever the issue is, I can never leave my family behind, so I have to talk to them. They always ask me, 'When are you coming back home? What are you still doing?' And some of them also can encourage me: 'You know, the home is a mess. You just stay there. We don't have peace anymore. So you just stay.' Some of them are desperate to see me. They'll be like, 'Son, when are you coming home? You need to come home.' Sometimes, it's hard though; it moves me emotionally, and I feel like I want to go home. It's been ten years now, and I still miss my mum so much. When I came [here], I didn't have a mum. I didn't have a sibling. I had to grow up and learn to cook for myself. It wasn't until 2014, after the war broke out, that two more of my cousins came. That was the first time I felt I had a family in Kakuma.*

*But these two cousins recently left Kakuma and went back to South Sudan. They are still there. But they may come back at any time. Also, the other cousin of mine isn't around, he just went somewhere, too. So, I'm the only guy who is around right now. But it doesn't mean that they are gone forever, you know. You leave, and even though you go abroad, people still come back to Kakuma.*

Kakuma is less than two hours by boda-boda from the South Sudanese border. Despite continuing violence and climatic shocks in South Sudan, back and forth movements between Kakuma and South Sudan are common, especially among younger refugees. Between 2016 and 2019, our research group carried out a longitudinal study with 1,362 refugees in Kakuma to better understand these types of movements (Betts et al., 2023). Our data show that refugees in Kakuma are highly mobile: between 2016 and 2019, 54 per cent of refugees in our sample had moved to a new location. About half of these had returned to their country of origin. To better understand these movements, we asked people remaining in Kakuma why their former household members or neighbours had gone back. The most frequent reasons provided were for job opportunities or for family responsibilities, such as to take care of a sick family member in the origin country. As with Maker, South Sudanese households often adopt split-family strategies, with part of the household remaining in Kakuma while others move in search of opportunities.

In Kenya, refugees are unable to move freely under national refugee policy. In addition, under international refugee law, return to the country of origin can put refugee status at risk. Refugee movements outside of Kakuma are therefore often temporary, and refugees usually do not report these to UNHCR or the Kenyan authorities, to avoid risking their status and access to food rations. But these movements do happen.

As a result, households in Kakuma and Kalobeyei frequently receive food rations that are, in theory, larger than they should be. This is the case with Maker, who reported receiving food rations for himself and his three cousins, even though they are not currently in the camp. Our data suggest that about one-third of South Sudanese households in Kakuma and Kalobeyei have more people recorded on their ration card than are currently living in the household.

Maker has been living alone since his cousins moved back to South Sudan. His house, built from neatly moulded and carved mud bricks, is in the Kakuma camp. Inside, a wooden-framed bed sits at the end of the room, made up with cotton sheets and a pillow. Pairs of clean trainers are lined up along the woven rug beside his bed, and a pink shirt and grey suit trousers hang from a nail above. Documents and books are neatly stacked on a wooden table below a small window. As Maker stays in Kalobeyei, where his work is, during the week, his house is left empty most of the time. Living alone or as a couple is the typical household structure of the richest 10 per cent in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. Among the poorest 90 per cent, the average household has about eight members, with three adults and five children. Among the richest 10 per cent, the average household size is two, with two-thirds of household members being adults.

*When I arrived in 2012, I had to redo primary school. Then, I went back to South Sudan to finish Form 4.<sup>1</sup> In 2019, I returned because I realized Kakuma is a place of opportunity. It's a place where I can pursue my dreams. Because, in Kakuma, you can be whoever you want to be, if you have the mind of what you want to be. It doesn't matter what certificate you have; you can do any course that you like. See, I can go on small courses, like peace building. I'm doing it now, this is the certificate. You know, I'm also doing another course on counselling. If I am interested in learning, I can do another course. If I have nine certificates, plus my primary certificate, plus the knowledge I gain from these organizations, who will I be? Somebody, right? Even the English that people speak, I may speak it better than the guy who is a graduate. So that's why I always like opportunities*

<sup>1</sup> The last year of secondary school.

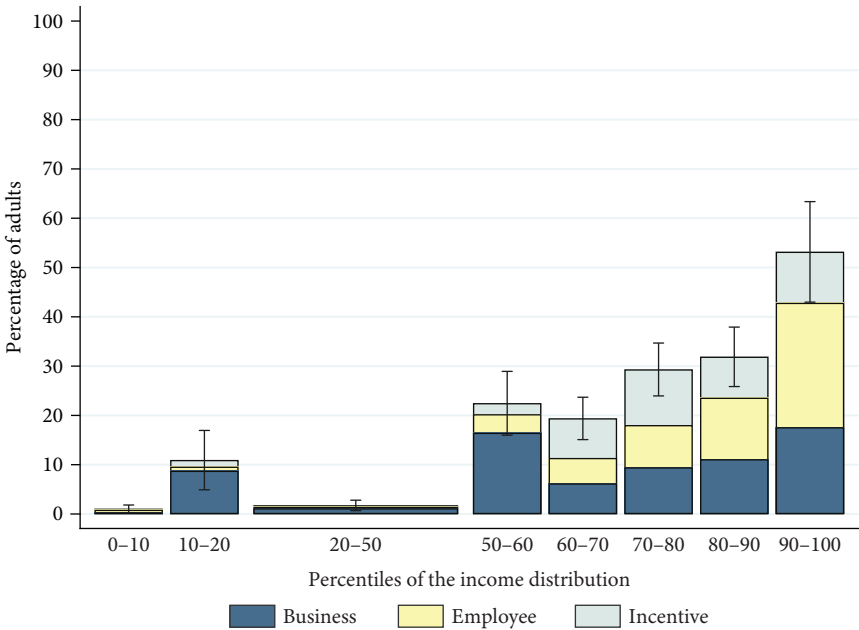
*in Kakuma. They are not limited. And people should not give up because they don't have their certificates with them. Even if they don't have a Kenyan certificate, either primary or secondary, they should not give up because of that. This is because the system here is different. Like, I can't go to university in Kenya, but I can take the opportunities that Kakuma is offering. Why don't you learn if you want to learn?*

*I am somebody now, I am no longer in school. Now, when I wake up, I go to work. My economic situation is a bit hard, but not like when I was hopeless and jobless. Thank God, now I have something to do. Now I work as a chemist. I am working for someone else. I started my job at the beginning of this year. Last year, I volunteered, so I could learn. Then, I started working as a lab technician. I worked in Kakuma for like seven months then moved to Kalobeyei. In Kalobeyei, I worked with a Somali guy for six months, then moved to where I am now. I help in terms of medication and as a lab technician. Each month I make KSh 10,000 [US\$80].*

*Right now, it's my dream job, but I would love to be a doctor. I hope I can study further in the future. You know, there's nothing impossible. It only requires patience, hard work, and determination to get to where you want to [be]. When I came to Kakuma, I never knew that I would be a lab technician, so there's nothing impossible. I don't want to be a simple technician forever; if I get the chance, I would like to study and become the doctor that I deserve to be.*

*But it's hard because I studied in a different country with a different certificate. Sometimes, I feel helpless because the certificate doesn't meet the requirements here. But there are so many opportunities in Kakuma that we should not give up. I did my studies in South Sudan, so I can't go to university in Kenya until I study again here. So that's what I will do.*

The pharmacy is at the back of the clinic, enclosed by chicken wire. There is just a small opening for customers to pay through and receive their medication. Boxes of antibiotics like Axylin and Lacillin, Sonadol painkillers, Omeprazole, and many other medications fill the shelves behind. Maker asks if we would like to see his lab. We follow him through a white tarpaulin sheet into a small room. 'This is my light compound microscope, and this is my centrifuge', he says while pointing to the two white machines on a work bench, 'We use them to separate the blood and to see if a patient has malaria. I also do urine analysis and stool analysis. We can also do pregnancy tests and tests for STIs. And many others.'



**Figure 16** Adult employment by category

Source: Authors.

Only 16 per cent of adults in Kakuma have an income-generating activity (Figure 16). But among the richest 10 per cent, more than half of adults are working. About 41 per cent of all workers are self-employed or working in a family business, 26 per cent are working for a non-governmental organization (NGO) or an international organization as incentive workers,<sup>2</sup> and the rest—like Maker—are employed by other refugees or members of the host community. While education is not a significant predictor of whether refugees have a job, it is a significant predictor of work income. Each extra year of education increases the average monthly income of working refugees by KSh 141 [US\$1.2], which is substantial given that the average monthly income from work is only about KSh 5,800 [US\$48].

Because only a minority of adults work, others are left looking for educational programmes that might increase their chances of finding a job or earning higher pay. As Maker puts it: *‘All the agencies are doing a great job constructing schools . . . but the challenge we have is that we have the primary and secondary level, but to get to the next level of education is hard for us.’* About

<sup>2</sup> Incentive workers are refugees employed by humanitarian organizations within the camp to support service delivery—such as teaching, health care, or logistics—typically in exchange for a small monthly stipend rather than a full salary due to legal restrictions on refugee employment in Kenya.

one-third of adults in our sample were studying at the time. While there are opportunities for primary and secondary education, places at higher education institutions are limited. Among adults aged eighteen to twenty-five, only 1.3 per cent were enrolled in higher education. This low rate reflects several barriers to access, such as the competitive nature of applications, the cost of studying, including fees and cost of materials, and unstable electricity and internet connectivity (UNHCR, 2017). Women are also disproportionately affected because of caring responsibilities.

*My education is something I will always pray for. Young people pray in their hearts because it's hard to go to church and express themselves. Religion is a community whereby you come together in faith. Now, though, young people like me say we are Christian, but we don't go to church. But it doesn't mean we are not religious. We know what is important to pray for. I pray for education, health, and peace. I always pray that South Sudan can be free from this trauma, and that I can go home, see my family and be happy to live with them. But now I cannot go back. If I go home today, I would be going to trouble. So, I pray in my heart. Just because I don't go to church every day, it doesn't mean I am not spiritual. I am.*

*After praying, I may clean the house or do my laundry if my clothes are dirty. I brush my teeth, take a shower, and put on clothes. I like doing housework lazily. I don't cook any more; I go to a hotel. The food is made by a Somalian. It's in a Somali area, so I have to cope with whatever they have there. I like chapati for breakfast with tea. Then, in the afternoon, I don't like their pasta, but I do have rice. Then I have supper.*

*In my free time, I like to sing, listen to music, and play basketball. Whenever I am stressed, I go to the basketball court. By the time I come home, everything is relieved from my head. Basketball is in my blood. I am at home on the court; it's where I can laugh with my friends. Coming home, I'm tired. My mind never thinks of anything but eating and sleeping. And also, if I'm so much stressed, I listen to music. I fresh up my mind, and then I sing the good music that I love. I also want to be a musician. Despite the fact that I have another career, my hope is to sing. I like singing.*

*I learnt how to play basketball in 2010 in my hometown. I wanted to play, but my home was very far. So, I bought a ball that resembled a basketball from a shop in the market. I started watching other people play and copied*

*the drills. Once I came to Kakuma, I was lucky enough to find a basketball court in Kakuma 1. That's when I fell in love with basketball. Someone gave his time and trained us. In 2014, I was lucky enough to get a [sport] scholarship to study. Basketball was something bigger than anything. I went three years without having to pay a school fee; I got to see other places thanks to basketball.*

Sport is very important to many in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, with the most popular sports being football, dancing, volleyball, and basketball (Betts et al., 2024). There is a large football pitch outside the WFP compound where we are staying, and each evening, before sunset, groups of young adults arrive in brightly coloured football kits to play against each other. The pitch itself is roughly marked out on a hard-packed dirt field, devoid of grass in the arid climate. A goal stands at the end of the pitch with a net that has been mended more than a couple of times. Despite the limited set-up, this pitch, like other sports grounds found across the camp, gives refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei a place to gather, compete, laugh, and to escape—even if momentarily—the challenges faced in the camp.

*The challenges I face are the same as the challenges everyone faces in Kakuma. People are not getting enough food, and there is a lack of water. Life in Kakuma generally is hard. What pushed me to face these challenges is that I want the best for myself. I want to make my own money. I want to succeed and, for me to do that, it's only on my own self-determination.*

*If I can, I try to help others—I give some assistance to my friends, in small ways. Like, if somebody comes and says, 'I don't have this thing', I give if I can because I already have a job. I give food from my Bamba Chakula to my friends and neighbours so that I don't have to sell it. I don't cook for myself. If I need food sometimes, maybe I will go to my neighbours, and they will feed me. But I am not depending on this. I have the ability to eat anything I like. If I want chicken, I go and get chicken. I mostly go to restaurants to eat because I don't have a wife to cook for me.*

*I usually eat alone. I have friends here, but I don't have family, so I feel alone. It's hard being alone because no one has my back. I don't like the fact that I don't have brothers around me. Like, who will I run to if I have a fight or if something happened. For example, what if you are in love with a girl and accidentally get her pregnant? If you don't have people around, it is hard to handle your case. Also, if you are dating a girl, she might want confirmation of your family, so*

*that she can trust you. Even though I am an honest man, who wouldn't run away? We have a tradition that when you get a girlfriend, the girl needs to be welcomed into your home, she needs to be impressed. She wants to enjoy the company of your sisters, brothers, mum, and dad. And then she will be like, 'Yes, this is the family that I'm getting married to,' you see. But I don't have that around. So that makes me feel lonely. This feeling is always in my mind. I am a man. Like I'm a grown man. Twenty-seven years is not young. Soon I'll be like a mature adult. I'm in a relationship, but this thing is holding it back.*

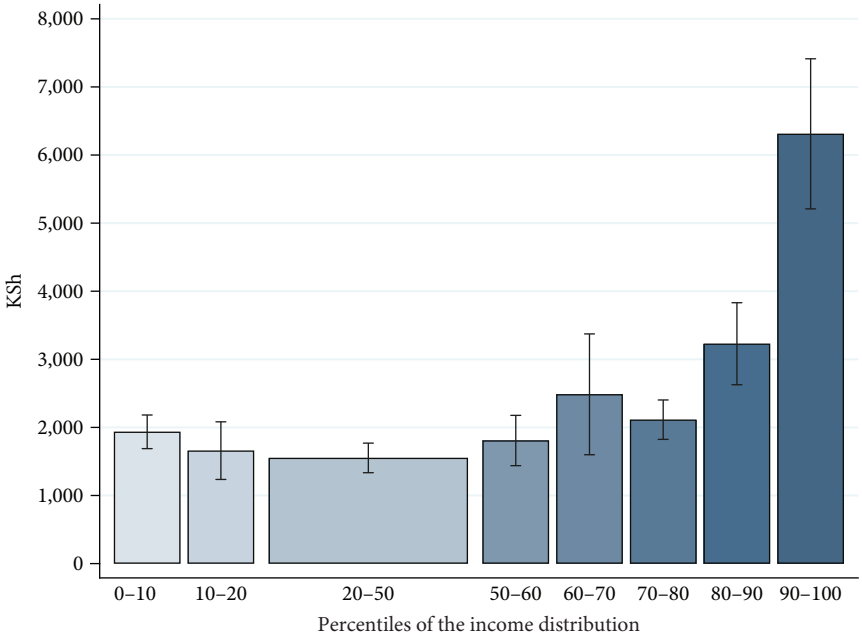
*But even though there are challenges, I like it here. I feel comfortable. The best day was when we celebrated a friend's birthday. I had a call from my friend's girlfriend asking me to gather all our friends and come. We are not used to celebrating our birthdays, so I thought there was a problem that we had to solve. But it wasn't, it was the most joyful evening that we ever had. We put on good clothes; it was very simple and happy.*

*I really like clothes. My favourite items are my shoes and clothes. It is important that I look good. A day I remember was when I was like five or six—my brother bought me new jeans, very shiny shoes, and a big, wonderful shirt. That day was remarkable for me, I will never forget. That day always makes me think of him as the best brother, even though he could be rough. I remember crying when he came home. He would come and beat me, then beg for forgiveness. It's not like he didn't love us, but that is nature, you see. It's like a way of raising you, making you learn not to do the wrong thing.*

Although Maker does not stay at his house often, it was important to him to make it a nice place to live. *'It makes me feel comfortable. This is what I do in the morning'*, he says while beating a cloth against his table to get rid of the dust, *'I clean my area whenever I am around. This is my reading table and when I watch movies on my phone, I place it there.'* Christian, one of the filmmakers interviewing Maker, asks what the flower on the table is about. It's a red artificial rose in a pot with a label that reads *'It's a treasure to have you in my life.'* *'About the flower'*, Maker answers, *'it's actually my favourite flower. That's why I have it on the table. It was a gift from my girlfriend when I was living in Juba ... I miss her, she was special.'* Christian asks if they still talk. Maker looks down, *'We do ... I am in touch with her, but not much. We chat on Facebook. Sometimes I call, sometimes she calls. That's all for now. I can't say any more things about her, it's personal.'*

Living largely on his own since arriving in Kakuma, Maker’s journey has been characterized by a strong sense of independence. As a result of his determination to succeed academically and professionally, as well as support from family in South Sudan, Maker has found himself among the wealthiest households. These relatively well-off households are not distributed evenly across the camps. Households in the richest 10 per cent are more likely to live in Kakuma 1 and 2, the oldest and most vibrant parts of the camps. Their lives differ in many respects. First, they have more diverse and richer diets—households in the richest 10 per cent were twenty-three percentage points more likely to have eaten fish or meat in the day before the interview, 37 per cent compared with 14 per cent. They also consume 53 per cent more calories on average, and the value of their food consumption is 105 per cent higher.

Even though they are better off, households in the richest 10 per cent are also much more likely to receive remittances: 49 per cent did so in the four weeks preceding the survey, compared with 6 per cent in the rest of the population. One key reason is that they are better connected abroad. Two-thirds of households in the richest 10 per cent report having family members or friends

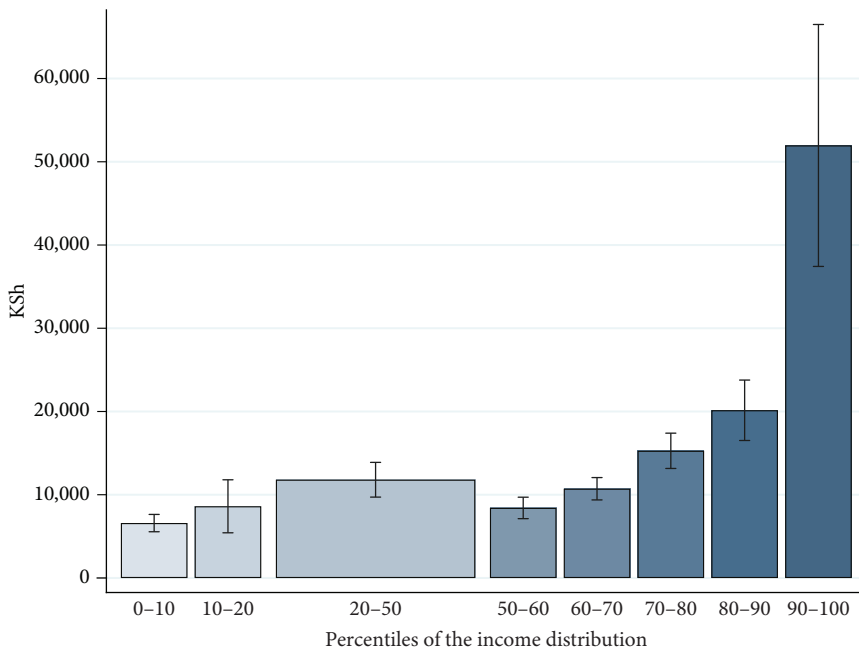


**Figure 17** Per-person monthly household expenditure in Kenyan shillings (KSh)

Source: Authors.

living outside Africa, compared with 18 per cent in the rest of the population. Maker also receives remittances from an uncle, who also supported him in his studies and journey to Kakuma. He used to receive about KSh 5,000 [US\$42] per month on average, a large amount in Kakuma—it is about the median monthly wage of workers in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. But Maker said that transfers are becoming less frequent now that he has a good job.

Relatively rich households in Kakuma can afford to buy more and live more comfortably. Their monthly expenditure per person is, on average, more than 200 per cent higher than that of other households (Figure 17). The difference is even more striking for specific expenditures, especially those that Maker mentions, such as clothing, which is 400 per cent higher, and airtime, which is 883 per cent higher. The per-person value of their assets is nearly 400 per cent higher (Figure 18). For instance, 86 per cent of households in the richest 10 per cent have a smartphone, compared with 58 per cent in the rest of the population. They are also more likely to have electricity: 61 per cent do, compared with 21 per cent in the rest of the population.



**Figure 18** Value of household assets in Kenyan shillings (KSh)

Source: Authors.

Another key expense for Maker is eating out. While only 6 per cent of households in the bottom 90 per cent reported having spent money in restaurants the week before the survey, 53 per cent of households in the richest 10 per cent reported such expenditures.

*Everyone loves having a good life. Living in a good life, that means building a good house for yourself, right? And then also have a very special moment in your life. My dream is to be the best I can be for myself. I want to build the best for myself, have a good house, a happy family, a car that I own. But these things, they shall never come to your path until you put in hard work. And that hard work is going to start from you. It will start from here, where you are right now, with the thoughts and the plans that you have. So, for me, my wishes and my dreams, I want a car for myself. I want a happy family. I want to build a good house, not just to live here for the rest of my life.*

*Can I say something to the person watching this? Please take the opportunity, don't let it pass you by. We are all from different nations, we are different people. But since we are gathered here, everyone is one. I love Kakuma. It's not because it's better than any other place. It's the togetherness and because Kakuma is bigger than anything else. Although it's hard, that's the nature of life. People have been in Kakuma since the 1990s, and they still live here. And there may be opportunities to leave, to go somewhere else and make yourself a better person. But Kakuma is home to everyone. Take the opportunity and do something that will change you.*

# Conclusion

This book is built around a fundamental tension: the tension between data and human stories.

Data in the form of numbers, figures, or statistics are ever more present. They populate newspapers, social media, policy reports, business strategies, academic research, and the algorithms that guide our lives. Their purpose is to provide a scientific, representative, and objective account of how the world works or should work. They are used to inform debates, shape public opinion, and guide decisions in all sectors of our societies. In this sense, quantitative data are powerful tools for understanding societies at scale.

Yet, data are also often dry and dehumanizing. Statistical summaries such as means or medians compress the lives of hundreds or thousands of individuals into one number. In doing so, they necessarily abstract away individual histories, experiences, and particularities. What is diverse and lived becomes aggregated and flattened. Statistics feel detached from the people they describe. The individuals behind the numbers tend to disappear. As a result, statistics are also more difficult to remember.

Stories sit at the opposite end of this spectrum. Stories are profoundly human. For thousands of years, long before written records, societies relied on oral storytelling to transmit culture, norms, and essential knowledge across generations. Extreme stories conveyed lessons about danger, cooperation, and success, and humans evolved to learn and share them because they contained information that mattered for survival. People are wired to tell, listen to, and remember stories, especially those that represent the extremes of human experience.

This creates a tension for anyone seeking to understand the world and to communicate that understanding to others. Quantitative data can generate broad, representative insights, but they are abstract, impersonal, and hard to communicate and retain. Stories, by contrast, are vivid, memorable, and emotionally resonant, but they are frequently unrepresentative, decontextualized, or selected precisely because they are exceptional.

This book has sought to reconcile this tension by exploring the following question: can we humanize data by associating them with representative

stories? And conversely, can we tell stories that are representative and contextualized rather than cherry-picked from the extremes of experience?

We applied a methodology we call Representative Storytelling to Kakuma, one of the world's largest refugee camps. In a field dominated by extreme representations, our approach uses quantitative data to select stories on a representative basis and to contextualize them. Insofar as possible, we have tried to create a platform for the voices of refugees themselves to reach a wider global audience of people who may not have lived experience of displacement. Our role, as outsiders, has been three-fold: to select the households on a basis that is representative, to document the accounts of those selected, and to contextualize the stories using quantitative and qualitative evidence. The aim was not to privilege stories over data, or vice versa, but to allow each to complement the other.

To conclude this book, we take a step back and reflect on what we learned from developing and applying Representative Storytelling in Kakuma. The conclusion is organized around four questions. First, what have we learned about our methodology? Second, in our particular context of Kakuma, what shapes variation in the struggles, opportunities, and aspirations of the nine selected refugee households? Third, what do their stories have in common, which may lead us to view refugees as a unified group? Finally, what implications do our insights have for policy and future research?

## **Reflections on Our Methodology**

When implementing our methodology, we had no idea at the outset whether the individual household stories would offer particularly engaging accounts in their own right, only that they would each represent a particular income level within the camp. And yet the nine stories are compelling, individually and collectively, because they help build a representative picture of the realities of life in Kakuma.

We also found out that every story can be seen as extreme, depending on the reference point. What constitutes an 'extreme' or an outlier is inherently relative and context dependent. Our nine stories span the economic distribution within Kakuma. From Rose to Maker, these are, by camp standards, relatively ordinary lives. Yet, even the most economically successful among them would be classified as poor in many countries. Maker, while representing economic success within Kakuma, would fall around the thirty-third percentile of the global income distribution but within the poorest percentiles in high-income

countries. His story reflects exceptional success in his local context but relative normality or poverty in the global one.

The same logic applies within individual life stories. Many elements that are tragically common in Kakuma, including forced displacement, exposure to violence and climatic shocks, the loss of loved ones, food insecurity, theft, and repeated shocks, would be considered extreme in many other settings. In the camp, they constitute normality. Whether a story is framed as exceptional or ordinary depends not only on the events themselves but also on the audience and reference point.

These observations point to an important limitation of the methodology, which is primarily empirical. Stories and findings are necessarily shaped by the place and moment in which the study is conducted. In our application, Representative Storytelling was applied in Kakuma, a large and long-standing refugee camp in northwestern Kenya. The stories documented in our book capture life in the camp primarily in 2022, before subsequent reductions in humanitarian assistance and the early implementation of the Shirika Plan. As such, they should be read as representative of Kakuma at a particular point in time rather than as a timeless or universally generalizable account of refugee experiences elsewhere.

Another challenge for our approach emerged while collecting household stories. Human discussions, we discovered, naturally gravitate towards what is exceptional, dramatic, or emotionally powerful. When implementing Representative Storytelling, our instruments included questions on the daily lives of refugees but also on themes that call for compelling narratives. Respondents, in turn, often highlighted stories they perceived as noteworthy or meaningful. Enumerators, interpreters, and we as researchers are trained to investigate further the narratives that are extraordinary rather than mundane. As a result, even our methodology, which was explicitly designed to move beyond extreme stories, could not fully avoid them. This is not necessarily a flaw as the ambition of Representative Storytelling is not to fully eliminate extremeness but to control it. We did so by anchoring stories in the income distribution, by selecting them based on its full spectrum, and by situating them in their context using data.

A further insight concerns the use of filming as part of the research process. Working with filmmakers living in Kakuma allowed us to collect and co-produce stories with refugees rather than merely about refugees. The collaboration benefited from complementary forms of expertise: our experience in research design and analysis and their deep contextual knowledge and professional experience of film production in the camp. This contributed to a

relatively more balanced research relationship, perhaps more than is typical when external researchers collaborate with refugee communities, because it created opportunities for mutual learning. Despite this, our positionality as scholars affiliated with well-resourced institutions in the Global North inevitably placed us in a position of relative privilege.

Filming also changed how stories were told and how participants engaged with the research. The presence of a camera can be a limitation as it influences people's behaviours. Hence, working with filmmakers and interpreters who have deep contextual knowledge and taking the necessary time to familiarize participants with the practices of filmmaking is particularly important. Compared to conventional interviews, however, the presence of a camera has also encouraged greater involvement: participants showed places, objects, routines, and relationships that would have been difficult to capture in words alone. Our refugee colleagues emphasized that our systematic approach to story selection enabled them to enter communities they had not previously accessed, build relationships with people they would otherwise not have met, and document spaces and moments of everyday life they had not encountered in their earlier work. Film also enables us to reach audiences beyond academic readers, including people who may never visit Kakuma and for whom video may be the only way to encounter the camp, even indirectly. At the same time, filming is time-consuming, resource-intensive, and not suitable for all research settings. It is therefore best seen as a 'nice to have' with clear advantages but not a necessary component of Representative Storytelling.

A final and important learning concerns the practice of returning. We went back to Kakuma twice in the years following the initial interviews to share the films and draft chapters with participants, to check for accuracy, and (crucially) to ensure that they felt comfortable with how they were represented. These encounters were often emotionally intense, both for the participants and for our team. For some respondents, watching themselves in the videos or hearing their stories told one or two years before—while their circumstances had changed little—was difficult. At the same time, many expressed appreciation that we returned and sustained the relationship. Research can sometimes seem extractive, and the act of returning helped mitigate this dynamic. This stands in contrast to much quantitative research (including ours), where large samples make it virtually impossible to return to households to share findings and where participants may understandably feel used rather than engaged with. With nine households, we were able to avoid this. It also ensured that consent remained informed and genuine over time rather than assumed once and for all. While returning is time-consuming and costly—and, in some contexts,

may be done remotely—it is, in our view, a strongly recommended component of Representative Storytelling.

### **Understanding Differences across Deciles**

Decontextualized stories, especially when cherry-picked, offer limited insight into broader social patterns. At worst, they risk distorting understanding by overemphasizing extremes. A central contribution of Representative Storytelling is to move beyond this limitation by selecting stories systematically across the spectrum of a key dimension. In this book, we selected refugees based on their relative position on Kakuma's income distribution, with each story representing a particular point along that curve. This design allows us to step back from individual narratives and ask what becomes visible when stories are read collectively: how constraints and opportunities evolve across the distribution and which meaningful differences emerge. This section synthesizes a non-exhaustive set of such observations, illustrating how the systematic selection of stories, together with quantitative data and contextual knowledge, enables stories to speak not only as individual accounts but also as evidence of broader trends.

Several patterns emerge as we move across the distribution. At the bottom end, households all lack any source of earned income and are fully dependent on aid. This reflects that 57 per cent of households in Kakuma have no other income source than humanitarian aid. It is only when we get to the sixth decile that we find that Ayen's household has a family member working. As we move upwards, income increasingly comes from work, first through low-paid or informal employment; then through small-scale entrepreneurship; and, at the very top of the camp's distribution, through relatively stable professional employment or larger businesses. Remittances are also more common among better-off households.

Differences in income are closely linked with other dimensions of living standards. Asset ownership, consumption, and dietary quality change little across the lower half of the distribution but begin to diverge higher up, creating visible gaps in living conditions within the camp as measured in the quantitative data. These differences are also salient when comparing the nine stories, with Maker living in a different class. This is all relative, however. Even in the highest decile, average incomes are only around US\$100 per person per month, and households that appear relatively well off within Kakuma would still be considered very poor in high-income countries.

Perceptions of Kakuma also appear to change as we move up the deciles. For those on lower incomes, Kakuma is a place of survival. Rose told us, *'I don't have any work. I only depend on the food and support from the United Nations.'* At the other end of the spectrum, Maker suggests, *'Kakuma is a place of opportunities'*, explaining that he chose to come back to Kakuma: *'I love Kakuma . . . In Kakuma . . . you can be whoever you want to be.'* Between these extremes, several of the households view life in Kakuma as difficult but a relative improvement compared to insecurity back home.

Taken together, the nine stories also show how debt plays an important role across the income distribution, though its nature and function change with income. Debt levels are highest among the poorest refugees, for whom debt is the main coping strategy in response to shocks. Among these households, debt is closely linked to the modality of humanitarian assistance, as aid cards are used as collateral to secure credit. Debt levels are lowest in the middle of the income distribution. Then, at the other extreme, richer households also contract high levels of debt, but the sources and motivations differ. They are more likely to borrow money from financial institutions, and borrowing is more often associated with investments.

Gender and household structure also differ markedly across the distribution. Seven of the nine stories are told by women, and among these, the five poorest households are all female-headed, with partners either deceased, missing, or living in South Sudan. In these households, women's priorities consistently centre on their children's survival and well-being. These households tend to be larger, with many children and high dependency ratios. Caregiving responsibilities constrain mothers' educational attainment and limit their access to stable employment, reinforcing economic vulnerability. By contrast, better-off households are typically smaller, with fewer dependents, and are more likely to include working-age men without caregiving responsibilities.

Education, too, plays a more prominent role as income rises, not only as a potential pathway to work but also as a source of aspiration and agency. Thi-jin explains, *'[M]y son will come of age, complete his education . . . Through his education he will be able to take care of us.'* Elizabeth joined school with her children and passed her secondary school exams. She reported investing what little money she had in her children being able to sit their exams. Nyaliak also enrolled in school and in a range of vocational courses alongside her children: *'[W]hat motivated me to go to school is that everyone is given the opportunity to do something that benefits them . . . we decided to go to school and learn . . . My main aim of going to school is to be able to speak for myself.'*

Finally, some differences intersect with geography and nationality. Where households reside in the camps matters. The poorest, generally South Sudanese recent arrivals, are living in the Kalobeyi settlement, where 81 per cent of households are fully dependent on aid. By contrast, there is greater opportunity within the Kakuma camp, particularly for those in or near Kakuma 1, where the main markets and employment opportunities are located. Nationality also makes a difference. Obviously, eight of our nine households are South Sudanese; the exception is Abdirizak, who is from Somalia. We know from our wider data collection that Somali men are much more likely to be involved in entrepreneurship, to have higher household incomes, and to have greater access to remittances.

To what extent can we explain these differences? Of course, with nine stories and descriptive data, we cannot in any way infer a causal relationship between income and the lived experiences that each household describes. Nevertheless, as we move up the deciles, patterns emerge showing how income shapes lived experience. Representative Storytelling allowed us to observe these patterns without reducing them to averages or isolating them from the human lives that experience them.

### Recognizing Commonalities

In addition to these differences, the stories also have many things in common. They share commonalities that echo a large literature on refugee lives and livelihoods (e.g. [Jacobsen, 2005](#); [Campbell, 2006](#); [Horst, 2007](#); [Werker, 2007](#); [Lindley, 2009](#); [Hammar, 2014](#); [Carrier, 2017](#); [Omata, 2017](#)), which has long emphasized a set of structural challenges that distinguish refugees' socio-economic trajectories from those of other poor populations. Representative Storytelling allows us to illustrate these commonalities through representative, situated lives. We focus on four mechanisms that [Betts et al. \(2026\)](#) identified to explain systematic differences between host and refugee populations.

First, trauma—each of the stories, except that of Maker, involves experiences of conflict and violence in the country of origin. Rose explains how she fled violence in Juba, lost her brother, father, and mother to the conflict, and was forced to leave her husband in South Sudan: '*[M]y journey came as an emergency. . . I was just thinking about getting my children somewhere safe.*' Celina tells us, '*[M]y husband was gunned down, and I had no choice but to leave immediately.*' Malual reminds us that '*[T]here were actually three tragedies that forced us out of our village: it flooded, there is a war, and there is no education for*

*the children in South Sudan.* Even as income levels rise across the deciles, these stories of traumatic experience repeat across the households. Abdirizak lost his wife, his two children, his property, and also his health, becoming disabled after being shot in Somalia.

Second, dispossession—each story involves the loss of tangible or intangible assets as a result of flight. Rose and her family had to quickly sell their cows for below market value. Celina lost all her family's cattle and their savings before they fled. The loss of cattle, property, and businesses as a result of conflict and violence is common to all. Nyaliak explains, *'We left everything at home, both my TV, my bed, and everything else.'* But dispossession is not limited to the physical loss of assets; it is also the loss of credentials. Even Maker had no other choice but to repeat primary school after moving to Kakuma because his prior certificates were not recognized.

Third, uprootedness—each household has had experiences of being forced to adapt to an unfamiliar environment. Without exception, they describe the challenge of leaving the place and people they knew and loved and adjusting to new circumstances with different cultures, languages, and people. Maker shared his sense of dislocation arriving in Kakuma at the age of eighteen with only his sixteen-year-old cousin—*'[T]he moment I reached Kakuma, it was like I arrived in hell. I thought it would be like Nairobi or Kampala. But that's natural. You know, when you get to a place it will always look different from where you came from, even if it's much better.'* Like others, Malual described their experience of initially arriving at the reception centre and the challenges of adapting: *'In the reception centre, I was worried about the kind of foods that were served to us daily. They would serve sorghum and cowpeas daily, which we weren't so used to back in our home village. It was stressful not having fresh fish, milk, and meat to eat.'*

Fourth, rights restrictions—across all of the stories, each household faces challenges that result from refugees facing regulatory restrictions, including limitations on their right to work in the formal economy or to live outside the camps. These challenges are reflected in the difficulties of accessing employment. Only Maker has a job and that is within one of the informal health centres within the camp, which lacks general practice status. Across the other households, refugees rely upon some combination of aid, incentive work within humanitarian organizations, or small-scale entrepreneurship. In all of their activities, they face regulatory barriers to full participation in the economy. Unlike the local Turkana, they cannot own large animals or collect firewood outside the boundaries of the camp. Those in Kakuma are also limited in where and how they can spend the cash assistance that they receive from humanitarian organizations.

Beyond these four challenges, hope and aspirations can be found at every income level. Nearly all the households talk about their aspirations for the future and for their children. As Nyaliak puts it, *'I don't want my children to live the life I am living . . . the best day I remember is the day my son sat for his final exams and got good grades.'* Maker wants to be a doctor and says, *'I want to build the best for myself, having a good house, having a happy family, having a car that I own.'* Like Abdirizak, who is learning English in the hope he will be selected to move to the United States, many households also aspire to resettle to a third country to restart their lives.

In almost all the stories, religion plays an important role. Eight of the accounts are from South Sudanese Christians and one from a Somali Muslim. For nearly all, God and prayer play a central role in shaping hope and navigating the challenges of life in Kakuma.

Taken together, these commonalities help explain why it remains analytically meaningful to speak of 'refugees' as a group, despite substantial internal heterogeneity.

### **Insights for Policy and Practice**

A unique feature of this book has been its attempt to cover the full spectrum of income levels in Kakuma. Rather than just selecting extreme stories of poverty or success, we have proposed and applied a new methodology: Representative Storytelling. In selecting households that represent each decile, from first to ninth, we have covered the full distribution of incomes. Unusually, this means we have also covered 'the middle,' a group that is often forgotten when refugees' stories are depicted in the media.

Refugees' lives do not neatly fit the stereotypes of villains, victims, and heroes. But, of course, elements of all of these exist in all people. Many of our stories show vulnerability as well as extraordinary courage and resilience. People have fled unimaginably traumatic events, lost loved ones, and struggled with extreme poverty. And yet, each of our nine protagonists has also found ways to overcome their extraordinary challenges, to survive, and to maintain a sense of hope and aspiration—whether through strength of character, necessity, or by drawing upon their faith.

Recognizing that refugees do not fit reductionist stereotypes is important for how stories and narratives are told by the media and many humanitarian organizations. One of the key takeaways from this book is to show that there are different ways to narrate the lives of refugees. Refugee stories do not have to be told through sensationalism alone. Beyond the outliers, people's ordinary

lives ‘in the middle of the curve’ can also be interesting and insightful. The lives of refugees do not have to be romanticized but often involve stories of struggle, hope, resilience, and aspiration that are compelling in their own right. Many aspects of these stories are ordinary in the Kakuma context but extraordinary from an outside perspective.

This approach also matters for policy. If policymakers’ views of refugees are based on reductionist stereotypes, then they will design policies that reflect a distorted view of the lived reality of refugees’ lives, whether in camps, cities, in poor countries, or in rich countries. Representations focusing on extreme vulnerability call for uniform humanitarian solutions based on food assistance, shelter, and protection. Conversely, if attention centres on exceptional success stories—refugee entrepreneurs, athletes, or cultural figures—it can foster the belief that self-reliance is attainable for everyone, given sufficient motivation or modest support. The third common narrative, portraying refugees as threats or villains, fuels policies of exclusion, containment, or forced return. All three framings risk distorting policy choices.

Our analysis points to a more complex reality, and being able to understand the sources of similarity and difference among refugees offers an opportunity to nuance policy interventions. The stories and data show that virtually every household in Kakuma depends, to some degree, on humanitarian assistance. Even when households earn income from work, it is typically limited to one or a small number of adults within each household, and it involves low and unstable wages. Even for households in the top decile, business incomes and employment frequently remain tied to the humanitarian economy. The story of Maker also illustrates how success and vulnerability fluctuate over time. While he was largely self-reliant at the time of our interview, subsequent family arrivals and changing circumstances left him struggling to make ends meet when we returned. Given Kakuma’s remote and arid location, the constraints of local markets, and the formal and informal restrictions refugees face, it is difficult to imagine a camp economy that could function without humanitarian aid.

At the same time, all refugees have aspirations and potential. Recognizing heterogeneity in refugees’ economic lives allows policy to move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches and towards interventions that complement humanitarian assistance more effectively. Our method offers a lens to examine diversity across but also within households. What Rose needs as a single-female household head at the first decile of the income distribution is different from what Maker needs as a single young man working as a pharmacist and aspiring to be a doctor. Children, adolescents, and older

household members likewise face distinct constraints and opportunities. All are in need of international protection because of what they have in common as refugees, but they are in very different positions in terms of their material and non-material needs, capabilities, and future possibilities.

The same logic extends beyond Kakuma. If understanding heterogeneity matters for policy within a single camp, it matters at least as much across refugee settings. Kakuma represents a specific camp context in East Africa. While the majority of refugees across Africa reside in refugee camps, elsewhere most refugees now live in cities. The experience of refugees living in other regions of the world may be different, especially in urban centres or in high-income countries. Refugees there may have higher incomes and higher rates of employment, although not necessarily greater subjective well-being or better physical and mental health outcomes. Urban refugees face a different set of challenges, often resulting from having to subsist in the informal economy and lacking access to humanitarian assistance (Betts et al., 2024). Representative Storytelling could be used in these other contexts to understand how refugees live beyond Kakuma and how diversity within refugee populations plays out under different institutional and economic conditions.

Beyond the refugee context, we believe that Representative Storytelling speaks to a broader challenge: how to humanize data in debates about major global and social issues. This challenge applies not only to refugee protection but also to other contexts in which data and human stories are commonly deployed for political purposes—global health, international development, human rights, or climate change, for example.

Too often, human stories are deployed in ways that are unrepresentative and decontextualized, while quantitative evidence remains abstract and emotionally distant. This book has argued that the two need not be in tension. By selecting stories on a transparent, non-arbitrary basis and situating them within representative data, it is possible to make statistics more human and stories more informative.

Humanizing data is not about replacing numbers with narratives, or vice versa, but about allowing each to enrich the other.

Beyond our particular focus on refugees, Representative Storytelling offers a broader foundation for public engagement with major global or social challenges. By moving beyond the outliers that are so often emphasized by vested interests, this methodology demonstrates that the everyday lives of individuals, businesses, and communities ‘in the middle of the curve’ are equally worthy of attention, compelling, and insightful.

# Glossary

**ATM** Automated Teller Machine.

**Bamba Chakula** Cash transfers sent from the World Food Programme (WFP) to refugees living in Kakuma refugee camp. The value of the transfer at the time of research was US\$7 per person per month. Refugees receiving Bamba Chakula also receive in-kind food assistance from one of the four WFP distribution centres in Kakuma.

**Bamba Chapaa** Cash transfers sent from the WFP to refugees living in Kalobeyei settlement. The value of the transfer at the time of research was US\$17 per person per month.

**Boda-boda** A term commonly used in East Africa to refer to motorcycle taxis.

**Classes 1–8** The grades in primary school.

**Clinic 7** The Ammusait General Hospital, known as Clinic 7, which is the main hospital. It is located in Kakuma 4 and is run by the International Rescue Committee.

**DRS** Department for Refugee Services.

**Forms 1–4** The grades in secondary school.

**KCPE** Kenya Certificate of Primary Education, an exam taken at the end of primary school.

**KCSE** Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education, an exam taken at the end of secondary school.

**KSh** Kenyan shillings.

**Lagga** A river, or a dry riverbed, that floods easily during the rainy season.

**M-Pesa** A mobile phone-based money transfer service.

**PIN** Personal Identification Number.

**Size 1, 2, 3** A term used in Kakuma to describe the size of a household. It corresponds to the amount of food rations a household is eligible to receive, with larger household sizes entitled to larger food rations.

**UNHCR** UN Refugee Agency.

**WFP** World Food Programme.

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