

Dadaab Region In Kenya

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Abstract

Dadaab is a refugee-hosting area in Garissa County, northeastern Kenya, near the border with Somalia. Established in 1991 during the Somali civil war, the refugee complex has developed from emergency camps into a long-term urban and economic system. Government and UNHCR data recorded approximately 420,058 refugees and asylum-seekers in Garissa as of June 30, 2026, distributed across Hagadera, Dagahaley, Ifo, and Ifo 2; more than 96% were from Somalia. This paper examines Dadaab's geography, history, population, governance, economy, education, health, water, security, environmental pressure, and durable-solution debates. It argues that the region should not be understood only as a humanitarian camp or security problem. Dadaab contains generations of residents, commercial networks, schools, community organizations, and relationships with Kenyan host communities. At the same time, restricted movement, uncertain legal status, funding shortages, climate stress, and limited livelihoods create persistent dependency and inequality. Voluntary repatriation, resettlement, local inclusion, education, and mobility should be pursued together rather than treated as mutually exclusive solutions. Kenya's emerging Shirika Plan and the Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Program create opportunities to transform refugee-hosting areas, but implementation must protect refugee rights and benefit surrounding communities.

Introduction

Dadaab is one of the most recognizable refugee-hosting regions in the world. It is frequently described as a temporary camp, yet it has existed for more than three decades. Children born during its early years have become adults, and some families have lived there across generations.

The area is located in a semi-arid part of Garissa County. Heat, variable rainfall, drought, flooding, and limited infrastructure shape daily life. Dadaab is also connected economically and socially with northeastern Kenya and southern Somalia.

This paper argues that Dadaab must be analyzed as a protracted displacement setting. Humanitarian assistance remains essential, but long-term policy must expand legal, educational, and economic opportunity. Treating hundreds of thousands of people as permanently temporary creates predictable harm.

Location and Physical Environment

Dadaab lies in northeastern Kenya near the Somali border. The landscape is generally dry, with pastoral livelihoods, seasonal water systems, and significant exposure to drought. Climate variability affects water supply, food prices, livestock, shelter, and movement.

The camps are not isolated compounds surrounded by empty land. They exist within communities whose residents also face poverty, infrastructure gaps, and climate stress. Any program directed at refugees affects host-community relationships and local resource use.

Environmental planning should therefore include shared water systems, land restoration, waste management, renewable energy, and drought resilience rather than assigning environmental damage to refugees alone.

Historical Development

The complex was established in 1991 as people fled civil war and state collapse in Somalia. Initial camps included Ifo, Dagahaley, and Hagadera. A major influx occurred during the 2011 drought and famine, when approximately 130,000 people arrived in the region (UNHCR, 2026a).

Other arrivals have followed conflict, food insecurity, political violence, and climate-related displacement. The population has fluctuated through births, returns, resettlement, verification, and new arrivals.

Emergency infrastructure gradually became semi-permanent. Markets, schools, religious institutions, media, transport, and civic organizations developed. This history complicates policies based on the assumption that the population will depart quickly.

Population and Camp Structure

Government and UNHCR data for June 30, 2026, list 420,058 refugees and asylum-seekers in Garissa. Hagadera hosted approximately 138,983, Dagahaley 105,008, Ifo 92,367, and Ifo 2 about 83,700. Somali nationals represented approximately 96.8% of the registered population (Government of Kenya & UNHCR, 2026).

These figures change and should always be dated. Registration status may not capture every resident, and administrative categories do not describe household movement or social relationships.

Dadaab's scale resembles a city, but it lacks the full municipal rights, revenue systems, and infrastructure available to ordinary cities. Humanitarian agencies perform functions that would otherwise belong to public institutions.

Governance

Kenya's Department of Refugee Services is responsible for refugee affairs, with technical and operational support from UNHCR and partner organizations. County government, security agencies, community leaders, nongovernmental organizations, and donors also influence services.

Multiple actors can provide expertise but create fragmented accountability. Refugees may not know which institution controls documentation, movement, assistance, education, or dispute resolution.

Meaningful participation requires more than consultation meetings. Refugee and host-community representatives should influence planning, monitor services, and receive information about budgets and decisions.

Legal Status and Freedom of Movement

Refugees have rights under international and Kenyan law, including protection from forced return to danger. In practice, camp-based policies and documentation can restrict movement, work, education, and access to services outside designated areas.

Movement restrictions reduce self-reliance. A qualified teacher, entrepreneur, nurse, or student may be unable to pursue opportunity elsewhere. Restrictions also create incentives for informal travel and expose people to exploitation.

Security concerns are legitimate but should be addressed through individualized, lawful measures rather than treating an entire population as a threat. Legal identity and predictable procedures strengthen both protection and security.

Humanitarian Assistance and Funding

Food, shelter, healthcare, water, sanitation, education, and protection services depend heavily on international funding. Donor shortfalls can reduce rations, staffing, supplies, and maintenance.

Short funding cycles are poorly suited to a settlement that has existed for decades. Agencies repeatedly manage emergency gaps instead of investing in durable systems. Multi-year financing can support teacher development, water infrastructure, renewable energy, and livelihoods.

Assistance should be targeted according to vulnerability while avoiding abrupt withdrawal from families who lack legal access to income.

Food Security and Nutrition

Many households rely partly on food assistance or cash transfers. Reduced rations can increase debt, meal reduction, child malnutrition, and harmful coping strategies. Market-based assistance can support local trade but depends on stable prices and adequate supply.

Nutrition programs must address young children, pregnant and lactating women, people with chronic disease, and persons with disabilities. Screening should connect to treatment and follow-up.

Long-term food security requires legal livelihoods and regional resilience, not indefinite ration dependence. Small business, vocational training, agriculture suited to arid conditions, and financial inclusion can contribute when policy allows.

Water, Sanitation, and Public Health

Water provision in a semi-arid region is technically and financially demanding. Boreholes, pumping, storage, distribution, and treatment require continuous maintenance. Population growth can exceed system capacity.

Sanitation and waste management affect diarrheal disease, dignity, and environmental quality. Dense settlements create fire and outbreak risks. Public-health planning should integrate surveillance, vaccination, maternal care, chronic disease, mental health, and emergency response.

Refugees and host communities share disease and environmental systems. Separate weak services are less effective than coordinated regional planning.

Education

Dadaab contains primary and secondary schools, vocational programs, and pathways to higher education. Demand exceeds available classrooms, teachers, learning materials, and scholarships. Students may study in crowded conditions and face uncertainty about recognition of qualifications.

Education is both a right and a durable solution. It prepares young people for life in Kenya, Somalia, resettlement countries, or another future. Curriculum and certification should remain portable.

In March 2026, UNHCR reported that 245 refugee students from Dadaab had been selected to attend senior secondary schools across Kenya through the Elimu Scholarship Programme. Such mobility expands opportunity beyond the camp while highlighting how exceptional access remains (UNHCR, 2026b).

Livelihoods and the Local Economy

Dadaab has developed substantial markets linking refugees, host communities, humanitarian workers, and cross-border trade. Businesses provide food, communication, transport, clothing, financial services, and repair.

Refugees contribute labor, consumer demand, skills, and networks. Host communities may benefit from infrastructure and employment while also experiencing price, land, and service pressures.

Livelihood policy should support business registration, banking, mobile money, vocational certification, women's enterprise, and access to wider markets. Aid programs should procure locally when quality and value permit.

Gender, Protection, and Vulnerability

Women and girls may face gender-based violence, early marriage, unequal access to education, and economic dependence. Men and boys may face recruitment pressure, detention risk, or inability to meet expected provider roles. LGBTQ+ refugees and other minorities may experience additional danger.

Protection programs need confidential reporting, survivor-centered care, legal support, safe shelter, and prevention. Distribution systems should not require vulnerable people to expose private circumstances publicly.

Community-based protection is important, but institutions must not transfer responsibility to volunteers without authority and resources.

Security and Public Narratives

Dadaab has often been discussed through national-security concerns connected to proximity to Somalia and al-Shabaab. Security incidents require serious response, but collective suspicion can lead to discrimination, movement restrictions, and pressure for premature closure.

Refugees are not a homogeneous security category. Many fled the same armed groups that threaten Kenya. Cooperation improves when communities trust reporting mechanisms and authorities respect rights.

Public narratives should include education, commerce, family life, and local governance rather than representing Dadaab only through terrorism or dependency.

Environmental Pressure and Climate Change

Drought, heat, flooding, and resource scarcity affect refugees and hosts. Collection of fuelwood can contribute to land degradation, while inadequate drainage can intensify flood and sanitation problems.

Solutions include clean cooking, solar energy, water efficiency, vegetation restoration, and climate-resilient infrastructure. Environmental projects should employ local residents and recognize pastoral knowledge.

Climate change may also contribute to future displacement, making regional preparedness essential.

Durable Solutions

International refugee policy identifies voluntary repatriation, local integration, and third-country resettlement as durable solutions. In protracted situations, complementary pathways such as education, labor mobility, and family reunification are also important.

Return to Somalia must be voluntary, informed, safe, and dignified. Political pressure or reduced assistance should not be used to create involuntary return. Conditions differ within Somalia and can change rapidly.

Resettlement offers life-changing protection but is available to only a small proportion. It cannot solve the entire situation. Local inclusion and mobility therefore require serious attention.

Shirika Plan and GISED P

Kenya's Shirika Plan seeks to move from camp-centered humanitarian management toward integrated settlements and socioeconomic inclusion. The Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Program, launched in 2023, is intended to support refugees and host communities and transform camps into economic hubs (UNHCR, 2026a).

The approach could improve services, legal opportunity, and regional investment. Its success depends on financing, implementation, community participation, documentation, and protection against local inequality.

Transformation should not become a change of terminology without expanded rights. Residents need measurable access to work, movement, education, public services, and decision-making.

Policy Priorities

Priority	Required action
Protection	Maintain asylum access, documentation, and protection from forced return
Movement and work	Create lawful, predictable pathways for employment and mobility
Shared services	Invest in county systems benefiting refugees and hosts
Education	Expand classrooms, certification, scholarships, and digital access
Livelihoods	Support enterprise, banking, procurement, and skills recognition
Climate resilience	Improve water, clean energy, drainage, and land restoration
Participation	Give refugee and host communities decision-making roles
Durable solutions	Pursue return, inclusion, resettlement, and complementary pathways together

Conclusion

Dadaab began as an emergency response but has become a long-term social, economic, and political system. Its residents include people who fled war, children born in Kenya, entrepreneurs, students, caregivers, and professionals. Describing them only as a temporary population obscures reality.

The region faces severe challenges: restricted opportunity, funding shortages, climate stress, legal uncertainty, and pressure on host communities. Humanitarian aid remains necessary, but it cannot substitute indefinitely for rights and development.

The Shirika Plan and GISED P offer an opportunity to build shared institutions and expand inclusion. Success will require sustained financing and accountability. The goal should not be to make a camp more permanent. It should be to ensure that displaced people and Kenyan hosts can participate in secure communities with education, livelihood, mobility, and a genuine range of future choices.

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