

SDG 4, Quality Education: Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp

Kakuma refugee camp, in north-western Kenya near the South Sudanese border, is one of Africa's largest and longest-standing refugee settlements. According to latest data, Kenya hosts nearly 860,000 refugees and asylum seekers, with Kakuma, where more than 200,000 reside, being the second largest camp (UNHCR Kenya, n.d.). Many of those who live there have fled conflict and persecution in South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Burundi, and other countries. The camp was established in 1992, so it is not an 'emergency' in the short-term sense: many young people have spent all or most of their lives there. For this generation, access to education is central to any hope of a different future – and directly linked to SDG 4.

The camp has implemented various educational initiatives to address barriers to education, particularly for the majority of its residents who are children. Education in Kakuma is provided free of charge by UNHCR and a range of NGO partners, including the Lutheran World Federation (LWF 2023), Finn Church Aid (FCA), and Windle International Kenya and Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS), working under Kenya's national education policy. It includes regular primary and secondary education, as well as an Accelerated Education Programme (AEP) for out-of-school and over-age learners to bridge educational gaps. It is important as the number of over-age learners in both primary and secondary schools is increasing, which shows that refugees are gradually recognising the value of basic education. Many of them missed out on schooling in their home countries and are now eager to learn and make up for lost time and opportunities (UNHCR 2016).

Lutheran World Federation alone runs 34 schools in the camp, where it applies a concept of inclusive education whereby students with disabilities are welcomed into the same classrooms as non-impaired students (LWF 2023). Head teacher of one of those schools, Jacob Nating'a, explains that the concept first started at the school in 2018. 'We provide inclusiveness for all learners to be in the same school, the same class, with the same teacher and only some differences in learning equipment' (ibid.). It is important for students with disabilities to attend regular schools because in and around Kakuma, disability has often been seen as something shameful, leading some families to hide their children at home instead of sending them to school, and sometimes to even lock or tie them up, which shows that this is not only about education, but about their basic right to a normal life.



In 2023, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Kenya took over seven secondary schools in Kakuma refugee camp, serving over 15,000 learners. Yet in some schools, girls make up only 26–27% of students, and most youth in the camp remain out of school. The report ‘Breaking Down Barriers: Increasing Girls’ Access to and Completion of Secondary Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp’ (JRS 2024) maps these obstacles in detail. Addressing these challenges, JRS has launched its third Gender-Responsive Education (GRE) pilot in Kakuma through the ‘EAGLES_K – Empowering African Girls to Learn and Excel in School’ project, already backed by over \$1 million to boost girls’ enrolment and improve learning, safety and wellbeing for all secondary-school youth in the camp.

Tackling the education gap in places like Kakuma refugee camp requires innovative, creative thinking – and one such solution comes from researchers at the University of Geneva (UNIGE). They created the Beekee Box, a small device that lets teachers bring a whole online learning platform into areas without internet access or reliable electricity. Instead of waiting for infrastructure that may never come, trainers load courses, videos, readings, and tests onto the Box in advance and then take it with them into the camp. In Kakuma, where around 190,000 refugees live and moving across the camp can be difficult and unsafe, the Beekee Box means learning can ‘travel’ to different locations. Learners simply connect to the Box’s local Wi-Fi with their phones or nearby computers and can follow full training programmes, interact with others and complete assessments – all offline (Université de Genève 2019).

General statistics, initiatives, and policy plans are important, but they are never as powerful as a personal story – like that of Majambere, a Burundian refugee at a Windle-run secondary school in Kakuma. When he arrived at the camp and joined Year 7, he had to learn a new curriculum plus Kiswahili and English, while his parents, who were jobless, could not afford basic learning materials. There was no electricity at home, so he studied at night by solar lamp and only used a calculator in his final exam (Windle International Kenya n.d.A). Thanks to his hard work and support from his family and teachers, Majambere became the top scorer in the National Secondary Exams.

Similarly motivating is the story of Asia Gedi Khalif, an 18-year-old Somali refugee raised by a single mother – also in Kakuma camp. She became the top student at Kakuma Refugee Secondary School and the overall top girl across Windle International Kenya camp schools, scoring a B+ in the 2021 KCSE despite overcrowded classes, poverty, and strong competition from boys. She credits her success to her mother’s belief in education, her sister’s support and mentorship, and targeted support for girls in WIK schools (Windle International



Kenya n.d.B). Their journeys show how, even in very difficult conditions, refugee students can succeed when they get a real chance – and how education can open the way to future dreams.

Yet, as UNESCO (n.d.) notes, ensuring quality education in refugee camps means recognising both the progress, but also the problems and challenges ahead. In Kakuma, all children can attend free primary school, new tools like the Beekee Box make digital learning possible without internet access, there are special programmes for girls (including two girls' boarding schools), and an Accelerated Education Programme helps older learners catch up. At the same time, many over-age students remain in primary classes, which makes teaching harder, and schooling is often disturbed by food distributions, poor health, and difficult family situations linked to camp life. These mixed realities show how challenging – but also how vital – it is to move towards SDG 4 on inclusive, equitable and quality education for all.

Questions

1. Why is access to education so important for refugees' long-term futures and for achieving SDG 4?
2. What are the main barriers that typically prevent refugee children and youth from going to school?
3. How can education systems balance access (getting many learners in) with quality (good learning conditions)?
4. Why is it especially important to focus on girls' education in refugee and crisis settings?
5. What role can technology play in improving education where infrastructure is very weak?
6. What responsibilities should the host government, international organisations and NGOs each have in providing education for refugees?

List of references

- JRS, 2024. *Breaking down barriers: Increasing girls' access to and completion of Secondary education in Kakuma refugee camp*, <https://jrs.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/FINAL-4-April-2024-Kakuma-Gender-Analysis-Report_to-print.pdf>.
- LWF, 2023. *Kenya: Inclusive education in Kakuma*, <<https://lutheranworld.org/news/kenya-inclusive-education-kakuma>>.



UNESCO, *Education in Kakuma Refugee Camp*, <<https://www.unesco.org/en/dtc-financing-toolkit/education-kakuma-refugee-camp>>.

UNHCR Kenya, n.d. *Kenya statistics package – 31 July 2025*, <<https://www.unhcr.org/ke/media/kenya-statistics-package-31-july-2025-0>>.

Université de Genève, 2019. *Beekee Box: a network to teach that doesn't need the internet or electricity!*, Press release.

Windle International Kenya, n.d.A. *Burundian refugee emerges top scorer in national secondary exams*, <https://windle.org/docs/stories_and_features/Burundian%20Refugee%20is%20Stop%202021%20KCSE%20Student.pdf>.

Windle International Kenya, n.d.B. *Somali Refugee Girl Tops 2021 KCSE Exams*, <https://windle.org/docs/stories_and_features/Somali%20Refugee%20Girl%20Tops%20in%202021%20KCSE%20Exams.pdf>.

Author: Jakub Wódka
jakub.wodka@lazarski.pl