

Food Insecurity and South Sudanese Urban Refugees in Kenya

by Cherie Enns, Samuel Owuor, Abbey Lin, Jacqueline Fanta, Cobby Achieng, William Kolong and Kristin Swardh

Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the already precarious situation of urban South Sudanese refugees living in Nairobi and Nakuru, Kenya. The pandemic not only increased food insecurity but also disrupted livelihoods and exacerbated socio-economic vulnerabilities that were already significant. These refugees faced limited access to support mechanisms typically available in refugee camps, with inadequate government response and interruptions to remittance flows. Urban refugees were hit especially hard due to the absence of organized support frameworks, leaving them more exposed to the pandemic's impacts.

This policy brief examines the critical challenges faced by urban South Sudanese refugees in terms of food security and their overall socio-economic well-being. It also outlines practical policy recommendations aimed at mitigating these challenges and supporting the long-term resilience of urban refugees in Kenya.

Introduction

Globally, 2.37 billion people experienced food insecurity in 2020, an increase of 320 million people in just one year, largely driven by the COVID-19 pandemic (FAO, 2021). Africa bore the brunt of this surge, with the continent accounting for a substantial portion of the newly food-insecure population. Among the most vulnerable groups were refugees, particularly urban refugees who live outside formal refugee camps and often lack access to structured support systems.

Kenya has long been a major host for refugees, with South Sudanese refugees forming a significant proportion of the total refugee population. Most studies have focused on refugees in camp settings like Kakuma or Dadaab, where formal assistance programs are available. However, urban refugees, including those living in Nairobi and Nakuru, face unique challenges. Unlike camp refugees, they are often left to fend for themselves, with little access to food aid, healthcare, or educational support. This policy brief focuses on the experiences of South Sudanese urban refugees during the pandemic, highlighting key areas where urgent policy intervention is needed.



© MiFOOD Network 2024
Balsillie School of International
Affairs, 67 Erb St West, Waterloo,
Ontario, Canada N2L 6C2

This publication is funded by an
Operating Grant from the Canadian
Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)
and a Partnership Grant from the
Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council (SSHRC)

Key Challenges

1. Food Insecurity

Food insecurity was a central concern for urban South Sudanese refugees, many of whom experienced severe difficulties in accessing adequate food. Over 60% of Kenya's urban refugees reported experiencing food insecurity during the pandemic. Unlike camp-based refugees, urban refugees did not benefit from consistent food aid programs. Focus group discussions revealed that many families had to reduce their meal frequency to just two meals a day, with some adults skipping meals entirely so their children could eat.

The pandemic-induced lockdowns made accessing food even harder. With markets closed or operating under restrictions, urban refugees struggled to purchase essential items. Additionally, the increased competition for limited food supplies caused prices to skyrocket, further reducing their purchasing power. This situation was exacerbated by disrupted supply chains, leading to shortages of staple foods such as maize, beans, and vegetables.

2. Limited Access to Support Systems

Urban refugees generally have less access to the support systems available to refugees in camps. In camps, international organizations like the UNHCR provide food, healthcare, and essential services, but these services are not readily accessible to urban refugees. During the pandemic, this gap widened, with urban refugees often overlooked in relief efforts. Government assistance was minimal, and most urban refugees did not receive any direct support during the crisis.

In focus group discussions, participants expressed frustration over their exclusion from government-led aid programs. Many felt abandoned by both the Kenyan government and international organizations, which failed to address the growing needs of urban refugees during the pandemic. Without the safety net that camp refugees could rely on, urban refugees faced an increased risk of falling into extreme poverty and hunger.

3. Loss of Income and Remittances

The COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted income sources for urban refugees. Most urban South Sudanese refugees rely on informal work in sectors such as domestic labor, petty trade, and casual work. The restrictions imposed during the

pandemic, including curfews and business closures, led to widespread job losses and a reduction in income opportunities. Many refugees who were self-employed saw their small businesses collapse as demand plummeted and restrictions made it impossible to operate.

Additionally, many urban refugees depend heavily on remittances sent by family members living abroad. These remittance flows, crucial for purchasing food and other necessities, were severely disrupted during the pandemic. Economic instability in countries where family members resided, combined with logistical difficulties in sending money, led to a steep decline in remittance inflows. This left urban refugees with fewer resources to cover their basic needs, compounding their vulnerability.

4. Legal and Administrative Barriers

Urban refugees face numerous legal and administrative hurdles that limit their ability to secure formal employment or run businesses. The process of obtaining work permits and business licenses is often cumbersome, expensive, and filled with bureaucratic obstacles. Many urban refugees lack the necessary documentation to even begin the process, leaving them trapped in the informal economy, where job security is minimal and wages are low.

Without proper legal protections, urban refugees are also more susceptible to exploitation and harassment. Participants in the focus groups recounted instances of being mistreated by employers or being harassed by the police for working without the necessary permits. The inability to access legal employment leaves many refugees vulnerable to extreme poverty, further exacerbating their food insecurity.

Policy Recommendations

1. Enhance Support for Urban Refugees

It is critical for the Kenyan government and international organizations to extend support mechanisms for urban refugees. During crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, food assistance, healthcare, and other essential services must be made available to urban refugees, similar to the services provided in camps. This could be done through food voucher programs, community kitchens, or partnerships with local NGOs that serve urban refugees.

2. Facilitate Access to Legal Documentation and Employment

The Kenyan government should streamline the process for urban refugees to obtain work permits and business licenses. Simplifying these processes would enable refugees to engage in the formal economy, allowing them to earn a stable income and contribute to the local economy. Legal pathways to employment would not only improve the economic prospects of urban refugees but also reduce their reliance on informal, unstable jobs.

3. Strengthen Social Protection Systems for Refugees

Expanding social protection systems to include urban refugees is essential for mitigating the impact of food insecurity and economic hardship. Cash transfers, food vouchers, or direct food distribution programs could provide immediate relief to families facing extreme hunger. Additionally, integrating refugees into existing social protection programs would help build long-term resilience, enabling them to better cope with future crises.

4. Address the Disparities between Camp and Urban Refugees

Policymakers must address the significant gap in service provision between urban refugees and those in camps. Urban refugees often face greater socio-economic vulnerabilities but receive less institutional support. Creating tailored interventions for urban refugees that mirror the services available in camps—such as healthcare, education, and food assistance—would go a long way in improving their overall well-being.

5. Promote Community-Based Resilience Programs

Community-based initiatives should be encouraged to help urban refugees build self-sufficiency and resilience. Supporting refugee-led organizations or creating community development programs that focus on urban agriculture, vocational training, or cooperative businesses could provide sustainable livelihoods for refugees. These programs could also promote social cohesion between refugees and host communities, reducing tensions and fostering cooperation.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the vulnerabilities of South Sudanese urban refugees in Kenya, particularly in terms of food security and socio-economic stability. The challenges they face are complex and multifaceted, requiring urgent attention from policymakers. Strengthening support systems for urban refugees, improving their access to legal documentation and employment, and addressing the disparities between camp and urban refugees are crucial steps toward building a more inclusive and resilient refugee system.

By implementing these recommendations, the Kenyan government and its international partners can ensure that urban refugees are not left behind in times of crisis. It is imperative that urban refugees receive the support they need to rebuild their lives and contribute to the social and economic fabric of their host communities.

Acknowledgement

This Policy Brief is based on MiFOOD Paper No. 19 and was created with the assistance of ChatGPT 4.0.

References

1. FAO. (2021). *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021*.
2. Crush, J., Thomaz, D., & Ramachandran, S. (2021). *South-South Migration, Food Insecurity and the COVID-19 Pandemic*. MiFOOD Paper No. 1.
3. Onyango, E.O., Crush, J., & Owuor, S. (2021). *Food Remittances, Migration and Rural-Urban Linkages in Kenya*. MiFOOD Working Paper No. 2.
4. Pape, J., Beltramo, P., Nimoh, P., et al. (2022). *Understanding the Socio-Economic Conditions of Urban Refugees in Kenya*. World Bank Report.