



Refugee Integration in Malawi

Relocation Intentions of Dzaleka Camp Residents



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Key Points

- Almost half of refugees sampled are aged between 25 - 34, considered a productive group in economic terms. Integration of this people group would add labor workforce useful for national development.
- Only 14% of survey participants expressing the intention to relocate onto Malawian territory would like to take up formal employment, therefore not posing a particular competitive threat in the sector.
- 22% of refugees stated that they would leave Dzaleka to start a business in Malawi. Of this group, 49% indicated they would have access to capital from friends and family living overseas, and 45% said they had personal savings.
- Overall, 71% of all refugees sampled said that they had experience in formal or informal business practices.
- 36% of refugees said they would not want to leave Dzaleka, even if the opportunity was offered.
- Refugees who have attained a level of higher education are less interested in settling in Malawi than those with no higher education.
- 48% of refugees cited "poor living conditions" as the motivation for wanting to leave the camp.

Recommendations

- Irrespective of policy considerations, living conditions in Dzaleka camp must be urgently improved, with a priority on decongestion.
- The speeding up of the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) process in Malawi must be prioritized to ensure that the refugee population has access to essential services, and can be assessed for integration should a policy change take place.
- Access to foreign currency capital, a demonstrated savings culture, and widespread business experience would make the refugee community an asset for developing the economy and creating local jobs.

Introduction

At the date of publication, Malawi is registering 84,891 Persons of Concern (POCs) – of which over 52,000 are foreign nationals at different stages of their asylum claim, originating mostly from DR Congo, Burundi, Rwanda and Somalia. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines refugees as people “unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.” People obtain the right to refugee status through a process called Refugee Status Determination (RSD).

On first arrival in Malawi, refugees are taken to Dzaleka refugee camp where their asylum claim is under review. Only upon receiving refugee status, people become eligible for opportunities such as resettlement to a third country and access to higher education programmers.



Dzaleka Market Vendor. Credit: Theresa Rooney

In August 2021, UNHCR Malawi reported a high backlog in RSD processing, with only 32% of applicants having received their refugee status.

In addition to the RSD backlog, Dzaleka camp was designed to host a maximum of 12,000 people, while the current population is over 52,000 with a sustained influx of new arrivals. This poses pressures on the resources and opportunities available for camp residents.

Malawi Refugee Policy

Aleinikoff & Poellot (2014) believe that the international community has a moral mandate “to end the condition of being a refugee” for those trapped in protracted displacement situations. This call is rendered more urgent by the pressure that rapidly increasing refugee numbers place on the demands for humanitarian aid, which are becoming increasingly difficult to meet (Oliver & Ilcan, 2018).

In 2018 the UNHCR held negotiations with the international community for a commitment towards the local integration of refugees (Global Compact on Refugees, 2018). This resulted in Malawi pledging to adopt the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) which would pave a path for refugee integration (UNHCR First Global Refugee Forum, 2019). However, to date the CRRF has not been implemented, and national legislation requires all refugees to reside within the Dzaleka refugee camp exclusively, withholding from them the rights to free movement, economic participation, and naturalization.

Source of introductory facts and stats: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/88529> and <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/mwi>
Aleinikoff, T. A., & Poellot, S. (2014). The Responsibility to Solve: The International Community and Protracted Refugee Situations. *Virginia Journal of International Law*, 54(2), 195–222.

Oliver, M. & Ilcan, S. (2018). The Politics of Protection: The Right to Food in Protracted Refugee Situations. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 37(4), 440–457. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdy013>

Global Compact on Refugees (2018). United Nations High Commission for Refugees. Retrieved from Web site: <https://www.unhcr.org/5c658aed4>

UNHCR First Global Refugee Forum (2019). Statement by the Minister of Homeland Security. Retrieved from Web site: <https://www.unhcr.org/5df922ca4.pdf>

In April 2021, as part of enforcing the implementation of the longstanding encampment policy, and contrary to a CRRF implementation, the Government of Malawi issued a directive that refugees who had left Dzaleka Refugee camp return to the site by 28th April, 2021 (Kasakula, 2021).

The directive was issued on the basis that the presence of refugees outside of the camp poses a threat to national security, according to the Minister of Homeland Security, Chimwendo Banda.

Refugees Living Outside Dzaleka

De Leo (2020) studied the sub-group of refugees in Malawi that resided illegally outside Dzaleka camp to find a means for financial independence through informal business initiatives, prior to the 2021 directive re-enforcing the encampment policy. Findings reveal that at least half of sampled refugees utilize an informal system of borrowing within their community to fuel business growth, and one in five gives capital to fellow refugees to start, sustain or increase a business without expectations of repayment.

This resourcefulness in overcoming barriers to formal finance access has proven a viable model for success in the informal economy of Malawi. In terms of creating jobs for local people, each refugee operating a business at the time of the research was employing at least two Malawian staff, or at least three for refugees living in rural areas.



*A child prays during Sunday School in Dzaleka.
Credit: Josephat Primo El Ramiro*

Motivation for our Study

Given the lack of clarity on the government's position towards a refugee policy shift, the value of our research is the provision of much-needed information regarding potential levels of influx of refugees into the national territory, disaggregated by target geographical location and economic sector.

The findings of this study provide a basis for dialogue on the merits of a CRRF implementation (as per the Government's pledge) versus the encampment policy (as per Government's current plans and policy framework). In addition, the findings may also inform policy formulation and guide policy implementation by various relevant stakeholders.

Kasakula, G. (2021, May 1). The Times Group. Retrieved from <https://times.mw/laws-rights-refugees/>

De Leo, F. (2020) Refugee Entrepreneurship in Malawi: Success Factors and Job Creation Effects. <https://inuaconsulting.com/resources/>

Research Objectives and Methodology

The study aimed to collect and analyze data on refugees' intention to emigrate from Dzaleka; specifically, we wanted to assess their access to investment capital, their educational and professional qualifications, and their destination of preference.

The survey was administered to 342 participants at random amongst refugees located in eight administrative zones of Dzaleka where residential density is higher. Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of Malawi.

Research Findings

Our research participants were asked a set of questions based on the hypothesis that Malawi offered them the opportunity to leave Dzaleka and settle on the national territory. 64% of people stated that they would choose to move out of Dzaleka, and among these 79% would want to settle in an urban location, hoping to find a job (42%) or to start a business venture (36%).

59% of respondents who indicated they would leave Dzaleka to go to a village said that the choice was based on feeling safe in a rural area, while 26% expressed an interest in farming.

Almost half of respondents were aged between 25-34, considered a productive age bracket in economic terms.

Overall, almost half (48%) of the people we interviewed cited poor living conditions in Dzaleka as the main reason for intending to leave, whereas 22% said their motivation was to set up a business. Only 14% indicated that they would want to take up a job in the formal sector. This result is interesting in the context of common myths related to foreigners posing a threat to citizens in a nation with high unemployment rates.

Relocation intention by education level and work experience

The majority of those willing to leave Dzaleka to settle elsewhere in Malawi were people who did not hold any tertiary education. This was somewhat surprising, and the reasons require further research. However, an assumption might be that they would rather aspire to be resettled to a more economically advanced nation, where their prospects for formal employment are higher.

When asked whether they held any formal professional experience, 45% of the sampled individuals indicated that they did, however when asked about business experience, formal or informal, a large proportion (71%) responded positively.

Refugees who indicated they would have capital to start a business said this would originate from friends and family from abroad (49%) and from their own savings (45%).



*Malawian National Curriculum Books in a Refugee-established Primary School in Dzaleka
Credit: Florisa De Leo Magambi*

Conclusion and Policy Implications

Since data shows that not all refugees are willing to move out of Dzaleka, integration may be offered on a voluntary basis, and services related to refugee protection in the camp would still be required. We have found no particular evidence that integration would result in job losses for Malawians.

Survey responses demonstrate a need to increase access to higher education for refugees, as well as to address the poor living conditions reported by the population as their principal motivation for wanting to leave Dzaleka.

From the observation that most of those willing to migrate are young, we conclude that integration might supply the needed labor force to add on to the working-age population of Malawi.

Allowing integration may enable refugees to set up businesses that add value to the country's economic output based on three important factors: their prior business experience, their access to capital in foreign currencies from friends and family overseas, and their saving culture.



Refugee Student at School: Credit: Josephat Primo El Ramiro

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