

# Vijana Twaweza Club: Food security via a refugee-led organisation in Kenya



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Amisi from Vijana Twaweza Club holding a catch of fish. Kenya, 2024

## What we know:

Food insecurity and population displacement are widespread in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region, and are exacerbated by climate-induced shocks, poverty, and conflict. Home to huge refugee camps, such as Kakuma and Dadaab in Kenya, the region currently hosts 20% of the world's refugee population (Reliefweb, 2022).

## What this adds:

The authors present a case study of Vijana Twaweza Club, a refugee-led farming project that aims to improve food security for people living in Kakuma refugee camp, albeit on a small scale. The club has created a successful farm, as well as a training division, illustrating the potential of refugee-led organisations to find successful community-level solutions to improve food security.

**A**lthough clearly outlined in Article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the right to food remains elusive for many. For the 110 million forcibly displaced people globally, this is particularly true. By 2050, estimates point to an increased global population of 9 billion people, resulting in a 60% increase in food demand (Breene, 2016). With global efforts to feed a growing population veering off track – notably, the Sustainable Development Goal of 'zero hunger by 2030' – addressing demands for food is becoming ever more urgent.

*“The idea of gaining global consensus on the need to ensure food security looks unlikely any time soon.”*

The international development policy discourse on meeting global challenges, such as

food security, is awash with optimistic jargon. The terms 'resilience', 'participation', 'empowerment', and so on only capture the current situation in vague and simplistic forms (Schnable et al, 2020). These terms often form the backbone of policies that deflect decisive action and encourage the transfer of responsibility to those living in poverty, all for problems that are seldom of their own causing. The concept of 'resilience' has long enjoyed prominence in development policy relating to food security programming in developing countries. While ostensibly implying that the poorest have the power and capacity to feed themselves, if only they just showed enough determination to do so, the concept has increasingly been criticised by social and political analysts (Jaspars, 2020). The term ignores the reality of unjust power dynamics and resource shortages in food systems around the world.

Accounting for power dynamics, along with many other factors that influence access to ad-

equate food, the reality of the 'right to food' as a universally accessible concept becomes questionable. Like other universally agreed human rights, this is pertinent when considering those whose legal status is defined by exclusion of one or more of these rights, rather than inclusion. Refugees, being the case in point, live predominantly in conditions that exclude them from exercising the right to food to its fullest.

## Focusing on East Africa

After six consecutive years of drought and other climate-induced shocks, displacement and food insecurity are endemic in the East and Horn of Africa and Great Lakes region. This situation is driven – and further reinforced by – widespread poverty, conflict, and violence in a complex and perpetuating cycle. Home to huge refugee camps, such as Kakuma and Dadaab (both in Kenya), the region currently hosts 20% of the world's refugee population (Reliefweb, 2022). In Kakuma alone, nearly 250,000 people rely on food rations from the World Food Programme to make ends meet while they wait out their exile.

With a reduction in resources allocated to refugee camps the world over, people living in camps like Kakuma are very much at the receiving end of global humanitarian funding cuts. Although up-to-date figures are hard to come by, the World Food Programme generally provides monthly rations that equate to 70–75% of people's food requirement. However, the amount of food refugees receive fluctuates frequently in the region. In February 2024, rations were reportedly reduced from 80% to 50% in Kenya's Dadaab refugee camps (UNHCR, 2023a). In Kakuma, rations were cut by 60% in May 2024 (USCRI, 2024).



*“From an academic vantage point, it is easy to see the failings in our global humanitarian and development systems. What is harder is to point out viable solutions that could prevent some of the worst outcomes that these failings accrue.”*

In recent years, refugee-led development is one solution receiving more attention in the international development discourse. Defining refugee-led organisations as legitimate stakeholders in refugee policy and programming in 2023, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) heralded a shift in development thinking (Harley, 2023). Transitioning from a top-down approach to a more grassroots view allows refugees to play the primary leadership role in deciding and managing objectives and activities to meet their own needs.

Considering its relative novelty, refugee-led development is an under-investigated approach. Taking a cue from the Localisation agenda promoted over the last decade in the humanitarian sector, the development sector is increasingly aware of the power asymmetries that characterise top-down global development methods. With this in mind, refugee-led approaches to development offer another pathway to course correct. Specifically, advocates of refugee-led development applaud its proximity to both the communities it serves and the issues it addresses. They suggest that refugee-led organisations’ understanding of, and connection to, local problems afford them a level of legitimacy and transparency that other development actors do not have. Ultimately, supporters of refugee-led organisations champion their capacity to be more effective and achieve more impactful outcomes than development organisations directed from afar (Sturridge et al, 2023).

Discussion of development is often confined to abstract academic discourse. One can easily forget that it is a concept grounded in the real-life experiences of people who are seldom part of the academic arenas in which it is debated. Discourse surrounding food security is frequently held at a level that may obscure the individual experiences of those that it most affects. Cutting through this noise, we offer here an example of a small but successful refugee-led farming project aimed at improving food security within Kakuma refugee camp. By sharing this experience, we hope to bridge the gap between discourse and reality. We highlight the ability of refugee-led organisations to find their own development solutions and the implications of such schemes.

### Case study: Vijana Twaweza Club Kakuma refugee camp

Kakuma refugee camp is in northwestern Kenya in the semi-arid Turkana state. Along with the neighbouring Kalobeyei integrated settlement, Kakuma is home to more than 250,000 refugees from 24 different ethnic communities (UNHCR, 2023b). The camp has been open since 1992, when the ‘lost boys’ of Sudan (a group of young people fleeing civil war in the country) were first granted sanctuary there. It is administered by the Kenyan government and UNHCR. Life in Kakuma’s desert-like conditions is difficult, with temperatures regularly exceeding 35C degrees. Conditions are those of survival.

While Kenya’s 2021 Refugee Act foresees a time when its refugee camps will be converted into settlements, the reality is that the country currently operates an encampment policy. Asylum seekers who enter the county are sent to one of its huge refugee camps while they await processing of their asylum claim. When they arrive in Kakuma, refugees are allocated some building materials (usually wooden poles and tarpaulin sheeting), a mosquito net, and some space to set up their own huts. Monthly food rations in-

clude sugar, flour, and cooking oil – amounting to roughly 75% of their food requirements. Various services are provided in the camp, such as basic healthcare and education, but conditions are overcrowded.

Beyond rations, Kakuma’s residents rely on trading and an informal market economy to meet their food requirements. Despite their efforts, malnutrition is an issue with around 11% of children aged 6–59 months experiencing wasting and an estimated 60% suffering from anaemia in 2017 (Njagi, 2022). With the regional drought, pressure on global food production, and now reduced rations, there is a worsening food crisis in the camp. There are few sustainable solutions on the table.

### Vijana Twaweza Club

Vijana Twaweza Club is a community-based organisation in Kakuma refugee camp that sustainably produces food to feed people living in the camp. Since its formation in 2018, the project has produced over 1,200kg of fish. This has supplied more than 500 families in Kakuma with produce, which the club sells at affordable prices throughout the camp. Vijana Twaweza Club is composed of 23 young refugees who represent all the different ethnic and national backgrounds of Kakuma’s diverse population. The club started life as an idea generated by refugee students who were studying the University of Geneva’s undergraduate ‘One Health, Basic Medical Training and Introduction to Human Rights’ course being delivered in the camp. These students wanted to use their knowledge and skills to find solutions within the camp. With some seed money donated from friends overseas, Vijana Twaweza Club was born. It took its first steps toward becoming a food-producing organisation by digging a small fishpond in the refugee living quarters in the camp. The pond, which was lined with plastic sheeting bought from the nearby Kakuma town, was then filled with water and populated with Tilapia fish captured from a nearby river.



Members of Vijana Twaweza Club harvesting their fish. Kenya, 2024



After a few trials (and errors), the students began contacting various humanitarian organisations working in Kakuma refugee camp and the wider international development community to scale up their project. Project members took additional training courses in aquaculture, agriculture, permaculture, and project management – both in person and through on-line platforms. After connecting with the Jesuit Refugee Services in Kakuma, Vijana Twaweza Club was granted some additional space to build more fishponds in 2020. Moreover, the Jesuit Refugee Services stood as a referee for the club's first successful funding application to Caritas Italiana Kenya. The funding they received allowed Vijana Twaweza Club to build a new 20m by 8m fishpond, which was then used to raise tilapia and catfish.

It was at this time that the project began to garner international attention. The UK-based Permaculture Magazine awarded Vijana Twaweza Club the 'Youth in Permaculture Prize' for 2020. The World Food Programme quickly followed suit, bestowing the 'Young East Africa Innovators Award' in 2021. The prize money garnered from both afforded Vijana Twaweza Club the opportunity to invest into new tilapia and catfish stocks. This money also supported scale-up efforts, which focused on the construction of new fish tanks.

The growth of Vijana Twaweza Club has not been without setbacks. The COVID-19 pandemic and its associated lockdown in 2021/22 impacted Kakuma in unique ways, placing a greater onus on refugees to meet their own needs. With entry and exit to the camp largely closed and little guidance and health management penetrating the camp, Vijana Twaweza Club mobilised itself as a community-based organisation. Members used their health knowledge to produce short advisory videos on social distancing, hygiene, and general health-care, which were made in English, French, and Kiswahili. Videos were shared around the camp via the free WhatsApp instant messaging app

(which has high penetration in Kakuma) to empower fellow refugees. Through their provision of this social good, Vijana Twaweza Club gained further prominence in Kakuma as a vehicle for refugee-led development. Anecdotally, it seems this also paved the way for further conversations inspiring fellow refugees in Kakuma to begin their own food security journeys. Many individuals approached club members for advice on how to start their own gardens and farming projects in the camp.

After realising the food security role that refugee-led organisations could play, combined with their successful fish farming experiences, Vijana Twaweza Club began developing a side project. On land granted by Jesuit Refugee Services, the club set up a small vegetable garden to grow *murere* – a local spinach-like crop that yields highly nutritious greens. The successful production of *murere* enabled Vijana Twaweza Club to quickly scale up the gardening project to include carrots, onions, spinach, kale, *amaranthus*, banana, cowpeas, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, and sugar cane. The vegetables are harvested at regular intervals and distributed to club members or sold in the local market, with profits being put back into the project.

Using the profits gained from selling vegetables and fish, Vijana Twaweza Club set up other side projects raising rabbits and ducks, as well as rearing crickets for protein. The crickets and droppings from the rabbits and ducks are then used to feed the fish in a cycle that complements the club's founding permaculture principles.

With the help of the World Food Programme, construction of five additional 15m fishponds, made from cement, is underway. The ponds will be supplied with water that is used in a circular manner to water the crops in the gardens. In addition, Vijana Twaweza Club has recently received funding from Credit Agricole Assurances to initiate a poultry farming training programme for refugee women in Kakuma. The project, which began in February

2024 (the time of writing), is training 10 refugee women over six months to become independent chicken farmers.

## Conclusion

Being a refugee-led organisation driven by young people, part of Vijana Twaweza Club's ethos is to build the agriculture management capabilities of its members for the future. This means that all members take part in and learn from new projects as they progress. This type of forward-looking capacity development is an important learning point for other refugee communities who wish to become more self-sufficient in achieving food security. Refugee-led organisations, such as Vijana Twaweza Club, can play a pivotal role in supporting food security for future generations. This can be whether refugees stay in camps where resources are limited, are resettled overseas where cutting-edge agriculture management skills are required, or if they return home to rebuild their own agriculture systems.

As the world moves toward an uncertain future, with challenges such as population growth and climate change weighing heavily on current food systems, innovation is needed more than ever. Drought, famine, inequality, and conflict may seem like impossible foes, but projects such as Vijana Twaweza Club show that young people can and will find ways to overcome adversity. Even in the most difficult of circumstances, the success of the project represents the hard work of the club's members. The power of knowledge to inspire new ways of thinking, doing, and – above all – the possibility of humanity to forge a sustainable future for everyone is on show. Vijana Twaweza Club provides an example to all.

To learn more, please visit the club website at <https://www.vijanatwawezaclub.org/>

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