



A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING AND GOVERNANCE IN KENYA'S SHIRIKA PLAN

INSTITUTIONALIZING MEANINGFUL REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN KENYA

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INSTITUTIONALIZING MEANINGFUL REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN KENYA

An initiative led by R-SEAT (Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table)

In partnership with Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), R-SEAT Kenya Core Group, African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC).

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This publication marks the first-of-its-kind policy paper on a framework for inclusive decision-making and governance in Kenya's Shirika Plan, with a focus on institutionalizing meaningful refugee participation in Kenya.



**R-SEAT Kenya
Core Group**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Shirika Plan, launched by the Government of Kenya in March 2025, marks a strategic shift from encampment policy towards a settlement-based approach aimed at integrating refugees into national systems. Aligned with the **Kenya Refugees Act (2021)** and the **Global Compact of Refugees (GCR) (2018)**, the Plan aims to facilitate economic inclusion, boost self-reliance, and foster host-refugee integration. To ensure this vision delivers its intended outcomes, meaningful refugee participation must be institutionalized as a core principle, not treated as a peripheral activity. This is in line with the commitments set out in Paragraph 34 of the GCR, which states: “Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.”

Institutionalizing refugee participation means recognizing refugees as co-creators of solutions and contributors to policy, not just as beneficiaries. Over the years, refugees have demonstrated their expertise and capacities by leading local initiatives and facilitating programs that reach the most vulnerable. When meaningfully engaged, their knowledge and lived experience enhances program efficiency, drives effective local solutions, and fosters stronger community engagement and empowerment.

This policy paper, developed by R-SEAT (Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table), draws from a **draft Conceptual Framework** on *Meaningful Participation of Refugees in the Implementation of the Shirika Plan*, and on the **outcomes of a high-level multi-stakeholder workshop**, on *Utilizing Refugee Participation in the Shirika Plan Development*, convened in March 2025. It outlines a clear rationale for structured, refugee-led engagement and presents practical recommendations for embedding meaningful refugee participation (MRP) across the Shirika Plan’s governance, implementation, and monitoring processes.

For The Shirika Plan Joint Secretariat (i.e. Department of Refugees Services (DRS) and UNHCR Kenya) and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and Refugees in Kenya, this is a strategic opportunity to jointly reinforce the value of meaningful refugee participation, strengthen local leadership and localization efforts, create inclusive development, and co-design durable solutions.



Image 1. Two-Day Interactive Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, Organized by R-SEAT in Partnership with ReDSS, Oxfam, LERRN, and R-SEAT's Kenya Core Group.

STAKEHOLDER PERCEPTIONS OF THE SHIRIKA PLAN

Understanding how the Shirika Plan is perceived is critical, as these perceptions will shape its acceptance, implementation, and overall impact. The Shirika Plan represents Kenya's commitment to inclusion in the national development agenda as a government-led initiative. However, perceptions and understanding of the plan vary among stakeholders. Limited engagement and inadequate information have led to mixed reactions, including opposition from some refugee communities. As R-SEAT in Kenya works primarily at the national level with government institutions, we recognize these consistent concerns. Refugees in Kenya, affected by the current global humanitarian funding shortages and aid cuts, and with limited prospects for self-reliance and durable solutions, need intentional inclusion, participation, and access to clear information on the Shirika Plan.

Key concerns include limited awareness and sensitization, unclear or incomplete information, low levels of engagement, and the use of undefined terms such as “inclusion” and “integration.” The absence of a clear implementation framework has also contributed to resistance and only partial acceptance of the plan.

While the Shirika Plan has significant potential and could inform subsequent progressive policies for refugees in Kenya, these concerns require urgent attention. R-SEAT remains committed to working with states, and in Kenya our priority is to strengthen and support the institutionalization of meaningful refugee participation at state level. Ensuring that refugee perspectives and expertise inform the plan's implementation as it is essential to making the process more accountable, inclusive, and impactful.

BACKGROUND

Kenya remains one of Africa's most significant refugee-hosting countries, hosting over 850,000 refugees and asylum seekers as of July 2025 and playing a pivotal role in the East African refugee management and response landscape. The 2021 Refugees Act and the launch of the Shirika Plan in March 2025 reflect a growing political commitment to refugee self-reliance, host-refugee integration, and economic inclusion.

“Shirika,” derived from the Swahili word “*ushirika*,” means “coming together.” The plan aims to reimagine refugee camps as socio-economic hubs by leveraging national systems and implementing a whole of society approach, and importantly, by building on the new status of these camps, which have been designated as municipalities by the two counties hosting the most refugees, namely Kakuma in Turkana County and Dadaab in Garissa County respectively. The plan will run for eleven years (2025 to 2036), with an estimated budget of \$943 million, and will be implemented in three phases: Transition, Stabilization, and Resilience. This shift aligns with global and regional frameworks, including the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Policy Framework on Refugee Protection, and addresses the need to reimagine refugee responses through the global Humanitarian-Development-Peace (HDP) Nexus.

For the Shirika Plan to be effective, sustainable, and legitimate, refugee participation must shift from ad hoc consultations on the margins to structured, institutionalized power-sharing models. Despite its ambitions, the design and governance of the Shirika Plan DOES NOT include a clear mechanism for refugee engagement, raising the risk that the very communities the Plan targets will be left without meaningful recognized roles in shaping or monitoring its implementation. If not intentionally considered the Plan risks falling short of its commitment to inclusive governance and a whole-of-society, whole-of-government approach. Without building in meaningful participatory measures for and with refugees, it undermines the overall credibility, effectiveness, and long-term impact of refugee self-reliance and real inclusion in Kenya.

Part I: The Conceptual Framework: Purpose and Key Components

This draft Conceptual Framework on Meaningful Refugee Participation, developed by AMADPOC (African Migration and Development Policy Centre) and commissioned by R-SEAT, offers a practical roadmap to achieve the institutionalization of refugee participation across the Shirika Plan's governance, implementation, and evaluation stages.

Through a desk review and research, the Framework explored various forms of refugee participation, including the risks of not embedding refugee participation in the Shirika Plan. **It underscores the crucial need for dedicated support and a structure to facilitate meaningful refugee participation across all levels.** In practice, refugee involvement in the Shirika Plan process has been limited and lacking influence due to its ad hoc and unstructured nature. **The analysis shows that while consultation may be assumed within the Shirika Plan, the role of refugees and refugee-led organizations is not explicitly mentioned in the governance structure, making it seemingly absent.**

The absence of clear mechanisms for refugee engagement and participation remains a concern. This Framework addresses this gap and proposes strategies for institutionalizing participation, aligned with global best practices and grounded in Kenya's current policy context.

The Framework is built on five key pillars:

- **Foundational Principles:** Rights-based, inclusive, legitimate, and representative participation;
- **Multi-Level Governance:** Participation must occur at all levels, from urban and camp-based community structures and county level bodies to national governance mechanisms (e.g., the Steering Committee, Shirika Joint Secretariat, and Technical Working Groups).
- **Programmatic Integration:** Participation and input integrated across all stages of the Shirika Plan programme cycle including planning, service delivery, monitoring and evaluation;

- **Contextual Consideration & Adaptability:** Tailored approaches for camps, urban refugees, women, youth, and persons with disabilities
- **Risk Management & Mitigation:** Addressing power asymmetries, language barriers, and protection risks tied to visibility and leadership.

Crucially, the Framework seeks to shift refugee participation from unstructured and ad hoc consultation to institutional integration, enabling meaningful refugee influence over plans, decisions, and policies. It acknowledges the Government of Kenya's political will on refugee participation but seeks to facilitate action towards an inclusive, shared decision-making and advocates for formal roles for refugee leaders and advocates and by extension RLOs leaders.

Part II: Multistakeholder Interactive Workshop – Utilizing Refugee Participation in the Shirika Plan Development: Workshop Purpose and Highlights

On 25-26 March 2025, R-SEAT, in partnership with **Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS), Oxfam International, R-SEAT's Kenya Core Group, and the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN)**, convened an interactive workshop in Nairobi ahead of the Shirika Plan's official launch on the 28th March. The event brought together Kenyan government officials, UNHCR, refugees and RLOs from Nairobi, Kakuma, and Dadaab camps, humanitarian actors, civil society, and international stakeholders to:

- Validate and refine the draft conceptual framework;
- Identify viable structures for refugee inclusion in Shirika's governance;
- Explore refugee-led approaches to service delivery, financing, and accountability; and,
- Build consensus on next steps for operationalizing refugee participation.

Key Highlights:

- Strong consensus that refugee participation must be institutionalized, not informal



Image 2. Two-Day Interactive Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, Organized by R-SEAT in Partnership with ReDSS, Oxfam, LERRN, and R-SEAT's Kenya Core Group.

- Broad support for a **Blended Refugee Expert Committee** that combines advisory and elective forms of engagement as a national mechanism and embedded in the Shirika Plan's governance structure.
- Government of Kenya expressed political will to explore formal refugee participation mechanisms. Participants noted this must be matched by sustained commitment from UNHCR, donors, and other stakeholders to ensure coordinated implementation and long-term support.
- RLOs demonstrated strong capacity for technical contributions and service delivery, especially when supported with direct and flexible funding through the technical working groups.
- Participants affirmed that meaningful refugee participation would improve program efficiency, equity, and impact, especially under current funding constraints.
- Demand for localized communication platforms, including refugee-led media, multilingual messaging, and regular feedback processes.

Strategic Relevance for Stakeholders

The Shirika Plan is not only a transformative national plan in Kenya, but also an opportunity for international stakeholders to demonstrate alignment and support for global norms on refugee participation, inclusion, and durable solutions.

For the Government of Kenya, the Shirika Plan presents an opportunity for Kenya to lead the region in participatory refugee governance. Institutionalizing refugee participation, particularly through the establishment of blended refugee expert committee model, positions Kenya as a leader and innovator among refugee-hosting countries in the Global South. By streamlining the registration and operations of RLOs and formalizing refugee expertise into Shirika processes, Kenya can demonstrate its commitment to meaningful refugee participation, durable solutions, localization, and inclusive, governance and development.

For UNHCR Kenya, the Framework advances priorities under the Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) agenda by establishing clear mechanisms to embed refugee perspectives in programme design and delivery. By supporting a blended refugee expert committee model and enabling multi-level refugee participation—from Technical Working Groups to the Shirika Joint Secretariat—UNHCR in Kenya can help ensure that implementation of the Shirika Plan consistently reflects refugee perspectives and needs. In doing so, it will play a catalytic role in supporting the Government of Kenya to operationalize Paragraph 34 of the Global Compact on Refugees.

For diplomatic missions, including donors, donor governments, and multilateral actors, commitments have been made to locally led development and inclusive governance through the Grand Bargain (GB). Supporting meaningful refugee participation mechanisms in Kenya allows these stakeholders to align practice with the principles of localization. It enhances the effectiveness of funding, strengthens social cohesion, and improves donor impact and coordination. Backing a structured a blended refugee expert committee model could also be a pathway for attracting more funding and resources by linking Kenya with donor countries with refugee participation and governance models that both recognize the expertise and lived experience of refugees as demonstrated in other region such as the Global North.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For the Government of Kenya (GoK)

- **Primary Recommendation:** Co-design a **Blended Refugee Expert Committee** under the Shirika governance structure, based on the consensus reached by actors in the March Muli stakeholder workshop, in partnership with GoK (Department of Refugees Services), refugee leaders, RLOs, and civil society actors.
- Reduce registration barriers for RLOs by removing unnecessary vetting processes and instead provide refugee documentation support to the State Department for Social Development under the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection.
- Identify practical and cost-effective ways to support refugee participation and localized consultations, including allocating targeted resources where feasible for strengthening coordination and sensitization of Shirika Plan within counties.
- Facilitate engagement and participation of the blended Refugee Expert Committee with key government decision-making bodies and national advisory policy committees, such as the Refugee Advisory Committee (RAC), established under Section 11 of the Refugee Act 2021.
- Support the inclusion or co-options of Refugee Led Organizations (RLOs) with thematic focus to Shirika Plan Pillars.

For UNHCR Kenya

- **Primary Recommendation:** Champion and support the establishment of the blended Refugee Expert Committee under the Shirika Plan governance structure and, where possible, facilitate its resourcing as the primary refugee engagement mechanism and advisory body, bringing together refugees with expertise in Shirika Plan implementation and the broader refugee policy space in Kenya.

- Provide guidance and support for the Committee's community-level engagement and advocate for its inclusion in the Technical Working Groups (TWGs) of the Shirika Plan, including in Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) frameworks, as aligned with UNHCR's Protection and support on AAP frameworks.
- Support the co-design and formation of RLO coordination mechanisms to advance RLO coordination, promote meaningful engagement of the RLOs in the implementation of the Shirika Plan, thereby strengthening service delivery.

For Diplomatic Missions and Development Partners

- **Primary Recommendation:** With the success and impact of the Shirika Plan being a priority for donors funding its implementation, it is essential to institutionalize refugee participation within its governance structures. This will enable refugees to meaningfully contribute their insights, advice, expertise, and concerns.
- Demonstrate support for a structured, blended refugee expert committee mechanism as a scalable and replicable model that aligns Kenya with broader donor initiatives.
- To advance localization, consider providing direct and flexible funding to RLOs, prioritizing impact and learning. This approach can open pathways for direct funding and support the capacity and institutional development of RLOs to enhance their delivery.
- Promote inclusive dialogue in high-level donor forums, through considering invitation to refugees from the refugee expert committee for donor meetings and events reinforcing refugee priorities such as legal rights, mobility, and economic participation.

For Refugee Leaders and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs)

- **Primary Recommendation:** Continue supporting and engaging in the co-establishment of the blended Refugee Expert Committee, as agreed during the March workshop, to provide structured engagement in policy and decision-making processes as experts in Shirika Plan implementation.
- Engage proactively in shaping and advancing the expert committee, approaching participation as a shared institutional and collective responsibility rather than an individual role or interest.

- RLOs should leverage their institutional capacity and thematic focus areas to actively engage in the Shirika Plan technical working groups and through ongoing processes for establishing coordination mechanisms.
- Continue strengthening internal coordination, governance, and communication structures to ensure inclusive and accountable engagement.
- Strengthen internal systems and structures to be ready for funding opportunities that may emerge from localization efforts and Shirika Plan.
- Proactively engage with partners and advocate for the inclusion of other vulnerable and marginalized groups, such as women and persons with disabilities, in advocacy and decision-making.



Image 3. Two-Day Interactive Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, Organized by R-SEAT in Partnership with ReDSS, Oxfam, LERRN, and R-SEAT's Kenya Core Group.

CONCLUSION

While these recommendations are not exhaustive, R-SEAT and its partners plan to hold follow-up consultations and outreach to refine and share them more broadly. Most importantly, the Shirika Plan Joint Secretariat led by the (Department of Refugee Services(DRS)/Government of Kenya and UNHCR Kenya) should proactively engage stakeholders on the urgent need to establish the blended Refugee Expert Committee, rooted in both expertise and lived experience, for policy and advisory engagement. **R-SEAT is committed to supporting this process by providing leadership, technical guidance, and mobilizing resources. Such a participatory structure will contribute to a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable Shirika Plan, positioning Kenya as a regional leader in refugee response through meaningful refugee participation.**

The Expert Committee will serve as a model for inclusive governance with and for refugees, drawing on their expertise rather than limiting participation to passive feedback and consultations, as is often the case in the East Africa region. The committee will not be a consortium of RLOs in Kenya, but rather a body of elected refugee leaders with relevant expertise who will provide strategic advisory input on Shirika Plan implementation and policy. Members will be selected based on clear Terms of Reference (ToRs), developed after planned consultations.

The ToRs, once developed, will strengthen engagement on national refugee policy priorities and reinforce Kenya's international commitments. A clearly defined mandate and role for the Expert Committee will also ensure that other ongoing processes, particularly those related to RLO coordination, continue unhindered, with R-SEAT providing only strategic support and guidance.

Technical, Co-creation and Design Approach

For the co-establishment of the blended Refugee Expert Committee, a taskforce made up of refugees and various partners will be constituted to support implementation in collaboration with R-SEAT. As part of the ToRs, the approach to forming the committee will include a transparent selection process that both recognizes and leverages the expertise and lived experiences of refugees. Wherever possible, appointments or selections will be made through a voting process.



Image 4. Two-Day Interactive Workshop in Nairobi, Kenya, Organized by R-SEAT in Partnership with RedSS, Oxfam, LERRN, and R-SEAT's Kenya Core Group.

About R-SEAT

R-SEAT (Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table) is an international initiative working to enhance the effectiveness of global refugee responses by co-designing mechanisms to amplify refugee leadership ecosystems and increase the participation of refugees at state levels in a meaningful, sustainable, and transformative way. In Kenya, R-SEAT works with a dedicated Core Group of refugee leaders, researchers, partners and allies to elevate the refugee leadership ecosystem through the institutionalization of refugee participation at the state level.

www.refugeesseat.org

About R-SEAT Kenya Core Group

The R-SEAT Kenya Core Group is composed of at least 10 influential refugee leaders, RLO representatives, and a few select partners who support R-SEAT Kenya's work in institutionalizing refugee participation in state-level policy and decision-making spaces. Membership is voluntary.

Partners:

Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) - ReDSS seeks to improve joint learning and programming, inform policy processes, enhance capacity development and facilitate coordination in the collective search for durable solutions. It is a coordination and information hub that acts as a catalyst and agent provocateur to stimulate forward-thinking and policy development on durable solutions for displacement.

African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) - is an independent African-led research consultancy firm with over 14 years of experience working with African governments, Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and the African Union Commission providing technical support on aspects concerning migration and development in Africa with a policy lens.

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For updates, future developments, and additional resources related to this Policy Paper, please visit the R-SEAT website and platforms in the coming months.

Acronyms

SHIRIKA - Socio-economic Hubs for Integrated Refugee Inclusion in Kenya

GCR - Global Compact of Refugees

DRS - Department of Refugees Services (DRS)

UNHCR Kenya - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees In Kenya

RLOs - Refugee-Led Organizations

R-SEAT - Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table

ReDSS - Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat

AMADPOC - African Migration and Development Policy Centre

IGAD - Intergovernmental Authority on Development

MRP -Meaningful Refugee Participation

AAP - Accountability to Affected Populations

HDP Nexus - Humanitarian, Development and Peace Nexus

GB - The Grand Bargain

ToRs - Terms of Reference

RAC - Refugee Advisory Committee

LERRN - Local Engagement Refugee Research Network

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