

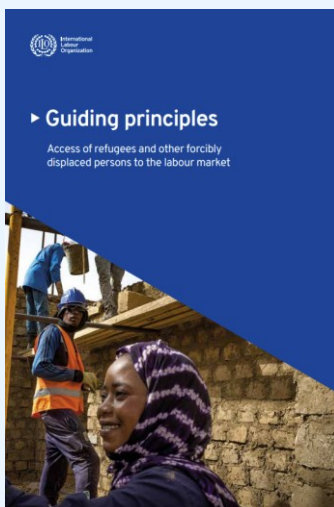
# ► Labour market inclusion for refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

Kenya: Economic and employment policies for inclusive labour markets

June 2026

The ILO Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and Other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market, adopted in 2016 by a tripartite technical meeting, provide a basis for the formulation of policy responses and national tripartite dialogue applicable to responses to forced displacement.

## The Guiding Principles on the Access of Refugees and other Forcibly Displaced Persons to the Labour Market



The Guiding Principles (GPs) support efforts to improve labour market functioning and ensure the protection of nationals, as well as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons (FDPs), in accessing decent work. The GPs are a set of voluntary, non-binding principles rooted in relevant international labour standards and universal human rights instruments, and inspired by good practices implemented in the field.

The Guiding Principles are structured around six core pillars:

- A. Governance frameworks on access to labour markets;
- **B. Economic and employment policies for inclusive labour markets;**
- C. Labour rights and equality of opportunity and treatment;
- D. Partnership, coordination and coherence;
- E. Voluntary repatriation and reintegration of returnees; and
- F. Additional pathways for labour mobility.

**This knowledge product focuses on section B of the GPs, with specific emphasis on Principles 17 and 18.** Using Kenya as a case study, it illustrates how the inclusion of refugees and other FDPs in economic and employment policies can foster shared growth and social cohesion between displaced and host communities.

## Unpacking the Guiding Principles

### What does Section B on Economic and employment policies for inclusive labour markets mean in practice?

**Guiding Principle 17** – National employment policies: ILO Member States are encouraged to develop and implement national employment policies that include refugees and other FDPs, where possible, together with representative employers' and workers' organizations.

**Guiding Principle 18** – Employment strategies should include measures to:

- enhance the capacity of public employment services, and improve cooperation with other providers of services (including private employment agencies) to support the access of refugees and other FDPs to the labour market, particularly as regard job placements and career counselling;
- support the inclusion in labour markets of women and youth from refugee and other FDP populations, including through access to education, life-long learning, childcare and after-school programmes;
- support recognition and accreditation of acquired skills and competencies by refugees and other FDPs through appropriate skills determination tests;
- facilitate tailored vocational training, including occupational safety and health training, with a strong on-the-job component (for example, apprenticeships), and intensive language teaching;
- strengthen access to skills development and upgrading opportunities, and entrepreneurship and business start-up training for refugees and other FDPs; and
- facilitate increased access to decent work opportunities for refugees and other FDPs and host communities, including by fostering transitions of employment from the informal to formal economy.

## Case study: Kenya's Shirika Plan – Including refugees and other FDPs in national systems

### Key points



Celestin Mbaruku from Democratic Republic of Congo fled war and took refuge in Kenya in 2000. His informal tailoring skills were certified through Government of Kenya's Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) programme in 2024. The policy developed with support from the ILO, has opened doors for him to apply for formal jobs or even open his own training institute. © ILO, 2024.

### Key issue:

- Promoting inclusive and decent job creation while integrating refugees and other FDPs into employment policies.

### Key takeaways:

- Kenya has progressively strengthened inclusive employment policies by building on county-level socio-economic development plans, scaling successful pilots into national systems, and anchoring refugee inclusion in the 2025 Shirika Plan.
- Transitioning from humanitarian assistance to development-led approaches allows refugees and other FDPs to support self-reliance, labour market functioning and contribute to economic growth.

## 1. Profile of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons

In 2025, Kenya hosted more than 850,000 refugees and asylum seekers, primarily from Somalia and South Sudan, making it Africa's fifth largest refugee-hosting country. The refugee situation in Kenya has been protracted since the early 1990s, with refugee camps in Garissa and Turkana counties established more than 30 years ago and expanded over time in response to successive displacement waves, initially from Somalia and later from South Sudan and other neighbouring countries. Three in four refugees are women and children, one in two is a child, and close to 45 per cent are of working age.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. Major developments: Towards inclusive employment policies

Kenya has progressively strengthened inclusive employment policies by building on county-level socio-economic development plans, scaling successful pilots into national systems and anchoring refugee inclusion in the 2025 [Shirika Plan](#).<sup>2</sup> This integrated approach is transitioning refugee camps into integrated settlements and promoting socio-economic inclusion.

### Box 1. The Shirika Plan for Refugees and Host Communities

#### The six pillars of the Shirika Plan

The Shirika Plan shifts from humanitarian aid to a development-focused approach that empowers self-reliance for refugees and host communities, and is structured around six thematic pillars to support this transition and promote socio-economic inclusion:

1. *Systems' Building*, enhancing institutional capacity
2. *Integrated Services*, providing education, health, housing, social protection, electricity and water, sanitation, and hygiene)
3. *Climate Action and Natural Resource Management*, targeting environmental sustainability, conservation, resilience and food security
4. *Human Skills and Capital Development*, supporting education, development and recognition of skills for employment
5. *Sustainable Economic Development*, developing livelihoods, reducing barriers to business development and participation, and facilitating micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) growth
6. *Durable Solutions and Complementary Pathways*, supporting voluntary repatriation, resettlement, local socio-economic integration and complementary pathways, such as sponsorships.

Kenya integrates refugees into a comprehensive set of national legislative and policy frameworks covering employment services,<sup>3</sup> skills development and recognition,<sup>4</sup> and entrepreneurship,<sup>5</sup> while ensuring non-discriminatory access through the Refugees Act, 2021,<sup>6</sup> and the Refugee (General) Regulations, 2024.<sup>7</sup> The Shirika Plan operationalizes this

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, [Kenya Statistics Infographics, June 2025](#).

<sup>2</sup> Republic of Kenya, 2025, [Shirika Plan for Refugees and Host Communities](#), Pillar 5.

<sup>3</sup> Republic of Kenya, ["National Employment Authority Act, No. 3 of 2016"](#).

<sup>4</sup> Republic of Kenya, ["Technical and Vocational Education and Training Act, No. 29 of 2013"](#); ["Kenya National Qualifications Framework Act, No. 22 of 2014"](#); ["Industrial Training Act"](#) (1959, amended 2024); Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Services, ["National Industrial Training and Attachment Policy"](#) (2013); Ministry of Education, ["Recognition of Prior Learning Policy"](#) (2024), ["National Policy for Vocational Education and Training"](#) (2024) and ["National Dual Technical and Vocational Education and Training \(TVET\) Policy"](#) (2025).

<sup>5</sup> Republic of Kenya, ["Micro and Small Enterprises Act"](#) (2012, revised 2022); ["Co-operative Societies Act"](#) (1998, amended 2023); Ministry of Industrialization, Trade and Enterprise Development, ["Micro and Small Enterprises Policy"](#) (2020).

<sup>6</sup> Republic of Kenya, ["Refugees Act, 2021"](#), section 8(2)(q) on the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in compliance with national law, and section 28 on the right of recognized refugees to engage in 'gainful employment or enterprise or to practice a profession or trade where he holds qualifications recognized by competent authorities in Kenya'.

<sup>7</sup> Republic of Kenya, ["Refugee \(General\) Regulations, 2024"](#), regulation 30 on recognition of refugee identity cards as proof of legal residence and regulation 46 on movement exemptions for employment and business.

integration by embedding refugees in relevant frameworks<sup>8</sup> and by explicitly supporting mechanisms under Pillar 2 on integrated services for refugees with professional skills to engage in formal and self-employment.

More specifically, Kenya has strengthened refugees' access to the labour market through a more inclusive, skills-focused strategy that links local pilots with national reforms and the overarching Shirika framework. This has been achieved through the following measures:

- The National Employment Authority Strategic Plan, 2023–27, provides for Rural Employment Services<sup>9</sup> that have extended basic job-search and placement support to remote refugee-hosting areas, while the Shirika Plan embeds youth empowerment, gender inclusion and digital skills within TVET, skills training and adult education.<sup>10</sup>
- The nationwide Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Policy, developed with employers and piloted with more than 600 beneficiaries, including refugees, enables certification of informal learning,<sup>11</sup> and the Shirika Plan commits to further scaling this for refugees.
- Work-based learning has been strengthened through national dual training standards<sup>12</sup> and the National Dual Training Policy, 2025. In addition, social partners are currently involved in developing an inclusive quality apprenticeship guideline that aims to integrate refugees and FDPs in work-based learning, and the Government is developing a micro-credentials policy framework, providing for affordable, stackable and flexible skills development and recognition processes for host communities and refugees. Plans to upgrade TVET institutions in camps and host communities under the Shirika Plan, reforms to the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) framework,<sup>13</sup> the County Licensing Act, 2024, and improved access for refugees to chambers of commerce services all further support the transition from informal to formal work.<sup>14</sup>

### 3. Outcomes and key lessons

Kenya's Shirika Plan is shifting refugee inclusion towards self-reliance by anchoring it in national systems rather than short-term humanitarian aid, and has strengthened government-led shared services in education, health and livelihoods across major refugee-hosting counties, including Garissa, Turkana, as well as in urban settings, benefiting both refugees and host communities. Policy reforms also activate refugees' underutilized language skills and professional experience, linking them more directly to Kenya's economic transformation agenda.<sup>15</sup>

These experiences point to several key lessons:

- **First**, inclusive and holistic economic and employment policies are most effective when they are aligned with national laws, build on successful local pilots through bottom-up approaches and are sustained over time with flexibility and long-term commitment.
- **Second**, integrating refugees and other FDPs into national systems is essential for strengthening self-reliance and reducing aid dependency, but it requires targeted investments in services and infrastructure, especially for young people and women, to ensure equitable access and participation.
- **Third**, transitioning from humanitarian assistance to development-led approaches succeeds when policies are harmonized across national and subnational levels so that implementation is coherent, builds resilience against climate-related and economic shocks and delivers tangible benefits for both refugees and host communities.

<sup>8</sup> Shirika Plan, Pillar 1 on systems building and harmonization of laws and policies, foreseeing a comprehensive national refugee policy; Pillar 4 on human skills and capital development, including refugees in the TVET Policy and Recognition of Prior Learning Policy; and Pillar 5 on sustainable economic development, including refugees in MSME strategies.

<sup>9</sup> ILO, 2024, "[Rural Employment Services: Empowering Communities through Local Partnerships in Kenya](#)"

<sup>10</sup> Shirika Plan, Pillar 4, on digital skills training and the expansion of non-formal and adult education through Adult and Continuing Education Centres (ACEs) for refugees and host communities.

<sup>11</sup> ILO, "[Kenya's Journey to Recognizing Informal Skills: The Making of the Recognition of Prior Learning Policy](#)" (ILO–Prospects Impact, 2024), and "[From Self-Taught to Certified: Kenya's Recognition of Prior Learning \(RPL\) Awards over 600 Certificates](#)" (ILO–Prospects Impact, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> ILO, 2024, "[Apprenticeship Welding Programme in Kenya for Refugees and Host Communities](#)"

<sup>13</sup> Republic of Kenya, "[Micro and Small Enterprises Act](#)" (2012, revised 2022); Ministry of Industrialization, Trade and Enterprise Development, "[Micro and Small Enterprises Policy](#)" (2020).

<sup>14</sup> ILO, "[Empowering Enterprise: Refugees and Hosts Thrive with Business Support Services in Kenya](#)" (ILO–Prospects Impact, 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Kenya Coalition for Refugee Economic Inclusion, "[Unlocking Refugee Work Authorisation in Kenya: A Practical Framework for Economic Inclusion, Institutional Alignment and National Growth](#)" (2026).

## 4. Actionable steps: Roadmap based on experience from Kenya

- **Establish a clear legislative foundation:** The Refugees Act, 2021, grants refugees the right to apply for work permits, providing a clear legal basis for labour market participation and laying the groundwork for broader inclusion.
- **Operationalize through regulations:** The Refugee (General) Regulations, 2024, streamline the issuance of refugee identity cards, formalizing them as valid proof of residence for employment and access to services.
- **Anchor reforms in county-level plans:** The shift towards longer term inclusion began with the Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Programme<sup>16</sup> in Turkana in 2016, and the Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan<sup>17</sup> in 2021, which link refugee-specific development with broader county development strategies.
- **Test inclusive approaches through pilots:** Pilots in refugee-hosting areas generate evidence and build local capacity for later system-wide scaling.
- **Consolidate inclusion in a national framework:** The Shirika Plan formally provides for refugee inclusion in national TVET, skills, RPL, employment and entrepreneurship policies, notably under Pillar 2, through equitable access to education and TVET; Pillar 4, through RPL advancement, strengthened training institutions and digital and vocational skills; and Pillar 5, through MSME and entrepreneurship support for refugees and host communities.

## 5. Way forward

Some barriers to refugee inclusion remain and should be addressed through coherent and rights-based policy design. Refugees face bureaucratic delays in registration and documentation, restrictive job-offer requirements and frequent “no-merit” rejections for work permits, compounded by limitations on freedom of movement, which sustain cycles of employment exclusion.<sup>18</sup> Camp-based refugees experience low formal employment and labour force participation due to limited access to skills development, recognition, and employment services, as well as weak connectivity. This is compounded by low local labour demand in host counties and high levels of informality. Job opportunities are often limited to ‘incentive work’ for humanitarian agencies at wages below those for Kenyan workers. In addition, more than 60 per cent of working-age women remain entirely outside the labour force owing to childcare responsibilities, limited mobility and entrenched gender norms.<sup>19</sup>

To address these constraints, efforts should focus on strengthening the inclusion of refugees in skills and employment policies, as now foreseen in the Shirika Plan, and on harmonizing refugee, employment and skills frameworks with broader labour market governance, particularly regarding access to labour markets, labour rights protection, equality of opportunity and treatment, and gender equality and non-discrimination (see sections A and C of the GPs). Tripartite monitoring mechanisms bringing together government, employers’ and workers’ organizations should be established to track integration progress, identify implementation gaps and enable adaptive, rights-based policy responses. At the same time, economic and employment measures should address climate change impacts, particularly in arid, climate-vulnerable areas, especially in refugee-hosting regions, through shock-responsive social protection, livelihood diversification and just transition interventions that build resilience and sustain decent work pathways for refugees and host communities.

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<sup>16</sup> Government of Kenya and UNHCR, “[Kalobeyei Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan \(KISEDIP\) 2018–2022](#)” (2018).

<sup>17</sup> County Government of Garissa and UNHCR, “[Garissa Integrated Socio-Economic Development Plan \(GISEDIP\) 2023–2027, Phase I](#)” (2023).

<sup>18</sup> Vuni, Patrick, and Buhandwa Irugi, “[Refugees’ Access to Work Permits and Business Licences in Kenya](#)” (2023), Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH).

<sup>19</sup> World Bank, “[Building Evidence to Enhance the Welfare of Refugees and Host Communities: Insights from the Kenya Longitudinal Socioeconomic Study of Refugees and Host Communities](#)” (2024).