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The Impact of COVID-19 on Education and Youth Well-Being in the Dadaab Refugee Camps

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Executive Summary

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in school closures globally, including in the Dadaab refugee camps. This study explored the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the Dadaab refugee camps. Based on semi-structured interviews with refugee educators and service providers in the camps, we found out how the pandemic has negatively affected young refugees' lives. While the schools attempted to implement distance education, it was ineffective overall. In addition to disrupting learning, there were many negative consequences of the school closures, including the cancellation of school feeding programs, worsened social issues, and a rise in mental health issues and suicides. While the issues highlighted in this paper are connected to the impacts of COVID-19, most of the issues were long-standing structural problems that already existed in the camp, including limited resources, funding shortfalls, overcrowded classrooms, a shortage of trained teachers, and limited Internet infrastructure. As a result, it has been challenging to reopen schools and to offer quality education to students. If donors and NGOs want to tackle the adverse social effects of the pandemic for students, they will have to not only reopen schools and mitigate the risks of contracting the coronavirus, but also address the underlying challenges of living, learning, and teaching in a space that is organized to exclude and immobilize refugees.

This study makes several recommendations on how to "build back better" to improve refugee education going forward in Dadaab. Although the pandemic brought significant challenges in Dadaab, it also provided an opportunity to explore how refugees can work out their own agency for survival, without the physical presence and intervention of the humanitarian workers and the Government of Kenya. This opportunity for agency was especially important in a camp setting that is designed to sequester refugee residents and make them vulnerable, voiceless, and dependent on humanitarian handouts. Future education initiatives must include meaningful refugee participation and leadership from refugee-led organizations and initiatives. There is a need to hire more qualified teachers on the ground to address the significant teacher shortage. The agencies handling education should ensure that all schools can access learning through digital platforms by providing all the required infrastructure and technologies. Teachers in Dadaab should receive training on how to use technology to deliver lessons to students, to take advantage of alternative teaching methods in case schools close again. Finally, as schools reopen, it is important to make sure that different groups of learners are not left behind, especially refugee girls.

1. Introduction

Refugee education is not only a necessity in fulfilling the Sustainable Development Goals, but it is also a universal human right that should be accessible to everyone. In the Dadaab Refugee Camps, the investment in universal primary education in the 1990s eventually paved way to free secondary education in 2000. To maximize the benefits of this opportunity, parents put every effort into encouraging their children to study hard so that they could receive opportunities for further studies. Refugee students studied hard, and some of the top performing students were awarded a limited number of scholarships at universities in Kenya and abroad. Educated refugees are better able to contribute regardless of the durable solution that they eventually access: they can better integrate locally or in a resettlement country, or they can contribute to the reconstruction of their homeland upon return (World Bank and UNHCR 2021). As the UNHCR and the World Bank explain: "highly educated refugees can also contribute to the sustainable development and reconstruction of their home and host countries" (World Bank and UNHCR 2021: 14). Access to education improves young people's chances at a better quality of life in the context of protracted displacement and encampment such as Dadaab.

However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in school closures globally, including in the Dadaab camps. Our working paper seeks to ascertain the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education in the Dadaab refugee camps. Based on semi-structured interviews with refugee educators and service providers in the camps, we found out how the pandemic has negatively affected young refugees' lives. Funding for schools has been drastically reduced and students' learning opportunities, which were already limited, have been disrupted. To ensure that young people return to learning and receive a quality education, donors and education providers will have to address not only the pandemic, but also the challenging realities of education in refugee camps.

2. Methodology

The four researchers are a group of community researchers in the Dadaab refugee camps who received their undergraduate and graduate degrees in education from York University through the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) Project. Their passion to do this research study is rooted in their individual experiences as educators in Dadaab. Okello was one of the teachers

who piloted the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education at its initiation in 1997 and is still a refugee teacher in Dadaab. Ochan began teaching at the primary level in 1998 and is still teaching in the camps. He has also been promoted to the roles of school administrator and headteacher. Arte and Abdikadir are both primary educators in Dadaab with a decade of teaching experience. Given their combined knowledge and experience alongside interviews, the researchers provide deep insight into how COVID-19 has impacted education in Dadaab camps. It should be noted that this research is not exhaustive as the pandemic continues to evolve and different measures are still being crafted to ensure the safety of teachers and learners in school.

The researchers used a selection sampling method to identify the participants from Dadaab's three refugee camps and collected data through remote or socially distanced semi-structured interviews. Forty-five participants were interviewed for this study – 16 women and 29 men – who at the time of the interviews were living and working in the Ifo, Dagahaley and Hagadera refugee camps of the Dadaab refugee camp complex. When quoting participants, we used pseudonyms to protect their identities. All the participants serve refugee communities from different sectors. Some of them work with NGOs in providing schooling, health, and educational programming. Other participants are refugees who are self-employed as shopkeepers or in other entrepreneurial activities, and others work in private medical clinics. Among the participants are youth, community, and religious leaders, as well as university students, schoolteachers, and administrators in elementary and secondary schools. We sought to understand the impact of the pandemic on the camps, generally how the refugees navigate their challenges amid lockdowns and immobility, and specifically the impacts of coronavirus pandemic on education. The research questions were meant to understand the participants' lives and activities before the pandemic; their perception of COVID-19; how life changed because of the coronavirus and how the community perceives the risk of the disease; the implications of the disease on education, social life, economy, and culture; and the intervention of stakeholders (UNHCR, INGOs, and other stakeholders).

This study was only limited to participants within the refugee community. Since international organizations withdrew from the camp because of the pandemic, there were no study participants from these organizations. It demonstrates the impact of refugees' responses to the consequences of the pandemic within their own displaced communities. The withdrawal of international organizations during the pandemic further recognized how refugees are capable of solving

problems in their own communities and can bear responsibilities in times of crisis. This is proof beyond doubt of refugees' independence and the possibility of "meaningful refugee participation" (Milner *et al.* 2022). The refugee community negotiated their own survival at that crucial time of the first outbreak and spread of coronavirus. Our position as researchers with firsthand experiences of displacement and as teachers by profession makes us insiders in this study and affects our perspectives throughout this research. This insider position made it possible to interact with the refugees, even during the height of restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic when outsiders could not come to the camps. As the saying goes, "nothing about us without us" provides us with the opportunity to be the voice of our people at this critical time of need.

3. History and Context of Education in the Camps

The Dadaab camps, which were established in 1992 to host refugees from Somalia, are now undergoing a process of gradual closure (Brankamp 2022; Cone 2021). There have been calls to close the Dadaab refugee camps for years. A tripartite agreement to close the camps and repatriate Somali refugees was reached between Kenya, Somalia and the UNHCR in 2013. This plan was started in earnest after the 2015 terrorist attack at Garissa University by alleged Al-Shabab agents, which resulted in the deaths of 148 students (Nation Reporter 2015). The Dadaab refugee camps were frequently blamed as a hideout for the terrorist group, but these claims were often made without strong evidence. In response, the Kenyan government gave the UNHCR three months to relocate over 500,000 refugees. This order prompted the voluntary repatriation of many Somali refugees when funding and safety would allow. The non-Somali refugees were to be relocated to the northwestern part of Kenya to the Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement, some 16 kilometers outside of Kakuma. Most of the non-Somali refugees – hailing from South Sudan, Uganda, and Ethiopia – had originally been moved to Dadaab for protection reasons given Kakuma's proximity to the borders of those countries. They now fear going back to Kakuma and Kalobeyei because of the possibility of being attacked by their governments. Some refugees yielded to the pressure and left to Kalobeyei, but those who felt their lives were in real danger resisted. Some, like the Ethiopians, opted for repatriation rather than relocation. The Ethiopian Embassy official requested that the UNHCR and the Government of Kenya not forcefully send the Ethiopian refugees without enough support to help them start a new life at home. They should not just be put in a plane and send back home empty-handed, since the

Ethiopian government was not actually prepared and had not put anything in place for those people. He said Ethiopia had other priorities, however, will not accept unfair treatment of its citizens. When COVID-19 hit, relocation exercises were stopped immediately. Refugee camps (in Dadaab and Kakuma) were locked out from the rest of Kenya. Movement into and outside of the camps was restricted. At the moment, there can no longer be any relocation of refugees as the president signed into law the Refugee Act 2021. This Act is the current issue of concern for the refugee community, and we are advocating for its immediate and effective implementation.

Refugees, either Somali or non-Somali, who choose to remain in Dadaab face the repercussions of resisting camp closure if they do not comply. For example, in 2020, all non-Somali children registered to sit for their Kenya National Examinations in Dadaab schools (primary and secondary) were forcefully de-registered and their data was transferred to Kalobeyei without the consent of their parents. The Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) and UNHCR had planned to ensure the parents' transfer with their children unconditionally. There were some refugees who were transferred from Kakuma to Dadaab on protection cases. They were told to go back to Kakuma camps. That was a desperate time for non-Somalis with children bound to sit for national examinations. The Government of Kenya and the UNHCR in Dadaab used any means possible to pressure non-Somalis to relocate to Kakuma and Kalobeyei, including diplomacy, persuasion, provocation, deregistration and transfer of refugees' data from Dadaab to Kakuma and Kalobeyei, forceful mobilization of the non-Somalis by government officials going house-to-house, and the uninvestigated burning of the belongings of the property of some South Sudanese in a bus that was to take them to the airstrip at Ifo Camp Transit Center. In addition, the non-Somali refugees who worked for international organizations for a small honorarium (incentive workers) in Dadaab had their services terminated. Some non-Somali families, who did not have serious security concerns in Kalobeyei, yielded to the pressure and relocated with all the family members. With ongoing political instability in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes Regions, Dadaab is still seen as a haven by many refugees, particularly by non-Somalis who cannot be hosted in Kakuma for protection reasons. Somali refugees have been pressured to repatriate through ration cuts, forceful collection of refugee belongings, cuts to the water supply, terminated employment contracts, and examination de-registration (Okello 2021). The security situation in Somalia is still precarious, even though some Somali refugees opted for repatriation given the reduced humanitarian

assistance in the Dadaab camps. In addition to the repatriation and relocation procedures, the Government of Kenya also stopped the registration of new refugees.

For over two decades, refugee children and youth have had access to education in the camps, enabling better futures for many young people who would have otherwise stagnated as their displacement grew longer. The positive psychosocial effects of education on displaced children and youth are well known (Grasser 2022). Schooling serves as a rite of passage to signify that one has passed from one stage of life to another. It is a place where children come to learn about their place in the world and what they could achieve with learning. According to an elder in Ifo refugee camp interviewed for our study, the first Dadaab refugee secular school was established in 1993 by the community under the leadership of Abdulaziz Garad, a Somali educator who is believed to have served in Somalia's Barre government. Learning activities at that time focused on basic literacy and numeracy with instruction done in the Somali language. According to one of our interviewees, there was no physical building for the school. The only class was under a big tree in an open space where the children and the teacher interacted in windy and dusty conditions. In the mid-1990s, the United Nations International Children Educational Fund (UNICEF) took over the program by facilitating the construction of five classrooms made of temporary structures in the current Abdul-Aziz primary school, formerly known as Elody Primary school. Under the sponsorship of UNICEF, formal education flourished in the camp. However, schools in the camps did not have any specified guidelines or curricula to steer learning activities. When parents realized that they would not return to Somalia anytime soon, they asked that their children be educated in the Kenyan curriculum. This request led to the introduction of the Kenyan curriculum in the refugee camps in 1998 (Ochan 2021). Dadaab's refugees decided to embark on education as a tool to nurture their children's potential for the betterment of their country's development in the future.

Before COVID-19 hit, schools in the Dadaab camps were already experiencing many challenges that have been documented in other research studies. For example, schools faced a lack of sufficient resources and funding, poor infrastructure, the segregation of persons with disabilities in schools, a lack of trained teachers, overcrowded classrooms, and difficulties in retaining girls in schools (Duale *et al.* 2019; Abikar 2021; Dagane and Aden 2021; Oyat 2022; Ochan 2021). The pandemic escalated the pre-existing problems and these challenges made it essentially impossible to comply with pandemic restrictions. For instance, classrooms were already congested, four

children could occupy a desk meant for two students. Observing the one metre distance per student in the classroom was impossible to apply. There was no fund for the construction of extra classrooms.

4. Public Health Measures in the Dadaab Camps

Image 1: Handwashing station at a school in the Dadaab camps

As a result of the process of camp closure described above, the situation for refugees in Dadaab was already quite difficult when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. When the Government of Kenya decreed the lockdown of all refugee camps within its territory, refugees' movement was limited to only their authorized areas of the camps. At that time, issuing refugee travel documents (for travel to other parts of Kenya) was halted regardless of the severity of the problem as all offices within the refugee camps were officially closed. Refugee protection and social services were ceased. Although many aid workers had access to tools that enabled them to work remotely, these resources were inaccessible to refugee service providers, primarily incentive teachers and community workers who were still subject to the general refugee and specific pandemic restrictions in the camps. Just as importantly, refugee students and clients were unable to obtain tools that enabled remote learning and service provision. Currently, these resources are still unavailable and continue to impede on refugees' access to quality services, particularly education.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic heralded lockdowns and closures of schools and workplaces worldwide. Almost immediately, we knew that the pandemic disproportionately affected those who are the most marginalized in society, including refugees and other immigrants. The order for the lockdown of camps in March of 2020 caught many people unprepared. The order

to close was fully observed at all agencies' premises in the camps: hospitals, distribution centres, field offices, and educational centres. Schools were abruptly brought to a halt. Nobody knew when things would resume as normal as the coronavirus spread and public health measures required people to be on high alert to avoid contact with contaminated surfaces or spaces. Despite public health recommendations to cover the mouth and nose with a face mask and to regularly wash hands, masks, soap, and clean water were not readily available in the camps. People were also advised to socially distance, but the camps were already overcrowded with over 250,000 people living in spaces built for 90,000 refugees. Ali, a health worker in the camps noted:

> What we are doing, we are only avoiding the quarantine centers and the areas, especially, at the hospital. So those measures are only done around the health facilities because there are team that force people to follow the protocol. But at block levels, at tap-stands where we get water, which are community water places, all those places, guidelines are not followed. So, there is no personal level of preventing COVID-19. So, there is no personal level of initiatives for preventing COVID-19. We are about to see how things go on, when you are suspected, or, you have the signs and symptoms of the disease, then we are taken to the quarantine where we are taken for further management of the disease.

Ali further noted how the refugee incentive staff working with agencies are creating awareness and educating the public about the causes of COVID-19 and how it spreads. The UNHCR and the implementing organizations, however, did not adequately utilize their enormous capacities to mobilize the community. He lamented:

> People could have been given funds to train the community at the block-levels. The agencies should have used a lot of resources in mobilization of religious and other stakeholders from all walks of lives in the prevention of corona virus. There was not much involvement at this level. It was only at higher level that the information was shared.

As it was difficult for many refugees to adhere to these regulations for reasons beyond their control, police officers irregularly enforced these measures. The pandemic halted all social and public services in the Dadaab camps, and they continue to be indefinitely disrupted due to the lack of viral control measures. Testing and tracing of the virus is woefully inadequate, and vaccines are only available for a limited number of aid and incentive workers.

Despite the measures to control refugee movement in the name of stopping the transmission of COVID-19, it was aid workers' mobility that eventually became a key agent in spreading the coronavirus in the Dadaab camps, given the high mobility of aid workers and refugees' relative immobility. The virus was first detected in one of the Dadaab refugee camps in March 2020 through an aid worker who had contracted the virus during her holiday leave. She tested herself for COVID-19 in Nairobi before reporting back to her workstation, but the result was delayed, and she was urgently required for duty. A day after her arrival, she received the positive test result and required isolation. The news terrified all those who came into contact with her, including the guard who welcomed her at the gate. The free movement of aid workers into and out of Dadaab, the movement of local Kenyans, and the arrival of Somalis from Somalia fostered the spread of this virus in the camps. To mitigate the spread of the virus, camp authorities ensured that the reported cases were moved to quarantine centres for further investigation and provided treatment for positive cases. However, it is uncertain how effective these measures were given the limited resources and large number of refugees, local Kenyans, and aid workers in the Dadaab camps. Unfortunately, those who contracted COVID-19 were often stigmatized and sometimes segregated by the community even after recovery, for fear that they could still harbour the virus.

The remoteness, immobility, and consequent lack of resources in refugee camps makes public health provision difficult. Based on the proximity of Dadaab to the Somali border and its remoteness from the capital city of Kenya, Nairobi, refugees' resilience was the only effective tool in preventing the spread of coronavirus in the camps. The UNHCR and the implementing partners, through virtual meetings (Zoom Conferencing, phone calls and WhatsApp Platforms) with the refugee leaders and the host community leaders jointly created awareness by mobilizing refugees through radio programs, public address systems, and cell-phone short messages. Members of the public were told to strictly follow the COVID-19 protocol and police officers ensured that the refugees followed the rules.

5. School Closures and Ineffective Distance Education

Education is important in anyone's life. Even though refugee education in the camps operates based on emergency thinking, particularly short-term planning, for refugee children school is often a source of stability in their lives given the disruption of conflict and displacement. The pandemic

halted the benefits of education. Lockdowns and mobility restrictions in the camps created serious challenges for the well-being of children and youth who were already coping with displacement and sometimes separation from their biological parents. Schools were a haven for children in more ways than one, and the abrupt closures resulted in many negative impacts for their well-being.

While the schools in Dadaab were closed, some schools were repurposed as quarantine centers, but this practice was met with negative feelings by the community out of concern for the risk of contagion. When the quarantine centres were abandoned, the schools were fumigated to ensure their safety for resumption of learning. The agency in charge of hygiene and sanitation had a frequent schedule for fumigation of learning institutions.

With the global health emergency of COVID-19 and the shutdown of schools, students whose needs were already underserved by refugee schools were now on their own, without the online learning opportunities available to children in developed countries. During the lockdown, schools were not prepared to reach learners virtually and resorted to the radio (Gargar FM) and WhatsApp, both which were not effective or sustainable. Six interviewees shared that although teachers tried to teach students through radio and WhatsApp, unlike face-to-face instruction in which students can actively participate in class, the radio program method of teaching was not interactive. The one-way communication did not allow students to ask questions during the learning session or seek clarification on a specific point which they might not have understood. The other problem with WhatsApp and radio teaching, according to five of our participants, was that subjects that required practical activities in both primary and secondary education could not be demonstrated through audio lectures or via WhatsApp text. Since the lessons took a lecture approach, many learners were unmotivated to attend class and therefore withdrew from the radio lessons. The schools in the camps have limited infrastructure for internet connectivity. The UNHCR and the education implementing partner has only connected two primary schools per camp to the Internet. The rest of the schools do not have access to internet connectivity. All the schools have solar power, thanks to UNHCR and a Government of Kenya project. The next section highlights some of the negative consequences of the school closures beyond disrupted learning: the cancellation of school feeding programs, worsened social issues and a rise in mental health issues and suicides.

6. Negative Impacts of Schools Closures

6.1   Cancellation of School Feeding Programs

Regardless of whether they were living with families or on their own, those who were enrolled in primary education benefited from the school feeding program. Meals were an additional advantage to attending school. Although the World Food Programme distributes rations in the camp every two months, these provisions are insufficient. Refugees' rations had already been reduced by 40%. Many are malnourished by the end of the 60 days and have little food for the last two weeks before they receive new rations. Refugee children who relied on school meals experienced many problems during the severe lockdown period. The school feeding program was an important source of calories and good nutrition for children, and sometimes their only source of food. During this time, Terre des Hommes (TDH), a Swiss organization for children's aid in Dadaab, provided food vouchers worth 50 US dollars per child at least two times.

6.2   Worsened Social Issues

The recurrent and prolonged lockdowns in the Dadaab refugee camps have also negatively affected the well-being of students. Insufficient learning opportunities, social isolation, growing economic precarity, and rising gender-based violence is impacting the well-being of young people, especially girls. Before the school closures, daily attendance at school provided youth with an opportunity to interact with other people their age and feel a sense of inclusion within the community. During the school closures, there was a rise in various social issues, including drug use and early marriage. Many schoolgirls ran away from their homes for unknown reasons to places which would be discovered through tracking their phone chats by police officers in the criminal department. Some were found with their relatives in Garissa town of Nairobi, while others were found with their boyfriends, friends or just in a hiding place with people who are not even their relatives or friends. Most girls had found the school environment a safe space for socialization and interaction with peers. Confinement at home during the pandemic time made homes very precarious to most of those girls who were closely monitored by their parents and guardians. It later came out that those who refused to come back home got married and started family life.

Hodan, a youth leader in the camps, pointed out that "those who have not gone to school are many. Eighty percent of the population are youth and some have become drug addicts. We mobilize them

and give them awareness to go back to school. I tell them not to use drugs." Hodan warned of the consequences of closing schools without adequate safeguards for young people:

> Yes, now I have heard of school reopening. Some are going to school and the rest are remaining at home (because the government only accepted the candidate classes to resume learning in October 2020. The rest of the students, eventually, resumed in January 2021). I request all children should be taken back to school, while children follow the COVID-19 protocol. If they are not taken back to school, the students will start doing things that are not good for their age. Some of the boys now are going to the market and indulged in drugs. For the girls, they will marry when they are young. They will miss their education opportunity.

Other interviewees corroborated Hodan's assessment and observed that the COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated social issues facing refugee youth, which could further worsen if measures are not put in place to ensure their social inclusion while maintaining safety.

6.3   Mental Health Issues and Suicides

While citing examples of those new behaviours in Dadaab refugee camps during the pandemic, our participants also noted the prevalence of self-harm and suicide. The Dadaab refugee camps have recorded thirty-six attempted suicides among youth during the pandemic and six youth have died by suicide through hanging or drinking poison. In the Ifo camp, there were twelve suicide attempts, Dagahaley camp registered nineteen attempts and four deaths, and Hagadera recorded five attempts and two deaths. COVID-19 has contributed to the deterioration of refugees' mental health as they are impacted by worldwide challenges. Many refugees were dependent on remittances from relatives abroad, so when many workers were laid off in the global North, the bitter repercussions were the death of their family members in the camps. Two youths whose relatives were abroad committed suicide, one in Dagahaley camp and the other in Hagadera. There were also some attempted suicides by some youths with relatives abroad related to a declining share of resources previously sent from abroad.

7.   The Challenge of Re-Opening Schools with Limited Resources and Teacher Shortages

The anxiety about the spread of COVID-19 among refugees left many families in suspense wondering whether large family sizes would be able to keep physical distance while at home. Such

anxieties delayed the decision to reopen schools until October 10th, 2020, for the candidate classes: the students in the last year of primary school (Standard 8) and the students in the last year of secondary school (Form 4) who were preparing for their primary and secondary school certificate exams. The Ministry of Education scheduled their national examinations in March 2021. The remaining classes reopened in January 2021. As the country reopens educational institutions nationwide, many schools in the Dadaab refugee camps remain ill-prepared and lack first aid kits, handwashing soap, masks, air filters, and other resources required to protect children from COVID-19. Handwashing facilities are limited and the school buildings make it difficult to ensure physical distancing. Though COVID-19 protocols need to be observed for the foreseeable future, schools are reopening with the overcrowded classrooms that were the norm before the pandemic.

The quality of education in the UNHCR-managed educational institutions may not return to the pre-pandemic level even as schools reopen, given the drastic reduction of teachers in the camps. Before COVID-19, the smallest schools had approximately 1,500 students and the most congested had over 3,000 learners. Just before the pandemic and closure in March 2020, the schools were run by 297 teachers in the three camps, after a reduction of 158 teachers in early 2020. The Lutheran World Foundation, which runs primary education in the camps, claimed that the UNHCR in 2020 gave them only 136 million Kenyan shillings for education and for teachers' salaries. With this amount, they could afford to have 17 to 26 teachers per school, depending on the school population. However, the international minimum standard for teacher-pupil ratio is 1:40 (World Bank Development Committee 2004: 3). That means Dadaab refugee camps should have 38 to 75 teachers in every school, depending on the population of learners. At the beginning of the pandemic, many teachers and aid workers returned to their homes and some have never reported back to their working stations. Worryingly, the number of teachers was reduced to only three in most schools across the three camps. This problem extends beyond education and limits educational, health, humanitarian, and protection services.

More than a year after the initial lockdowns, schools in Dadaab refugee camps are still facing enormous challenges in adapting to the demands of teaching and learning in the pandemic. After being closed for almost a full year, the government ordered all secondary and primary schools to reopen on January 4th, 2021. For 2021, the Lutheran World Foundation complained again of underfunding from UNHCR as they received only 70 million Kenyan shillings. With that much

funding, they could only afford 7 teachers per school, regardless of the school population. They decided to have only three refugee teachers, three administrators (that is, the headteacher, the deputy headteacher and the senior teacher), plus a national (Kenyan) teacher to run the school. This plan ran unsuccessfully for one month. It raised a lot of concern in the refugee camps, as this capacity cannot contain all learners. In every school, there are two levels of pre-primary classes followed by Grades 1-4 and Standards 5-8. If all the learners in every level report to their classes, it will be very challenging for those few teachers to manage them. Apart from actual instruction, it is difficult to ensure COVID-19 protocols are followed without sufficient adult supervision. These young learners need older people to guide them, otherwise someone with coronavirus can spread the disease to the whole school and the camps at large. Most parents have decided not to send their children to school until this issue is resolved. To advocate for these changes, parents and students held a peaceful demonstration in the Ifo camp in January 2021. However, LWF education has not been able to send officers into the field to visit activities in the camps. After the demonstration, headteachers, UNHCR, LWF and the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) told the community that children must report to school as their attendance has been ordered by the government. Even though schools lack enough teachers, pupils must report to learning. All schools in Ifo camp closed within that one month of January 2021 and resumed immediately when UNHCR and LWF were funded to bring the teachers they had laid off back to work.

Immediately after the public schools were officially opened nationwide, many private schools, both primary and secondary, were initiated by the refugees and the host community. These private schools are doing extremely well, with refugee and host community children performing well in the national examinations. In one school, Al Bushra Academy, in Hagadera camp, the school managed to produce 48 students who achieved a grade of B+ in the last Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education. These are students who qualify for international scholarship opportunities, which take only 20 refugee students per year. The UNHCR secondary schools performed incredibly badly with many students receiving a grade of E.

8. Conclusion: Building Back Better

While the issues highlighted in this paper are connected to the impacts of COVID-19, most of the issues were long-standing structural problems that already existed in the camp. For example,

overcrowding in both school classrooms and in the camps in general was a growing concern long before the pandemic began. The paper also highlights some of the problematic ways in which Dadaab has been governed for almost 30 years, including paternalism, encampment, power asymmetries between humanitarian organizations and NGOs, and significant restrictions on mobility (Hyndman 2000). Insufficient donor funding and putting refugee camps in areas that are already marginalized, with frequent threats of camps closures, are some of the issues that made refugee lives precarious.

Education is considered a means to better futures for children and youth who are segregated in a remote refugee camp and facing bleak social and economic prospects. It is generally believed that education provides access to improved opportunities upon resettlement, return, and even when still living in the camps. Given the overcrowding and lack of resources, education in the Dadaab camps was by no means a perfect haven for refugee students before the pandemic, but it provided children with the opportunity to learn in community and to develop psycho-social skills that would alleviate the harsh conditions and dullness of camp life. The pandemic has only aggravated the already poor educational, social, and economic conditions in the camps.

Many of the teachers we interviewed provided recommendations to safely reopen schools, including ensuring that COVID-19 protocols are observed like wearing masks, social distancing, infection controls (i.e., provision and wearing of face masks, temperature checks, washing and sanitizing hands, coughing or sneezing into your arms, etc.), installing hand washing facilities and ventilation in classrooms and meeting spaces, and offering public health workshops to educate students and staff on safety measures. If donors and NGOs want to tackle the adverse social effects of the pandemic for students, they will have to not only reopen schools and mitigate the risks of contracting the coronavirus, but also address the underlying challenges of living, learning, and teaching in a space that is organized to exclude and immobilize refugees. There is a dire need for adequate and sustainable funding to hire more qualified teachers, including refugee educators, and to address overcrowding and the lack of learning and reading materials. If the UNHCR and other stakeholders want to reignite students' and families' hope in a better future, education will need to be built back better.

9. Recommendations

- **Kenyan Governmental Support for Refugee Education** – The Government of Kenya should support refugees' peaceful coexistence among refugees and with the host communities, regardless of their nationalities. This will create a stable environment for students and their parents who are always living in a precarious situation. The Refugee Act 2021 should be fully implemented in regard to the integration of refugee children into the government education management plan for everybody within the territory of Kenya, regardless of their nationalities. The Ministry of Education should improve the quality of education and promote inclusivity between the refugees and the host community who will be learning together.

- **Hiring more Teachers** – There is a need to hire more qualified teachers on the ground to address the significant teacher shortage, including refugee educators.

- **Training for Teachers** – Most teachers in primary schools are refugees who have finished their high school education. In addition to hiring new teachers, agencies should provide current refugee teachers with in-service training to improve their teaching skills (Abikar 2021). In particular, teachers in Dadaab should receive training on how to use technology to deliver lessons to students to have alternative methods of teaching if schools were to close again. Additional training on COVID-19 protocols and other emergency response strategies should also be included.

- **Improved Technology and Infrastructure** – Technology can mitigate the challenges of a reduced teaching staff by offering students the opportunity to access remote learning. If remote learning can be delivered to all the schools in the camps, children will only need to be minimally supervised to attend the online classes conducted by one teacher across the three camps. For remote learning, teachers could also be located outside of the camps. To make remote learning possible, the agencies handling education should ensure that all schools can access learning through digital platforms by providing all the required infrastructure and technologies. The donor community should consider furnishing refugee schools with computers, internet connectivity, and computerized whiteboard systems in classes.

- **Parental Involvement –** Parents' collaboration with teachers and involvement in their children's education improves the quality and performance of students. Parents should collaborate with teachers and be involved in their children's education by ensuring consistent

attendance, monitoring performance, and encouraging academic excellence. Here in the camps, parents could learn more about specific challenges related to the pandemic and also participate in awareness and mobilization of children unable to come back to school after the serious pandemic wave. Establishing committees at the neighbourhood "Block" level may be another way to monitor and support the progress of refugee students.

- **Gendered Approach** – Girls are especially at risk of not returning to school as the schools reopen, especially since some girls have been forced into early marriages during the pandemic. Female education must be supported by all actors and the community should eliminate barriers that prevent girls from attending education (see also Dagane and Aden 2021; Oyat 2021). Schools should continue to be a safe haven to for refugee learners who are experiencing different challenges in life. Some children come from homes that experience gender-based violence and family instability, and teachers should be empathetic to these situations.

- **Refugee Empowerment and Participation** – Refugee-led initiatives should be at the forefront in driving change and they should play a key role in monitoring and evaluating how services are created and implemented during the COVID19 pandemic time. The agencies partnering with refugee-led and community-based organizations should avoid treating these local organizations as their beneficiaries and see them as equal partners in projects. Refugees should be given the opportunity to solve their own problems through knowledge contribution, meaningful participation, and exercises of power in decision-making processes (see also Milner *et al.* 2022). Involving the community will prevent the dependency syndrome that is commonly associated with refugees in encampment. The agencies concerned with primary and secondary education sector such as the Lutheran World Federation and Windle International Kenya should closely work with the refugee-led organizations in order to jointly address pertinent issues. Empowering the local organizations through trainings and capacity building will improve them, giving hope to the younger generations in camps and creating more opportunities for success.

- **Multilateral Collaboration** – The UNHCR should increase resource support for primary and secondary education, partnering with other international and local agencies to complement and synergize efforts (see also Duale 2020). Encouraging collaboration between international agencies and community-based organizations can help all stakeholders progress towards the creation and implementation of local and sustainable solutions.

- **Funding Research on Refugee Education** – More funding should be allocated to refugee education research and development, especially research studies led by members of the refugee community. This will provide evidence-based solutions towards refugee education reform.

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