

Examining the Link between Aid, Integration, and Support for Refugees: US Aid Cuts and Kakuma Camp, Kenya

Wave 1 Report

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December 16, 2025



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1 Background

We are conducting a panel study to examine two key developments affecting refugees in Kenya: (a) the Shirika Plan, which seeks to promote the socioeconomic integration and self-reliance of refugees by transitioning from refugee camps to “integrated settlements,” and (b) recent cuts to U.S. refugee aid. Our objective is to understand how these changes influence the social and economic outcomes of both refugees and host communities. Additional details on each component of the study are available in their respective pre-analysis plans.

The first wave of data collection took place in May 2025 and comprised two components. First, we conducted a face-to-face survey with 300 members of the Turkana host community residing near Kakuma refugee camp. This survey was administered by TIFA Research. A comparable survey was also conducted in Isiolo to serve as a comparison case, though this data is not included here. Second, the principal investigator carried out 18 in-depth interviews with refugee leaders living in both Kakuma camp and Kalobeyi settlement. The study is designed as a four-wave panel and we intend to study the effects of the complete cut to cash assistance (*bamba chakula*) in June.

Please note that the findings presented in this report are preliminary and based solely on the first wave of data collection. All statistics should be considered provisional and may be subject to revision. This report should not be cited as a journal publication and a full academic manuscript is forthcoming, which will include causal analysis of the panel data. The project is generously supported by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and Stanford University’s King Center on Global Development.

2 Summary of Findings

- **Severe aid reductions** in food assistance and cash transfers (*bamba chakula*) have significantly increased hardship for refugees and the host community. These cuts have brought about hunger, insecurity, economic decline, and preventable deaths from malnutrition and treatable illnesses.
- Refugees have adopted **harmful coping strategies**, including cutting meals to once per day, accruing heavy debts at *bamba chakula* shops, turning to transactional sex, and engaging in theft due to desperation.
- **Education and healthcare services in the camps have deteriorated sharply.** Many children have dropped out of school due to hunger, high student-teacher ratios, and new financial requirements. Hospitals and health clinics face medication and staff shortages that result in health issues going untreated.
- **The host community is also severely impacted by aid cuts.** Loss of trade in firewood and charcoal, employment from NGOs and refugees, and reduced economic activity have negatively affected livelihoods previously dependent on refugee camp economies.
- Refugees broadly reject the **Shirika Plan, associating it primarily with forced integration, loss of humanitarian support, and unclear implications for citizenship.** The lack of clear information and consultation has increased refugee mistrust and opposition.
- Despite overall rejection of the Shirika Plan, **specific integration measures such as freedom of movement and employment rights are supported** by both refugee and host communities, provided essential humanitarian aid remains stable.
- **Repatriation to insecure home countries is increasingly considered** by refugees due to the crisis, with claims of refugees travelling on foot back to South Sudan. **Resettlement** to third countries remains highly desired but is perceived as increasingly unattainable due to the closure of the US resettlement program.
- There is **widespread confusion among refugees about who is responsible for aid reductions**, with blame frequently placed on international humanitarian agencies rather than the U.S. government.

3 Interviews with Refugee Leaders

3.1 Aid Cuts

Our in-depth interviews with refugee leaders found that the recent aid cuts in Kakuma refugee camp have triggered a crisis, with severe reductions in food, cash assistance, and essential services leading to widespread hunger, insecurity, economic decline, and mental health distress. Refugees now receive only a fraction of previous support, forcing many to skip meals, fall into debt, drop out of school, or turn to risky coping strategies such as transactional sex and theft. Education and healthcare systems are faltering, and job losses among both refugees and host community members have intensified hardship. Leaders report that the Turkana host community is also suffering from the collapse of trade and employment tied to the camp economy, though relations remain largely peaceful. In this context, repatriation has become increasingly appealing—even to conflict zones—while resettlement remains the most preferred solution. Refugee leaders widely reject the Shirika Plan, citing fears of forced integration, loss of identity, and reduced services under Kenyan government control, all exacerbated by poor communication.

3.1.1 Severe Food Shortages

The main problem affecting the camp is a severe lack of food. Food assistance has drastically reduced, with refugees receiving insufficient rations lasting only about one week each month. Previously, refugees received 820 KES in cash assistance (*bamba chakula*) alongside a food basket containing rice, yellow beans, and oil. They also previously received non-food items such as firewood, soap, salt, and sanitary products. However, recent cuts reduced assistance to just 400–515 KES per month, with food rations cut to 40% of daily needs. In June and July, there will be no cash assistance at all and refugees will be provided with food rations that will provide them with only 102g rice, 50g split peas and 35g cooking oil per person per day.

These shortages are intensifying related problems:

- **Insecurity:** Crime is rising rapidly, often perpetrated by youth who have dropped out of school in the aftermath of the budget cuts. People fear theft and violence, which has taken place with knives and machetes even during daylight hours. As one participant said, *“Some of the youths are idle. There are now no jobs or trainings, things that we had before that kept them busy. These boys are forming groups and stealing from people.”* Police often do not intervene.
- **Mental Health Crisis:** Desperation is widespread, with respondents claiming that people across the camp are becoming depressed and suffering mentally. One widely shared story is of a single mother of nine children who committed suicide because she could not feed her children and was refused additional credit at the *bamba* shop.
- **Economic Collapse:** Local businesses, both refugee and host community-owned, have seen significant closures due to decreased demand and limited circulating cash within the camp.
- **Transactional Sex:** Girls and young women are resorting to transactional sex to obtain basic necessities such as sanitary pads and food. This is leading to unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions.

3.1.2 Decline in Essential Services

In addition to the cuts to food and cash assistance, there has been widespread downscaling and closure of services provided by international organizations. These include:

- **Education:** Budget cuts have resulted in teacher layoffs, creating overcrowded classrooms. Many children cannot concentrate due to hunger, causing increased school dropouts. School meals, once an incentive for attendance, are significantly reduced or eliminated. Many national teachers have been laid off and replaced by refugee teachers, raising concerns about teaching experience. While primary education remains nominally free, new registration, exam, and material fees are now required. Secondary education has required fees since 2018.

- **Healthcare:** Medication shortages are acute. People presenting with malaria are often given prescriptions but must purchase the drugs themselves, which many cannot afford. Clinics are dealing only with emergencies and increasingly operate only during daytime hours. Many are only provided with painkillers for their illnesses.
- **Employment Losses:** Refugees previously employed by NGOs have lost their jobs, worsening economic hardship and community vulnerability.

3.1.3 Coping Strategies

Refugees have adopted several coping strategies, including:

- Limiting food intake to one meal per day.
- Incurring significant debt at local shops, hoping that they will be able to repay with bamba chakula in the future.
- Seeking financial help from relatives abroad, particularly those who have resettled.
- Attempting to generate income through small businesses, hawking, and informal jobs such as boda boda rentals.
- Organizing demonstrations and submitting formal complaints and petitions to UNHCR. A protest in March 2025 led to the minor concessions of water becoming available and the resumption of a small amount of oil in food rations.
- Engaging in transactional sex.
- Participating in theft and robbery.
- Turning to alcohol as a stress relief mechanism.
- Leaving the camp (see below).

Interview quotes:

- *“We are just facing this without having a solution. We see the problem is there but we don’t have a way to solve it. We are powerless.”*
- *“Refugees know their problems. They also know the solutions. But they’re not able to implement those solutions.”*
- *“I see elderly people brainstorming in the afternoon and evening. They are asking themselves, how are we going to survive the next four years? Because this guy [Trump] won’t change. With Trump, there’s no hope.”*
- *“People are sinking and swimming in debts. They’re borrowing from shops to get something for their kids.”*

While all refugees have been affected, some groups are particularly vulnerable: single mothers, the elderly, and single individuals who receive fewer rations.

Some refugees hold out hope that bamba chakula will return in August and that funding from other donors will materialize. There is speculation that China or Russia might step in to fill the funding gap, and some discussed a new China-funded education program.

3.1.4 Impacts on the Host Community

Refugee leaders state that the Turkana host community is also suffering:

- Refugees previously exchanged food for firewood and charcoal sold by the Turkana. With less food, this trade has stopped.
- Previously, locals who helped with food distribution would be given a small amount of food by refugees as payment. Refugees cannot afford to do this anymore as the food rations are so small.
- Turkana women who did domestic work in the camp have lost work.
- Many Turkana who worked for NGOs have lost their jobs.

3.1.5 Onward Movement and Durable Solutions

Refugee leaders state that, generally, refugees' preferences for durable solutions, ranked from most to least preferred, are resettlement, repatriation, and naturalization in Kenya. There is a strong aversion to becoming Kenyan citizens (see Shirika Plan controversy below). As one refugee leader said, *"No one wants to become a Kenyan. They would rather go back to their countries. Their wish is to get resettled to a third country to start their lives over. If that's not an option, they want repatriation. The final option is staying in Kenya, which is becoming more unpopular with these cuts"*.

3.1.5.1 Repatriation Amid worsening conditions in the camp, many refugees are increasingly requesting repatriation—even to countries still facing conflict. For some, the risk of returning home is seen as preferable to the certainty of starvation in Kakuma. One refugee from South Sudan expressed, *"Our people prefer to go back and die with a bullet in our homeland than to die of starvation in a refugee camp on somebody else's homeland."*

Preferences for return vary by nationality. Refugees from Burundi are returning in the largest numbers, aided by improved safety and a formal UNHCR repatriation program. One leader said, *"People used to line up outside the UNHCR compound for resettlement. Now, they are lining up for repatriation."*

In contrast, while many South Sudanese respondents—who make up the camp's largest population—expressed a desire to return, those from Somalia and Congo generally said they would not. As one Somali refugee explained: *"No one is planning to leave because we have nowhere to go. Our country is in a bad situation. We are under the government of Kenya and UNHCR. We are waiting for them."*

UNHCR has stated it cannot currently facilitate returns to South Sudan due to insecurity. In response, some refugees are attempting the journey independently—either by paying for transport or traveling on foot. However, multiple barriers hinder their return, including security checkpoints and the cost of travel. One respondent said, *"We are no longer free to return to our country. We are forced to remain in Kenya. If refugees were given transport to go back to their countries, you would find Kakuma empty."*

While a few do make it back to South Sudan, many are fearful or hesitant. Some lack family or property in South Sudan, and for others—particularly younger generations who have grown up entirely in Kakuma—there is little sense of connection to their country of origin. Without land or livelihoods, they worry about how they would survive upon return. Many say they would need UNHCR support to access land and rebuild their lives. Others prefer to remain in Kakuma because of the educational opportunities available in the camp.

3.1.5.2 Movement in East Africa A small number of refugees—especially those who are educated or single without dependents—are attempting to travel to urban areas like Nairobi. However, the city poses serious challenges: high living costs, widespread unemployment, and legal barriers to formal work.

Some refugees have asked to be relocated to Uganda, where they would be eligible for land and could grow food for themselves.

3.1.5.3 Resettlement Resettlement remains the most hoped-for solution. Yet recent developments—such as the suspension of US resettlement and cases of refugees being turned away from Germany—have created anxiety and disillusionment in the camp. When resettlement is no longer available, and basic needs such as food, healthcare, and education are not being met, many refugees say they would prefer to return to their home countries rather than continue to endure worsening conditions in Kakuma.

3.1.6 Awareness and Distrust

Many refugees are uncertain about the reasons behind the recent aid cuts. While some understand that the reductions stem from the United States—specifically policies from the Trump administration—others believe that the Kenyan government or UNHCR are deliberately withholding support. This lack of clarity is breeding mistrust, particularly toward refugee leaders. Some residents accuse their leaders of failing to advocate for them, not realizing that these leaders have limited influence.

There are some who think that UN organizations are using the aid cuts as a way to pocket money from international donors. Many feel that they are not receiving adequate communication and respect from UN agencies in the face of dwindling resources. As one said, *“We the refugees complain, the food is little. They undermine us, saying that the food you are given is free, why are you complaining?”*. Others believe that UNHCR is using these cuts to aid as a way to prompt refugees to leave the camp. One respondent mentioned the Swahili proverb: *“Akufukuzaye hakuambii toka”—“whoever is chasing you out does not tell you to go.”*

This atmosphere of confusion and mistrust is heightened by the current election period in the camp. Political candidates are making promises they cannot keep, including claims that they can restore food rations and cash transfers.

3.2 Shirika Plan

Refugees are strongly opposed to the Shirika Plan. This opposition stems from both misinformation about what the plan entails and genuine concerns about socioeconomic integration. The plan has become a deeply politicized issue within the camp, particularly during recent demonstrations. Camp leaders are increasingly cautious when speaking about it, fearing backlash from residents. As one leader explained, *“People are pointing fingers that we are not standing with them. We are classified as the oppressors with the other organizations.”*

Implementation of the Shirika Plan has been limited so far. The most significant change has been the transfer of hospital management from UNHCR to the local county government.

3.2.1 Refugee Concerns

The greatest source of concern and confusion relates to Kenyan identification and citizenship. Many refugees believe the Shirika Plan would require them to obtain Kenyan IDs and give up their refugee status. Refugees oppose this because they fear that they would lose eligibility for resettlement or voluntary return. Many also worry they will be forced to become Kenyan, abandoning their cultural or religious heritage.

Other concerns relate to the withdrawal of UNHCR services. Refugees fear that service delivery under the Kenyan government will be lower in quality and more neglectful. They point out that even before refugees arrived, the Turkana region received few public services from the state, despite facing harsh environmental conditions such as drought and limited agricultural capacity. They argue that if the government struggles to support its own citizens, it will be unable or unwilling to support refugees without UN involvement. One refugee summarized this worry: *“The government of Kenya has failed to manage its own population. Do you feel like adding 300,000 more refugees to them will be a good plan? They can barely manage their own citizens so how do they [plan to] manage refugees?”*

While many support the idea of gaining access to employment, they worry that jobs in Turkana are scarce and underpaid. Refugees are already paid less than Kenyans for the same work, and without UN support to supplement this, they fear they will not be able to make enough money to support themselves. One refugee explained, *“Kenyans themselves don’t have jobs and these are people who have gone to school, unlike us. Do you think they will leave the 7 million jobless people and employ the refugees? No. So refugees are feeling like Shirika Plan is not an option.”*

Many also cite experiences of mistreatment by Kenyan authorities, including harassment, arbitrary arrests, and police brutality. *“The way that refugees are treated by people in authority, the Kenyan government, it’s really sad. They are being arrested for no reason. The police are very brutal to the refugees. Do you think they will be happy being handed over to the government? No, they won’t.”*

Despite their concerns, refugees generally support the principles of freedom of movement and access to employment—the stated goals of the Shirika Plan. They point out that freedom of movement is currently restricted. Leaving the camp requires a movement pass, and while some find informal ways to travel, they risk arrest if caught. Refugees would like a policy that provides greater freedom of movement and employment, but they do not support the Shirika Plan in its current form.

3.2.2 Turkana Concerns

Refugee leaders say that local Turkana communities also oppose the Shirika Plan. They worry that if refugees gain Kenyan IDs and voting rights, they will become politically sidelined, as refugees would outnumber the host population. They also fear losing access to land that could be allocated to refugees. Additionally, they are concerned about the loss of services—particularly food assistance, education and healthcare—that they have come to rely on through their proximity to the camp. If refugees are integrated and no longer receive aid, Turkana residents may also lose access to these indirect benefits.

3.2.3 Communication

Refugees criticize the lack of consultation around the Shirika Plan. Many say they have not been informed about its contents and are therefore unwilling to support it without understanding the implications. Leaders who have traveled to Nairobi for discussions with UNHCR and the government about the Shirika Plan have faced criticism and hostility upon returning to the camp, accused of collaborating with authorities rather than representing the community's interests. Refugee leaders assume that the international community knows that they do not accept the plans for integration.

Some refugees believe that the Kenyan government is using the plan as a strategy to attract additional international funding, rather than to genuinely improve conditions. There is also suspicion that the government is issuing IDs so that refugees can vote in upcoming elections. Others suggest that the government is trying to benefit economically from refugee-owned businesses, particularly those run by Somalis and Ethiopians who have invested heavily in the camp economy.

One refugee expressed widespread sentiments of mistrust and resistance: *“We demand repatriation instead of integration. Why should I be integrated? They are trying to impose integration on us by denying us food. These budget cuts are a trick to lure us to accept integration. The government of Kenya is trying its best to convince the donors that we have accepted their Shirika Plan, their integration plan. This is because they want the money. But once the money is released, they will use the money for their own political gain. They don't care about the refugees. We have to care about ourselves.”*

3.3 Additional Issues

The camp continues to face a range of serious challenges unrelated to the aid cuts or the Shirika Plan:

- **Shelter:** There is a significant shortage of shelter. Some refugees remain in reception centers for years due to the lack of permanent housing.
- **Water:** Water is scarce. Turkana is a semi-arid region with desert-like conditions, and clean water is often unavailable. When boreholes run dry, refugees resort to drinking river water, which leads to outbreaks of cholera. There is also not enough water for washing clothes or maintaining hygiene.
- **Road Infrastructure:** A road was built around seven years ago to connect different sections of the camp, but it has since deteriorated. During the rainy season, it becomes impassable due to mud, making it extremely difficult to travel between camps or transport goods. This has disrupted businesses and delayed aid deliveries. Recently, a lorry overturned while trying to deliver oil, highlighting how poor road conditions directly impact access to essential supplies.

4 Host Community Survey

Our survey with 300 members of the host community shows that Turkana residents largely consider themselves to have benefitted from the presence of the refugee camp, particularly through access to food and humanitarian assistance. These benefits shape their views on the Shirika Plan and the consequences they are facing from the recent aid cuts. Many residents oppose the Shirika Plan if it leads to reduced food, cash

assistance, and services for refugees, since such reductions would also diminish their own access to resources and employment opportunities. As indirect recipients of international aid, they too are experiencing hardship as a result of the cuts.

Quotes from open-ended questions highlighting the ways in which the host community benefits from the camp:

- *“We have benefitted because there are free schools in the camps where children of locals who are less privileged can be able to attend and also residents can go there to seek casual labor employment and in the evening they can get food [as payment]. Also there were times NGOs that supported refugees considered the host community and rolled out projects to build like to build small but permanent homes for us. We also have our people intermarrying with the refugees. UNHCR also had programs that built classes in various schools. Also Kakuma’s revenue has increased over time as compared to Lodwar due to a lot of businesses going on about and a lot of people duly paying their taxes.”*
- *“Because of them, we are able to access basic needs like health from the UN and other basic needs like food.”*
- *“There are ways we benefit because the Turkana people bring charcoal, firewood, others walk in and are asked to fetch water wash the dishes do the laundry, and after doing the work they get something to go and eat at home with their kids and whenever the refugees get something they sell it to us, that is helping each other.”*
- *“Because of the small developments we have witnessed at least there is good roads now, infrastructure, special amenities are present.”*
- *“Because most of them take firewood to the camps and sell it to the refugees, some take charcoal after that they are given food and they go feed their kids. Some do laundry to get paid and some can even get a job or employment. Now that most companies have been closed down there isn’t employment available in the camps. Most Turkana people are now idle.”*

4.1 Aid Cuts

More than three in four respondents were aware of the recent aid cuts. The most commonly reported change as a result of the cuts was increased visible suffering of refugees—particularly due to food shortages and reductions in Bamba Chakula (see Figs. 1 and 2). Many respondents noted seeing refugees starving or begging for assistance. When asked what they believed refugees would do in response, the most frequent answer was that refugees would repatriate to their countries of origin, followed by concerns that some might resort to crime or violence to obtain food and other basic necessities (see Fig. 3).

Fig. 4 shows that host community members are also being directly affected by the cuts. Most commonly, households reported decreased income and fewer resources, often as a result of reductions in food aid and Bamba Chakula provided to refugees. Many also reported losing jobs they previously held with NGOs or in refugee households (e.g., as domestic workers). Notably, very few reported an increase in violence or crime within their own households as a result of the cuts.

Interestingly, members of the host community tend to assign blame for the aid cuts to both the United States and UN agencies (see Fig. 5). While many correctly identified U.S. President Donald Trump as the origin of the cuts, a large share also blamed the UN—despite it not being the source of the cuts, but rather the agency tasked with implementing them. This suggests widespread misinformation or lack of clarity around the origins of the cuts and the roles of different actors.

As shown in Fig. 6, healthcare was the most frequently accessed service in the past month, followed by education. This aligns with existing reports indicating that host community members benefit from healthcare and education services intended for refugees, and implies they are also vulnerable to service disruptions. Many also reported employment through NGOs, which may have been significantly higher prior to the cuts.

Regarding their current economic and security situation, members of the host community report substantial food insecurity, with many stating they do not have enough to eat each day (see Fig. 7). In terms of

safety, many also reported feeling unsafe walking at night (see Fig. 8). We will be examining whether these measures change as the effects of aid cuts continue.

Figure 1: Have heard about recent cuts and reductions to services for refugees in Kakuma camp?

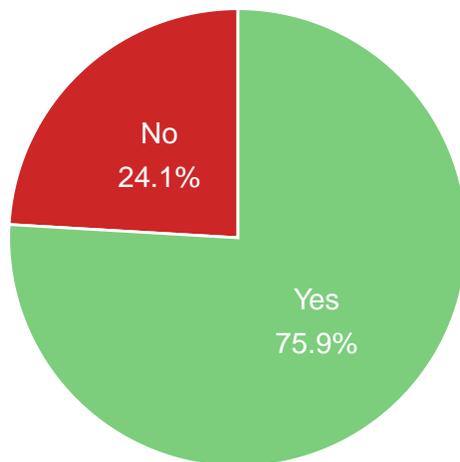
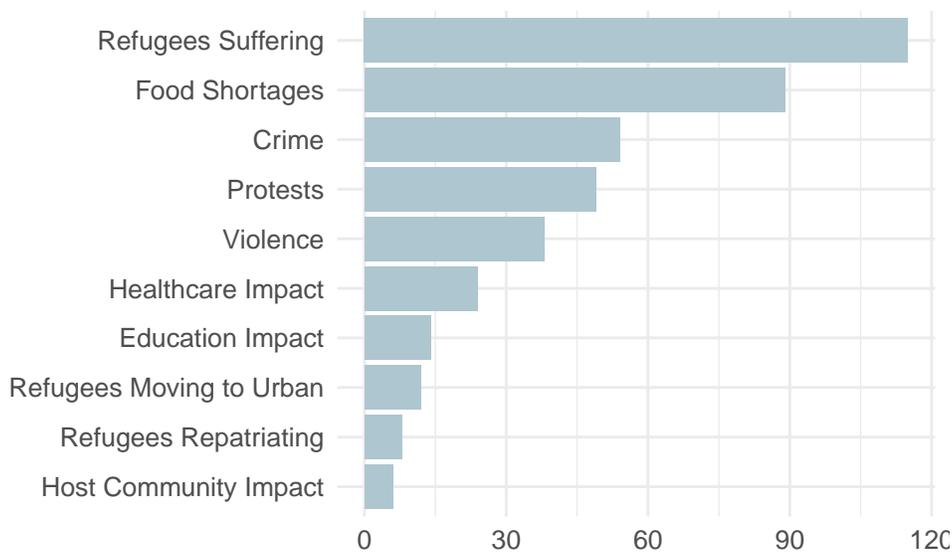


Figure 2: What changes you have seen as a result of these cuts?



4.2 Shirika Plan

There is strong opposition to the Shirika Plan among the host community, with 59.4% of respondents stating that they are opposed to the Plan (see Fig. 9). However, this opposition should not be interpreted as a rejection of improved rights for refugees in Kenya. Rather, it is important to highlight that both host and refugee respondents commonly believe that the Shirika Plan entails granting refugees Kenyan citizenship. In fact, 10 shows that 48.5% believe the Plan will lead to citizenship, which is notably higher than those who associate the Plan with its original plans of expanded work rights (7.9%) and increased freedom of movement (6.4%).

When asked about specific dimensions of refugee integration, local respondents expressed much greater support (see Fig. 11). This suggests that opposition to the Shirika Plan is driven primarily by concerns about citizenship and potential reductions in aid, rather than general hostility toward refugees. For example, 56.3% support refugees continuing to live in the area, 43.7% support refugees working in their communities, and

Figure 3: What do you think refugees are already doing (or will do in the future) in response to this?

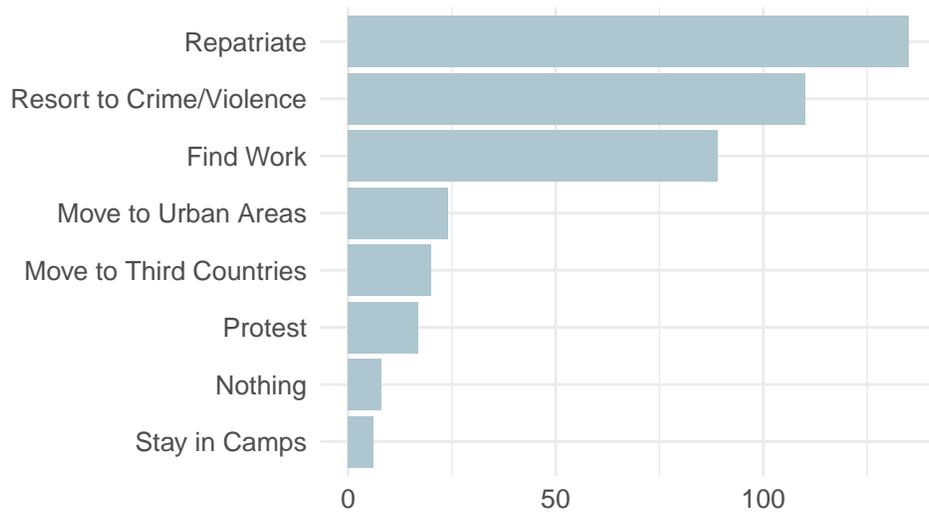


Figure 4: Has your household been negatively impacted by these cuts? If so, how?

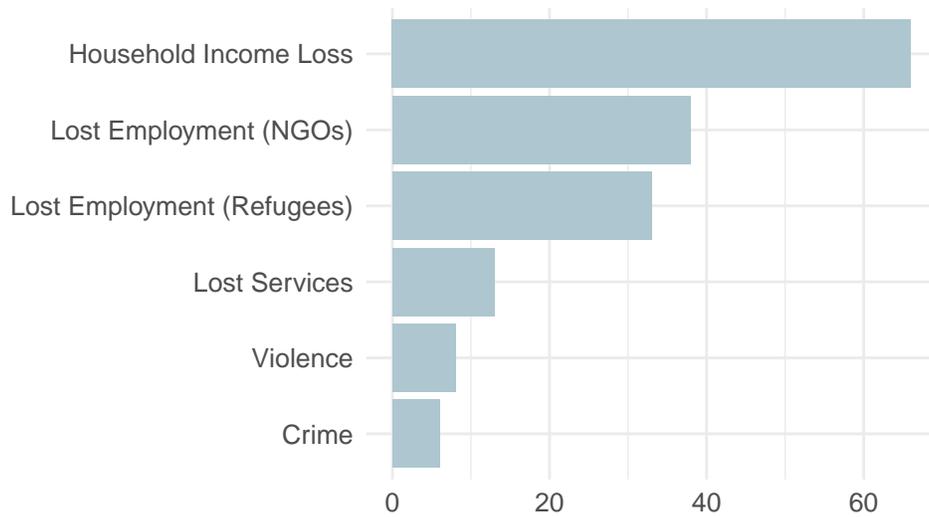


Figure 5: Who do you think is most responsible for these recent cuts and reductions to services?

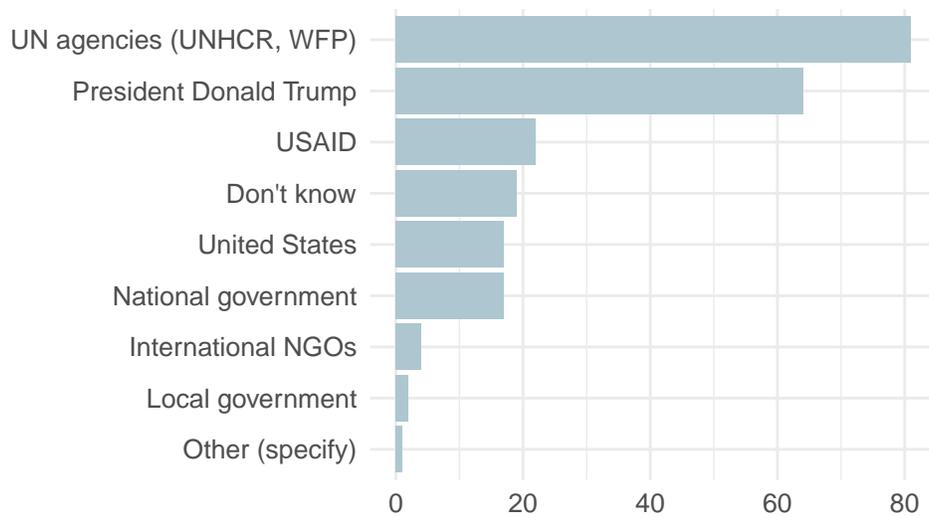


Figure 6: Interactions with refugees and Kakuma in the past month



Figure 7: In the past 7 days, were there times when your household did not have enough food or enough money to buy sufficient food? How many days?

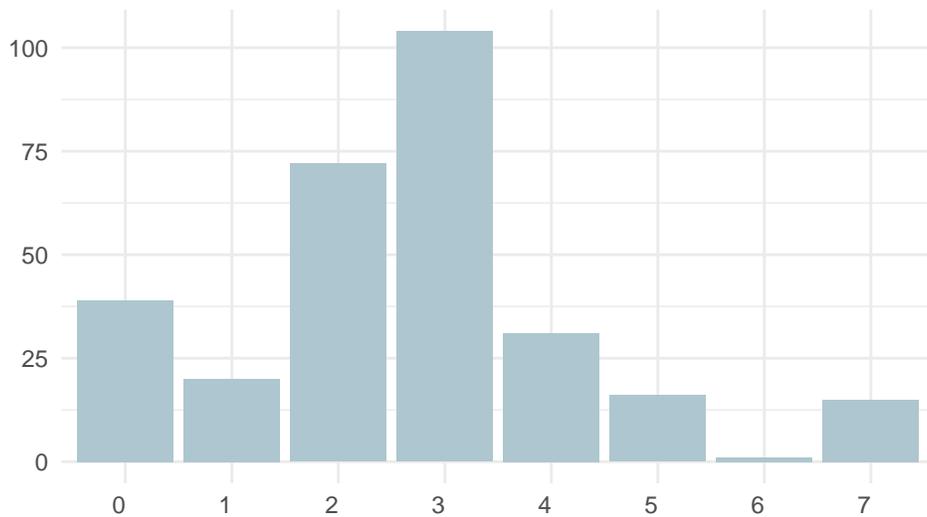
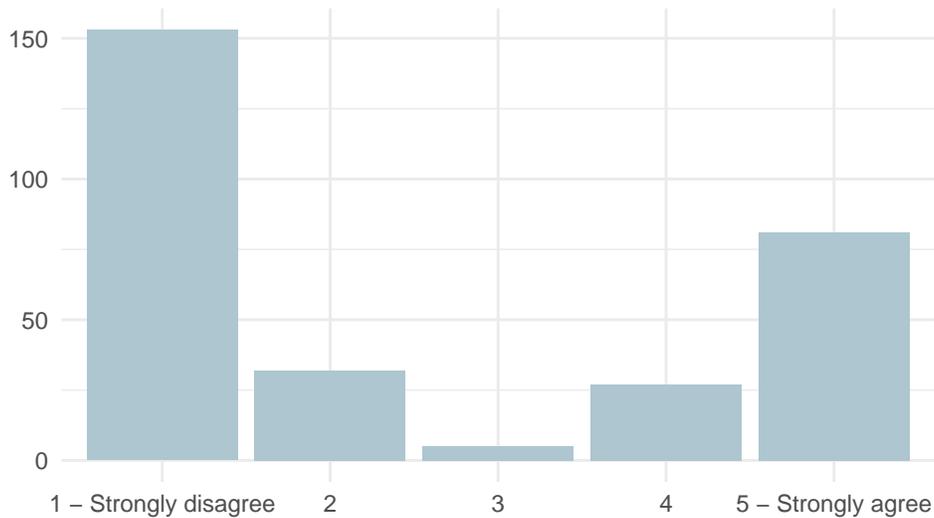


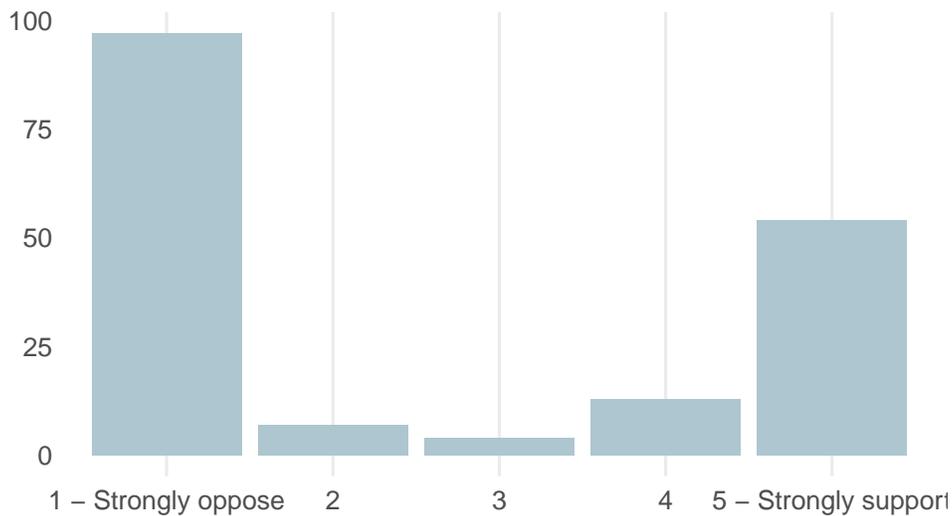
Figure 8: I feel safe walking alone in my area/neighbourhood at night.



55.7% support refugees accessing healthcare. However, support drops sharply when it comes to citizenship, with only 19.0% in favor—yet this is the dimension most commonly associated with the Shirika Plan.

Also note that awareness of the Plan is relatively high, with 68.0% saying that they have heard of the Shirika Plan.

Figure 9: Do you support or oppose the Shirika Plan?



4.3 Attitudes Toward Refugees

Figure 13 shows that attitudes toward refugees within the host community are bimodal. While a majority (56%) support Kenya hosting refugees, a substantial minority (43%) are opposed. Notably, the overwhelming majority of Turkana respondents (92%) believe that refugees come to Kenya to escape conflict or violence, rather than to obtain citizenship or access humanitarian assistance.

More than two-thirds of host community members agree that the Turkana have benefitted from the presence of refugees in Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement (see Fig. 15). As shown in Fig. 16, locals report that refugees have had a positive impact on service quality, employment opportunities, and local culture, but a negative impact on levels of violence and the price of goods.

Figure 10: What have you heard about what the Shirika Plan entails?

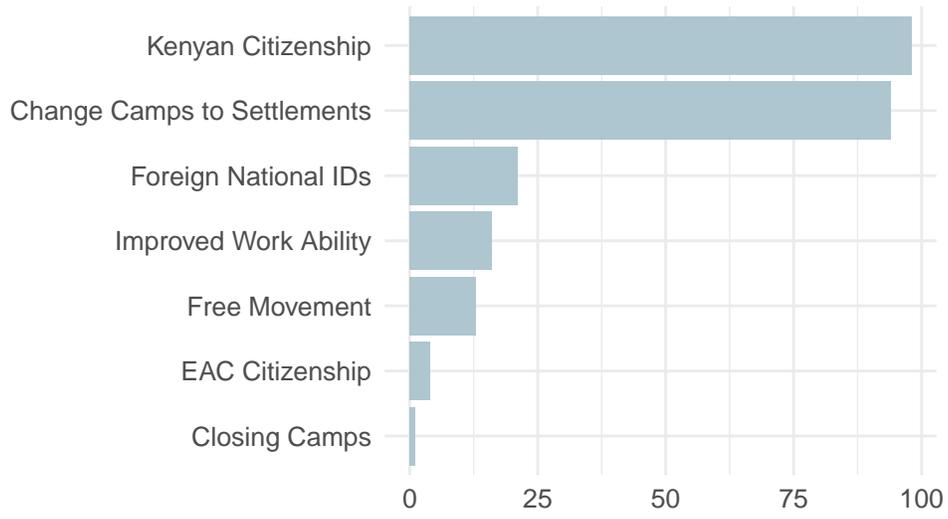


Figure 11: Support for different dimensions of integration

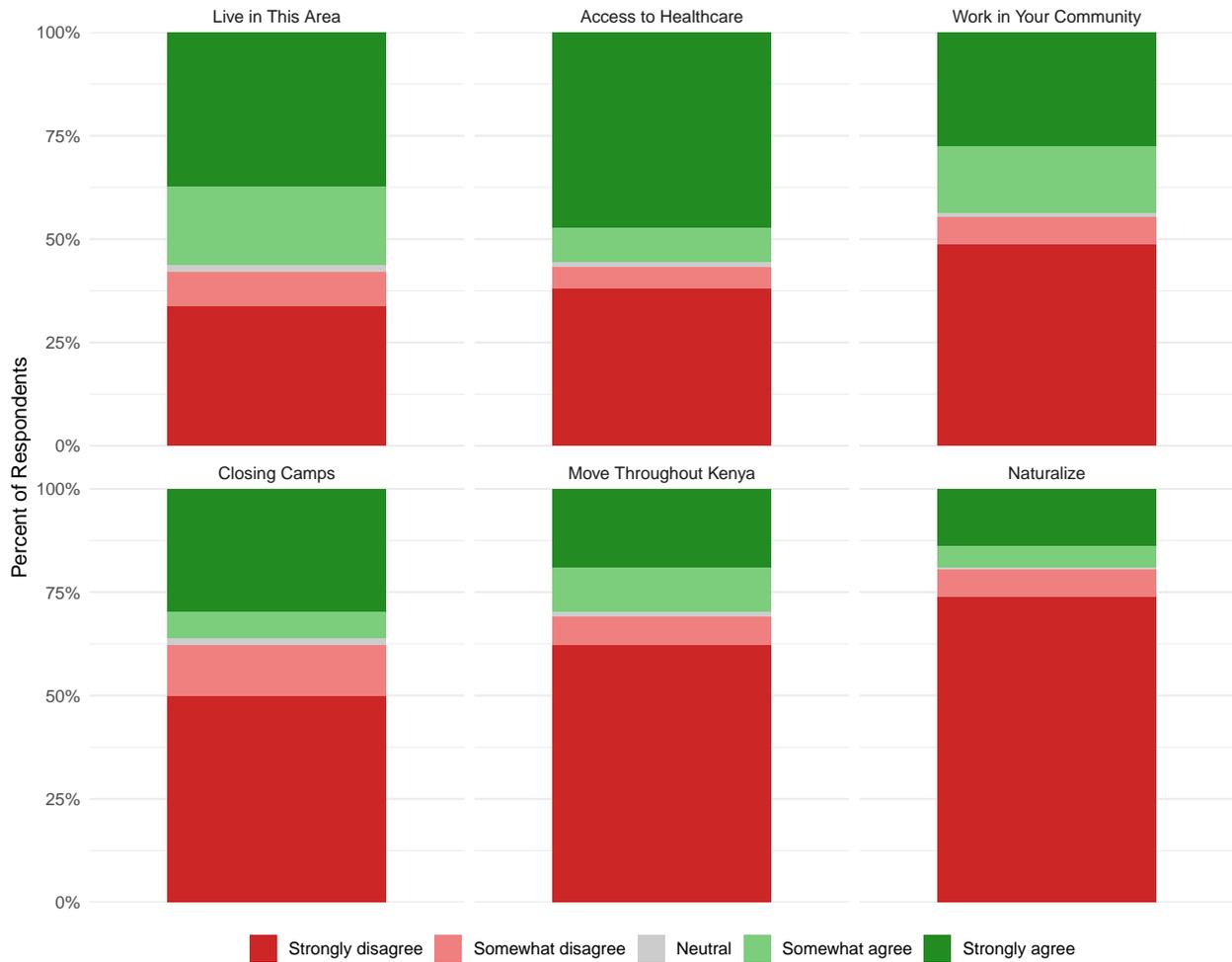
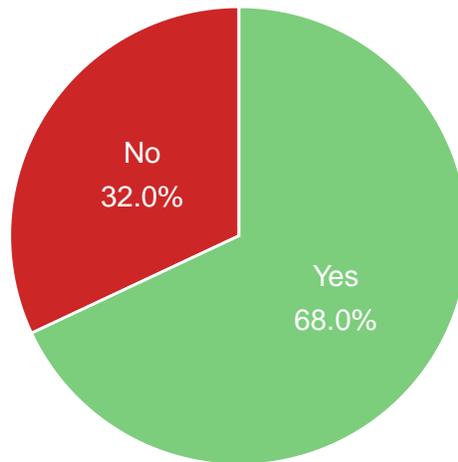


Figure 12: Have you heard of the Shirika Plan?



When asked to choose between five policy options for refugees, local Turkana showed the greatest support for maintaining Kakuma (as either a camp or settlement), rather than for options that would shut down the camp—such as repatriating refugees to their countries of origin or granting them full freedom of movement and work (see Fig. 17).

Figure 13: To what extent do you support or oppose Kenya hosting refugees?

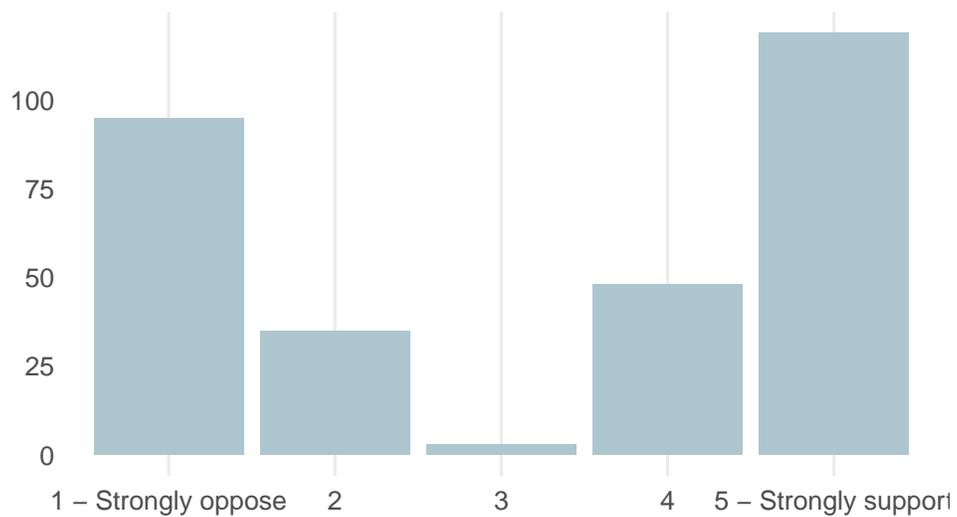


Figure 14: Why do you think most refugees come to Kenya?

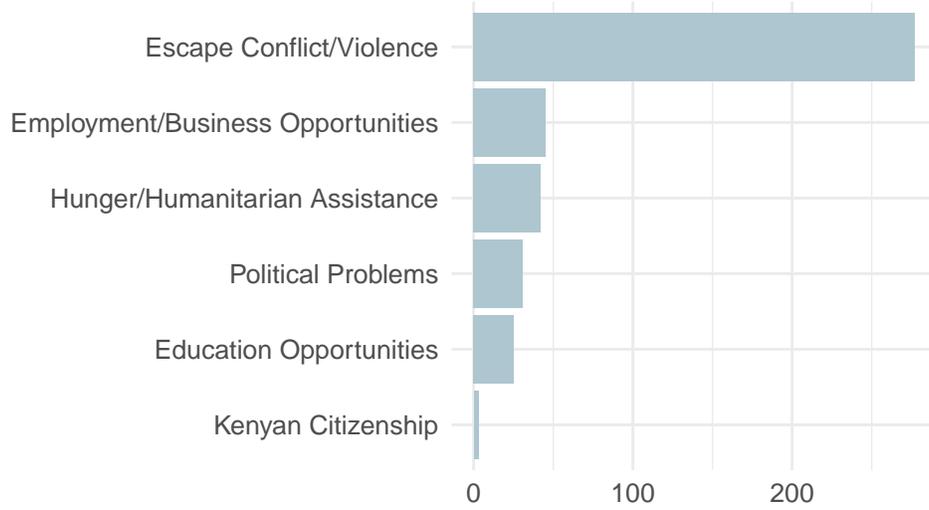


Figure 15: We Turkana people living near Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement have benefitted from the refugees living here.

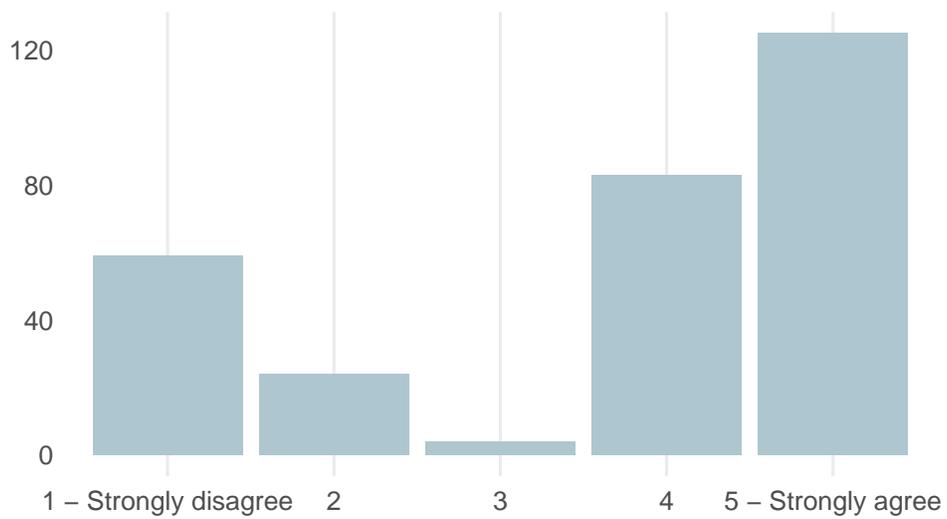


Figure 16: Perceptions of negative effects of refugees

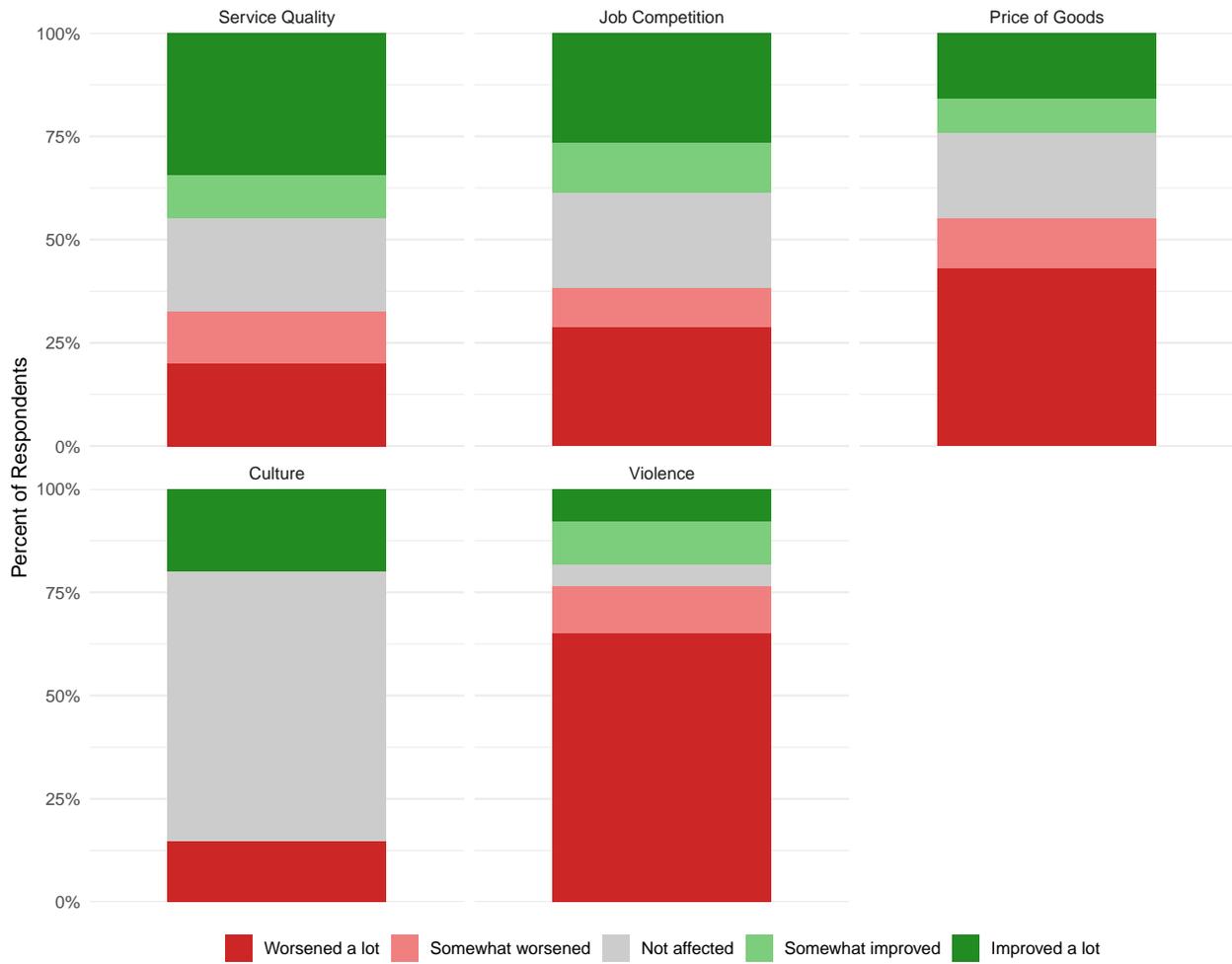


Figure 17: Preferred policy option for refugees

