

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

Wave 2 Report

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December 16, 2025



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### Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Background</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Summary of Findings</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Interviews with Refugee Leaders</b>	<b>5</b>
3.1	Differentiated Assistance . . . . .	5
3.2	Cuts to <i>Bamba Chakula</i> in June and July . . . . .	5
3.3	Recent Responses to Aid Cuts . . . . .	6
3.4	Communication and Perceptions of Responsibility . . . . .	6
3.5	Relationship with the Turkana Community . . . . .	7
3.6	Shirika Plan . . . . .	7
<b>4</b>	<b>Host Community Survey</b>	<b>8</b>
4.1	Aid Cuts . . . . .	8
4.2	Attitudes Toward Refugees . . . . .	13
4.3	Shirika Plan . . . . .	14



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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.

We have conducted two of four survey waves. The first wave of data collection took place in May 2025 and the second wave in July 2025. Each wave consists of two components. First, we conduct a face-to-face survey with 300 members of the Turkana host community residing near Kakuma refugee camp. This survey is administered by TIFA Research. A comparable survey is also conducted in Isiolo to serve as a comparison case, though this data is not included here. Second, the principal investigator carries out 18 in-depth interviews with refugee leaders living in both Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement. The study is designed as a four-wave panel to track the impacts of key policy changes, including the complete cut to cash assistance (*bamba chakula*) in June/July 2025 and the rollout of Differentiated Assistance in August, which tailors aid based on assessed vulnerability levels.

Please note that the findings presented in this report are preliminary and based on the first two waves 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. This report provides an update since Wave 1, and readers should refer to the Wave 1 report for an initial assessment of the immediate effects of the aid cuts.



Photo credit: Gabriella Kennedy

## 2 Summary of Findings

In June and July 2025, refugees received no *bamba chakula* cash assistance but continued to receive 40% of standard food rations. In August, there will be a rollout of a new system of Differentiated Assistance. Under this model, refugees are categorized by level of vulnerability: Category 1 (most vulnerable) receives 40% of food rations (the same as in June and July), Category 2 (vulnerable) receives 20% of food rations, and Categories 3 and 4 are deemed self-sufficient and will no longer receive food assistance, *bamba chakula*, or services such as healthcare and education.

Key findings:

- **The incoming rollout of Differentiated Assistance is expected to cause widespread hunger**, with nearly half of all refugees set to receive no food rations or services such as healthcare and education. Refugees have little access to agricultural land or sustainable livelihoods in Kakuma or Kalobeyei, making it difficult to generate income elsewhere.
- **Many vulnerable individuals have been misclassified as self-sufficient**, including single mothers, those with disabilities, and refugees who have lost their income due to the collapse of small businesses and job cuts at NGOs. Many refugees chose not to take the survey to determine their category for fear that it was associated with the Shirika Plan and would lead to forced citizenship.
- **Differentiated Assistance is feared to increase insecurity, deepen inequality, and spark unrest**, as refugees anticipate resentment and robbery among those still receiving limited aid.
- **Severe cuts to *bamba chakula* in June and July triggered hunger, business collapse, and rising insecurity**, as cash circulation disappeared and households struggled to meet basic needs.

- **Education, healthcare, and security have sharply deteriorated**, with reports of murder, school dropouts, medication shortages, malnutrition, sexual violence, and preventable deaths across the camp.
- **Peaceful protests and boycotts have continued**, with refugees mobilizing in opposition to both the aid cuts and the Shirika Plan in hopes of drawing international attention and support.
- **Repatriation to South Sudan is increasing**, especially from Kalobeyei, as refugees lose hope in conditions in Kenya and leave independently without UNHCR assistance.
- **Urban migration is rising among the few with money or connections**, though the majority of refugees remain in Kakuma as they cannot afford to travel.
- **The host community is also affected by rising crime, violence, and reduced healthcare access**, contributing to declining support for refugee hosting and growing backing for camp closures.
- **The Shirika Plan remains deeply unpopular** and widely associated with forced citizenship.

## 3 Interviews with Refugee Leaders

### 3.1 Differentiated Assistance

Refugees fear that Differentiated Assistance will lead to widespread starvation. Unlike in Uganda, where refugees can grow their own food, Kakuma and Kalobeyi are arid and unsuitable for agriculture. Without aid, there are no viable paths to self-reliance. Even those once considered “self-sufficient” have lost incomes due to business closures and NGO job cuts.

The primary concern is that categorization does not reflect actual vulnerability. Respondents cited cases of business owners placed in Category 1 while orphans and single mothers were assigned to Categories 3 and 4, which receive no food or free services. The system was reportedly based on a survey that many refugees refused to take or answered falsely because of a rumor that it was tied to the Shirika Plan and would result in forced Kenyan citizenship. Confusion over whether the survey was conducted by the government or UNHCR heightened distrust. Some believe non-participants were automatically placed in the lowest categories, though this remains unconfirmed. Others noted that WFP used existing UNHCR data, but this failed to consider key indicators like remittances or support from abroad.

Refugees warned that the program is already fueling resentment, insecurity, and social division. Those receiving food may be targeted for robbery, and the system is widely seen as creating new hierarchies. Many called for equal distribution of available aid, even if that means that the aid runs out sooner.

While Categories 3 and 4 are promised increased freedom of movement and financial inclusion (e.g., loans, permits, training), respondents raised three main concerns:

1. Most do not want to leave Kakuma and cannot afford the high costs or risks of relocating to urban areas. Those who are vulnerable cannot realistically start businesses or relocate to cities like Nairobi.
2. Many of the promised services already exist and have not improved self-reliance. Refugees need jobs rather than training, but employment opportunities are scarce even for Kenyans.
3. There is widespread skepticism that the government will deliver on these promises.

A few business owners welcomed the increased mobility, but these were exceptions. Most already travel regularly and are not the most in need. A help desk will allow refugees to contest their classification, but successful appeals would still leave them without food for at least a month.

### 3.2 Cuts to *Bamba Chakula* in June and July

The suspension of bamba chakula in June and July 2025 affected life throughout Kakuma and Kalobeyi.

- **Insecurity** increased, with reports of theft, violent crime, and fatal stabbings. Many refugees avoided leaving their homes after dark, fearing robbery.
- **Hunger and malnutrition** increased, as limited rations failed to meet basic needs and families could no longer afford fruits, vegetables, or other supplements.
- Children dropped out of **school** due to hunger, while clinics faced severe medication shortages. Without cash assistance, many could not afford necessary treatment.
- The **local economy** declined, with many shops closing due to unpaid credit and disappearing customer demand without bamba chakula. Prices for essential goods have increased.
- **Water access** remained limited, leading to many women and girls fetching water from riverbeds where they face risks of sexual violence.
- **Transactional sex** rose, with growing concern over the spread of sexually-transmitted diseases, particularly as some men pay more for unprotected sex.
- Refugees reported a rising **death toll**, attributed to hunger, untreated illness, gangs and insecurity, and lack of medical care.

### **3.3 Recent Responses to Aid Cuts**

#### **3.3.1 Demonstrations and protests**

In response to the rollout of Differentiated Assistance, refugees organized peaceful demonstrations during the weeks beginning July 21st and 28th across Kakuma and Kalobeyei. Community leaders called for a boycott of food distribution and schools. Some respondents said a few individuals were prepared to use force to enforce the strike.

The protest generated fear as well as solidarity. Parents were hesitant to send children to school, worried it would be seen as betrayal. Some Kenyan teachers reportedly stayed home due to concerns about violence.

Refugees hope the demonstrations will attract international attention and renew donor support. Some cited South Korea's recent rice donation as a hopeful sign. Leaders are also meeting with UNHCR, WFP, and government representatives.

#### **3.3.2 Repatriation**

Refugees have begun returning to South Sudan independently, especially from Kalobeyei, with more expected after the full rollout of aid changes in August. Returns are taking place independently. Refugees with limited cash are arranging private transport with local vehicle owners; others are making the journey on foot. UNHCR has denied formal requests for assisted repatriation. Refugees speculate this is due to political considerations or a lack of funding, though international law prohibits assisted returns to countries experiencing ongoing conflict. One respondent reported that a group of returnees was intercepted and beaten at the border before being forced back to the camp.

Willingness to return varies. Congolese and Somali refugees are mostly unwilling due to ongoing violence in their origin countries. Burundians are more open to return with UNHCR support, though numbers are small. South Sudanese, who can return by foot because of proximity to the border, are the most likely to leave in large numbers. Recent arrivals in Kalobeyei are more inclined to repatriate, having fewer social or economic ties to the camp. Some families reported that it is becoming common for household heads to return first to assess conditions before bringing others.

*"If this differentiated assistance continues, Kakuma will no longer be there. People are just waiting now."*

#### **3.3.3 Urban migration**

A small number of refugees – mostly single, educated, or financially supported – are relocating to cities like Nairobi despite Kenya's encampment policy. Others remain stuck, unable to afford transport or urban living costs.

*"People are poor. They don't have money to buy food... How will they travel out of the camp?"*

#### **3.3.4 Despair and hopelessness**

Across interviews, refugees described a deepening sense of hopelessness. While demonstrations are an attempt to make change, many feel powerless in the face of the aid cuts.

*"There's no future here. No tomorrow. No jobs, no food, no money. Unless a miracle happens, there's no hope."*

### **3.4 Communication and Perceptions of Responsibility**

Most respondents placed blame on UNHCR, WFP, and the Kenyan government, not on the United States. While some were aware that U.S. funding had been reduced, they argued that international organizations still bear the responsibility to protect refugees and ensure their survival. Somewhat surprisingly, the United

States was primarily seen still as a donor (of oil and pulses), with frustration towards the country being toward the cut to resettlement, rather than their dramatic cuts to aid.

Many respondents believed the aid reductions were part of a broader effort by the Kenyan government to pressure refugees into accepting the Shirika Plan. Some said UNHCR was no longer acting on behalf of refugees, and was instead aligning itself with government interests.

### **3.5 Relationship with the Turkana Community**

Respondents noted that the Turkana host community is also suffering from the aid cuts, as they have long depended on the refugee economy for income and trade. Tensions have reportedly increased, with more theft and insecurity between refugees and Turkana residents. A key source of friction is that refugees, no longer able to pay locals for firewood or water collection, are now gathering these resources themselves. This has led to disputes, with some Turkana asserting that natural resources in the area belong to them, not to the refugees.

### **3.6 Shirika Plan**

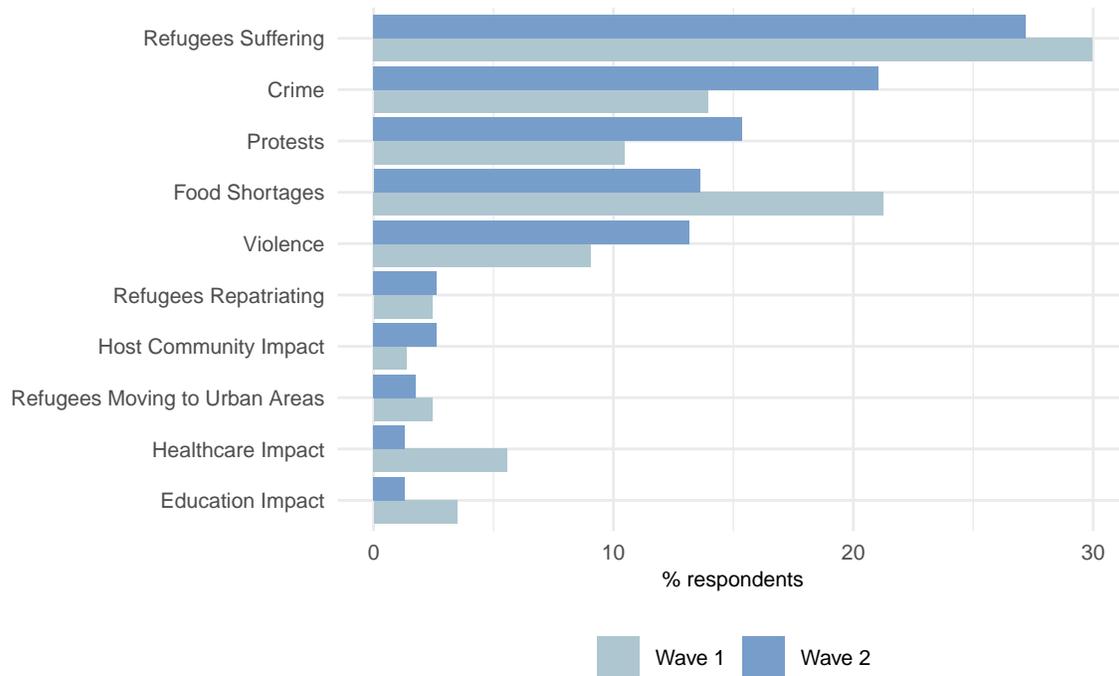
Refugee opposition to the Shirika Plan remains strong. Respondents emphasized that the recent protests are not only a response to Differentiated Assistance but also a rejection of the Shirika Plan. Respondents stated that, since the Shirika Plan was announced, there have been no visible improvements in the camp. The only update was that a meeting had been held recently on July 17th, though there were no concrete follow-ups.

## 4 Host Community Survey

As discussed in Wave 1, the host community survey supports previous research demonstrating that the local Turkana benefit from international aid and are also therefore affected by the cuts. From May to July, we saw some changes with the host community population, notably a decrease in support for refugee hosting and a slight increase in support for closing the camps. This may be in response to reports of increased crime and violence and a decline in the availability and quality of camp healthcare services for locals.

### 4.1 Aid Cuts

Figure 1: What changes you have seen as a result of these cuts?



As in Wave 1, the most frequently reported impact of the cuts was the increased visible suffering of refugees (Fig. 1). A notable change after the *bamba chakula* cut in June and July is that locals now speak more about rising crime and violence, and less about refugee suffering and food shortages. When asked how they think refugees will respond, fewer mention repatriation – despite this being more common in refugee leader interviews – and more cite refugees seeking work or protesting (Fig. 2). The latter is unsurprising given the recent wave of demonstrations against differentiated assistance.

As in Wave 1, Fig. 3 shows that host community members are also directly affected. In July, fewer reported household income loss or job loss overall, but more noted losing work from refugees – likely because refugees no longer have *bamba chakula* cash to pay for services such as housekeeping. The largest change in citizen access to the camp was in healthcare. Although healthcare remains the most frequently cited service used, fewer accessed it in July than in May. Access to education, employment, business, and other services was largely unchanged (Fig. 4).

Perceptions of worsening crime and violence have increased since the cuts, while reported food insecurity has remained relatively stable. The share of respondents who felt unsafe walking in their neighborhood at night rose from 60% to 69.1% (Fig. 5), a difference confirmed by regression analysis (see forthcoming academic paper). Average days without enough food or money to buy it increased from 2.73 to 2.78, though the share reporting three or more such days fell from 57.4% to 50.2% (Fig. 6). The regression analysis found no statistically significant change in food security (see forthcoming academic paper).

Figure 2: What do you think refugees are already doing (or will do in the future) in response to this?

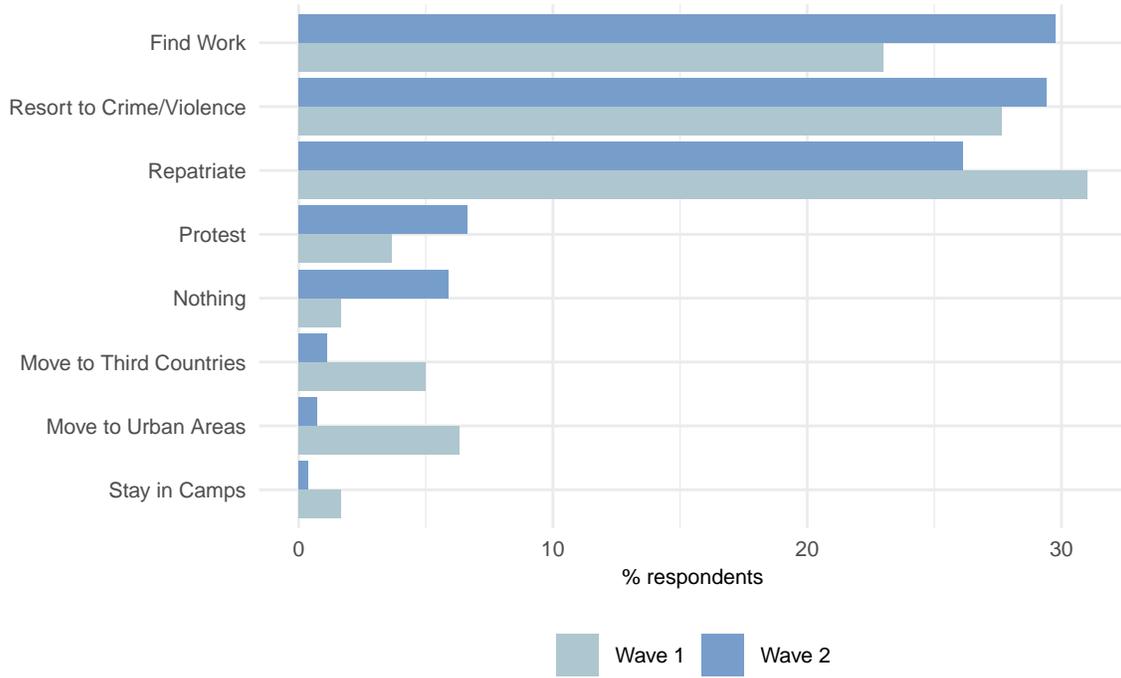


Figure 3: Has your household been negatively impacted by these cuts? If so, how?

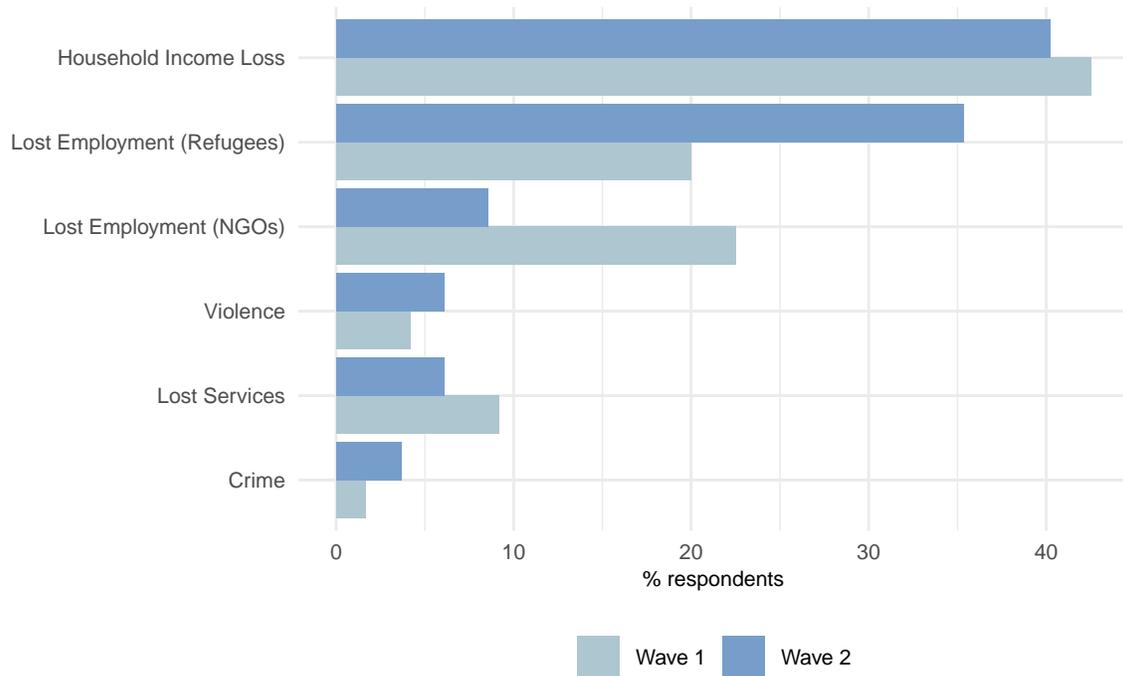


Figure 4: Interactions with refugees and Kakuma in the past month

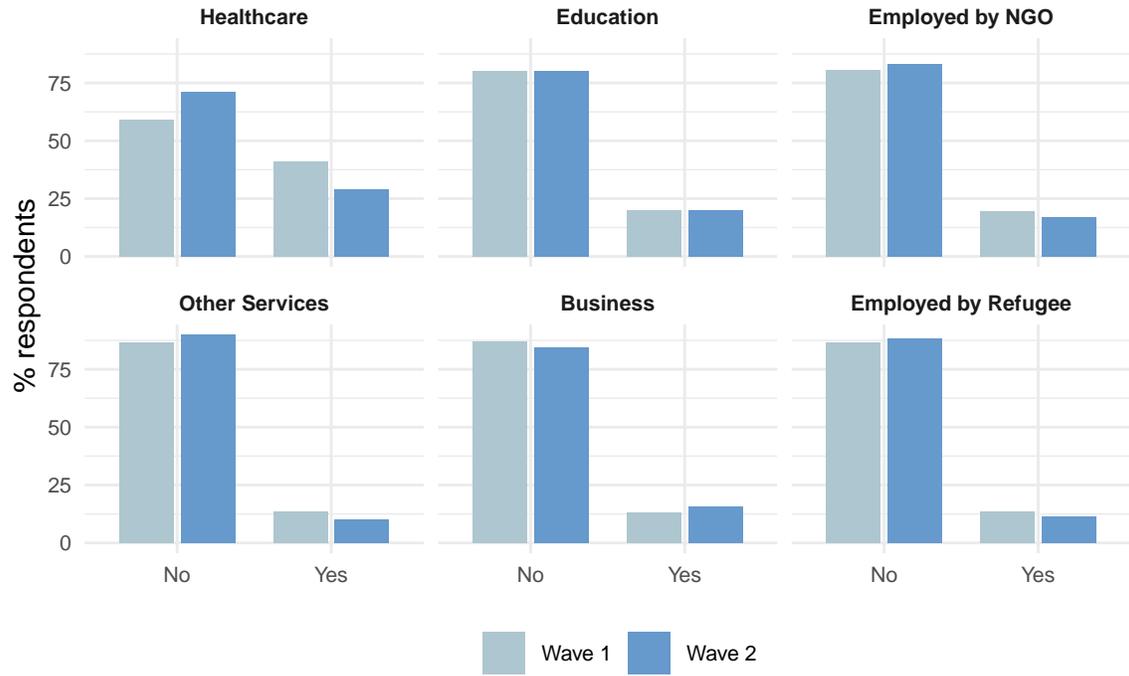


Figure 5: I feel safe walking alone in my area/neighbourhood at night.

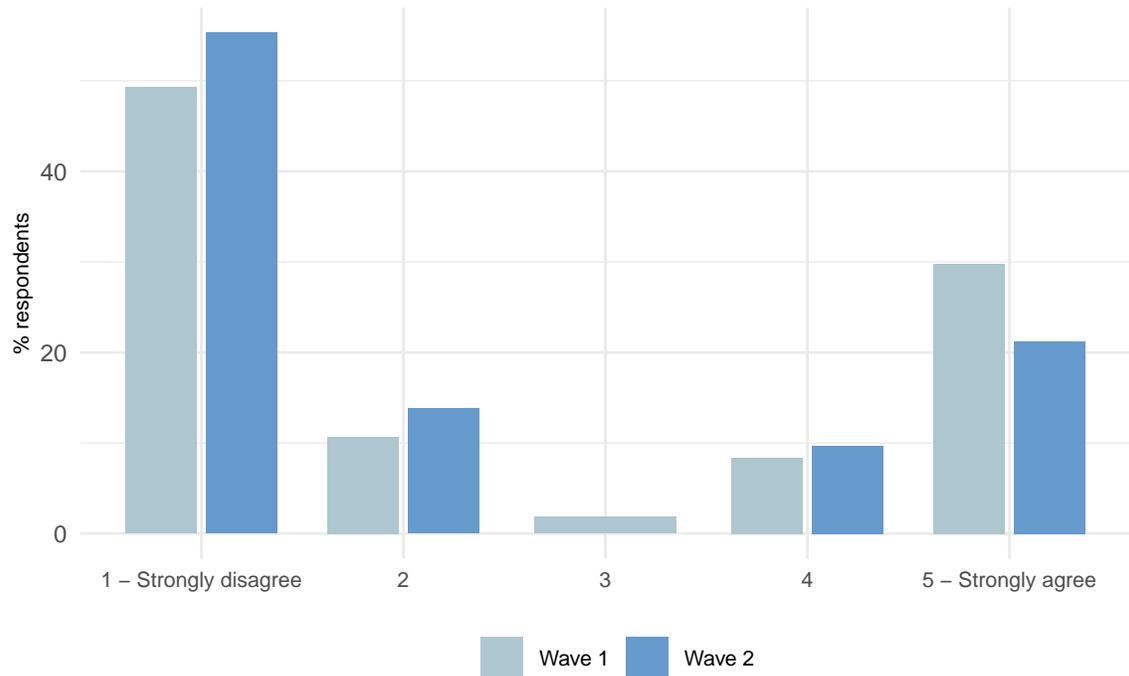
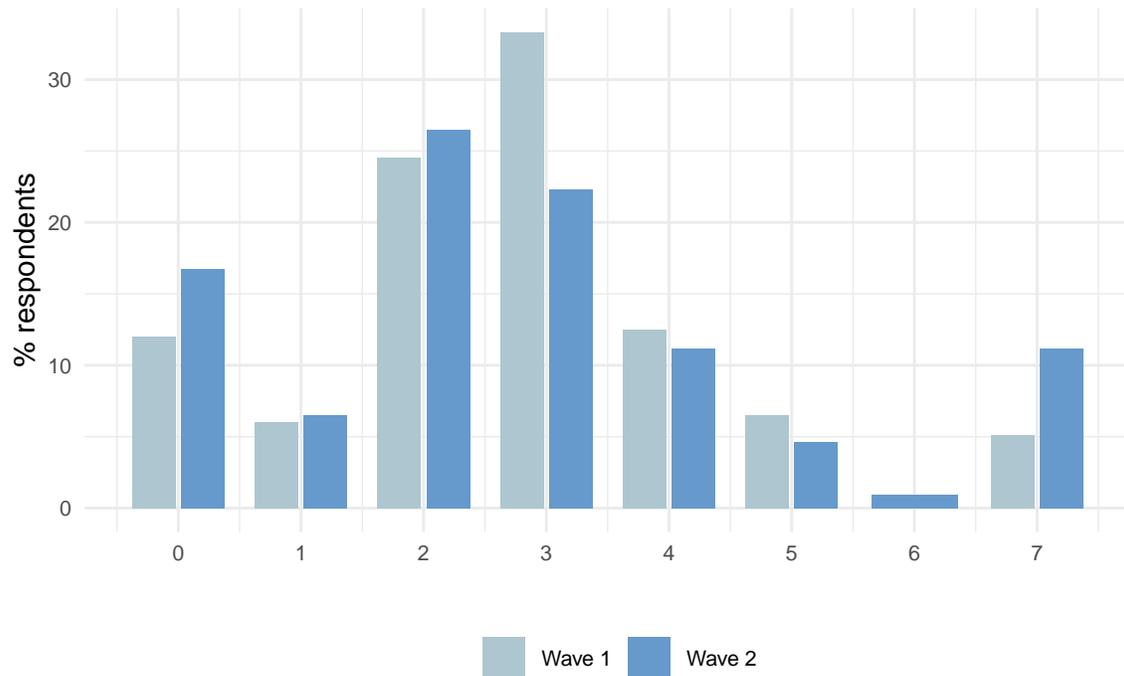


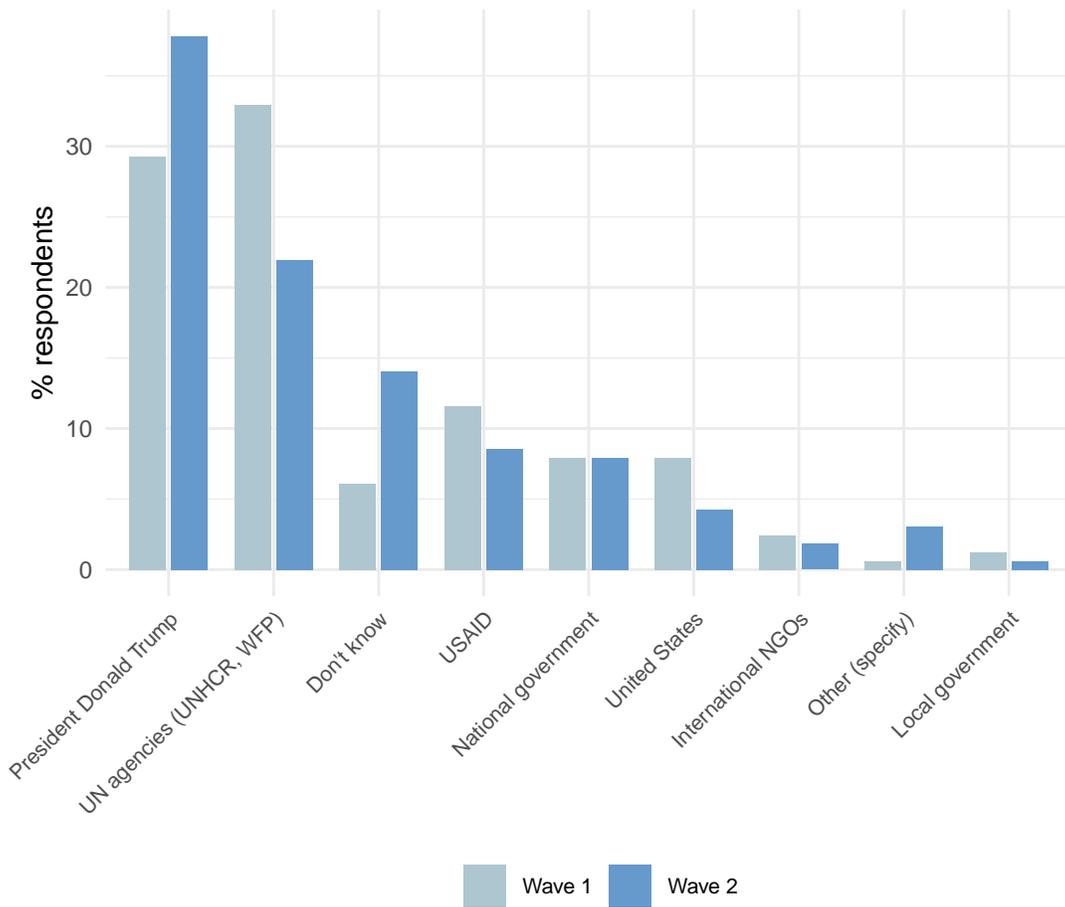
Figure 6: In the past 7 days, were there times when your household did not have enough food or enough money to buy sufficient food? How many days?



In open-ended responses, locals described shortages of food, hunger, and starvation – primarily among refugees, but also affecting the host community. Previously, WFP food distributions allowed locals to buy cheap food from refugees, but this is no longer possible. Respondents linked hunger to increased refugee crime and job-seeking in Kakuma town. Many reported a downturn in business and trade, with shops closing near the camp as refugees have less money to spend. Others mentioned ongoing protests and a perceived rise in deaths.

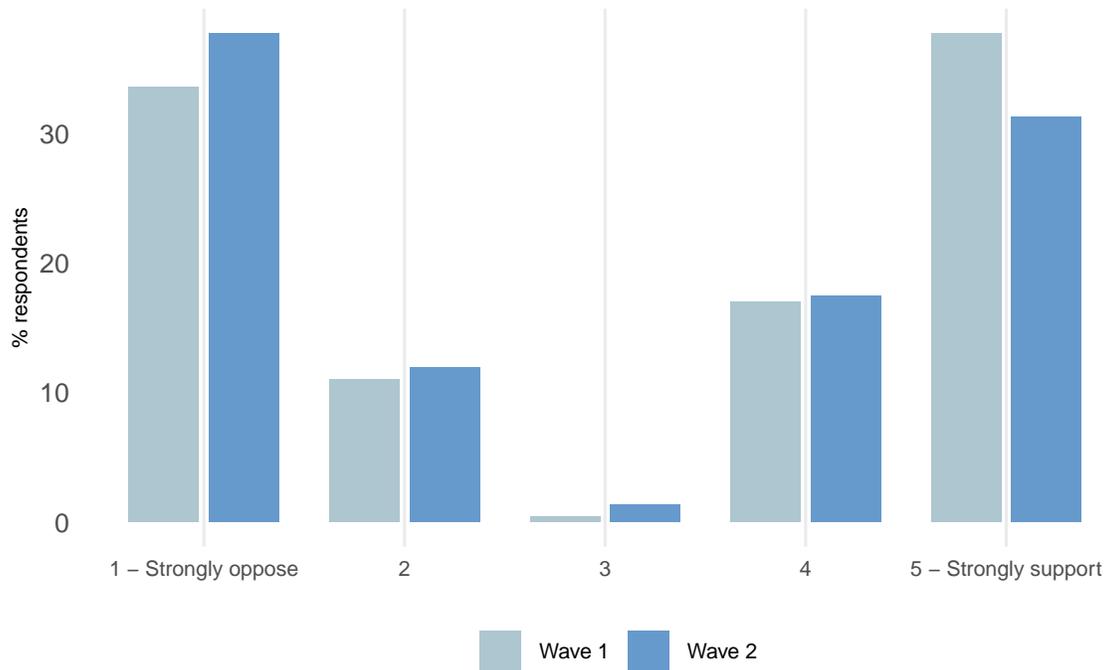
In May, locals blamed Donald Trump and UN agencies equally for the cuts and reduced services. By July, more blamed Trump and fewer blamed UN agencies (Fig. 7). This contrasts with refugee leader interviews, in which blame shifted toward UN agencies and the Kenyan government rather than the United States.

Figure 7: Who do you think is most responsible for these recent cuts and reductions to services?



## 4.2 Attitudes Toward Refugees

Figure 8: To what extent do you support or oppose Kenya hosting refugees?

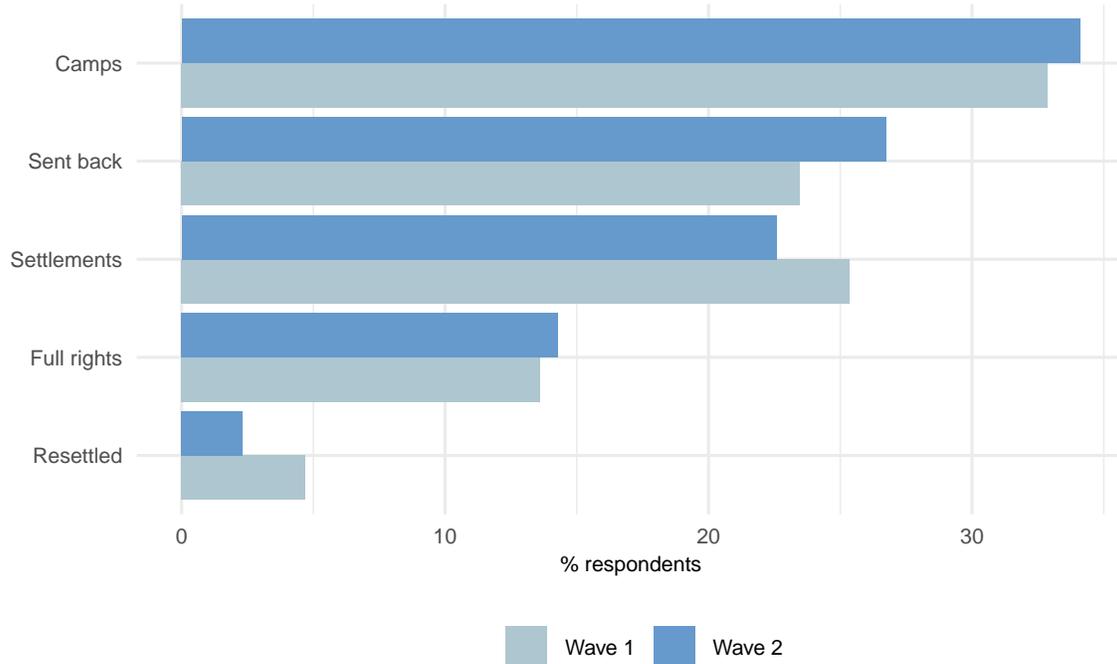


Since the cut to *bamba chakula*, support for refugee hosting has declined (Fig. 8). In May, 54.8% supported Kenya hosting refugees and 44.7% opposed. By July, this had reversed, with slightly more opposing: 48.8% supported and 49.8% opposed. This shift is confirmed by the regression analysis in the forthcoming academic paper.

A similar change is evident in policy preferences: more locals now favor sending refugees back over granting full rights, accommodating refugees in settlements, or resettling them elsewhere (Fig. 9). This is not necessarily a sign of hostility – interviews with refugee leaders show that many, especially South Sudanese, now wish to return home and have requested UNHCR funding to do so. Locals may be aligning with these expressed preferences. Even so, support for local integration – whether through Shirika Plan settlements or full rights to employment and movement in Kenya – appears to be decreasing. In analysis of additional variables that we do not include in this summary report, we also find statistically significant decreases in trust in refugees and willingness of locals to allow more refugees to move to the area.

In Wave 1, over two-thirds of host community members agreed that the Turkana have benefited from the presence of refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. That view largely persists after the *bamba chakula* cut. However, a higher share now believe that refugees have worsened service quality in the area (Fig. 10), likely reflecting the recent service cuts and deterioration observed in recent months.

Figure 9: Preferred policy option for refugees



### 4.3 Shirika Plan

Strong opposition to the Shirika Plan observed in May remains, with 65.1%% of respondents opposed (Fig. 11). As noted in Wave 1, this opposition should not necessarily be read as rejection of improved rights for refugees in Kenya. Both host and refugee respondents often believe the Shirika Plan means granting refugees Kenyan citizenship – a highly unpopular policy This perception has declined since Wave 1, possibly due to information from local and international actors (Fig. 12).

Support for most dimensions of integration has changed little following the *bamba chakula* cuts (Fig. 13). The exceptions are a slight increase in support for closing the camps and a decrease in support for refugees’ access to healthcare. As in Wave 1, there is strong opposition to granting citizenship, a dimension of integration frequently linked to the Shirika Plan.

Figure 10: Perceptions of negative effects of refugees

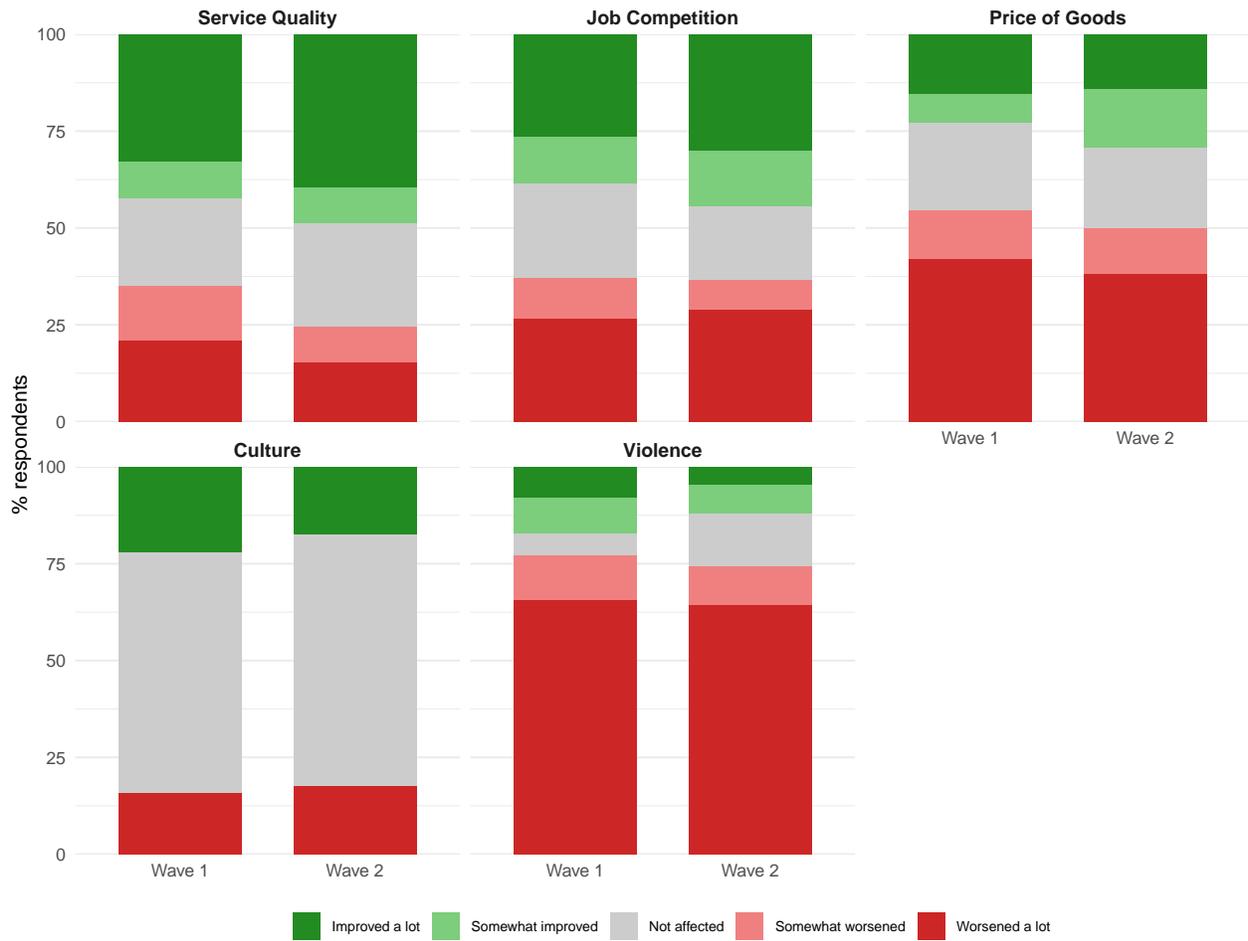


Figure 11: Do you support or oppose the Shirika Plan?

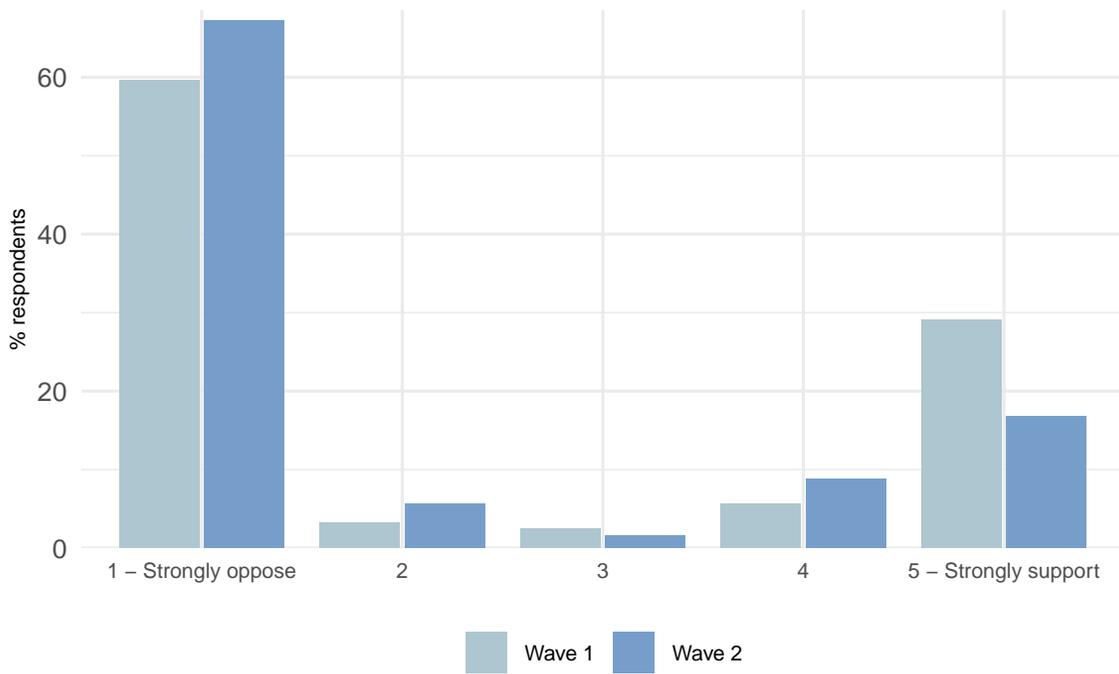


Figure 12: What have you heard about what the Shirika Plan entails?

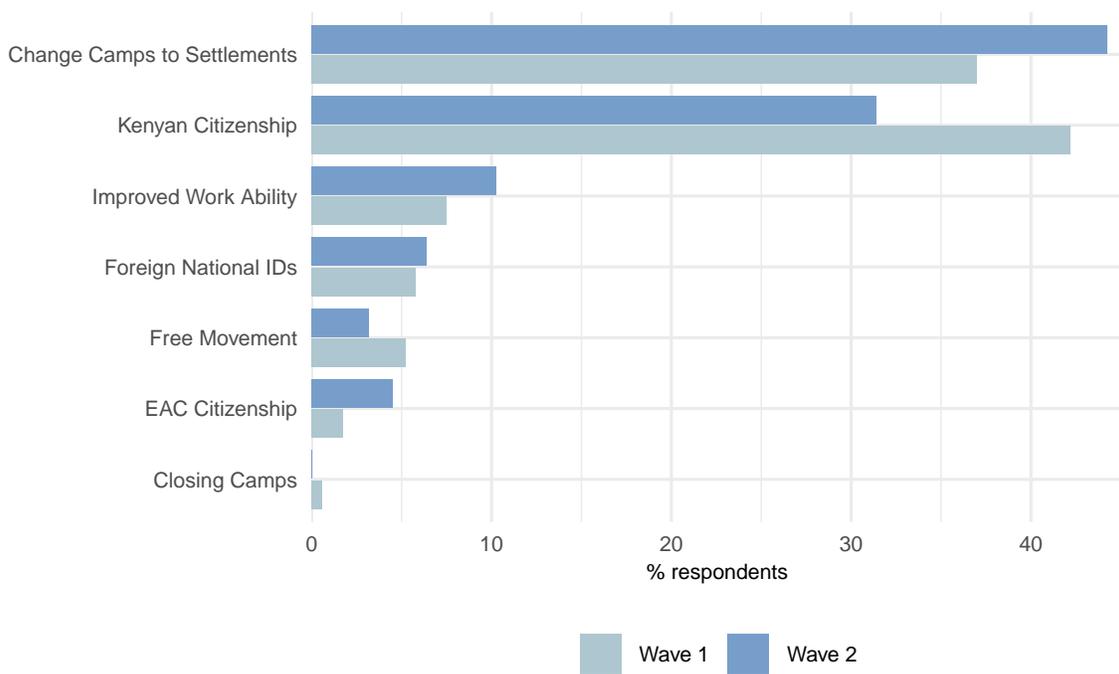


Figure 13: Support for different dimensions of integration

