



# From refugees to residents: a win–win for cities



Garissa Market, Eastleigh. Daniel Koßmann via Flickr, CC-BY-NC-SA 2.0

*“[In Nairobi] I do not feel free to move around ... I only feel safe when there are lots of Somalis around so I can call for help if I need to.”*

**Fardosa\***, aged approximately 50 years,  
speaking in October 2021

As a Somali refugee in Kenya, Fardosa’s life is defined by movement. First by flight, now by immobility: she is unable to join her son in Europe and has no safe place to return to (Fardosa’s husband, who remained in Mogadishu, has divorced her). For the foreseeable future, Nairobi will be home.

The Kenyan capital is a big city, but Fardosa’s world is tiny, with limited opportunities. She supplements money sent by her son by selling cosmetics on the street, but rarely ventures beyond Eastleigh, the suburb where many Somali refugees and Kenyans of Somali origin live.

\* The interviewee’s name has been changed; her story is shared with permission

*“I do not feel free to move around. I have already been arrested by the police once and ended up losing 1,000 shillings to be released ... I feel unsafe from the police, because they may arrest me, and from the city council ... [who] come and they trample on the things I am selling on my mat. They ruin them and then I have nothing.”*

But while she may not venture far, Fardosa’s interior world is expansive. She has aspirations. When we asked Fardosa to imagine what a ‘good life’ would look like, she closed her eyes and said:

*“Having capital to open a shop ... where I can do business securely without the authorities harassing me. And that shop would produce sufficient income so I can bring my children [from Mogadishu] and be able to support them ... I would sell cosmetics: the same thing I am doing now but on a larger scale. A good life would also mean not worrying about being married because I have financial independence.”*

This is not an idle dream. Fardosa sought business training from a local NGO, but when she presented her refugee documentation, they explained they could not help her: she is registered in the vast Dadaab refugee complex, and so ineligible for help in Nairobi. But Fardosa has never been to Dadaab; she does not understand how this has happened.

The further irony of this error is that, unlike some people of Somali origin, Fardosa does not move around Kenya freely: she has not travelled between camp and city. Indeed, she cannot even cross Nairobi to reach the UNHCR office to rectify this error. She is restricted not only by fear of harassment, but the high cost of travel – it could take multiple trips to rectify her papers. Although physically in the city, Fardosa cannot exercise her right to the city.

## Making cities work for long-term refugees

IIED pledged to undertake research on protracted displacement at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.

We met Fardosa in October 2021, during the pilot qualitative phase of a large mixed-methods research study: [Protracted displacement in an urban world](#). This [multi-partner project](#) compares the livelihoods, wellbeing and self-reliance of displaced people in camps and in cities, based on their own definitions and priorities. The project spans Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Jordan and Kenya.

### Maintaining progress during COVID-19

Despite the pandemic, IIED’s partners have been determined to continue documenting refugee and IDP experiences and [bringing together stakeholders](#), and to do this safely. In 2021, an interesting finding emerged from focus group discussions and preliminary analysis of survey data in Afghanistan and Ethiopia: the importance of mobility.

This goes beyond a demand for freedom of movement: for urban refugees and IDPs, access to public transport is emerging as strongly correlated with wellbeing. Displaced people around the world are choosing to move to cities, but to realise their potential, they must be able to make the most of what urban life has to offer. This means being able to move around, with affordable public transport and without fear of harassment.

### Accepting displaced people as city residents

Back in Nairobi, IIED is working with long-time partner [SDI-Kenya](#), the Kenyan federation of [Shack/Slumdweller International](#) (a network of community-based organisations of the urban poor spanning Africa, Asia and Latin America). Our work together is indicative of what we seek to achieve across all four focus countries: to ensure displaced people are included in urban plans, policies and services, benefitting both individuals and the city as a whole.

In 2020, SDI-Kenya started working with the many refugees who live alongside and in similar conditions to Nairobi’s lowest-income residents. SDI is finding ways for the Nairobi City County to consider displaced people simply as city residents: with skills, ambitions, and rights. For example, they are including displaced people in a new participatory planning process in Mathare informal settlement. This is a vital first step towards refugees’ broader inclusion in Nairobi life.

SDI-Kenya is also engaging at national level with the Refugee Affairs Secretariat, exploring how together they could reach women like Fardosa with SDI's core activities, which are focused on women's savings groups and community organisation.

With the Refugee Bill passing into law, there is a real opportunity to position Nairobi and other urban centres as 'host cities' and displaced people as city residents. As IIED's research progresses, we will contribute to this debate with a wealth of data from refugees, IDPs and the urban poor on the barriers they face to achieving livelihoods, their self-defined wellbeing, and ultimately self-reliance.

We will have solutions too: as part of the research process, SDI-Kenya is regularly convening a municipal 'participatory forum' with local authorities, service providers and civil society to discuss steps that can be taken at the city level to remove identified barriers.

**Working alongside key stakeholders including UNCHR, we plan to unlock the benefits of city life for displaced people.**

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