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Exploring Potential Opportunities for the Malawi Government to Implement the Encampment Policy; Experiences from the Dzaleka Refugee Camp of Malawi

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Abstract

The global refugee crisis has displaced over 42 million people as of 2023, driven by conflicts, natural disasters, and socio-economic challenges. Encampment policies, widely used to manage refugee populations, aim to centralize aid distribution and maintain security. However, these policies often lead to overcrowding, dependency on aid, and restricted autonomy. Malawi's Refugee Act of 1989 exemplifies this, with Dzaleka Refugee Camp, initially designed for 12,000 people, now hosting over 50,600, straining resources and infrastructure. This study explores opportunities to improve Malawi's encampment policy through a qualitative approach, incorporating interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. Findings

reveal significant challenges, including weak enforcement, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to livelihoods. Drawing on regional and global best practices, the study identifies reforms such as stronger NGO partnerships, expanded education and employment opportunities, and infrastructure improvements to mitigate overcrowding and dependency. By advocating for rights-based, sustainable solutions, the study emphasizes aligning Malawi's policy with international standards. These reforms are crucial for addressing immediate humanitarian needs while fostering long-term resilience, self-reliance, and social integration for both refugees and host communities.

Keywords: Encampment Policy, Refugees, Livelihoods, Displacement

Introduction

Globally, the management of refugees has emerged as a critical issue, driven by increasing displacement caused by conflicts, natural disasters, and socio-economic challenges. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2023a) ^[30], over 43 million people were classified as refugees by the end of 2023, reflecting an unprecedented rise in forced migrations. Refugees face profound hardships, such as the loss of livelihoods, restricted mobility, and dependency on humanitarian aid. Chirwa (2022) ^[4] underscores that such challenges are worsened by the lack of adequate integration policies. Additionally, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR, 2023) ^[6] highlights the necessity for international cooperation in addressing refugee crises, while IOM (2024) ^[13] stresses the importance of aligning national strategies with global frameworks to ensure effectiveness and sustainability.

Encampment policies are designed to enhance resource allocation and administrative efficiency while maintaining security and order. These policies align with international frameworks like the 1951 Refugee Convention, which mandates state obligations to protect refugees without compromising sovereignty. The Global Compact on Refugees emphasizes innovative approaches to promote refugee self-reliance, such as vocational training programs, access to local markets, and partnerships with private entities (Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, 2023) ^[25]. While these policies can simplify logistical aspects of resource management, they often create long-term challenges, including overcrowding and restricted autonomy (Sackett, 2024) ^[26]. Recent studies highlight how dependency on external aid perpetuates socio-economic exclusion and limits refugees' ability to contribute to host communities (Valli *et al.*, 2021) ^[35]. Additionally, research indicates that a lack of self-reliance negatively affects refugees' self-esteem and well-being (Sackett, 2024; Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, 2023) ^[26, 25]. These observations underscore the complexity of balancing security and administrative goals with humanitarian imperatives.

The effectiveness of encampment policies remains a contentious issue. Proponents argue that centralized refugee camps improve security and simplify aid distribution (Smith, 2023) ^[28]. However, critics, including Betts *et al.* (2015) ^[2] and Klein and Maxwell (2022) ^[14], highlight significant drawbacks such as overcrowding and restrictions on refugees' freedom of movement. Recent analyses (UNHCR, 2023a; IOM, 2024) ^[30, 13] emphasize the need for reforms that balance national interests with refugee welfare, drawing on global best practices to create more sustainable and inclusive systems. Against this backdrop, this study explores opportunities for improving Malawi's encampment policy by leveraging lessons from regional experiences and international frameworks.

Research context

Refugee Management in the SADC Region

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) region has historically served as both a source and destination for refugees, hosting significant numbers of displaced persons. The SADC Regional Migration Policy Framework (2014) provides comprehensive guidelines emphasizing respect for human rights and regional cooperation in managing forced migration. Despite these frameworks, Chimbenje (2024) ^[3] identifies critical gaps, including insufficient resources, inadequate infrastructure, and weak enforcement mechanisms that hinder effective implementation. Recent studies by IOM (2024) ^[13], UNHCR (2023d) ^[33], and Milner (2009) ^[16] further highlight donor fatigue as a growing challenge, which exacerbates resource shortages and limits the capacity to provide adequate support for refugee programs in the region. Moreover, the region has seen an increasing number of displaced individuals due to climate change, which Betts *et al.* (2017) argue has further strained limited resources, creating a need for innovative solutions to address these pressing issues. Effective refugee management in the SADC region thus requires enhanced resource mobilization, capacity building, and regional collaboration to ensure alignment with global best practices.

Zambia provides a notable example of progressive refugee management. Hosting over 100,000 refugees, Zambia's model integrates elements of encampment and local integration. Betts *et al.* (2017) argue that allocating land for agricultural use and fostering access to local markets have enabled refugees to contribute significantly to Zambia's economy. For instance, refugees in settlements like Meheba and Mayukwayukwa engage in farming activities, producing surplus crops for local markets. Similarly, the Gronau & Ruesink (2021) ^[11] and UNHCR (2019) report that these initiatives reduce dependency on aid by empowering refugees with livelihood opportunities. Nchimunya (2019) ^[21] further highlights the strengthened socio-economic relationships between refugees and host communities, emphasizing the importance of local-level integration in promoting social cohesion and mutual economic benefits. Mwansa (2022) ^[19] underscores the pivotal role of education in facilitating refugees' socio-economic integration, noting that access to educational and vocational training programs has enabled refugees in Mantapala settlement to actively participate in and contribute to the local economy. Despite these successes, challenges such as resource limitations, competition for land, and inconsistent policy enforcement remain prevalent, necessitating continuous policy

adaptations (Chimbenje, 2024) ^[3].

In contrast, Tanzania's strict encampment policies demonstrate the drawbacks of containment strategies. Camps like Nduta and Nyarugusu face severe overcrowding, inadequate sanitation, and limited access to essential services, which create significant barriers to refugee well-being. Atukwatse (2023) ^[11] notes that such conditions not only hinder the delivery of humanitarian assistance but also exacerbate tensions between refugees and host communities over resource competition. Chimbenje (2024) ^[3] underscores that restrictive encampment policies perpetuate economic marginalization, as refugees are often denied opportunities to engage in formal employment or entrepreneurial activities. Recent findings by UNHCR (2023d) ^[33], IOM (2024) ^[13], and Smith (2023) ^[28] advocate for policy adjustments that combine security measures with livelihood opportunities. Additionally, Pherali & Abu Moghli (2021) ^[24] emphasizes the need for sustainable approaches that address both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term socio-economic integration. By learning from Tanzania's challenges, regional policymakers can design more effective frameworks that balance containment with development while fostering resilience within refugee communities.

Malawi's Encampment Policy

Malawi's encampment policy, rooted in the Refugee Act of 1989, mandates that refugees reside in designated camps, primarily Dzaleka Refugee Camp. In March 2023, the government issued a directive requiring all refugees and asylum seekers living in urban and rural areas to return to Dzaleka by April 15, 2023, or face enforced relocation (UNHCR, 2023b) ^[31]. This policy led to the arrest and detention of 377 refugees, including 117 children, on May 17, 2023, who were subsequently forcibly relocated to Dzaleka (UNHCR, 2023e) ^[34]. Originally designed for 12,000 individuals, the camp now houses over 50,600 refugees, creating significant strain on essential resources such as water, sanitation, healthcare, and education (UNHCR, 2023a) ^[30]. Mswoya (2019) ^[18] highlights that limited access to formal employment and education perpetuates dependency cycles among refugees, while Chirwa (2022) ^[4] identifies inconsistent policy enforcement as a critical factor exacerbating inequalities within the refugee population. Furthermore, Chimbenje (2024) ^[3] notes that overcrowding in Dzaleka has led to tensions between refugees and host communities, complicating efforts to promote social cohesion.

Despite its challenges, the encampment policy has achieved certain successes. Smith (2023) ^[28] asserts that centralization has enabled more efficient aid delivery and improved security within refugee camps. Klein and Maxwell (2022) ^[14] emphasize the role of administrative oversight in ensuring order and accountability within the camps. Additionally, UNHCR (2023c) ^[32] reports that centralization facilitates better monitoring and coordination of humanitarian assistance. However, the restrictive nature of the policy, including prohibitions on freedom of movement and formal employment, has undermined refugees' ability to achieve self-reliance. Ogutu (2025) ^[22] and Opi (2024) ^[23] argue that such restrictions often perpetuate cycles of dependency, limiting refugees' opportunities to contribute meaningfully to local economies. Recent analyses by Chimbenje (2024) ^[3], and Nchimunya (2019) ^[21] suggest that aligning Malawi's encampment policy with international

best practices could mitigate these challenges. Such reforms would not only improve the quality of life for refugees but also contribute to the broader development of host communities, fostering more equitable and sustainable outcomes in line with global frameworks like the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR, 2023) ^[6].

A Comparative Analysis of Encampment Policies

The effectiveness of encampment policies varies significantly across regions, offering valuable lessons for reforming Malawi's approach. Zambia's integration-focused model demonstrates the potential benefits of granting refugees access to livelihoods. In settlements such as Meheba and Mayukwayukwa, refugees are allocated land for farming and encouraged to participate in local markets, fostering economic self-reliance and reducing dependency on aid. A 2021 joint assessment by UNHCR and WFP highlighted that Zambia has long adopted a progressive, whole-of-society approach to hosting refugees, enabling their social and economic inclusion and facilitating their local integration through initiatives like the Zambia Initiative and the Local Integration Programme for former refugees (UNHCR & WFP, 2021) ^[38]. According to Betts *et al.* (2017), this approach has strengthened refugees' capacity to contribute to national development. Mwiinde (2022) ^[20] notes that refugees in Zambia's settlements generate significant agricultural outputs, which benefit both refugees and host communities. In 2024, the World Bank approved new grant funding to help Zambia improve access to socio-economic opportunities for refugees and their host communities, further supporting these integration efforts (World Bank, 2024) ^[39].

Conversely, Tanzania's strict encampment policies reveal the drawbacks of containment strategies. Camps such as Nduta and Nyarugusu are plagued by overcrowding, inadequate infrastructure, and limited access to basic services, creating significant challenges for refugees and host communities alike (Wilson *et al.*, 2024). A 2024 UNHCR report highlights that restrictive encampment policies and limited livelihood opportunities have led to heavy dependence on humanitarian assistance and negative coping mechanisms among refugees. Whitaker (2017) ^[37] similarly notes that Tanzania's encampment policies, rooted in the Refugees Act of 1998, have historically restricted refugees' rights to movement and economic participation, further entrenching cycles of dependency. Milner (2019) ^[16] argues that these conditions perpetuate tensions between host populations and refugees, particularly in resource-scarce settings.

A 2024 report by *The Citizen* underscores that Tanzania's Refugees Act of 1998 enforces strict encampment, limiting refugees' rights to movement and employment, thereby fostering cycles of dependency on humanitarian aid. Recent findings by UNHCR (2024) call for a reevaluation of these policies, advocating for approaches that integrate livelihoods and enhance refugee autonomy. Furthermore, a 2022 review by Kraler *et al.* emphasizes the importance of rights-based approaches that ensure refugees have the freedom to work and participate in local economies, which could alleviate some of the pressures associated with containment-focused policies.

Malawi faces challenges similar to those seen in Tanzania, particularly in its flagship camp, Dzaleka Refugee Camp. Dzaleka camp is overcrowded leading to strained resources

and limited economic opportunities. The encampment policy restricts refugees from certain rights, including access to public tertiary education and employment opportunities, and mandates that refugees cannot legally live outside Dzaleka Refugee Camp (Moyo & Kalyan, 2024). This restrictive policy limits refugees' ability to integrate into local communities. Msowoya (2019) ^[18] highlights that despite these limitations, refugees and asylum seekers in Dzaleka contribute to local and national economic development through entrepreneurial activities and informal trade, though these efforts are often constrained by the encampment policy. Additionally, Moyo & Kalyan (2024) identify significant barriers to quality education for refugee children in Dzaleka, such as overcrowded classrooms and insufficient resources, further hindering their integration prospects.

Moreover, inconsistencies in policy enforcement have exacerbated inequalities within the refugee population (Global Detention Project, 2023) ^[10]. Addressing these issues requires a shift toward inclusive and sustainable reforms. Drawing on regional and global practices, Malawi has an opportunity to refine its encampment policy to better balance security concerns with the socio-economic needs of refugees, ensuring alignment with international standards and fostering long-term resilience for both refugees and host communities. Implementing the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, which Malawi pledged to adopt in 2016 (Inua Advocacy, 2022) ^[12], could facilitate the integration of refugees into national development plans and promote self-reliance.

Thus, this paper aimed at exploring the potential opportunities on how best the Malawi government can implement the encampment policy. Due to the central location of the country in SADC, the number of refugees is argued to have been on the increasing side, this then makes this paper important as it can help in the smooth implementation of the encampment policies.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the implementation and challenges of Malawi's encampment policy. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for examining complex social issues, offering in-depth insights into stakeholder perspectives and lived experiences (Bentalha & Alla, 2024) ^[5]. Primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants included 20 stakeholders comprising government officials, UNHCR representatives, academics, and refugees. The semi-structured interviews allowed for open-ended discussions, enabling participants to share detailed perspectives on the policy's implementation and its socio-economic impacts. Two FGDs were conducted with refugee and community leaders to capture collective experiences and insights into the policy's challenges and opportunities. In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as policy documents, academic literature, and reports from international organizations were reviewed to contextualize the findings and align them with broader frameworks.

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and key themes from the qualitative data. This method facilitated a structured interpretation of participants' narratives, ensuring the inclusion of diverse viewpoints. Verbatim quotations were incorporated to enhance

authenticity and provide direct evidence of stakeholder perspectives. This approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the encampment policy's strengths, limitations, and potential areas for improvement, laying the groundwork for actionable recommendations.

Research Results

Potential Opportunities for the Malawi Government to Implement the Encampment Policy

The encampment policy offers a unique opportunity for the Malawi government to centralize services and enhance resource distribution. Government officers consistently highlighted that centralizing refugees improves monitoring and enables more effective delivery of healthcare, education, and food aid. One government official stated, *"Centralizing refugees allows us to streamline services and ensure that the limited resources we have are used efficiently without unnecessary competition. Centralizing has a lot of advantages to us service providers in terms of transport costs, human resource, and this helps us to remain effective with the limited resources we have"*

Another officer added, *"The policy helps us track the refugee population more easily and identify their immediate needs."* A refugee who had recently relocated to the camp remarked, *"The centralization made it easier for my children to access schooling and for us to receive food aid regularly, although there are still many challenges."* Field observations supported this perspective, with healthcare delivery and food aid appearing more coordinated within the camp setting.

NGOs and local communities also play a pivotal role in complementing government efforts. An NGO representative noted, *"By partnering with local communities, we've been able to establish agricultural programs that not only benefit refugees but also strengthen relationships with host communities. When we partner with local communities we receive a lot societal relations which works well to us in service delivery and also remain effective in agriculture production to feed our refugees."* A refugee leader echoed this sentiment, stating, *"We have seen success in farming projects where refugees grow crops for their own use and sell the surplus to local markets."* Another refugee elaborated, *"These farming initiatives have helped many families to earn a living and also to integrate with the host community, which has reduced tensions."* Observations confirmed that these initiatives have reduced aid dependency among refugees and improved integration with host communities.

Innovative funding mechanisms present another opportunity for policy improvement. Several government and UNHCR representatives emphasized the importance of public-private partnerships. One UNHCR officer explained, *"Partnering with private companies can bring much-needed investments into the camp's infrastructure, especially in areas like sanitation and housing."* Similarly, a private-sector representative remarked, *"There's potential for businesses to contribute to vocational training programs, which would equip refugees with skills they can use to become self-reliant."* A refugee participant noted, *"If we are given training and tools, many of us could start small businesses and stop relying entirely on aid."*

Effects of These Opportunities on the Encampment Policy's Implementation

Implementing these opportunities would significantly enhance the encampment policy's impact. Strengthened enforcement mechanisms, for instance, would ensure equitable compliance. One government officer suggested, *"If we enforce the policy uniformly, it will help maintain order and foster trust among refugees, who currently feel there is favoritism."* Refugees also highlighted the importance of fair enforcement, with one commenting, *"We need equal treatment; some refugees are allowed to leave the camp while others are restricted."* Another refugee stated, *"The unequal application of the rules makes us feel marginalized, and it creates tensions even among us."*

Expanding vocational training and educational opportunities would empower refugees, allowing them to become more self-reliant. A refugee expressed, *"We need education and job opportunities to improve our lives. We don't want to depend on aid forever."* Similarly, a local community leader emphasized, *"When refugees are given skills, they contribute to the economy and reduce tensions with the host community."* A young refugee woman shared, *"Learning tailoring has allowed me to provide for my family, and I hope to grow my business."* These sentiments align with field observations of refugees actively participating in training programs and seeking employment opportunities.

Improving camp infrastructure and services would also mitigate the negative effects of overcrowding. Refugees emphasized the urgent need for better facilities, with one stating, *"The overcrowding here makes it difficult to live. We don't have enough water, and sanitation is a big issue."* A humanitarian officer working at Dzaleka Refugee Camp confirmed, *"Overcrowding has overwhelmed our ability to deliver essential services. We need more resources and expanded infrastructure to meet the growing demand."* Another refugee leader commented, *"If the government and NGOs could build more shelters and improve water access, life here would be much better for everyone."* Observations revealed that insufficient facilities, such as inadequate water points and housing, exacerbate tensions among camp residents and strain relations with host communities.

Challenges Faced by the Government of Malawi in the Implementation of the Encampment Policy

Despite these opportunities, the implementation of the encampment policy faces significant challenges. Funding limitations remain a critical issue, with donor fatigue reducing resource availability. A government officer lamented, *"There is a great lack of resources to support refugees. Even UN agencies are struggling to meet their needs."* This view was echoed by a UNHCR representative, who noted, *"Donor fatigue has made it difficult to maintain consistent levels of funding, which directly impacts the quality of services."* A refugee shared their frustration, stating, *"We often go without basic supplies, and it feels like we have been forgotten by the world."*

Selective enforcement of the policy further undermines its effectiveness. Wealthier refugees often bypass residency requirements, creating perceptions of inequality. One government official stated, *"Some refugees manage to live outside the camp and even run businesses, which violates*

the policy and creates resentment among those who are restricted.” Refugees also expressed dissatisfaction, with one saying, *“It feels unfair that some are allowed to leave while the rest of us are confined to the camp.”* Another refugee commented, *“We need consistency. The rules should apply to everyone, not just the poor.”*

Overcrowding in Dzaleka Refugee Camp poses additional challenges. Originally designed for 12,000 individuals, the camp now hosts over 50,600 refugees, straining resources and infrastructure. Refugees highlighted the security risks associated with overcrowding, with one commenting, *“Since most of the youth returned to the camp after closing their businesses, they have become idle and resorted to theft. This has overwhelmed the already understaffed camp police unit.”* A refugee youth leader observed, *“Without activities or opportunities, many young people feel hopeless and angry, which leads to conflict.”* Field observations corroborated these concerns, revealing an urgent need for expanded facilities and enhanced security measures.

In conclusion, while the encampment policy offers opportunities to centralize services and streamline resource distribution, its implementation faces significant challenges. Addressing funding limitations, enhancing enforcement, improving infrastructure, and fostering refugee self-sufficiency are essential for creating a more equitable and sustainable framework.

Discussion of the findings

Potential Opportunities for the Malawi Government to Implement the Encampment Policy

The results of this study highlight the transformative potential of vocational training programs in fostering refugee self-reliance. One key finding is that refugees strongly value education and job opportunities, as these initiatives can reduce their dependency on humanitarian aid and allow them to contribute more meaningfully to the local economy. This aligns with Betts *et al.* (2015)^[2], who argue that vocational training, especially when it is aligned with local market demands, can significantly enhance refugee livelihoods.

Additionally, success stories from refugee women participating in vocational training programs, such as tailoring courses, indicate that these programs can be powerful tools for economic independence. This finding supports the work of Mwansa (2022)^[19], who observed similar success in Zambia’s Mantapala Refugee Settlement, where vocational and educational programs enabled refugees to integrate into local economies and reduce their reliance on aid. Malawi could benefit from adopting similar strategies, combining skill-building programs with access to local markets to promote self-reliance among refugees. Public-private partnerships could further support these efforts by providing much-needed investment in areas such as vocational training and housing, as highlighted by Chimbenje (2024)^[3].

Moreover, the results emphasize the critical role of NGOs and local communities in supporting refugee livelihoods. Community-driven initiatives, such as agricultural programs, have proven effective not only in benefiting refugees but also in fostering positive relationships with host communities. Nchimunya (2019)^[21] similarly suggests that such partnerships can enhance economic opportunities and social cohesion. Expanding these community-driven initiatives could alleviate some of the challenges refugees

face, particularly in terms of overcrowding and aid dependency. For example, agricultural training programs that integrate modern techniques with local market access could further empower refugees while building trust with host communities, as supported by Betts *et al.* (2017) and Gronau & Ruesink (2021)^[11].

Another key finding from the results is the urgent need for improved infrastructure in Dzaleka Refugee Camp to address overcrowding and enhance living conditions. The study observed that overcrowding has strained the camp’s ability to deliver essential services, creating significant challenges for both refugees and humanitarian workers. These concerns align with Smith (2023)^[28], who found that inadequate infrastructure exacerbates tensions in refugee camps. Addressing these issues will require innovative funding mechanisms. Collaborations with construction firms could help develop additional housing units, and partnerships with water management companies could improve sanitation and water access, as suggested by Sackett (2024)^[26]. Investments in infrastructure not only address immediate challenges but also create opportunities for long-term development, benefiting both refugees and host communities. Mwansa (2022)^[19] similarly found that infrastructure investments in Zambia’s refugee settlements have improved quality of life for refugees while benefiting host populations.

The results also suggest the potential for innovative funding mechanisms to address resource constraints. Public-private partnerships and diversified donor engagement are key strategies for overcoming funding shortages. This idea is supported by Whitaker (2017)^[37], who noted the importance of private-sector involvement in mobilizing resources for refugee programs. Additionally, expanding partnerships with diaspora communities could provide sustainable funding sources, helping to mitigate donor fatigue, a common challenge in the SADC region, as noted by Chimbenje (2024)^[3]. By diversifying funding streams, Malawi could ensure the sustainability of critical programs like vocational training and infrastructure development, creating a more resilient and effective encampment policy.

Effects of These Opportunities on the Encampment Policy’s Implementation

The findings suggest that key opportunities such as vocational training, NGO engagement, improved infrastructure, and innovative funding mechanisms can significantly enhance the effectiveness of Malawi’s encampment policy. These opportunities address critical challenges like aid dependency, overcrowding, and resource shortages, with the potential to shift refugee management from a reactive system to a sustainable framework that aligns with international standards.

A central issue identified in the results is the need for equitable enforcement of the encampment policy. The findings indicate that selective enforcement undermines trust and creates resentment among refugees. Uneven application of the rules, such as allowing some refugees to live outside the camp while restricting others, fosters divisions and reduces the policy’s credibility. Transparent and consistent enforcement is crucial for building trust and improving compliance, as this approach ensures fairness and accountability. Kraler *et al.* (2022)^[15] argue that clear and transparent policy implementation promotes trust, and involving refugee leaders in enforcement decisions could

further enhance accountability and fairness.

The study also highlights the transformative impact of vocational training and education on refugee self-reliance. Refugees expressed a strong desire for skills that would help them become self-sufficient, thereby reducing their reliance on humanitarian aid. The results confirm that vocational training programs, such as those focusing on tailoring, not only equip refugees with marketable skills but also help integrate them into local economies. These findings are consistent with the work of Betts *et al.* (2017) and Mwansa (2022) ^[19], who demonstrated the success of vocational training in reducing dependency and fostering economic integration. Implementing such programs in Dzaleka Refugee Camp could alleviate youth idleness and enhance the socio-economic integration of refugees, further strengthening the encampment policy's effectiveness.

The results also emphasize the urgent need for improved infrastructure to support the encampment policy. Overcrowding in Dzaleka has strained basic facilities like water, sanitation, and housing, negatively affecting refugees' quality of life. Addressing these issues through infrastructure investments would not only alleviate immediate challenges but also improve long-term living conditions. Enhanced infrastructure could facilitate better service delivery, including healthcare and education, creating a safer and healthier environment for refugees. Smith (2023) ^[28] supports this view, highlighting that improved facilities can ease tensions within the camp and with host communities, laying the foundation for long-term development.

Community-driven initiatives, particularly agricultural programs, were also identified as an effective means of promoting social cohesion between refugees and host communities. These initiatives have helped refugees integrate into local economies, fostering mutual benefits and reducing tensions. The findings suggest that scaling such initiatives could further promote shared economic benefits, enhancing the outcomes of the encampment policy. Engaging host communities in the decision-making process would also strengthen these initiatives. Participatory approaches, as emphasized by Pherali & Abu Moghli (2021) ^[24], ensure that refugee programs are sustainable and beneficial for both refugees and host populations.

Lastly, the study identifies the potential for innovative funding mechanisms, such as public-private partnerships and diaspora engagement, to support the sustainability of the encampment policy. The results suggest that collaborations with private companies could provide essential investments in camp infrastructure, particularly in sanitation and housing. These partnerships would not only address resource gaps but also offer skill development and employment opportunities for refugees. Engaging diaspora communities could further enhance the financial resilience of the policy, as remittances and investments from diaspora populations have proven effective in supporting refugee programs in other African contexts, as noted by Whitaker (2017) ^[37] and Chimbenje (2024) ^[3].

Challenges Faced by the Government of Malawi in the Implementation of the Encampment Policy

The findings highlight several key challenges that hinder the effective implementation of Malawi's encampment policy, including funding limitations, selective enforcement of regulations, overcrowding, strained resources, and capacity

issues within the government. Addressing these challenges is essential for improving both the effectiveness and sustainability of the policy.

One of the most pressing challenges identified in the results is insufficient funding to adequately support refugees. Resource scarcity, compounded by donor fatigue, severely affects the quality and consistency of services provided to refugees. This issue is not unique to Malawi but is a broader regional concern, as noted by Chimbenje (2024) ^[3] and Whitaker (2017) ^[37], who highlight that many refugee-hosting countries in the SADC region face similar challenges. This lack of financial support limits access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and vocational training, undermining efforts to promote refugee self-reliance. Diversifying funding sources, such as through public-private partnerships and engaging diaspora communities, could mitigate these challenges. Betts *et al.* (2017) emphasize that exploring innovative funding mechanisms is critical to sustaining refugee programs, especially in the context of declining international aid.

The results also point to the issue of inconsistent enforcement of encampment regulations. Selective enforcement, where wealthier refugees bypass residency requirements, has led to perceptions of inequality and unfairness within the refugee population. This selective application of rules undermines the credibility of the policy and fosters divisions among refugees. The findings suggest that equitable enforcement is crucial to building trust and improving compliance with the policy. Strengthening monitoring mechanisms and involving refugee leaders in decision-making processes could promote fairness and transparency in the enforcement of regulations, as supported by Kraler *et al.* (2022) ^[15].

Overcrowding in Dzaleka Refugee Camp emerges as another significant barrier to effective policy implementation. Originally designed for 12,000 refugees, the camp now hosts over 50,600, placing immense pressure on both infrastructure and resources. This overcrowding exacerbates health and security risks, reduces the quality of services, and increases tensions between refugees and host communities. The findings suggest that addressing overcrowding requires both short-term and long-term solutions. Short-term measures might include constructing additional shelters, while long-term strategies could involve regional resettlement plans and investments in camp infrastructure. Mwansa (2022) ^[19] illustrates how improvements to infrastructure in Zambia's refugee settlements, including expanded housing and sanitation facilities, have significantly improved the living conditions for both refugees and host communities.

Resource competition between refugees and host communities, intensified by overcrowding and limited access to services, was also identified as a contributing factor to social tensions. Other scholars have also argued that, in societies where democracy doesn't ensure even distribution of resources due to political greediness. The resource competition with other demanding societal challenges becomes real (Siamabele and Munalula, 2019) ^[27]. The results highlight that idleness, particularly among refugee youth, exacerbates these tensions. By providing refugees with economic opportunities, such as vocational training and access to livelihoods, these tensions could be alleviated. Chirwa (2022) ^[4] and Nchimunya (2019) ^[21] argue that empowering refugees through skill development

not only improves their self-reliance but also fosters stronger relationships with host communities by reducing competition for scarce resources.

Finally, the results reveal capacity challenges within the government, particularly the lack of sufficient personnel and technical expertise to manage the growing refugee population. These capacity gaps hinder the effective enforcement of policies and the ability to address the increasing needs of the refugee population. The findings align with Sackett (2024) ^[26], who highlights that under-resourced government institutions struggle to effectively implement refugee policies. Investing in capacity-building initiatives for government staff and camp managers is essential. Training programs in areas such as conflict resolution, resource management, and service delivery could enhance the government's ability to manage the complex issues associated with refugee management effectively.

Conclusion

Malawi's encampment policy, exemplified by the case of Dzaleka Refugee Camp, represents a critical effort to centralize resources and ensure the safety of displaced populations. While the policy has facilitated streamlined aid delivery and improved security, persistent challenges such as overcrowding, selective enforcement, and resource constraints undermine its overall effectiveness. The findings of this study highlight the urgent need for sustainable reforms that address these challenges while fostering refugee self-reliance and socio-economic integration.

Key opportunities identified include expanding vocational training programs, improving infrastructure, and fostering public-private partnerships to mobilize resources and create sustainable development pathways. Lessons from regional models, such as Zambia's integration-focused approach, underscore the importance of empowering refugees through livelihood opportunities and social inclusion, which can enhance their contributions to local economies and promote harmonious coexistence with host communities.

By aligning its encampment policy with international frameworks like the Global Compact on Refugees, Malawi has the potential to transition from a containment-based model to a rights-based approach that prioritizes both humanitarian needs and long-term resilience. These reforms will not only enhance the quality of life for refugees but also contribute to national development and regional stability. In conclusion, Malawi stands at a pivotal juncture. With targeted policy adaptations, it can transform its encampment strategy into a model of sustainable and inclusive refugee management, setting a precedent for other nations in the SADC region.

Recommendations and policy implications

The findings of this study carry significant policy implications for Malawi's encampment strategy and broader refugee management framework. Aligning Malawi's encampment policy with international standards, such as the Global Compact on Refugees and the 1951 Refugee Convention, offers an opportunity to balance security concerns with the socio-economic needs of refugees. By adopting a rights-based approach, Malawi can enhance refugee autonomy while ensuring compliance with global commitments. Key reforms, such as expanding access to vocational training, improving infrastructure, and fostering public-private partnerships, could transform refugee camps

into hubs of productivity and resilience. Additionally, integrating refugees into local development plans, as seen in Zambia's progressive model, could strengthen socio-economic ties between refugees and host communities, fostering mutual benefits. These reforms not only address immediate humanitarian needs but also contribute to national development by leveraging refugee skills and capacities to drive local economic growth. Policymakers must prioritize inclusive and sustainable measures to create an equitable framework that benefits both refugees and host populations while reinforcing Malawi's role as a regional leader in refugee management.

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