

Constraints and Prospects of Faith-Based Refugee Protection in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya

Kevin Oduor¹, Edwin Abuya,² and Martin Ouma³

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Abstract

This article investigates three distinct elements of faith-based organizations (FBOs) in refugee protection: their challenges, the appropriate solutions, and the opportunities available for FBOs to leverage. Knowledge about the three elements is critical in helping FBOs function effectively and efficiently. Unlike the relevant existing literature, the article focuses on issues that relate specifically to FBOs, not those that extend to almost all refugee-protection actors. The focus is on FBOs because they are usually the first responders to conflict-related crises, maintain their presence throughout all stages of a conflict, and are identified by the Global Compact on Refugees as key players in protecting refugees. The research collected data from the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya using focus group discussions (FGDs), key informant interviews, and general observations of the refugee environment. It analyzed the data using qualitative content analysis. The results indicate that specific challenges exist for FBOs in refugee protection. Nevertheless, these challenges are not beyond resolution; they merely necessitate a shift in strategy or perspective. Despite the various challenges outlined, the contributions made by FBOs remain substantial and are valued highly by refugees, host communities, and other humanitarian entities. Furthermore, there is considerable potential for enhancing the operational effectiveness of FBOs.

Keywords: faith-based institutions, refugee protection, challenges, opportunities, Kakuma refugee camp

¹ Doctoral candidate, University of Kenya, Nairobi, Kenya.

Corresponding author. ✉ koduor@students.uonbi.ac.ke

² Professor, Faculty of Law, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya.

³ Senior Lecturer, Department of Diplomacy and International Studies, University of Nairobi, Nairobi, Kenya.

“Altering the defining characteristics of the FBOs to address particular challenges would also entail relinquishing certain advantages associated with those attributes.”

(Field interview with UNHCR officer, 23 June 2022).

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of World War II, there has been a continual rise in the number of refugees globally (Adesina et al., 2022). In particular, the number of African refugees is increasing at an unsustainable rate. At the same time, durable solutions and humanitarian aid continue to dwindle (Mbiyozo, 2024). Many African states now follow global trends in adopting increasingly securitized approaches to refugee protection (Klein, 2021). As a result, many refugees face various forms of marginalization and are compelled to live precariously in informal enclaves of towns and cities or refugee camps and settlements.

Indeed, the vast number of refugees involved poses a substantial problem that hinders the state’s ability to accept and protect them (Christophersen, 2023). This article contends that there is a need for robust and efficient refugee-protection assistance from non-state organizations that understand the complexities of refugee protection. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are one such category of these institutions.

FBOs are distinguished by their profound religious convictions and objectives, which guide their approach to service provision and community engagement (Jahani and Parayandeh, 2024). Similarly, their dedication to promoting human dignity and the sanctity of life serves as their primary driving force (Goldsmith et al., 2006). As a result, they are uniquely positioned to promote refugee protection significantly and distinctively.

The central question, therefore, concerns how to enhance their effectiveness. This article contributes to the existing literature on this topic by analyzing FBOs’ challenges, proposing solutions to these issues, and identifying potential areas for them to capitalize on. The study provides a foundation for developing in-depth and comprehensive research on the work of FBOs in refugee protection.

This paper is organized into six sections. Following this introduction is the theoretical framework. It guides the study’s thematic analysis and situates the findings within broader scholarly debates. This section is followed by the literature review, which first explores refugee protection in Kenya and subsequently assesses the literature regarding the roles of FBOs in refugee protection. The fourth section outlines the study’s methodology, detailing how fieldwork research was conducted in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya. The fifth section presents and discusses the research findings. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the study, offers recommendations, and identifies areas for future research.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Contingency theory

The research employs contingency theory as a framework to enhance understanding of the challenges faced by FBOs, the most suitable solutions for these challenges, and the opportunities that FBOs can exploit. Contingency theory posits that the most effective method for managing an organization depends on the specific circumstances or context in which the organization operates. It asserts that a universal management approach does not exist and that various management strategies are suitable for different scenarios (Vaszkun and Koczkas, 2024).

This theory's central premise is that an organization's effectiveness is attained by ensuring an appropriate alignment between its subsystems (such as strategy, structure, and behavior) and the surrounding contextual elements (Ganescu, 2012). As such, the theory is suitable for determining how to improve FBOs' effectiveness in refugee protection, considering the context in which the organizations operate.

The contingency approach in management originated in the 1950s. It was developed by scholars such as Tom Burns, Joan Woodward, Paul Lawrence, and Jay Lorsch. These researchers examined the connections between organizational structure and environmental conditions, highlighting the necessity of aligning management practices with particular situational factors (Vaszkun and Koczkas, 2024). These pioneering theorists questioned conventional management methods, such as scientific management and bureaucracy, which aimed at determining the best way of managing organizations without considering contextual circumstances (Bryman et al., 2011).

Nonetheless, contingency theory presents certain limitations. One such limitation is its lack of a definitive framework for determining the optimal management practices suitable for specific circumstances. Another drawback is that the theory is heavily influenced by context, making it difficult to generalize its findings to different scenarios (Luthans, 1973).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Refugee protection in Kenya

Kenya ranks as the fifth-largest refugee-hosting state in Africa and the thirteenth-largest globally (World Bank, 2024). As of January 2025, the country hosted 829,211 registered refugees and asylum seekers (UNHCR Kenya, 2025). Most of the refugees in Kenya live in refugee camps, with a minority living in urban areas (DRS, 2025). For this reason, the study focuses on FBOs working in refugee camps. The Dadaab and Kakuma refugee camps, established in 1991 and 1992, respectively, are recognized as two of the five largest refugee camps worldwide (Halakhe et al., 2024).

Since achieving independence in 1963, Kenya has established numerous policies designed to safeguard the rights of refugees. The legal framework for refugee protection in Kenya is anchored in its constitution and related statutes. The country

officially ratified the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention on May 16, 1966, followed by the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees on November 13, 1981. Furthermore, Kenya ratified the 1969 Organisation of African Unity (OAU) Convention on Refugees on June 23, 1992 (Amatsimbi, 2024). The latest and most comprehensive domestic legislation is the Kenyan Refugees Act of 2021. Along with many other rights, the Act grants refugees the freedom of movement, the right to work, and access to financial services if fully implemented (Halakhe et al., 2024). Consequently, the country has made considerable progress in enhancing its refugee-protection framework.

FBOs in Kenya's refugee camps are actively involved with both refugees and host communities. They participate in various initiatives, including health care, livelihood support, water and sanitation, education, psychosocial services, food aid, shelter provision, responses to sexual and gender-based violence, spiritual guidance, child protection, and resettlement assistance (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015). FBOs account for almost 30% of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees' (UNHCR) official implementing and operational partners in Kenya, playing a crucial role in the camp management system. They are undoubtedly key players in the protection of refugees in Kenya's refugee camps. Nevertheless, their involvement as faith-based entities presents a fair share of challenges (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015).

Although numerous studies address refugee protection in Kenya (see, for example, Iverson, 2016), a limited number discuss the involvement of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in this context. Even fewer studies have examined FBOs' specific contributions, challenges and opportunities in this area. This article addresses this gap. The literature closely related to this study's subject matter includes the contributions of scholars such as Stoddard, Marshall, and Parsitau.

Stoddard and Marshall's (2015) report outlines the contributions of various faith-based actors involved in refugee protection. It also examines the place of religious beliefs in refugee protection. The report does not focus on FBOs in refugee camp environments but on those operating in urban settings, particularly in Nairobi, Kenya's capital city. It also does not address the difficulties faced by FBOs but rather the challenges encountered by refugees.

Parsitau's (2011) article investigates how FBOs assist in integrating displaced individuals into their new environments. It also explores the place of religious faith in coping with displacement. While it outlines the roles and challenges of FBOs, its primary focus is on internally displaced persons, rather than refugees.

Role of FBOs in refugee protection

This study adopts the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) definition of FBOs as "organizations that derive inspiration and guidance for their activities from the teachings and principles of religious faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within that faith" (UNHCR, 2023). Further, it defines refugee protection as "all actions aimed at ensuring the equal access to and enjoyment of

the rights of individuals of concern to UNHCR, in accordance with humanitarian, human rights and refugee law” (UNHCR, 2005).

This article focuses on FBOs for several reasons. First, it is because of their distinctive motivation as refugee-protection agencies. Unlike other refugee-protection actors, they are driven not solely by humanitarian principles but also by a conviction that their religious beliefs compel them to assist those in need (Ferris, 2011). Secondly, they are usually the first responders to conflict-related crises, providing immediate protection in the form of physical space before the UNHCR and other refugee-protection agencies intervene (ACT Alliance et al., 2018). Additionally, FBOs typically maintain their presence throughout all stages of conflict and are frequently among the final entities that vacate the area. They continue their efforts even after the media has departed and financial resources have dwindled (UNHCR, 2014).

Another key reason for focusing on FBOs is because the UNHCR and the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) identify them as key players in protecting refugees. The UNHCR’s (2023) “Guidance Note” highlights FBOs’ unique and important role in delivering protection, advocacy, humanitarian assistance, and solutions to refugee-related matters. The GCR, a refugee-protection framework for more predictable and equitable responsibility-sharing (Sulewski, 2020), recognizes FBOs as key contributors to peaceful coexistence between refugees and host communities (UNHCR, 2022).

Previous research on FBOs has concentrated primarily on their contributions to development (Olarinmoye, 2012; Haynes, 2013; Occhipinti, 2015; Islam, 2018) and their involvement in the provision of social services (Tarpeh and Hustedde, 2020; Glatzer et al., 2024). Studies focusing on the challenges and prospects of FBOs in refugee protection are scarcely existent. However, the research conducted by scholars like Nagel, Orji, and Mencütek is closely connected to the topic addressed in this article.

Nagel’s (2023) study examines a range of refugee-support initiatives provided by religious groups. It does not focus on FBOs’ challenges or the opportunities they could harness. Similar to this study, Nagel’s research is analyzed through qualitative content analysis of interviews with refugees and immigration officials. However, the fieldwork was not conducted in a refugee camp or within an African context. Instead, it was done in Germany, where the circumstances surrounding refugees may differ significantly from those in developing countries.

Nkwachukwu Orji’s (2011) article investigates the contributions of Christian and Muslim FBOs in safeguarding the displaced population in Jos, a city situated in north-central Nigeria (Orji, 2011). In contrast to this study, which centers on refugees, the article focuses on internally displaced persons. Additionally, it primarily explores the framework of relief operations, funding sources, criteria for selecting aid recipients, and the types of services FBOs provide. It does not address these organizations’ challenges or strategies to enhance their effectiveness.

Mencütek's (2020) study investigates the capabilities and limitations of FBOs created by refugees. The research is based on the case of Şanlıurfa, a Turkish border province accommodating half a million Syrian refugees. Its primary emphasis is on the function of FBOs in alleviating tensions and conflicts between the refugee populations and the local communities.

A comprehensive examination of the literature has revealed the dearth of studies that focus on either the challenges FBOs encounter or the opportunities they can leverage. The existing literature predominantly highlights FBOs' role in protecting refugees' rights. When this literature references the challenges faced by FBOs, it does not explicitly address the challenges unique to FBOs. Instead, it discusses issues that affect nearly all refugee-protection actors (Olarinmoye, 2012; Islam, 2018; Zhang, 2024).

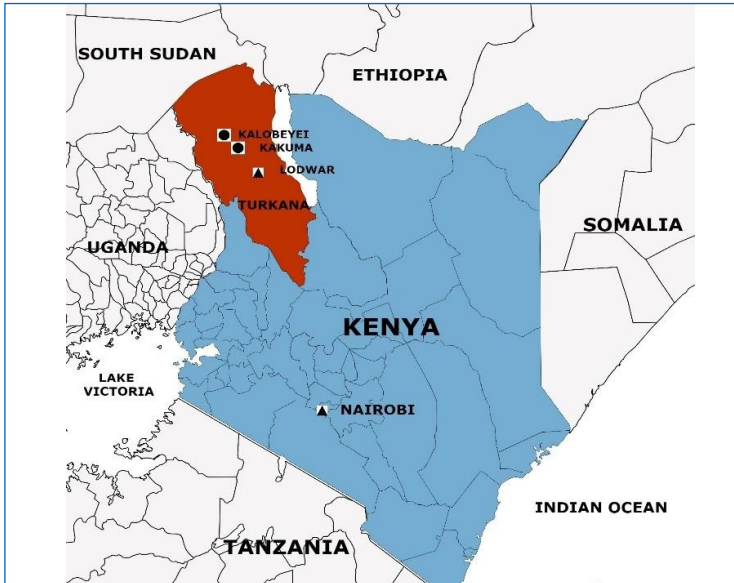
This article stands out by specifically investigating the challenges, potential solutions, and opportunities for refugee protection unique to FBOs. For instance, the issue of limited resources is a concern that impacts nearly all refugee-protection stakeholders, including the UNHCR. It therefore falls outside the scope of this analysis. This research is also unique in that it gives weight to the voices of the refugees. In other studies (Nawyn, 2017; Mencütek, 2020), the research has mainly focused on capturing the voices of refugee-protection and immigration officers.

METHODOLOGY

Study area

This article bases its analysis on primary data from the Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyi integrated settlement (see Figure 1). The researchers identified this camp as a suitable study area primarily due to its notable success in fostering peaceful coexistence among individuals from 13 different nations within a 12-square-kilometer area (ReliefWeb, 2012). The camp is Kenya's most diverse refugee camp and one of the largest multi-ethnic refugee sites globally (Lutheran World Federation, 2015). This diversity enriched the research process and findings (Almouzni, 2024), providing a suitable context to examine the adaptive capacity of FBOs, in line with the contingency theory. This is particularly because the theory emphasizes context-dependent organizational effectiveness.

Figure 1: Map showing the location of Kakuma refugee camp



Source: Luseno, Tracy and Oluwaseun, Kolade. 2021. Displaced, Excluded, and Making Do: A Study of Refugee Entrepreneurship in Kenya. *Journal of Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies*. <https://images.app.goo.gl/MJxvEoTfsh75cMN9>

To address the challenge of overcrowding in the Kakuma refugee camp, the Turkana County Government, the Kenyan State Government, the UNHCR, and the local community decided to establish the Kalobeyei integrated settlement in 2015 (UN-Habitat, 2018). This settlement adopted a different approach from the camp: integrating the refugees and the host community to foster self-reliance. Nevertheless, the experiences of refugees and the refugee-protection programs in the Kalobeyei integrated settlement are similar to those in the Kakuma refugee camp. For this reason, the camp and the Kalobeyei integrated settlement are collectively referred to in this article as the Kakuma refugee camp.

Data collection

The researchers collected data directly from the refugee community through six focus group discussions (FGDs). Each group consisted of eight participants. The six categories of FGDs comprised refugees of South Sudanese origin, refugees of Somali origin (these two nationalities are the predominant groups in the camp), refugees of various other nationalities, refugees living in the Kalobeyei integrated settlement, female refugees, and refugees with disabilities.

The study also gathered data from 34 key informants using key informant interviews. To enrich the study with a wide range of perspectives, the informants

comprised officers working with FBOs, secular non-governmental organizations (SNGOs), Kenya’s Department of Refugee Services (DRS), the UNHCR, as well as community and religious leaders (see Table 1). The study selected participants likely to offer valuable insights regarding the research question. The third data collection method involved the general observation of the refugee and host communities. Secondary data played a vital role in validating and enriching the primary data (Ajayi, 2023), thus enhancing the depth and breadth of analysis. This multi-method approach was well-aligned with the contingency theory’s emphasis on responsiveness to contextual complexity.

Table 1: Details of research respondents

Respondents’ Description	Data Collection Technique	Number of Respondents Sampled
FBO officials	Key informant interviews	15
UNHCR officials	Key informant interviews	3
Secular NGO officials	Key informant interviews	5
Department of Refugee Services officials	Key informant interviews	4
Religious and community leaders	Key informant interviews	7
Refugees	Focus group discussions	48
Total Number of Respondents		82

Source: Authors’ own work

The researchers gathered insights from officers associated with each of the eight FBOs operating in the Kakuma refugee camp (see Table 2), as these organizations were the primary focus of the study. As much as the study focuses on FBOs, the researchers sought the insights of officers working with SNGOs to obtain balanced, comprehensive, and reliable data. They engaged with respondents from four SNGOs in Kakuma: Humanity and Inclusion (previously known as Handicap International), Waldorf, COHERE, and Peace Winds Japan.

Table 2: FBOs in Kakuma refugee camp and their leading roles

No.	FBO	Main Roles and Services Provided
1.	World Vision International	- Water, health, and sanitation services (WASH) - Livelihood programs
2.	African Inland Church-Health Ministries	- Health, nutrition - Water, health, and sanitation services (WASH)
3.	Lutheran World Federation	- Primary and preschool education - Sustainable livelihoods
4.	Finn Church Aid	- Early childhood development and primary school education
5.	DanChurchAid	- Livelihoods and climate resilience programs - Life skills development - Peacebuilding and protection
6.	Salesians of Don Bosco	- Vocational education - Livelihood programs
7.	Jesuit Refugee Services	- Education and vocational training - Pastoral services
8.	National Council of Churches of Kenya	- Shelter and infrastructure - Reproductive health and HIV/AIDS services

Source: Authors' own work

Data analysis

The researchers used qualitative content analysis to examine the data. This data analysis method involves the subjective interpretation of data content through a systematic process of coding and the identification of themes or patterns. This analytical approach facilitates the comprehension of social realities through the perspectives of the research participants (Shava et al., 2021). The researchers employed Microsoft Word, a word processing program, to identify recurring themes and to conduct open coding, that is, coding the material without relying on a pre-established code list. This approach consisted of several stages: engaging in close reading to gain familiarity with the content, generating preliminary codes, identifying themes, refining and reviewing the initial themes, and conducting the final analysis. The analysis process was not linear but involved revisiting certain steps and refining themes. The codes emerged organically from the text rather than being artificially imposed on the text, thereby maintaining the authenticity of the participants' perspectives and expressions. This inductive coding process also aligned with the contingency theory,

which discourages rigid frameworks and instead supports adaptive and context-sensitive interpretation.

Ethical considerations

To ensure adherence to ethical standards in research, the researchers obtained approval from Kenya's National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation and the University of Nairobi. They also made every effort to conduct research that upheld essential principles such as confidentiality, privacy, and, where appropriate, anonymity. The research participants provided verbal and written informed consent to participate. Furthermore, the research process, findings, conclusions, and recommendations aimed to promote public welfare.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Challenges encountered by FBOs in refugee protection

The findings of this research illustrate the intricate and context-dependent challenges FBOs encounter in refugee protection. Therefore, the results support the fundamental assertion of the contingency theory: that an organization's effectiveness does not depend on a one-size-fits-all approach but is contingent upon its alignment with the surrounding environmental factors. Kakuma's distinct religious, cultural, and institutional environment offers advantages and limitations influencing FBO operations.

Perception of Islamic refugees on Christian-based FBOs

Rather than immediately pointing out the problems faced by FBOs, some respondents felt obliged to point out that most of the Muslims in the camp were not reluctant to accept assistance from Christian FBOs. For example, a Muslim respondent of Somali descent remarked:

First, we must commend the Christian FBOs here in Kakuma. Regardless of their Christian affiliation, they provide services to everyone with genuine commitment and without hesitation (FGD, 16 June 2022).

A female refugee of Ethiopian origin expressed her admiration, stating:

We are in awe of the way the Christian FBOs in the camp dedicate themselves to serving the community; they neither show discrimination towards non-Christians nor pressure anyone to convert to Christianity (FGD, 13 June 2022).

This finding contrasts with previous literature that identified proselytism as one of the significant setbacks of FBOs (Bickley, 2015). The literature suggests that FBOs tend to prioritize individuals who shared their religious beliefs (Kraft, 2016). This finding indicates that FBOs may have finally chosen to confront the issue of discrimination that has been historically linked to them.

Nonetheless, some refugee respondents expressed concern about the lack of Islamic FBOs, despite the presence of numerous Muslim refugees in the camp. They believed that the identity of Christian FBOs imposed specific constraints on their ability to effectively engage with and address the needs of the Muslim community. As a result, they felt that Islamic FBOs would meet the unique needs of the Muslim refugee population more effectively. A Muslim refugee posited:

We know that they genuinely strive to be impartial, but since they are Christian, they predominantly perceive issues through a Christian lens and interpret them from a Christian viewpoint. Christianity is a core aspect of their identity, which imposes certain limitations, regardless of how trivial they might appear (FGD, 16 June 2022).

Muslim refugees in Kakuma viewed themselves as excluded from development initiatives aimed at religious institutions. They believed that their cultural and religious values were not adequately acknowledged in the FBOs' decision-making processes. For instance, while some Christian FBOs had taken the initiative to establish Christian worship centers, there was a noticeable lack of support for establishing mosques. A Muslim refugee respondent affirmed:

While we sincerely appreciate the efforts of Christian FBOs to be as impartial as possible, we still desire to have Islamic FBOs. These will comprehensively address our spiritual and cultural needs (FGD, 16 June 2022).

Additionally, the Muslim refugees expressed their dissatisfaction with the limited employment opportunities for Muslim humanitarian workers in these organizations, particularly in light of the substantial number of Muslim refugees present. They perceived this situation as a form of discrimination, albeit not overt:

How we wish that the FBOs would develop a method for effectively balancing professionalism with considerations of religious diversity in their recruitment processes! (FGD, 16 June 2022).

Perceptions of discrimination extended to the selection of venues for meetings, training sessions, and aid distribution. According to refugee respondents, hosting these events in church environments, although practical for Christian FBOs, inadvertently discouraged some Muslim refugees from engaging fully in the activities. One respondent suggested:

FBOs should choose socially suitable venues, such as community centers or communal spaces ... that reflect an understanding of the diverse backgrounds of their service beneficiaries (FGD, 20 June 2022).

The feedback indicates that, although Christian FBOs are generally praised for their impartial service to all refugees, their nature as religious entities inevitably shapes public perception. The contingency theory provides insight into these perceptions

by demonstrating how the religious identity of FBOs, which is fundamental to their mission, may restrict their adaptability in multi-faith settings.

Personnel challenges

One of the key challenges that the UNHCR and the DRS officers identified, is the need for FBOs to maintain a careful balance between employing individuals committed to the religious tenets of the FBOs and ensuring that the workforce is competent and devoted. In the words of a UNHCR officer:

FBOs struggle to balance, ensuring that their human personnel are competent to deliver high-quality services while remaining aligned with the organizations' core values and principles (field interview, 29 June 2022).

This finding aligns with Couldrey and Herson's (2014) assertion that FBOs frequently prioritize hiring based on a person's religious affiliation to the church. This approach raises questions about the capacity of FBOs to adequately meet the varied needs of refugees, particularly those that surpass specific religious contexts. The contingency theory's emphasis on internal alignment with external conditions helps illuminate this tension. FBOs must balance preserving their religious ethos and adapting staffing strategies to meet complex operational demands.

According to UNHCR and DRS officials, FBOs face a significant challenge with high staff turnover. Due to their altruistic goals and heavy reliance on donations and volunteers, many FBOs struggle to offer competitive salaries. Their relatively low compensation packages often affect employee motivation, prompting staff to seek more lucrative job opportunities elsewhere. This high staff turnover ultimately disrupts continuity and hinders the capacity of FBOs to be effective. High staff turnover, linked to limited remuneration, further illustrates the difficulty of sustaining effective teams in resource-constrained settings — a common contingency that shapes organizational behavior. A DRS officer affirmed:

While volunteers' involvement and dedication are essential, recruiting a more reliable and seasoned team is equally important to guarantee the effective administration of key programs (field interview, 27 June 2022).

Collaboration gaps

A notable concern of the research participants pertained to collaboration gaps stemming from interdenominational disparities. They argued that the various denominations (such as Lutheran, Methodist, Anglican and Catholic), with their different operating philosophies, structures, and resource mobilization strategies, contributed to an environment of competition for resources and influence. An SNGO officer made the following comment:

Given their shared religious principles, we expected the various FBOs present to function cooperatively. However, denominational differences appear to be a divergent element (field interview, 25 June 2022).

This unhealthy competition hinders knowledge sharing among the refugee-protection entities. Indeed, previous literature has noted that a significant challenge for FBOs involved in development and humanitarian assistance is deriving strength from common spiritual values while ensuring that their approach remains consistent (Urban Institute, 2001).

Apart from collaboration challenges within the different FBOs, another challenge noted was the existence of collaboration gaps between FBOs and SNGOs. The explanations for these gaps were related to identity differences and a general fear of the unknown. An SNGO officer reported:

I cannot definitively identify the reasons behind our challenges in engaging with FBOs. There appears to be a pervasive sense of mistrust that indicates a potential incompatibility (field interview, 25 June 2022).

These collaboration gaps underscore the necessity for proactive initiatives to bridge the divide between secular and faith-based sectors (Ferris, 2005). Establishing trust and fostering open lines of communication can address these issues and facilitate collaborative partnerships that use the strengths of both FBOs and SNGOs in supporting the refugee community.

Bureaucracy

One recurring theme was the pervasive bureaucracy in FBOs. The respondents noted that bureaucracy was most prominent in well-established church institutions, particularly those affiliated with the Catholic, Anglican, Methodist, and Lutheran Churches. A refugee living with a disability lamented:

Delays in decision-making processes and a lack of responsiveness make it difficult for refugees to receive essential services on time (FGD, 28 June 2022).

As a result, numerous refugees felt frustrated. This highlights the punitive cost of cumbersome processes and the need for a more agile approach to refugee protection. Moreover, it prompts questions about whether the well-intentioned organizational structures of FBOs impede their goal of providing exceptional assistance to the impoverished. The contingency theory contends that hierarchical and rigid structures are less effective in dynamic or uncertain environments, such as refugee camps. Here, flexibility and rapid responsiveness are essential.

Managing unreasonably high expectations

FBO officers mentioned the challenge of meeting the exceptionally high expectations of refugees. The religious nature of FBOs leads to the presumption that these institutions can address all the needs of the refugees. An officer working with the DRS observed:

Some refugees set themselves up for disappointment, since they hold unreasonably high expectations of the FBOs (field interview, 27 June 2022).

These “over-expectant” refugees fail to comprehend that FBOs face numerous constraints and that their activities are restricted to specific mandates. In agreement with this finding, Moyer et al. (2011) present a scenario where individuals anticipated receiving free handouts from certain FBOs solely due to the latter’s classification as religious entities. These individuals were ultimately disheartened upon realizing that these FBOs were concerned primarily with promoting education and empowering farmers.

Refugees with disabilities also articulated their expectations. They regarded their needs as urgent and specific, necessitating prompt action from FBOs. They contended that FBOs are well-positioned to advocate for the rights of individuals with disabilities, as they are grounded in essential values such as compassion, tolerance, and empathy. A refugee with a disability commented:

I can assure you that our circumstances would have been markedly different had there been two or three FBOs dedicated to addressing the needs of refugees with disabilities. The population of refugees with disabilities is significant, making it astonishing that we are left to navigate these challenges on our own. If FBOs are unable to assist us, then who will? (FGD, 28 June 2022).

Inability to pursue income-generating ventures

A notable challenge that existing literature scarcely addresses is that the mission and values upheld by certain FBOs limit their ability to pursue and capitalize on emerging income-generating opportunities. These FBOs are committed to preserving their status as not-for-profit organizations. A notable instance was when the UNHCR indicated its willingness to have all its vehicles serviced and repaired by the Automotive School of the Salesians of Don Bosco. However, the Salesians of Don Bosco rejected this opportunity, as it would have represented a commercial involvement. A UNHCR officer opined:

For many, this situation represented a missed opportunity. It could have offered Don Bosco’s automotive engineering students valuable internships and job placements, while also enhancing Don Bosco’s capacity to support a greater number of refugees (field interview, 23 June 2022).

Conflict of interest

One unique challenge not mentioned in the field but addressed in the literature is the reconciliation of scriptural doctrines with the realities of everyday life. Issues related to ethics have proven complex in their implementation. The positions of certain FBOs and religious institutions on issues such as reproductive health; the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer plus (LGBTQ+) movement; abortion; and women's leadership are often controversial (Couldrey and Herson, 2014).

Another significant challenge identified in the literature, although not encountered during the field research, is the conflict of interest between certain FBOs and their affiliated churches. Conflicts arise when FBOs, as agencies of a parent church, formulate priorities or approaches that diverge from those of their parent church (Ferris, 2011). Challenges associated with doctrinal stances and the misalignment between FBOs and their parent churches further illustrate how internal dynamics obstruct responsiveness to external requirements. From a contingency viewpoint, effectiveness relies on addressing these tensions through contextually suitable methods, maintaining core values while adjusting implementation to fit local circumstances.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS TO THE CHALLENGES FACING FBOS IN REFUGEE PROTECTION

Address the perception of Muslim refugees

Concerning the issue of perceived discrimination by Christian FBOs toward Muslim refugees, the refugee participants stressed the importance of Islamic FBOs establishing a presence within the camp. This necessity arises from the absence of Muslim FBOs, in light of the significant population of Muslim refugees residing there. Furthermore, the refugee participants advocated for consistent outreach efforts toward the Muslim community in the camp. One respondent explained:

The Muslim population constitutes a vital segment of the camp's overall refugee demographic and, as such, warrants considerable attention and support (FGD, 20 June 2022).

The respondents emphasized that the outreach programs should sensitize the refugees about the FBOs' desire to serve people of all faiths and cultures. Socially appropriate outreach programs would resonate strongly with refugees from diverse cultures and succeed in encouraging those hesitant to seek assistance from FBOs. According to a DRS officer:

Christian FBOs may even reach out to Muslim refugees by using mosques and community radio stations (field interview, 27 June 2022).

Furthermore, the respondents stated that FBOs must demonstrate unequivocally that they have no hidden agenda. They should emphasize that their mission is centered on supporting those in need. A refugee participant of Congolese origin remarked:

FBOs must manifestly demonstrate that they have no interest in proselytization (FGD, 18 June 2022).

Related literature illustrates the case of the Lutheran World Federation, a Christian FBO, which initially faced resistance from the Dadaab refugee community in Kenya. Eventually, upon showing genuine respect for the Muslim faith, the FBO was welcomed warmly and granted extensive access to the Muslim community in the Dadaab refugee camp (Stoddard and Marshall, 2015).

Another pivotal recommendation relates to the physical spaces used by FBOs as aid distribution centers and training facilities. The respondents suggested that FBOs refrain from using religious institutions for these purposes. This practice had fostered feelings of discrimination among refugees of varying faiths. A UNHCR respondent explained:

Adopting more neutral facilities, such as community centers, for such engagements would denote FBOs' commitment to serving all refugees, irrespective of their religious or cultural backgrounds (field interview, 23 June 2022).

Enhance the diversity of FBO personnel

FBO officers opined that FBOs should tackle the perceptions of discrimination effectively. In their view, FBOs should enhance the diversity of their staff to reflect the religious and cultural demographics present in the camp. The revelation that Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) had employed a Muslim Human Resources Manager in the camp illustrated that FBOs had already begun hiring staff from diverse religious and cultural backgrounds. The respondents believed that this approach would convey their commitment to promoting inclusivity effectively. They also recommended that the recruitment policies and procedures of the FBOs be transparent and fair, aiming to attract qualified personnel from various backgrounds.

Manage bureaucratic processes proficiently

The respondents indicated overwhelmingly that addressing the challenge of bureaucracy would transform rigidly structured entities into agile stewards of refugee protection. They further suggested that bureaucracy could be managed effectively by prioritizing human connection over paperwork, simplifying organizational processes, and enhancing the FBOs' responsiveness to the needs of refugees. A refugee respondent suggested:

FBOs must consistently and creatively regenerate themselves to respond swiftly and effectively to refugees' needs (FGD, 20 June 2022).

The recommendation aligns with existing literature that underscores the importance of managing bureaucratic processes proficiently for the success of any organization (Bonsu, 2024).

Manage the elevated expectations of refugees

On the need to carefully manage elevated expectations of the refugee population, the respondents felt that FBOs should open communication channels with the refugees. The FBOs' perceived generosity and abundance of resources contributed to the refugees' unrealistic expectations and demands. A DRS officer posited:

To bridge the gap between societal expectations and FBOs' actual capabilities, these organizations need to be transparent about their strengths and limitations (field interview, 27 June 2022).

Certain refugees' unrealistic expectations illustrate the perceived capabilities and moral standing of FBOs. The contingency theory agrees that these expectations should be addressed through clear communication strategies that align stakeholders' perceptions with the actual capacities available. Refugees must comprehend the limitations of resources and mandates within which FBOs function.

Promote collaboration between FBOs and other refugee-protection stakeholders

In addressing the challenge of interdenominational disparities that hinder cooperation among different FBOs, the participants recommended fostering a collaborative spirit. This approach involves the collaboration of FBOs linked to diverse religious beliefs to achieve shared objectives. They asserted that such a strategy would enhance cooperation and reduce harmful competition. Furthermore, consolidating resources and expertise would ensure efficient delivery of services to the refugee community.

Furthermore, they expressed that FBOs should organize and conduct joint developmental projects with Muslim communities. They contended that collaborative efforts would greatly aid in addressing urgent issues such as sanitation, education, and health. In addition, such joint endeavors would cultivate a sense of shared purpose and achievement. An FBO officer commented:

Interfaith cooperation, particularly between Christian FBOs and Muslim institutions, would significantly contribute to establishing trust and credibility (field interview, 14 June 2022).

Participants specifically suggested partnerships between Christian FBOs and Islamic financial institutions to enhance access to financial services that comply with Sharia law. The respondents identified a gap in this area and expressed that such collaboration would encourage Muslim refugees to engage with FBOs without hesitation or skepticism. Consequently, this would support the economic empowerment of Muslim refugees, thus promoting their self-sufficiency.

Ensure competitive remuneration

Concerning the issue of high staff turnover, the respondents underscored the importance of competitive remuneration. They emphasized that offering a competitive compensation package is essential for attracting and retaining a skilled and motivated workforce capable of addressing the needs of refugees effectively. Fundamentally, this recommendation indicates that the motivation of staff and volunteers in FBOs is shaped not only by their religious beliefs but also by other factors, such as remuneration.

Preserve the positive inherent traits of FBOs

A significant viewpoint that emerged was that some challenges faced by FBOs could not be addressed effectively, as these issues stemmed from the inherent characteristics of the institutions. Consequently, tackling such challenges could be counterproductive. For instance, the reluctance to pursue income-generating ventures was due to the FBOs' commitment to maintaining their altruistic mission and focus on service provision. A UNHCR officer explained:

... altering the defining characteristics of the FBOs to address particular challenges would also entail relinquishing certain advantages associated with those attributes (field interview, 23 June 2022).

REFUGEE-PROTECTION OPPORTUNITIES FOR FBOs

Globally, FBOs have made substantial contributions to refugee protection (Abboud, 2017). Their unwavering commitment to assisting individuals in need, along with the strong relationships they have cultivated with refugees over time, has enabled them to make a significant impact on the protection of refugees (Mencütek, 2020). Moreover, FBOs have the potential to explore specific areas of their expertise further (Borja et al., 2021). In addition, FBOs have, on certain occasions, missed opportune chances to leverage their unique strengths (Pinckney et al., 2020). This section, therefore, examines the opportunities for FBOs to leverage their strengths to address the unmet needs of refugees living in the camps.

Specialize in addressing the psychosocial, moral, and spiritual challenges

The necessity of addressing the emotional and mental health needs of refugees is a significant theme that repeatedly surfaced in the field. As stated by one community leader:

... the refugees' experiences, more often than not, included suffering, violence, displacement and loss of property, livelihoods, identity, family and friends (field interview, 30 June 2022).

These unfortunate experiences left them with profound emotional and psychological scars (Renner et al., 2024). As such, most refugees need to find healing from traumatic

experiences to enable them to progress and make meaningful contributions to their well-being and that of their communities (Fegert et al., 2018).

A considerable segment of the refugee population said that FBOs are particularly well-equipped to offer vital psychosocial support. The respondents acknowledged that the FBOs dedicated to mental and emotional health care for refugees were performing admirably. Nevertheless, they also voiced concerns about the scarcity of available service providers. In this regard, a Burundian refugee respondent remarked:

A greater number of FBOs should allocate resources and focus on providing psychosocial support to the displaced. By doing so, FBOs can create a pathway towards a safer, more stable, and improved future for refugees in search of safety and hope (FGD, 18 June 2022).

A female refugee respondent also suggested:

FBOs should collaborate closely with mental health-care experts to enhance the development of culturally and religiously sensitive programs that adequately address the psychosocial needs of refugees (FGD, 13 June 2022).

The existing literature endorses this recommendation. It demonstrates that mere material assistance is insufficient for the impoverished to advance and attain self-reliance. The literature acknowledges that individuals benefit significantly from emotional support and reassurance from their faith and the associated communities. However, most humanitarian assistance institutions have overlooked the crucial psychosocial role of spirituality in bolstering the refugees' coping mechanisms (Couldrey and Herson, 2014).

Additionally, the respondents noted that FBOs have the potential to use their societal influence to tackle various family-related challenges, including parenting, financial responsibilities, domestic violence, early marriages, child abuse, and reproductive health. This capability stems from their long-standing respect for the family unit and commitment to promoting essential family and societal values. A community leader attested:

There is a general feeling that FBOs are best suited to address moral societal issues, especially those affecting our youth ... the issues consist of challenges such as pre-marital sex, addiction, peer pressure, drug and substance abuse, and gender-based violence (field interview, 30 June 2022).

Similarly, FBOs were considered best-placed in ensuring that the refugee population had access to spiritual guidance and moral support. A female refugee confirmed:

For myself and numerous others in similar circumstances, religious faith is a vital source of comfort, strength, hope, and resilience (FGD, 13 June 2022).

In this regard, Clarke and Ware (2015) agree with the assertions that religious practices and rituals, including meditation, spiritual reflection, and the observance of liturgy, are therapeutic tools that help refugees manage their challenging circumstances.

Specialize in fostering cohesion

Another significant theme that emerged was advocacy for peace and social cohesion. There are occasional moments of tension and the destabilization of social structures within the camp environment. Due to their moral standing and strong connections with local communities, FBOs were identified as the most appropriate entities for facilitating peacemaking and conflict-resolution efforts. A refugee living with disability submitted:

FBOs are uniquely suited to initiate and facilitate discussions among competing refugee groups, enhance awareness of the various cultures represented within the camp, and nurture a sense of community among the inhabitants (FGD, 28 June 2022).

Apart from tensions and conflicts between different refugee groups, the refugees and host communities competed for scarce resources like water and firewood. On multiple occasions, this competition resulted in violent conflicts. The respondents recognized FBOs as having significant potential to foster social cohesion between refugees and host communities. According to an SNGO officer:

The capacity of FBOs to simultaneously interact with refugee and host communities is a valuable asset for addressing and managing conflicts (field interview, 25 June 2022).

Specialize in the creation of child-friendly spaces

The respondents noted that FBOs were best suited for creating child-friendly spaces in the refugee camps. They confirmed that FBOs (such as Jesuit Refugee Services, Lutheran World Federation, and World Vision International) created child-friendly spaces for children to play, learn, and socialize. The FBOs did this excellently, but the demand for the service exceeded capacity. As such, the respondents suggested that more FBOs should strive to create child-friendly spaces, as this service provides refugee children with a sense of normality and stability. At the same time, these facilities opened up time (a critical resource) for the parents to fend for their families.

Strive to preserve the authenticity of FBOs' identity

Finally, the participants emphasized that the efficacy of FBOs is fundamentally anchored in their core principle of honoring each individual's intrinsic dignity and worth. This principle shaped their identity and drew partners and volunteers to endorse their efforts. Rather than completely adhering to the expectations of various individuals, FBOs ought to maintain their unique identity while seeking alternative

approaches to earn the trust of those who do not align with their beliefs. A DRS officer pointed out:

FBOs should remain authentic to their identity, as this sets them apart from all other organizations involved in refugee protection (field interview, 27 June 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings reveal that FBOs face unique obstacles in refugee protection. However, these obstacles are not insurmountable; they require a change in approach or viewpoint. Additionally, these challenges offer FBOs the chance to improve their operations and achieve considerably better outcomes than their present situation. Notwithstanding the numerous challenges outlined, FBOs' contributions to refugee protection remain substantial and highly valued by refugees, host communities, and other refugee-protection entities. Even so, there exists great potential for enhancing FBOs' operational effectiveness.

The article recommends that FBOs take advantage of the opportunities highlighted in the article. It further urges states and the UNHCR to collaborate and support FBOs in their efforts toward refugee protection. Lastly, it encourages FBO donors and partners to reaffirm their commitment to supporting FBOs, given their substantial capacity to enhance the refugee-protection framework. Specifically, the article calls on the UNHCR and donors to provide the necessary resources for Islamic FBOs' entry into Kakuma refugee camp by 2026.

One limitation of the adopted theory is that it is heavily influenced by context, making it difficult to generalize its findings across different scenarios. Consequently, as the scope of this study was limited to FBOs operating within refugee camps, a potential avenue for future research is FBOs involved in refugee protection in urban areas. Furthermore, a significant challenge identified was the perception of discrimination stemming from the absence of Islamic FBOs in a camp populated by numerous Muslim refugees. Future studies could examine refugee camps that include Islamic FBOs.

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