



In Partnership With



Policy Enabling Environment for Refugee Self-Reliance (PEERS) Roundtable in East Africa

**Nairobi, Kenya
March 30-31, 2026**

Concept Note

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More than 1 in 70 people in the world have been forcibly displaced by violent conflict, war, and persecution. The East and Horn of Africa hosts about 6 million refugees and asylum-seekers, of which Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania host more than 4.1 million. As global funding fails to keep pace with rising forced displacement, finding innovative and sustainable solutions is more urgent. With third-country solutions becoming more elusive, coupled with the slow pace of refugee return to countries of origin, the challenge for host countries and the global community is to support refugees to rebuild their lives and become self-reliant while creating an enabling environment for their inclusion and meaningful participation.

Majority of refugees in the East and Horn of Africa region are in protracted situations, with limited livelihood options, and facing some key barriers that include lack of access to formal employment. How can host countries create better self-reliance opportunities for refugees and the host? What factors facilitate or constrain the refugee right to work that host countries can influence directly through their policies? How can evidence and best practices inform the design and implementation of refugee policy in this region and elsewhere?

On **March 30-31**, the Refugee and Forced Displacement Initiative (RAFDI) at the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) will convene a Policy Enabling Environment for Refugee Self-Reliance (PEERS) Roundtable to address the above questions and more. Organized by MPI, in partnership with the East African Centre for Forced Migration and Displacement (EACFMD) and the Center on Forced Displacement (CFD) at Boston University, the PEERS Roundtable will bring together government officials, refugee leaders, development partners, academic experts, private sector representatives, and other key stakeholders to engage in a constructive dialogue that aims to share best practices and lessons on refugee inclusion. The overall goal is to inform the design and implementation of refugee policies and identify key policy areas that can be improved to enhance the self-reliance and inclusion of refugees in economy, national systems, and decision processes.

A recent [report](#) by the World Bank argues that self-reliance should be at the core of global response to the needs of refugees because such approach is “more sustainable and cost-effective to build on their agency, skills, and readiness to take care of themselves.” How can our practices shift from aid dependence to employment of refugees without exacerbating their vulnerabilities? What policy environment will ensure refugee self-reliance? The roundtable will build on existing literature; prior convenings; and different engagements of refugees and their inclusion in [policymaking](#), [plan development](#), and [municipal leadership](#) to constructively address key questions and share best practices that will inform refugee responses in the region and beyond.

Objectives

The PEERS Roundtable seeks to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Discuss best practices from selected host countries and how they could contribute to effective implementation of refugee self-reliance policies in East & Horn of Africa.
2. Draw lessons from global best practices on refugee inclusion and integration policies, including those from Latin America, to inform policies in the region, and vice versa.
3. Equip refugee leaders with strong communication and advocacy skillsets that would increase the effectiveness of their meaningful participation in regional and global fora.
4. Identify key policy areas that can be improved to enhance refugee protection and socioeconomic inclusion in the region and beyond.
5. Highlight opportunities for including refugees into national development plans and systems, and elevating refugee voices in decision-making spaces.
6. Provide actionable recommendations to inform the decisionmakers and practitioners as they implement or design refugee inclusion policies in the region and beyond.

The overall impact of the PEERS Roundtable would be to improve refugee inclusion and implementation of refugee policy in East Africa, with the following primary outcomes:

- Increased understanding of regional and global best practices and challenges in the design or implementation of refugee policy responses applicable to the East African context.
- Increased advocacy capacity of refugee-led organizations to meaningfully participate in policymaking discussions at the national, regional, or global level.
- Strengthened cross-regional learning and South-South perspectives on refugee integration practices, prioritizing peer-to-peer engagement over one-way knowledge transfer.

Forced Displacement Context

As of mid-2025, more than 1 in 70 people in the world have been forcibly displaced. As global funding fails to keep pace with rising forced displacement that has become increasingly complex and protracted, finding innovative financing and sustainable solutions is more urgent. With the slow pace of refugee return and third country solutions becoming elusive, the challenge for host countries is to support refugees to rebuild their lives and become self-reliant while creating an enabling environment for their meaningful participation. This requires collective efforts.

In 2025, the East and Horn of Africa region hosted about 6 million refugees and asylum-seekers, of which Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Tanzania have a combined total of more than 4.1 million. The region is home to both protracted and emergency crises. For example, the Sudan situation, which is the largest displacement and worst humanitarian crisis in the world; the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) situation, which has seen rising displacements from the eastern region; and South Sudan and Somali situations, which are both protracted. These ongoing situations and instability make it unsafe for refugees to return to their home countries.

Many refugees in the Horn and East of Africa are “locked in and locked out”: they are unable to return home in safety and in dignity, not allowed to move elsewhere, and they are denied access to economic opportunities in host states. The more the refugees stay longer in exile, the more their opportunities and freedom are severely limited. Policy responses that do not align with or neglect the interrelatedness of these realities are unsustainable. What does an enabling environment look like for refugee self-reliance? To what extent does the participation of refugees in the design and implementation of policy affect the outcomes?

Regional Policy Responses

The Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) and the East African Community (EAC) have advanced several regional policy commitments. These include the 2017 Djibouti Declaration on Refugee Education; the 2019 Kampala Declaration on Jobs, Livelihoods, and Self-Reliance; and the 2023 Munyonyo Declaration on Durable Solutions for Refugees, all of which include the pledges to support the protection and socio-economic inclusion of refugees. However, these policy instruments have not been put into practice across the board. Sharing of best practices will help strengthen the effective implementation of existing refugee policy and legal frameworks to enhance refugee self-reliance in the region and beyond.

While the trend toward refugee inclusion in the IGAD-EAC region is encouraging, policy response has been fragmented and is facing key challenges, including funding constraints. According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), only 34 per cent of the estimated \$8.6 billion requested for humanitarian response in the East and Horn of Africa was provided in 2025. This calls for collective action and responsibility-sharing.

Host Country Response and Challenges

Against the backdrop of a highly restricted funding environment, marked by strict prioritization of life-saving interventions, host country responses and plans are “increasingly facing recurrent delays and risk collapsing” because lack of funding and other factors threaten their sustainability. The PEERS Roundtable will highlight trends, opportunities, and solutions and recommend ways to adapt global or regional best practices to each context as countries tackle specific challenges.

- In **Kenya**, the Shirika Plan aims to integrate refugees into host community. Despite its political will for refugee inclusion, Kenya still struggles with administrative barriers to refugee self-reliance, including significant foreign funding cuts, lack of interoperability of government systems, complex work permit requirements, restriction on the freedom of movement, lack of *de facto* right to work, and other concerns.
- In **Ethiopia**, the Makatet Roadmap seeks to establish a comprehensive and operational approach to integrating refugees and enhancing host community resilience. Major barriers to the operationalization of the roadmap include deep funding cuts, and slow rollouts of the ID system and the roadmap itself, as well as policy incongruencies.

- In **Tanzania**, refugees face significant protection challenges, including restricted access, limited legal frameworks, and contested returns. Historically a leader in inclusive refugee policy response, Tanzania has recently moved to a deterrence approach. Refugees live in camps with limited access to employment, movement, or other opportunities.
- In **Uganda**, the presence of more than 1.9 million refugees from the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan and elsewhere, has severely strained its refugee hosting capacity amid diminished responsibility sharing commitments. While refugees are given a land to sustain their livelihoods, they still face some hurdles, including lack of access to formal financial services, difficulty in obtaining work permits, reluctance to hire them, and lack of clarity in laws. As the Center for Global Development report points out, “Access to and rights within the labor market are inherently connected to refugees’ ability to access public education, health services, official documentation, and financial services.”

Themes for the Roundtable

- **Legal and Regulatory Framework:** Host country legal framework guides the inclusion of refugees in the formal economy, national systems, and other opportunities to enhance self-reliance. Following the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, many host countries in the Global South implemented approaches, including legal stay arrangements, right to work, naturalization, and expanded economic and social systems access. *What are the best practices for designing or implementing laws to allow for inclusive legal framework? How do donor conditionalities shape host country policies over time? What impact does the absence of national policies have on a country’s approach to refugee management?*
- **Cross-Regional Learning and South-South Perspectives:** The roundtable prioritizes peer-to-peer engagement over one-way knowledge transfer to inform policies that integrate refugees into national development plans, strengthen local response capacity, and expand opportunities for refugee inclusion into labor markets. Best practices from Latin America’s approaches to regularization and private-sector integration will be shared, while East Africa’s innovations in refugee-led solutions, self-reliance model of land ownership, and integration into national plans will be brought into the discussion.
- **Local Integration and Social Cohesion:** Policies established at the national level set the backdrop for refugee inclusion in a host country. However, cities and other localities can implement localized programs that promote effective refugee inclusion practices. *What best practices do cities, counties, and host communities use to implement inclusive policies and promote social cohesion between refugees and the host community?*
- **Labor Market and Economic Inclusion:** Inclusion of refugees into the labor market, economy, and social system provides them with a sense of belonging and enables them to contribute to the host community. *What are the best practices and lessons learned for including refugees in the labor market and how should key stakeholders be involved?*

- **Refugee Voices and Global Advocacy:** People with lived experience are best poised to effectively address the challenges that refugees face. This requires communication, understanding of policy process, and evidence-based advocacy to shape the narrative in order to gain public support for policy change. *What are the best practices for effectively engaging refugees or policymakers in policy discussions? To what extent does the participation of refugees in the design and implementation of policy affect the outcomes?*
- **National Data System Integration:** A key component of expanding access to social and economic services is integrating refugees into national development and data systems. Incorporating refugees into national identification, census, education, health and financial systems can be challenging with limited resources. *What are the best practices for integrating refugees into national systems and datasets for health and education?*

Global Examples of Inclusive Refugee Policy

Colombia and Uganda are two top host countries in the Global South that have responded to forced plight with humane policies that fostered enabling environments for refugee self-reliance.

A [report](#) published by the University of Oxford’s Refugee Studies Center identifies three core elements of the Ugandan model. First, its regulatory framework allows refugees to work, move and choose their residence. Second, its assistance model enables refugees within rural settlements to own land for agriculture and cultivation. Third, its refugee–host interaction model encourages integrated social service provision and market access. The World Bank [brief](#) suggests a shift in thinking, arguing that “refugees should be viewed as economic actors in charge of their destiny (development approach) rather than as beneficiaries of aid (humanitarian approach).”

In the wake of the Venezuelan crisis, Colombia responded with a suite of policies aimed at integrating, rather than deterring, migrants and refugees. Its commitment to integration is demonstrated by the implementation of the [Temporary Protection Status](#) (TPS), which granted at least 1.8 million Venezuelans the right to remain and work in Colombia for 10 years. The TPS became the [largest](#) such temporary-protected-status program in the Western Hemisphere history, effectively integrating migrants and refugees into the socioeconomic fabric of Colombia through guaranteed access to health, education, financial services, and socioeconomic inclusion. This inclusive policy had a positive impact on the displaced people and host country’s economy. A World Bank [analysis](#) finds that the displaced Venezuelans who participated in the regularization program increased their incomes by 31% and consumption increased by 60%.