

# Intra-African Labour Mobility:

PATHWAYS TO AN INTEGRATED AND  
DYNAMIC AFRICAN WORKFORCE

SUMMARY



# About Amahoro Coalition

Established in 2019,  
Amahoro Coalition is  
the leading convener of  
African private sector  
leaders for social  
impact

We provide tailored solutions to the private sector, enabling them to tap into the African demographic dividend, including in vulnerable settings like displaced communities.

At Amahoro we also work to empower the youth of Africa, including those in displaced communities, through strategic connections with the private sector to co-create breakthrough opportunities for all.

# Introduction

This position paper queries the future of displacement management in Africa, as seen through a changing geopolitical and economic prism. Discussions on development funding in the Global South, following what seems to be the demise of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), have been sobering.<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the panic arising from this recent turn of events, it is important to recall that this attitude to development aid is neither unique to the United States nor is it unprecedented.<sup>2</sup> Over the last four years, major donor countries transitioned to spending funds earmarked for development assistance internally, catering to in-donor refugee costs and repurposing aid for climate-related projects.<sup>3</sup> The result is a severe reduction in the amount of aid money flowing to low-income countries, a trend that might not let up in the near future.<sup>4</sup>

Regrettably, the scaling down of development funding has been particularly pernicious for donor-reliant humanitarian concerns such as displacement management in Eastern Africa. And it is increasingly evident that, in such contexts going forward, wide-reaching policy shifts towards “self-reliance” are to be expected. This position paper situates itself in this crunch, between the old and new approaches to displacement assistance. We specifically examine the prevailing political economy in the context of the intra-African labour migration of protection seekers, in an effort to move the needle on the adoption of much-needed policy reforms in displacement management.

Our study reveals that the risks and costs associated with hosting protection seekers (referring to both asylum seekers and refugees) result in states’ policies that renege on obligations towards protection seekers’ socio-economic rights, especially their rights to decent work and to freedom of movement. It is this logic that informs the intransigence exhibited by Eastern African states in their reliance on donor funding for displacement assistance. To counter this and simultaneously trigger an orderly transition towards self-reliance policies, we propose the adoption of responsibility-sharing as a subregional strategy. We argue that responsibility sharing can be deployed as a mechanism to equitably distribute risks and costs and relieve among hosting states, social and economic hosting pressures, the result of which would be the realisation of the social and economic rights of protection seekers in the region, including through intra-African labour migration.

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1 Ken Opalo, ‘African countries must urgently start the process of ending aid dependency’ (An Africanist Perspective, 2025) <https://www.africanistperspective.com/p/african-countries-must-start-the> accessed 2 April 2025.

2 Ibid.

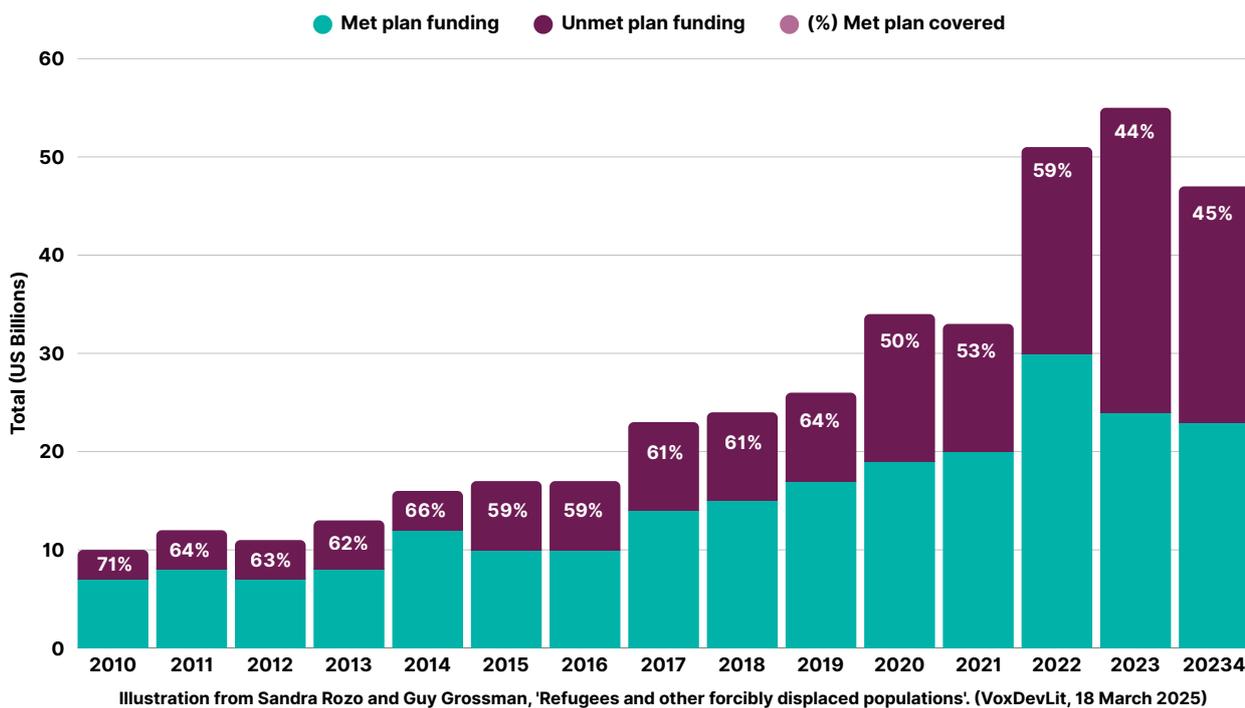
3 Ken Opalo, ‘What will become of international development after the end of the aid paradigm?’ (An Africanist Perspective, 2025) <https://www.africanistperspective.com/p/what-will-become-of-international> accessed 2 April 2025. See also Lee Crawford, ‘Don’t give up on aid just yet’ (Centre for Global Development, March 13 2025) <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/dont-give-aid-just-yet> accessed 2 April 2025.

4 Centre for Global Development (n.2)

# A changing geo-political context and the matter of self-reliance in Africa

International cooperation, a feature of the now fraying post-war global order, is in decline. Sadly, this retreat from multilateralism has been inimical to displacement management, referring to the strategies and actions adopted to address the needs of people forced to leave their homes.<sup>5</sup>

**Figure 1 - Illustrating the Humanitarian Funding and the Gap in Coverage for Forced Displacement Crisis**



Note: The percentage labels in each bar represent the global appeal coverage tracked for each year. Data source: Financial Tracking Service, OCHA Services.

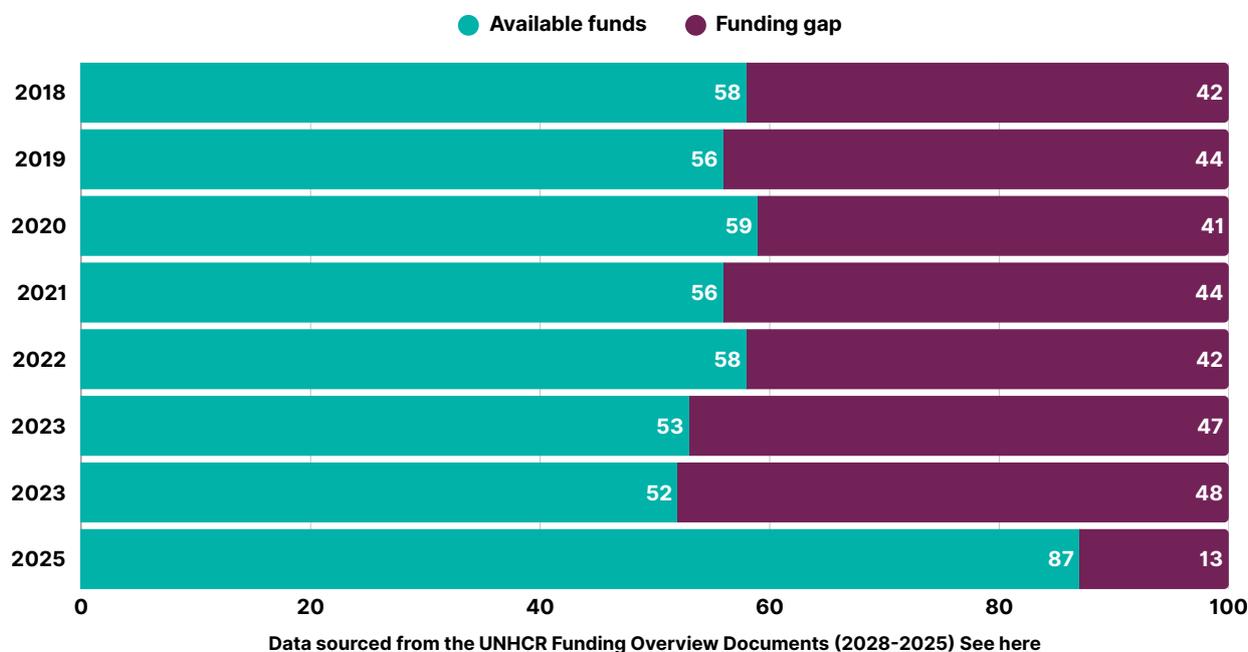
The graph above illustrates the enormity of the challenge. Evidently, the need for funding for forced displacement crises has increased over time. This could be attributed to an increase in displacement from conflict, climate change, or both. Unfortunately, the gap between pledged and required resources has also risen. The largest deficit was experienced in 2023, where guaranteed funds could only cover 44% budget.

<sup>5</sup> Johannes Hoogeveen, Kasrisha Silva, and Craig Loschmann, 'Investing in refugees' self-reliance: A more cost-effective and sustainable response' (UNHCR Blogs, November 14 2024) <https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/investing-in-refugees-self-reliance-a-more-cost-effective-and-sustainable-response/> accessed 19 January 2025.

Considering recent aid cuts by governments in developed countries, there is no indication that this trend will reverse anytime soon.<sup>6</sup> In fact, an increasing percentage of funds earmarked as aid is currently spent hosting protection seekers within developed countries.<sup>7</sup>

In response, stakeholders in the protection-seeking domain have turned their attention to advancing policies that are less reliant on donor funds. This manifests in the push for more self-reliance hosting policies, understood in brief, as the social and economic inclusion of protection seekers in their host countries.<sup>8</sup> Take, for instance, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which, as seen in the graph below, is set to witness the largest funding gap in its budget this year. Due to its widening deficit, the UNHCR's strategy has transitioned over time to experimenting with and facilitating the adoption of a self-reliance approach to hosting protection seekers.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 2 - Illustrating the UNHCR's funding gap**



6 Lee Crawford, 'Don't give up on aid just yet' (Centre for Global Development, 2025) <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/dont-give-aid-just-yet> accessed 19 March 2025.

7 For the UK, this amounts to about 28% of the aid budget today. See Independent Commission for Aid Impact, 'Use of the aid budget to host refugees in the UK rises to £4.3bn' (ICAI, 10 April 2024) <https://icai.independent.gov.uk/use-of-the-aid-budget-to-host-refugees-in-the-uk-rises-to-4-3bn/> accessed 19 March 2025. See also OECD, 'Foreign aid surges due to spending on refugees and aid for Ukraine' (OECD, 12 April 2023) <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/news/press-releases/2023/04/foreign-aid-surges-due-to-spending-on-refugees-and-aid-for-ukraine.html> accessed 19 March 2025.

8 See also OHCHR, Global Compact on Refugees (UN New York, 2018) <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet> accessed 19 March 2025.

9 Ibid.

# The crunch between old and new approaches to displacement management

Unfortunately, for countries that are net receivers of protection seekers in a region like the East, Horn and Great Lakes (EHAGL), the adoption of self-reliance hosting policies represents a colossal shift away from their long-held displacement management strategies. Except for Uganda, the rest tend to elect to renege on their obligations towards protection seekers’ socio-economic rights (“rights-reneging”), especially with respect to their rights to decent work and to freedom of movement.<sup>10</sup> Unsurprisingly, strategies that curtail the social and economic agency of protection seekers are primarily reliant on donor funding for their realisation.<sup>11</sup> And despite the mounting pressure for policy reform, these “rights-reneging” strategies persist, even though they are increasingly incompatible with changing global policy priorities in this regard.<sup>12</sup>

**Figure 3 - Summarising national refugee policy indicators.**

Main net-receiving countries in the EHAGL (except for Ethiopia)	Access to asylum procedures	Freedom of movement	Right to decent work	Secure rights to housing or land	Right to basic education	Combined measure of openness
Kenya						More restrictive
Uganda						More open
Tanzania						Very restrictive
Ethiopia						Very open

10 See UNHCR, ‘Uganda: Refugee Policy Review Framework update as at 30 June 2023 (UNHCR, 2023) accessed [here](#).

11 See Johannes Hoogeveen, Kasrisha Silva, and Craig Loschmann, ‘Investing in refugees’ self-reliance: A more cost-effective and sustainable response’ (UNHCR Blogs, November 14 2024) <https://www.unhcr.org/blogs/investing-in-refugees-self-reliance-a-more-cost-effective-and-sustainable-response/> accessed 19 January 2025.

12 Ibid. See also The World Bank and UNHCR, Economic Participation and the Global Cost of International Assistance in support of Refugee Subsistence Needs (UNHCR & The World Bank, 2024) <https://www.unhcr.org/media/economic-participation-and-global-cost-international-assistance-support-refugee-subsistence> accessed 19 January 2025.

13 For Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda’s UNHCR, ‘Kenya: Multiyear Strategies (yellow represents incomplete openness; green near-complete openness; while the red cross represents restrictiveness).

## The relationship between broader migration policy and States' responses to protection seekers' rights

In order to determine the reason for states' intransigence in displacement management policy, we examined the underlying political economy of hosting migrants. We chose to study EHAGL states' responses to protection seekers, within the general migratory context, rather than as a question of the refugee regime. The reason for this is two-fold. First, mobility along the Continent's major migration corridors is **mixed**. This refers to a migratory context where different categories of migrants, including refugees, asylum seekers, and regular and irregular labour migrants, move within and out of a region.<sup>14</sup> Second, within the EHAGL, the reasons for migration are complex, varied, and indistinct.<sup>15</sup> The region accommodates about 70% of its own protection-seeking stock, and **secondary or onward movements** are common.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, since most migrants in the region cite economic reasons as their primary motivation, forced movements remain a defining feature of migration in the subregion.<sup>17</sup>

Since the nature of people on the move evades categorisation, actual state responses to mobility will not suffer to discriminate between voluntary and forced migration. In fact, an

14 International Organisation for Migration, *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa* (IOM, 2023) (n. 10) 40.

15 See IOM, *A Region on the Move 2021: East and Horn of Africa* (IOM, 2022).

16 See Alexandar Betts, Naohiko Omata, and Jade Siu, 'Refugee mobilities in East Africa: Understanding secondary movements' (2023) 49 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 11. See also Daniella Botti and Melissa Phillips, *Moving on: Exploring onward migration of refugees and migrants from East Africa* (Mixed Migration Centre, 2021)

17 See *A Region on the Move 2022: East and Horn of Africa* (IOM, 2023) 64.

insistence on this dichotomy, prevalent in the literature, appears superfluous if viewed against this backdrop. In light of this, one can easily conceive of a **link between states' attitudes towards broader migration and their rights-renegeing strategies towards protection seekers**. Shifting our focus to the East African Community (EAC), a regional economic community that hosts 11 of the 14 countries in the EHAGL, we envision that there are certain aspects of the political economy informing migration policy on the subcontinent that necessitate states' restrictions on the rights of protection seekers to work and to movement.



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The subcontinent's political economy of migration is instructive. It is also characterised by high volume and low-skill mobility.

## Rights-renegeing and the labour migration policy-reality disconnect as twin-components of a larger strategic policy bundle

As expected, we found the study of the subcontinent's political economy of migration to be instructive. In addition to its mixed nature, its sub-regionality, and its economic underpinnings, migration in the EHAGL, regardless of who is on the move, has several other distinct traits: **It is characterised by high volume and low-skill mobility**. In low-income countries, such as the ones under study, these types of inflows can be highly destabilising because they have the potential to occasion large negative impacts on the labour market outcomes of the affected host populations.

The reason for this economic and politically destabilising outcome hinges on the high degree of substitutability between migrants and locals, particularly in low-income countries.<sup>18</sup> Where cross-border populations share similar education backgrounds, are largely engaged in informal low-skill work, and tend to rely heavily on the same occupations (such as agriculture or pastoralism) for subsistence, the degree of substitutability between migrants and the host population in labour markets is high. Hence, these migratory flows lead to an exogenous shift in the labour supply of the host location.<sup>19</sup> And seeing as low-skilled economic migrants and protection seekers are often willing to accept a lower wage than similarly low-skilled local workers, an influx of cheaper and substitutable informal labour, as happens during mass migration, results in large negative effects on locals' employment.<sup>20</sup>

**Figure 4 - Illustrating the theoretical mechanism leading to rights-reneging strategies among states**



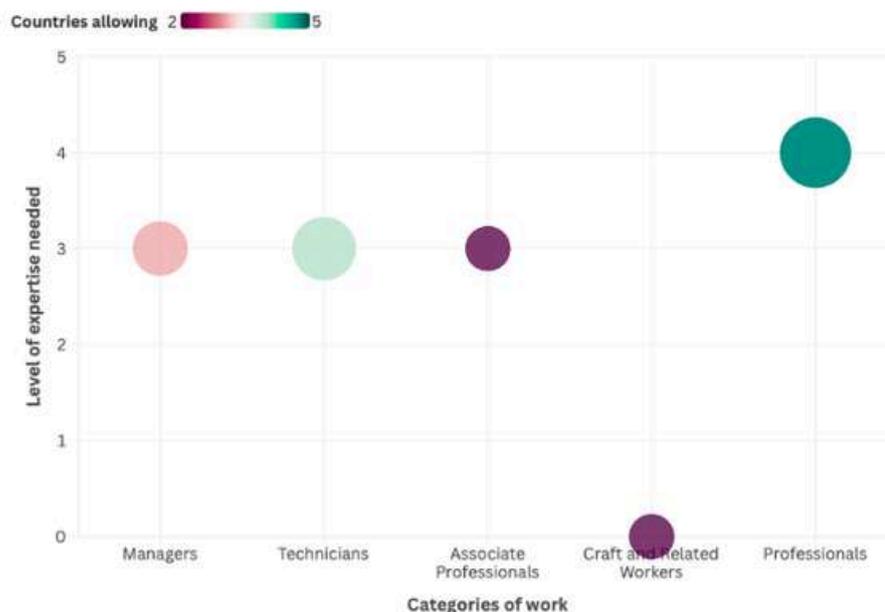
Consequently, there is an observable migration policy-reality disconnect arising from the policy aspirations of the Partner States of the EAC. They predictably choose to encourage high-skilled labour migration in a context characterised by high volume, low-skill migration. (Refer to the scatter plot in the next page) We argue that both this migration policy-reality disconnect and the rights-reneging policies of EHAGL receiving states are to be understood as **twin components of a larger strategic mobility policy bundle** deployed within the subregion. This can be explained this way: There are massive economic and political costs and risks attendant to hosting migrants, including protection seekers, which countries in the subregion aim to counter.

18 See Valentina Calderón and Ana María Ibáñez, 'Labor Market Effects of Migration-Related Supply Shocks: Evidence from Internally Displaced Populations in Colombia', Documentos CEDE 5851, Universidad de los Andes, Facultad de Economía, CEDE.

19 Ibid

20 See Isabel Ruiz and Carlos Vargas-Silva, 'The labour market consequences of hosting refugees' (2016).

**Figure 5 - Illustrating the absorption of migrant workers within the EAC**  
 Data from Regulation 4 of Annex 1 of the EAC Common Market (Freedom of Movement of Persons) Regulations



And thus, in an effort to **constrain all voluminous, low-skilled mobility**, the subregion’s net-receiving states elect a **mobility policy strategy that conceives of labour mobility in high-skilled terms generally and reneges on socio-economic rights in the case of protection seekers, specifically**. The result is an inefficient and unsustainable migratory environment, characterised by irregular migration and high vulnerabilities for most migrants making their way within the subregion.

## Responsibility sharing as remedial strategy for the realisation of self-reliance approaches

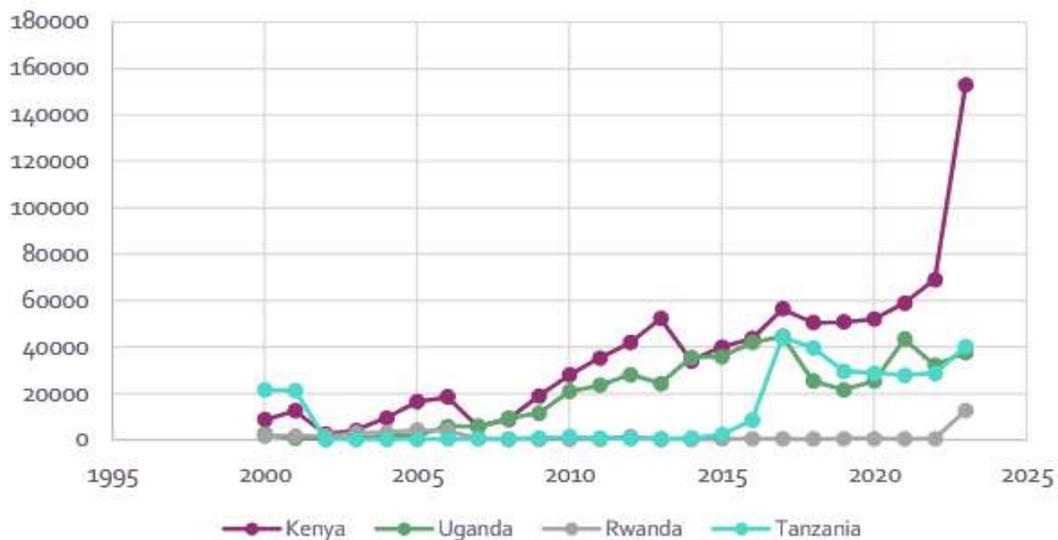
The greatest challenge to the realisation of protection seekers’ rights emerges to be, in fact, the nature of migration on the subcontinent—mixed, high volume, and composed of low-skilled migrants distributed over narrow territories occupied by socio-economically homogenous communities. Taking cognisance of this migration environment with a view to alleviating the circumstances of protection seekers specifically, we recommend the adoption of **subregion-wide dispersal policies, namely: responsibility sharing**. This is conceived as a subregional sharing of displacement management norms and of protection seekers, an aspiration already present in the 1969 OAU Refugee Convention.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See article 2 of the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa (10 September 1969)

Evident in **Figure 3** above, and in **Figures 6** below, there is a lack of uniformity in displacement management norms and in the distribution of protection seekers in the subregion. One reckons that the distribution of hosting risks and costs follows a similar pattern. This paper’s position is that a more equitable distribution of hosting risks and costs among states through **protection seekers’ sharing agreements** has the potential to alleviate the social and economic pressure that net-receiving countries in the subregion come under, while hosting. We foresee that the results of such cooperation among states would grant the subregion’s hosting states more leeway to guarantee the socio-economic rights of protection seekers, leading to more effective governance of their subregional labour mobility.

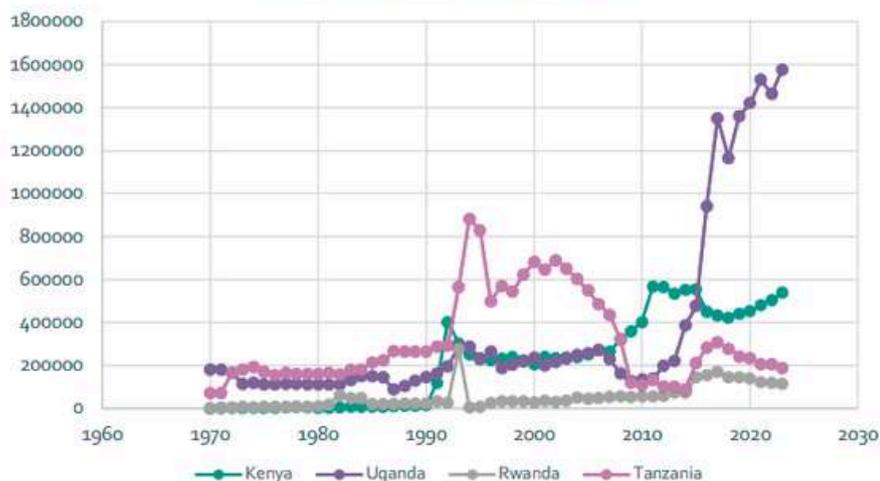
**Figure 6.A**

Asylum seekers hosted in each country over time



**Figure 6.B**

Refugees hosted in each country over time



Data for these graphs sourced from UNHCR (2024) – with major processing by Our World in Data. Last updated 25 July 2024. Find

Importantly, viewing responsibility sharing as a catalyst for the adoption of self-reliance policies in displacement management is an incredibly prudent strategy in the context of the EHAGL's changing policy environment. Besides, we also find this course of action to be providential in the following ways:

- \* Responsibility sharing is responsive to the protracted nature of displacement in the EHAGL:** Protracted displacement refers to situations where one is displaced for longer than five years and they lack a durable solution to their plight by means of voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement.<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, these durable solutions have not been forthcoming for most protection seekers in the subcontinent. With many stakeholders keen to adopt alternative local solutions, we position responsibility sharing across the subregion as one such localised solution that would provide policymakers, more flexibility and durability, beyond the available options.<sup>23</sup>
- \* A protection seekers' sharing agreement can be actualised through existing regulatory and policy coordination capacities in the EAC:** One other advantage of adopting responsibility sharing across the subregion involves the fact that it builds onto existing regulatory and policy coordination capacities built into the EAC. And while this might read as a double-edged sword since the EAC exhibits certain weaknesses in its regulatory, analytical, and delivery capacities, we find, on a balance of probabilities, the EAC's capacities to be promising. For example:

  - \* It signed the **Munyonyo Declaration on Durable Solutions for Refugees in the East and Horn of Africa**** in 2023, which largely echoes the principles in the **Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)**. These include the social and economic inclusion of protection seekers in their host countries; the pursuit of self-reliance policies, such as by affirming their right to decent work and enabling labour mobility; and responsibility sharing.<sup>24</sup>
  - \* It has plans to oversee the drafting, adoption, and implementation of **Comprehensive Regional Refugee Management Policies**.** These are designed to harmonise coherent standards of protection, including a shared policy on the onward and pendular movements of protection seekers within the subregion.<sup>25</sup>

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22 See originally, Jeff Crisp, 'No solutions in sight: The problem of protracted refugee situations in Africa' 75 *New Issues in Refugee Research* (UNHCR, January 2003). See for a recent discussion: Samuel Opono and Frank Ahimbisibwe, 'Protracted refugee situations and the shrinking durable solutions: Could there be a ray of hope in local solutions?' (2024) 10 *Cogent Social Sciences* 1.

23 See Samuel Opono and Frank Ahimbisibwe (2024)

24 See IGAD and EAC, IGAD-EAC Ministerial Declaration on Durable Solutions for Refugees in the East and Horn of Africa (IGAD & EAC, 16 June 2023).

25 Ibid

\* It recently adopted a **5-year migration action plan** with support from the International Organisation for Migration (IOM).<sup>26</sup> The action plan is intended to align Partner States’ policies and enhance collaboration with a view to strengthening their capacities on various issues linked to migration, ranging from labour, climate change, and development, among others.

\* **Responsibility sharing as a strategy would exploit opportunities arising from this period of transition within countries:** EAC Partner States’ national displacement management approaches are also changing. For example, Kenya’s new Refugee Act, modelled after the principles of the GCR, aims to shift the country’s practice away from decades of encampment towards the socio-economic integration of protection seekers through settlement.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the new Act foreshadows a model for subregion-wide responsibility sharing. It gives refugees from the EAC the option to take up EAC citizenship.<sup>28</sup> Effectively, this would proceed to affirm a bundle of socio-economic rights for them within the subcontinent.<sup>29</sup> With the right incentives, other Partner States may choose to extend the same offer to refugees in their territories, thus constructing a subregion-wide responsibility-sharing model.



26 IOM, East Africa Community Bloc adopts 5 year migration action plan with support from the IOM (IOM, 29 November 2024) <https://eastandhornofafrica.iom.int/news/east-africa-community-regional-bloc-adopts-5-year-migration-action-plan-support-iom> accessed 19 March 2025.

27 Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik, ‘From Global Refugee Norms to Local Realities: Implementing the Global Compact on Refugees in Kenya (d.i.e. 2019) [https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/BP\\_19.2019\\_06.pdf](https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/BP_19.2019_06.pdf) accessed 8 April 2025.

28 Section 28(8) Kenya: The Refugees Act (2021) No 10 of 2021.

29 See Kenya: The Refugees Act (2021) No 10 of 2021.



## Conclusion and Recommendations

Discussions on aid dependence in Africa will soon abound. And so will proposals aimed at realising more autonomous realities. The current crisis presents us with an opportunity to model a better future for displacement management in the region. Even more important is how we manage what seems to be an inevitable transition to national self-reliance approaches to hosting. This impending evolution in policy would effectively align countries' protection seeker assistance with the trend towards self-reliance championed by Africa's long-term policy stakeholders, such as UNHCR, IOM, the World Bank and bilateral foreign development agencies.

Crucial, however, is that we explore models that are respectful of the social, economic, and political structures underlying the extant displacement management regime. In fact, it is only then that we can sidestep latent political and social societal implosions. To this end, we propose the pursuit of responsibility sharing as a strategy, seeing as it has the potential to distribute hosting risks and costs across populations and states, with a view to relieving states of the social and economic pressures associated with hosting protection seekers. We argue that this relief precedes a realisation of the social and economic rights of protection seekers in the region, including through intra-African labour migration.

In conclusion, we endorse a few recommendations while striving for a protection seekers' sharing agreement within the subcontinent. Our key recommendations speak to building knowledge on stakeholder attitudes and their capacities and forging synergetic relationships among them. This is especially critical as successful stakeholders' engagement can compensate for weaknesses in the national and subregional institutions' regulatory, analytical, and delivery capacities.

## Recommendations

1

### Survey stakeholders' attitudes towards responsibility-sharing in the EAC:

There is a need to conduct both a thorough survey of the stakeholders, including of protection-seeker-led organisations in the subregion and their attitudes towards responsibility-sharing. The objective of such a survey would be **comprehensive stakeholder mapping**, wherein the levels of interest and the influence of stakeholders are identified.

2

### Build networks and forge relationships with like-minded partners:

We identify a need to seek out and forge relationships with similarly ambitious public and private sector organisations. A responsibility-sharing agreement within the subregion will most likely emerge as a result of intensive collaboration between local, regional, and international partners. The upcoming World Refugee Day and the Global Refugee Forum present opportunities for such engagement.

3

### Explore the feasibility of a protection seekers' sharing agreement in the EAC:

There is need to map out in greater detail, the existing formal and informal institutions and channels through which a high-level agreement, as envisioned in this case, comes to fruition.

4

### Collate best practices from other regional approaches to responsibility-sharing:

Unfortunately, protection seekers' sharing agreements are not the norm. In order to ensure success, it is important to glean some best practices with respect to the negotiation and drafting of such agreements. For example, one might envision discussions between stakeholders in the EAC, including its own Secretariat and seasoned experts from regions like the European Union, where sharing norms have been deployed to some extent.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Timothy Hatton, 'The Common European Asylum System – The role of burden sharing (Ifo Institute, 2016) [Available here](#), accessed 8 April 2025.

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