

# An Educational Resource

DEVELOPED BY, FOR, AND WITH

## YOUTH IN KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP, KENYA

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*In Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp, the educational trajectories of 65,000 school-age children and youth depend on their enrollment in one of only five secondary schools. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) manages the provision of education within the camp, and dedicated staff work to expand post-primary educational opportunities for youth. Given the size of the camp population, secondary schools in particular are forced to make difficult decisions about access, capping enrollment and managing waitlists in order to maintain a level of quality and protection. Yet even as UNHCR works to increase the availability of secondary schools, the social demand for post-primary education remains low relative to the camp population: more than half of school-age youth in Kakuma do not attend secondary school.*

**E**nrollment disparities such as this one are not solely a matter of inequitable access to schools, but also reflect the ways that young people conceive of their educational opportunities, both in the present and as a pathway toward future prospects.

Consider Innocent and Iwa, two refugee youth in their early twenties who recently completed secondary school. Educational services absent in Innocent's home country of South Sudan attracted him to Kakuma, and he conceives of school as an investment in his future, even if it requires prolonged displacement. He reflects, "With this education, I will become someone... Because [of my education], if I go elsewhere, at least I will start somewhere." By contrast, Iwa struggles to see the value of education in shaping a future that is within his reach. He asks, "What can education mean for a refugee when nothing comes of it?" Iwa is not alone in his worry that school can only open so many doors for refugees, when the doors schools promised to



Images taken by the Kakuma Youth Research Group. Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya.




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open simply do not exist. Many refugee children and youth drop out of school with the same frustrations, rationalizing that education cannot change their status as refugees with no legal ties to Kenya, few chances to access higher education, and no opportunity to work in the formal economy.

The perspectives of Innocent and Iwa illustrate competing discourses about the value of formal schooling in Kakuma Refugee Camp, which young people navigate, reproduce, and challenge. In a context of structural and spatial uncertainty, we set out to better understand the educational experiences and aspirations of displaced youth in Kakuma. The research design encompassed youth participatory action research, and the youth featured in this work are participants, as well as co-researchers. Throughout our interactions, students learned research skills and collaboratively designed an inquiry into the role of motivation and non-material support in Kakuma youths' educational experiences. In a context where youth agency is profoundly constrained by local, national, and global power structures, this study aimed to educate and empower young people with the skills and supports to author their own research agenda and employ research tools to document and address local challenges.

As a research team we interviewed students, teachers, graduates, and those who discontinued their schooling from a range of national backgrounds. We found that most youth seek advice and information from friends and teachers about educational opportunities, but the value of these supports and one's capacity to access them were inequitably distributed. We also identified significant "information gaps," so that youth aspirations and efforts to motivate youth were often forged without a clear understanding of structural opportunities and limitations. The personal significance of these findings, as well as our collective potential to respond to them, shifted as most student researchers completed their schooling and began their struggle to access post-secondary opportunities they had hoped would be available to them.

We soon realized that our knowledge and skills were strengthened by coming together and sharing information and experiences, an insight we leveraged in our plan to move from research findings into action. In consultation with UNHCR and partner organizations, we worked to document available opportunities in the camp and develop a Facebook community called "Kakuma Youth Opportunities for Lifelong Learning." This site is a youth-driven effort to create and

share a set of resources with young people in Kakuma who aspire to continue their education after completing secondary schooling, but are uncertain how to access opportunities for further learning. Undoubtedly, the social media presence of refugee youth will not—on its own—shift the structures that limit postsecondary opportunities. Nevertheless, developing a resource for, by, and with Kakuma youth has become a form of non-material support within the camp community. We believe that young people should leave school with the knowledge and skills to shape meaningful and sustainable futures, and that empowering youth like Innocent and Iwa demands that educational pursuits align with broader opportunity structures. Our hope is that youth-led dialogue will lead to greater awareness of the significance refugees place on their education in exile, more concerted advocacy efforts driven by refugee stakeholders to expand educational opportunities, and stronger alignment between educational opportunities and the structures that enable and constrain refugees' futures.

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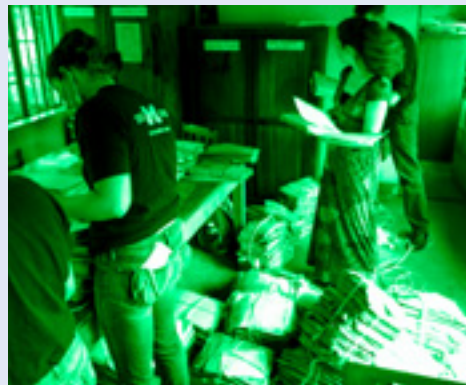
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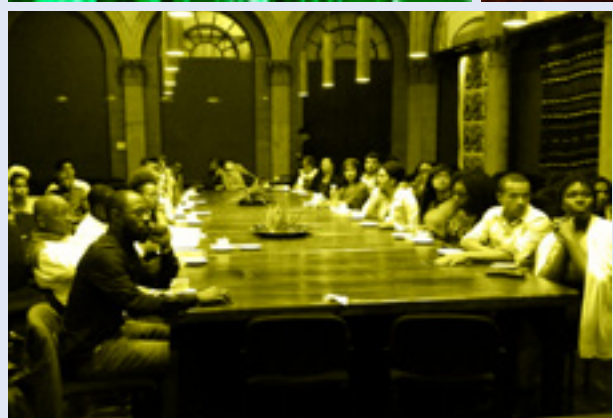
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