

VOLUME 1

REFUGEES IN MALAWI: ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW

Unveiling the reality of refugees to
dismantle the narratives that silence them



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Purpose and Scope of the Guide

This guide is a groundbreaking resource, offering the first comprehensive account of the refugee situation in Malawi, all in one place. It is designed to give readers a deep and accurate understanding of the past and present circumstances of refugees in Malawi, without the need to spend time piecing together fragmented information. As the first of its kind, this document will be revised periodically to reflect the evolving situation. While the historical context will remain constant, each new edition will highlight major events, changes, and data trends.

The primary aim of this guide is to provide accurate information, dispel myths, and offer insights into the lives of refugees in Dzaleka Camp. It addresses key aspects such as historical context, legal frameworks, living conditions, and the roles of various stakeholders, seeking to deepen understanding among the public, policymakers, and advocates for refugee rights.

More than just a collection of facts, this guide challenges misconceptions and encourages informed dialogue on refugee issues in Malawi. It serves as a tool for education, advocacy, and action, empowering readers to contribute to positive change and support meaningful reforms that uphold the dignity and rights of refugees.

Whether you are a concerned citizen, a government official, or an ally of refugees, this guide offers valuable insights and practical guidance on how we can all contribute to creating a more inclusive and compassionate society for those seeking refuge in Malawi.

Having called Dzaleka refugee camp both my home and office since 2003, the refugee cause is deeply personal to me. I have experienced as well as witnessed the struggles and resilience of those seeking safety here.

I believe that compassion begins with knowledge: let this guide be your starting point to advocate for the rights of refugees in Malawi. Through understanding the past and present, we pave the way for a future where refugees are not only seen but valued.

I hope that the guide will serve as both a mirror and a map, reflecting the reality of refugees in Malawi, and guiding us toward meaningful reform.

Innocent Magambi Founder and CEO Inua Advocacy



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Historical Background

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Malawi has a long standing tradition of offering refuge to those fleeing conflict and persecution, demonstrating the nation's deep commitment to humanitarian principles. However, Malawi has also experienced significant refugee outflows of its own. During the 1960s and 1970s, political persecution and ideological clashes, most notably involving Jehovah's Witnesses and the ruling one-party government, forced many Malawians to seek asylum in neighboring countries. This dual role—both as a sanctuary and a source of refugees—highlights Malawi's complex history in the region.



The Arrival of Mozambican Refugees

Malawi's role as a host country became particularly prominent during regional conflicts. The most notable instance was during Mozambique's struggle against Portuguese colonial rule and the subsequent civil war in the 1980s and early 1990s. During this time, Malawi provided sanctuary to over one million Mozambican refugees. At the peak of the crisis, one in every six people in Malawi was a refugee from Mozambique. In response to this influx, Malawi ratified the UN Refugee Convention—with certain reservations—and enacted the Refugee Act in 1989, establishing a legal framework that continues to govern refugee protection in the country today.

Establishment of Refugee Camps

Luwani Camp was opened in 1977 to host Mozambican refugees during the civil war, later hosting refugees from other nationalities until its closure in 2007. Dzaleka (originally a political prison during the one-party regime) was repurposed in 1994 as a refugee camp to accommodate the growing number of asylum seekers from Rwanda and Burundi after the Rwandan genocide. Initially designed to hold around 10,000 to 12,000 people, Dzaleka's population swelled due to ongoing conflicts in East Africa and the Horn of Africa. Despite its intended temporary status, Dzaleka has grown into a long-term refuge for over 60,000 people as of 2024, with no corresponding expansion of its facilities.



Key Terminology

This section aims to clarify essential terms related to refugees, providing a foundational understanding for readers. Grasping these terms is crucial for understanding the complexity of the refugee situation and the legal framework that govern their status.

The General Term Refugee: According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a refugee is “a person who has fled war, violence, conflict, or persecution and has crossed an international border to find safety in another country.” In Chichewa, Malawi’s national language, refugees are often referred to as “anthu othawa nkhondo” (people fleeing war). However, a more precise term would be “anthu othawa kwavo pa zifukwa zosiyanasiyana” (people fleeing their homes for various reasons), as persecution can arise from political views, ethnic or religious affiliations, and not solely from conflict or poverty.

Asylum Seeker

A person who has left their country of origin and applied for asylum (protection) in another country. Their claim for asylum has not yet been deliberated on.

Refugee

A person whose asylum claim has been reviewed and approved, resulting in the issuance of a refugee status document.

Stateless Person

An individual not recognized as a national by any state under its law. This includes people born in asylum who have not been granted citizenship by either their parents' country or the country where they were born.

People of Concern (POCs)

This category includes refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless persons.

People not of Concern

Asylum seekers whose claims have been denied on both application and appeal. International law prohibits their deportation, but they may choose voluntary repatriation, or seek asylum in another country.

People of Other Concern

In Malawi, this term refers specifically to Rwandans whose refugee status was nullified by the [2013 UNHCR Cessation Clause](#), which applied to those who fled between 1959 and 1998.

Undocumented Migrant

Someone who lacks authorization to enter or stay in a country. Sometimes referred to as “illegal migrant”.

CRRF

[Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework](#)

Refugee Status Determination (RSD)

Upon entering Malawi, asylum seekers must report to any government authority within 48 hours. The process involves several steps:

- 1. Immigration interview and search:** Asylum seekers entering through the border towns of Karonga or Chitipa are taken to holding facilities, while those arriving in the central or southern regions are directed to Dzaleka. Outcomes of this process can include immediate rejection and deportation, or a clearance document for further processing.
- 2. Homeland Security Refugee Department:** This department records the asylum seeker's story, collects biometric data, and issues a UNHCR Fact Sheet.
- 3. Application for Refugee Status:** Asylum seekers apply for refugee status at the Refugee Status Determination (RSD) office in Dzaleka, where they are given an interview date.
- 4. Review and Decision:** A committee comprising representatives from immigration, police, Ministry of Homeland Security, and other bodies reviews applications. Accepted applicants receive refugee status, while denied applicants may appeal to the Minister of Homeland Security. If the appeal is rejected, they become "People Not of Concern."

In Malawi, obtaining refugee status can be a long and uncertain process, with some individuals waiting over a decade for approval.



Without this status, refugees live in limbo, unable to access many of the benefits that come with recognized refugee status. For example, scholarships available through UNHCR's educational partners are generally only accessible to individuals with refugee status, creating a barrier for many in need. While some organizations, such as There is Hope, offer scholarships to all vulnerable people, the majority of educational opportunities and benefits remain restricted. In addition to scholarship access, only those with refugee status may be granted resettlement or, in limited circumstances, obtain a Convention Travel Document (also known as a "refugee passport") for essential travel needs, such as education, medical care, or family emergencies abroad. Even these are not guaranteed and require government approval.





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Durable Solutions

The UNHCR outlines three durable solutions for refugees:

- **Integration:** The host country offers citizenship or legal, economic, and social inclusion to refugees. Such integration is not provided for in Malawian policy framework.
- **Repatriation:** The refugee returns to their country of origin when it is deemed safe. By 2023, a growing number of Burundian refugees expressed a desire to return home. While the forced re-encampment may have contributed to this decision for some, others chose repatriation independently. The Government of Malawi, in collaboration with UNHCR, has been facilitating the documentation and travel arrangements for those opting to go back, ensuring that the process is voluntary and organized.
- **Resettlement:** Refugees are transferred from the asylum country to another state that agrees to admit them and grant permanent residence. Only individuals with formal refugee status (see RSD) are eligible to apply for resettlement. Globally, the UNHCR resettles less than 1% of refugees each year.

Important Facts

The Refugee Act: Legal Framework Governing Refugees in Malawi

Malawi's Refugee Act of 1989 establishes the legal framework for the reception, admission, and treatment of refugees. The Act aligns with key international refugee laws, including in part with the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. However, the Act has faced significant criticism for being outdated and insufficient in addressing the current needs of refugees. Despite its original intent, the law has not been substantially amended since its enactment, leading to concerns that it fails to adequately protect refugees in today's context.

The Act provides the legal foundation for the establishment of refugee camps and the regulation of refugee status determination procedures. It mandates that refugees live in designated camps and outlines their rights and obligations within these spaces. However, the Act also imposes significant restrictions on refugees, particularly in terms of movement, employment, and access to basic services, which have sparked debates about its respect of human rights standards.

Malawi's Reservations to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention

When Malawi ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, it made specific reservations that limit certain rights of refugees. These reservations include:

- Freedom of Movement: Refugees are required to reside in designated camps and cannot move freely within the country without special permission.
- Employment: Refugees are restricted from engaging in employment or self-employment outside of the camps.
- Public Relief and Assistance: Access to social services such as education, healthcare, and social security is limited for refugees.

These reservations severely limit refugees' mobility, employment opportunities, and access to essential services, undermining their ability to achieve self-sufficiency.

Unfulfilled Government Pledges

Over the years, the Malawi government has made multiple pledges to improve conditions for refugees, pledging to revise the 1989 Refugee Act and to lift specific reservations to the 1951 Refugee Convention. To date, none of these promises have been fulfilled, leaving refugees in Malawi in persistent hardship, unable to fully access their rights or improve their living conditions. In 2018, Malawi signed to adopt the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) under the New York Declaration endorsed by 193 UN member states in 2016. The CRRF aims to integrate refugees into host communities, promote their human rights, and reduce dependency on aid, but so far, Malawi has not implemented any of these measures.

In 2019, Malawi's Minister of Homeland Security made five key pledges at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva: integrating refugees into the National Development Agenda, implementing legal and policy reforms, improving registration and documentation, adopting a settlement approach, and enhancing reception and admission processes. Unfortunately, none of these pledges have been realized, further stagnating efforts to address refugee rights and improve their living standards. However, in Malawi's Development Plan (MW2063), there is a mention of refugees on page 35, in the context of "improved safety nets with effective delivery mechanisms," indicating a potential commitment to future action.

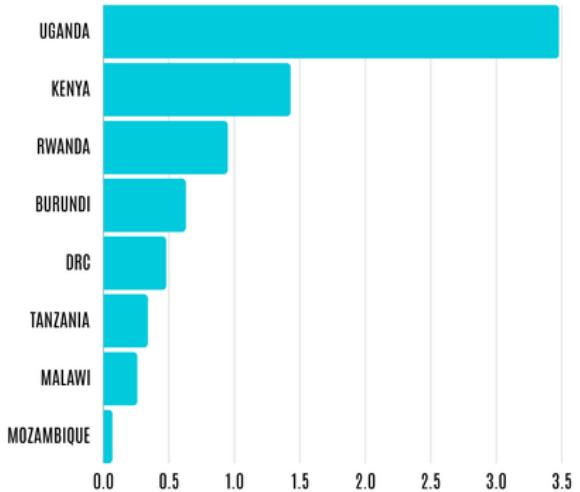
Regional Refugee Data (2024)

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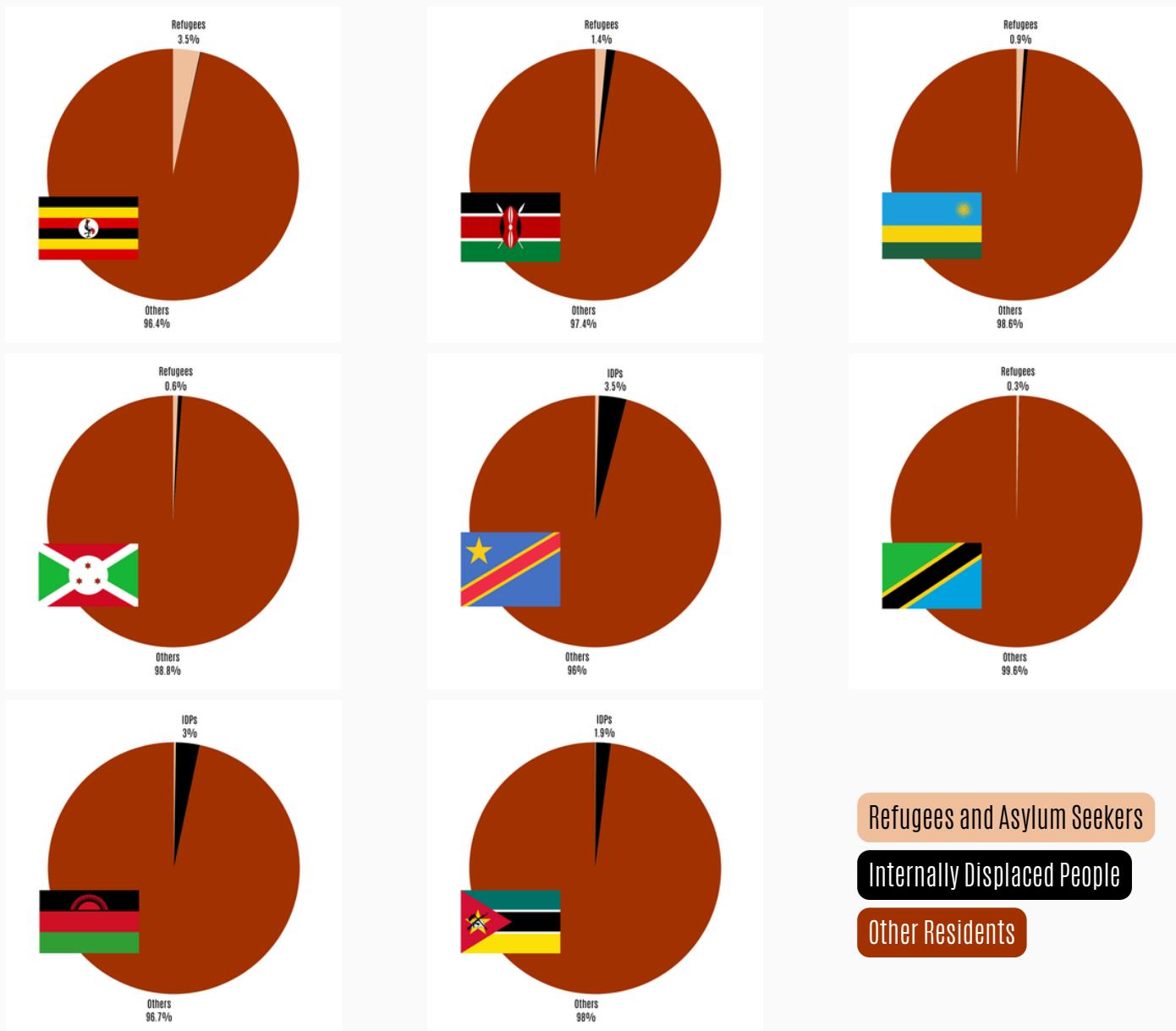
UNHCR data dated July 2024 is compiled here with data from the Global Report on Internal Displacement, and figures on country population from Worldometers.

The graphic to the right illustrates the percentage of refugees (which includes asylum seekers) to the total population in various countries in the region. In Malawi, refugees represent 0.26% of the total population.

Below, we illustrate country-specific data, including the proportion of IDPs present in each nation.



Refugees, Internally Displaced People (IDP) and Other Residents by Country (2024)



Debunking Myths

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The challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers in Malawi are deeply rooted in a combination of discriminatory government policies, entrenched corruption within refugee services, and pervasive myths held by the public. These myths, often fueled by misinformation, significantly hinder efforts to improve the lives of refugees. Inua Advocacy has been dedicated to debunking these misconceptions through a strategic communication campaign over the past three years.

Despite some progress, particularly following the forced relocation of urban refugees back to camps in 2023, ongoing education remains critical. As advocates, it is essential that we continue to challenge these myths and educate our audiences. Following are some of the most common myths and the realities that counter them.



Myth: Refugees Receive Business Capital from UNHCR

Contrary to popular belief, the UNHCR does not provide refugees with capital to start businesses. Research shows that refugees typically rely on personal networks, securing capital from friends and family. Often, they establish businesses based on trust agreements with Malawian suppliers, where transactions begin with trust and minimal or no initial cash exchange.



Myth: Refugees Sell Groceries Cheaply Due to Free Food Aid

The assumption that refugees can sell groceries at lower prices because they receive free food aid is incorrect. Until May 2019, WFP gave refugees 6kg of flour, less than 1kg of beans and less than 1 liter of oil per month. Subsequently, the introduction of cash assistance in place of food translated to USD 7.50 per person per month. This is not enough for personal subsistence, let alone as business capital.

Myth: Refugees Don't Pay Taxes

Many believe refugees do not contribute to the local economy through taxes, leading to resentment. In reality, refugees who own businesses are subject to the same tax regulations as local entrepreneurs, including the use of point-of-sale systems to ensure compliance with VAT collection obligations.

Myth: Refugees Import Goods Without Customs Clearance

There is a misconception that refugees bypass customs when importing goods, allowing them to undercut local prices. However, most refugees source their goods from Malawian suppliers. Those who import goods partner with legal business associates to ensure all necessary customs procedures are followed, just like any other importer.

Myth: Refugees Are in Malawi to Take Over the Economy

The fear that refugees are in Malawi to dominate the local economy is unfounded. While some individuals from Rwanda, Burundi, and the DRC may come to Malawi for business, this group is distinct from refugees, who have fled their countries out of necessity for safety, not for economic gain.



Myth: Life is Better in Rwanda than Malawi

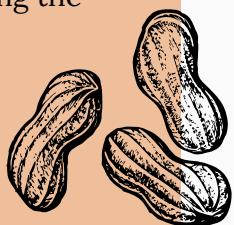
This myth questions why Rwandan refugees would flee to Malawi if their home country is more developed. It overlooks the fact that these refugees are escaping political persecution, not poverty. Development alone does not ensure safety from threats of violence or discrimination.

Myth: Refugees Are Criminals

The stereotype that refugees are criminals fleeing justice is not only false but dangerous. This sweeping generalization contributes to unnecessary stigmatization and ignores the reality that most refugees are innocent people fleeing persecution and violence.

Myth: Refugees Marry Malawian Women for Legal Documents

There is a harmful belief that refugees marry Malawian women solely to gain legal status, only to abandon them later. This stereotype is particularly unfortunate, as it was perpetuated by the Minister of Homeland Security before the forced relocation of refugees. In truth, refugees married to Malawians do not automatically gain citizenship and they were separated during the forced re-encampment.



Myth: Refugees Monopolize Agribusiness

The idea that refugees control the grain market to the detriment of local farmers is unfounded. Refugees who participate in agribusiness often pay better prices for grain than other buyers, contributing positively to the local economy rather than monopolizing it.

Myth: Refugees Hoard Foreign Currency

Some claim that refugees hoard foreign currency and send it back to their home countries, leading to a shortage in Malawi. This myth ignores the financial hardships that most refugees endure. This myth was particularly prevalent before the 2023 relocations, serving as a justification for the government's actions.

Myth: Refugees will Outnumber Malawians

Fears that the high birth rate in Dzaleka Camp will lead to refugees outnumbering locals and seizing land are exaggerated and are unsupported by population data. This myth mirrors historical unfounded fears used to justify discrimination, such as those directed against the Israelites in ancient Egypt.

Myth: Refugees Exploit Malawi's Laws

The belief that refugees choose Malawi because of its perceived lenient laws and better business opportunities is misguided. This perspective fails to consider the extreme desperation and dangers that drive refugees to seek safety in Malawi. Furthermore, other countries in the region, like Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania, host significantly larger refugee populations, disproving the notion that Malawi is uniquely attractive.

Life in Dzaleka Refugee Camp

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Dzaleka is a protracted refugee situation, meaning it has transitioned from an emergency camp to a long-term settlement that is still managed as an emergency. Unlike newly established camps where refugees often receive tents, food, and immediate support upon arrival, Dzaleka operates more like a large, restricted international village.

Upon arrival, asylum seekers are registered, issued ration cards, and introduced to the organizations and institutions that provide various services within the camp. Initially, they are housed in a transit facility before transitioning to stay with friends, faith communities, or under the guidance of leaders from their nationality. Due to the scarcity of land, new arrivals rarely receive a plot to build a house right away. The allocation of land is based on availability and the condition of the asylum seeker.

In Dzaleka, survival hinges on resourcefulness. Monthly rations often last less than a week, compelling refugees to innovate and find additional means to secure food and income. The camp is a hub of activity, with shops, beauty salons, tailoring services, private schools, vocational training centers, churches, restaurants, and other income-generating ventures.

The surrounding Malawian villages view Dzaleka as a place for recreation and economic exchange. Refugees and the local community have developed strong partnerships, particularly in accessing land for farming and engaging in mutually beneficial trade. This interdependence underscores the complex dynamics of life in Dzaleka, where resilience and collaboration are key to survival.



Education: Access, Challenges, and Opportunities

Education is a fundamental right, but in Dzaleka, access to quality education is severely limited. The camp has several primary and secondary schools, but these are often overcrowded, under-resourced, and staffed by volunteer teachers with limited training. The limited availability of secondary education, in particular, poses significant challenges for young people in the camp, many of whom are unable to continue their studies beyond the primary level. The lack of access to higher education is another significant barrier, with very few opportunities for refugees to pursue tertiary education. Some organizations offer scholarships and distance learning programs, but these are limited and highly competitive.

Food Security and Nutritional Concerns

Food security is a major concern in Dzaleka. The World Food Programme (WFP) provides monthly food rations to refugees, but these rations (equivalent to USD 7.50 per person per month) are insufficient to meet the nutritional needs of the population.

The situation is exacerbated by the lack of access to land for farming and the restrictions on employment, which limit refugees' ability to supplement their rations with other sources of food.

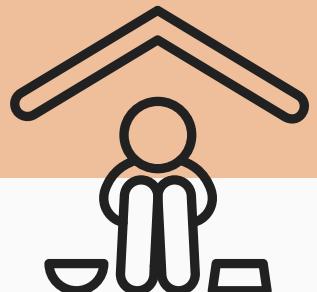
Malnutrition, particularly among children and pregnant women, is a significant problem in the camp. The limited availability of diverse and nutritious foods contributes to high rates of anemia and other nutrition-related health issues.

Shelter: Living Conditions in the Camp

Living conditions in Dzaleka are challenging, with overcrowding, inadequate housing, and limited access to basic amenities. Many refugees live in makeshift shelters constructed from mud, plastic sheeting, and other materials that offer little protection from the elements.

The lack of space and the deteriorating condition of these shelters contribute to poor living conditions and increased health risks. Efforts to enhance shelter conditions are constrained by the camp's increasing population and insufficient resources.

While some organizations have provided materials and support for building more durable shelters, the demand far exceeds the supply, leaving many refugees in substandard housing.



Healthcare: Services and Gaps

Healthcare services in Dzaleka are limited and inadequate to meet the needs of the population. The camp has one clinic operated by the Ministry of Health and supported by international organizations. The facility is overcrowded, under-resourced, and staffed by a small number of healthcare workers.

With limited medical staff and resources, the camp struggles to address prevalent health issues such as respiratory infections, malaria, and malnutrition. Access to specialized care, such as mental health services and treatment for chronic conditions, is extremely limited. The catchment area includes surrounding Malawian communities, taking the population to over 70,000.

Some refugee-owned private pharmacies and medical services are also present.

Access to Clean Water and Sanitation

Access to clean water and sanitation is a critical issue in Dzaleka. The camp has a limited number of boreholes and water points, which often results in long queues and water shortages. The quality of water is also a concern, with reports of contamination and outbreaks of waterborne diseases. Sanitation facilities in the camp are inadequate, with many refugees relying on shared latrines that are often in poor condition. These circumstances contribute to the spread of diseases and pose significant health risks, particularly for women and children.

Malnutrition, particularly among children and pregnant women, is a common problem in the camp. The limited availability of diverse and nutritious foods contributes to high rates of anemia, ulcers, and other nutrition-related health issues.

Convention Travel Documents (CTDs) Routinely Declined

Although Malawi is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, which mandates the issuance of travel documents to refugees lawfully residing in their territory, the current government has moved away from compliance.

Previously, Malawi allowed qualifying refugees to access Convention Travel Documents (CTDs), valid for five years at a time, enabling them to pursue international scholarships and critical medical treatment abroad. However, Malawi government stopped issuing these altogether for at least two years, impacting both new applicants and CTD holders needing renewals. In November 2024, government announced the availability of 2,000 CTDs and issued the first ten to applicants on the waiting list. However, the validity period for these CTDs has been cut down to six months, a hurdle for visa acquisition given that embassies require travel documents to be valid for at least six months beyond the visa issuance date.

The cessation of CTD issuance not only violates international obligations but stifles the aspirations of refugees seeking to improve their future.

Recent Events

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This section outlines key events that have significantly affected refugees in Malawi, both within and outside the refugee camp. These events, presented in chronological order, reflect the major challenges and disruptions faced by the refugee community from November 2022 to October 2024.

Stones and Tear Gas Exchange (November 22, 2022)

In the weeks leading up to the event, aid workers at Dzaleka Refugee Camp conducted a door-to-door assessment to identify families in need of plastic sheeting to protect their grass-thatched roofs ahead of the rainy season. When the list of selected beneficiaries was publicly displayed, many refugees were shocked to discover that their names were missing from the system, with others being recorded as having collected their sheets already.

With a significant number of people affected, the refugee community escalated the issue to the camp authorities and police. However, on November 22, when refugees returned to the distribution centre, the unresolved issues provoked frustration, culminating in unrest. Angry residents began throwing stones, breaking windows of aid workers' vehicles, and looting the warehouse. In response, the police were called, leading to clashes where tear gas was used against stone-throwing youth. The chaos lasted for hours, impacting many, including patients at the Dzaleka health centre, who were caught in the crossfire of tear gas and unrest.



Source: <https://www.voanews.com/a/police-refugees-clash-at-overcrowded-malawi-camp-/6847225.html>

Grenade Attack (December 14, 2022)

On December 14, 2022, a grenade was thrown at Butoyi Fideli, a Burundian community leader in Dzaleka Refugee Camp, as he was closing his office for the day. The explosion injured five people, with Fideli suffering the most severe injuries. This attack occurred just weeks after he had exposed a corrupt network that exploited refugees seeking resettlement, involving officials from UNHCR and Malawi's Ministry of Homeland Security, through which refugees were coerced into paying large sums of money to access resettlement opportunities in Western countries.

Despite facing threats to abandon his pursuit of justice, Fideli remained determined to hold the perpetrators accountable. Tragically, he succumbed to his injuries four months later. To date, there has been no formal investigation or arrests, allowing the suspects to evade justice.



Source: <https://www.investigativeplatform-mw.org/show-story/corruption-killings-sexual-abuse-rock-refugee-re>

Forced Re-Encampment of Refugees (2023)

On May 17, 2023, Malawi's government began forcibly relocating refugees and asylum seekers from urban and rural areas back to Dzaleka Refugee Camp. These refugees had integrated into local Malawian society, despite the Refugee Act restricting them to the camp, where they survive on meager UN allowances of about US \$5 per person per month.

The government's move, part of a larger effort to tighten controls on refugee movements, triggered widespread condemnation due to reports of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrests, property destruction, beatings, theft, and sexual violence by both government and non-government actors.

Reasons for the Forced Re-Encampment

In the months leading up to and including the forced re-encampment, anti-refugee propaganda was rife in national press, on radio and TV.

In the following sections, you will find the major reasons provided by the Honourable Minister of Homeland security, Dr. Ken Zikhale Ng'oma during many of his public addresses before and during the relocation.

The Minister has made allegations that refugees hurt the local economy, that they conduct criminal operations, and that they harbour specific individuals involved in terrorist activity in the Region, as well as some wanted in conjunction with the 1994 Rwanda genocide.

Economic Reasons for the Forced Re-Encampment

Honourable Ng'oma asserted that relocating refugees back to Dzaleka Camp was essential to fixing Malawi's struggling economy. He emphasized that the country was "under siege", and that keeping refugees integrated into local communities would prevent economic recovery.

Despite this strong rhetoric, six months after the forced relocations, the Malawian government devalued the local currency by 44% against the U.S. dollar, casting doubt on the effectiveness of this measure in addressing the country's economic problems.



Refugees arrested during the night were stripped of all their possessions and earnings from life in the city, and detained at Maula Prison before being taken to Dzaleka refugee camp.

Allegations of counterfeiting machines, firearms in containers

The refugee relocation that began on May 17, 2023, involved seizing over 120 shipping containers owned by refugees, asylum seekers, and permit holders from Burundi, Congo, and Rwanda and operating in Lilongwe's Mgona Township. Officials cited suspicion of hidden counterfeit goods, firearms, and minerals as reasons for the confiscation.

On August 28, police began inspecting the containers, and refugees who presented documents claiming ownership were subjected to arrests and intimidation. A Congolese woman with business permits watched as prison inmates emptied her containers, leaving spoiled soybeans on the ground. Another woman and her three-year-old son were detained overnight with no charges. Near the end of the inspections, police claimed to have found a pack of bullets in a container that had been moved to the police headquarters.

Though authorities promised a public report, none has been issued. The seized goods were auctioned without the owners' consent, with proceeds retained by the government.

Security justifications provided for the forced re-encampment

The Minister of Homeland Security, Dr. Ken Zikhale Ng'oma, claimed that refugees posed a significant security threat to both Malawi and neighboring Mozambique, suggesting that they might support the radical Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado. However, these allegations lacked substantiation. He also referred to the unresolved grenade attack that killed refugee leader Butoyi Fideli as further evidence of the threat posed by refugees, although under his leadership, no investigation was conducted, nor were any arrests made. Ng'oma also alleged that 522 individuals whose asylum claims were denied were former warlords, and claimed that 44 Rwandan army generals involved in the 1994 genocide were hiding among the refugees. He further mentioned receiving a list from the South African government of six genocide fugitives allegedly in Malawi, including Bizimana Augustin (who, according to a U.S. government report, died in 2000), and Félicien Kabuga, who was arrested in 2020 and is now on trial at the International Criminal Court. Other individuals he named were confirmed to have died decades prior, such as Sikubwabo Charles and Ryandikayo raising questions about the accuracy of his claims.

Bizimana Augustin: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/gcj/wcrp/206031.htm>

 Félicien Kabuga: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/18/rwanda-major-step-toward-justice-genocide>

Sikubwabo Charles: <https://www.irmct.org/en/news/irmct-prosecutor-announces-all-ictr-fugitives-successfully-accounted>

Ryandikayo: <https://www.irmct.org/en/news/irmct-prosecutor-announces-all-ictr-fugitives-successfully-accounted>

Malawi Defence Force Raiding Dzaleka

On July 17, 2024, Dzaleka residents endured a night of fear as the Malawi Defence Force (MDF) fired gun-shots in the air for at least two hours, while raiding some camp neighbourhoods named after Malawian cities: Blantyre, Zomba, and Karonga. The operation targeted a few suspected Ethiopian human traffickers, but it also led to arrests of numerous trafficking victims. Residents, however, reported that the MDF extended their searches to unrelated households, subjecting innocent people to intimidation and property theft. Accusations included the unlawful seizure of cash, mobile phones, and instances of physical abuse and torture.

A second, more widespread raid occurred on October 12, 2024, involving heavy gunfire that lasted for hours and spanned multiple zones within the camp. This time, eight Ethiopian suspects were detained, believed to be part of trafficking operations, along with approximately 200 Ethiopian nationals identified as trafficking victims. Reports of harassment, beatings, and confiscation of belongings, such as electronics and personal valuables, were widespread during both raids.

The initial raid saw two suspects released without trial, only to see their alleged illegal prisons targeted again in the October raid. Notably, during the second raid, two people were shot, including a Congolese teenager who sustained four fractures in the right foot. The eight suspects arrested in this operation were taken to Kamuzu Barracks and remained in custody without trial as of December 5.



<https://inuaadvocacy.org/2024/07/gunfire-erupts-in-dzaleka-refugee-camp/>
<https://inuaadvocacy.org/2024/10/combating-human-trafficking-at-dzaleka-refugee-camp/>



Corruption and Criminality

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Corruption is a pervasive issue that affects various aspects of life in Malawi, including the refugee sector. Reports of bribery, exploitation, and mismanagement of resources intended for refugees have been widespread. These practices exacerbate the already challenging conditions in the refugee camp and undermine efforts to support refugees in achieving self-reliance and dignity.

Alarming claims remain unanswered

An investigative journalism article from September 2023 contains detailed victim accounts of corruption and abuses perpetrated by some UNHCR Malawi officers, some officials from the Ministry of Homeland Security (both senior and field staff) and some refugee middlemen.

One large-scale, longstanding fraudulent scheme swindles desperate refugees by millions of Kwacha on the pretext that they would be allocated slots on the resettlement list. In a police statement, refugee middleman Mwalabo accepted that he and UNHCR official Owen Nyasulu (who had previously been the Dzaleka Camp Administrator for the Malawi Government) had indeed received K7.6 million. Mwalabo is the same person who was arrested on suspicion of murder by grenade attack of whistle-blower Butoyi Fideli; Mwalabo was later released without trial.

In another incident, one Burundi national claims to have paid a total of K60 million for a resettlement deal which never materialised. Homeland Affairs official, Peter Kumwenda, confessed in a report to Dowa Police that he received a K5 million ‘gift’ from the man in question. The latter asked Inua Advocacy for legal support to prosecute those who had defrauded him, which was provided. However, the case has been pending as the police are yet to conclude their investigations and make the necessary arrests.

Refugee Status Determination is another process where refugees claim corruption is rife, specifically with requests for sexual favours. A female asylum seeker whose family has been in Dzaleka over 20 years waiting to be granted refugee status says: “Some of us have been coerced into sleeping with UNHCR officials, hoping they will help us. In my case, I have slept with three officials who all promised to assist me, but nothing has materialised.” Other stories gathered in the article confirm this commonplace practice.

Finally, during the forced re-encampment period, reports were filed with Inua of government staff charging students who wanted to return to their secondary schools and universities, between K5,000 and K40,000 for a certification letter. Other re-encamped families were charged up to K40,000 for a tent in the communal shelter area, and others still alleged paying up to K300,000 to obtain a vacant lot for housing, or to build a shop for resuming business.

<https://www.investigativeplatform-mw.org/show-story/corruption-killings-sexual-abuse-rock-refugee-re>



Human Trafficking Cartels

Human trafficking in Dzaleka Refugee Camp is part of a well-organized chain that begins in Ethiopia, where young people are deceived with promises of a better life in South Africa. Traffickers in Dzaleka - often Ethiopian nationals posing as asylum seekers - serve as key facilitators of this network, and are among the most powerful in the operation.

In Ethiopia, travellers embark on a journey firstly receiving assistance from network members in Kenya before being transported through Tanzania into Malawi. Close to the Malawian border, dedicated transporters with connections to local police and immigration authorities generally facilitate a smooth transit into Malawi, allowing most travellers to reach Dzaleka Refugee Camp with minimal interruption. However, sources close to the traffickers indicate that disruptions along the way often arise from internal conflicts within the network. Conspiracies and power struggles among members can lead to intentional arrests of rivals, causing sporadic detainments and setbacks for those in transit.

In Dzaleka, traffickers hold their victims hostage in hidden "prisons" within the camp. There, captives face torture, starvation, and even death if their families fail to pay hefty ransoms.

Holding conditions are horrific, with minimal food and no proper medical care; victims who die are secretly buried by refugee youth hired by the traffickers. Despite the fact that these operations are well known to both the refugees and camp authorities, little has been done to stop them. Rival trafficking gangs sometimes arrange for the arrest or deportation of competitors, further victimizing those caught in the web of exploitation.

<https://malawi24.com/2024/10/22/death-in-blue-police-officers-implicated-in-fatal-human-trafficking-operation/>



Who Does What in Dzaleka?

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Refugee management involves a diverse range of stakeholders, all working together to support refugees and ensure a harmonious environment between them and their hosts. Central to these efforts is the Government of Malawi, specifically the Ministry of Homeland Security, which holds the primary responsibility for overseeing and coordinating refugee affairs in the country.

UNHCR and other organizations play a supporting role, complementing the government's efforts by providing additional resources, expertise, and services to enhance the well-being and integration of refugees.

UNHCR: Protection, Assistance, and Coordination

As the leading global agency for refugee protection, UNHCR plays a pivotal role in ensuring that refugees in Malawi are safeguarded and have access to their fundamental rights, including the right to life, freedom from torture, and protection against discrimination. UNHCR provides essential humanitarian aid through its implementing partners, offering critical support such as food, shelter, healthcare, and education. The agency also focuses on enhancing refugees' self-reliance through various empowerment programmes.

In addition, UNHCR coordinates the efforts of humanitarian organizations and government bodies, ensuring that aid is delivered promptly and efficiently, maximizing the impact of these collective efforts.

Government of Malawi: Policy Development, Regulation, and Enforcement

The Government of Malawi plays a crucial role in shaping and enforcing policies that govern the treatment of refugees, ensuring these policies are in line with international refugee law. It is responsible for enacting regulations that provide clear guidance on the practical application of these policies.

A key aspect of the government's responsibility is to ensure the enforcement of refugee laws and regulations, safeguarding refugee rights and addressing their needs.

Additionally, the government oversees the management of refugee camps, providing leadership, security, and controlling entry and exit permissions.



Implementing Partners and Cooperating Partners

Implementing partners are essential entities—both governmental departments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—contracted by UNHCR to deliver crucial services directly to refugees, addressing various thematic areas. These partners are funded by UNHCR and are also encouraged to seek additional donations to enhance their service delivery. Typically, these contracts span four years and are subject to renewal based on performance.

Cooperating partners are national and international organizations that focus on specific aspects of refugee management deemed by the Ministry of Homeland Security as needing additional support. Such organizations are authorized to provide services after receiving approval from Homeland Security. Once approved, these organizations collaborate with all entities working within the camp, including UNHCR.

While these cooperating partners do not receive direct financial assistance from UNHCR, they benefit from non-financial support provided by both UNHCR and the Government of Malawi. This support may include logistical assistance, coordination efforts, and access to coordination meetings, networks and resources.



Please note these lists are constantly being reviewed and the information may have changed since the publication date.

These lists are not exhaustive. Please consult the UNHCR and Ministry of Homeland Security respectively, for further information.

Implementing Partners

Plan International Malawi: Food and Nonfood Items (NFIs) Distribution, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), Child Protection, Human Rights and Livelihoods.

Welthungerhilfe (WHH): Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH)

Moravian Church in Malawi: Education

Cooperating Partners

World Food Programme (WFP): Provision of food assistance through cash

There Is Hope: Provides educational scholarships, vocational training, and supplies medicines for use at the Dzaleka health centre.

Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS): Environment, Education and Psychosocial Services

Centenary Bank and NBS Bank: banking services

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)

Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) are pivotal in offering essential services to their fellow refugees, embodying the spirit of self-reliance and communal care. These refugee-led organizations represent a profound shift from dependence to empowerment, taking ownership of their community's needs rather than merely lamenting their circumstances. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted their vital role, as they remained steadfast and accessible when international and national workers had to operate remotely.

CBOs bring solutions crafted from firsthand experience rather than distant boardrooms. Their leadership is fueled not by titles but by a deep, lived understanding of their community's struggles and aspirations. Unlike rigid bureaucracies, their decision-making processes are grounded in the realities of life within the refugee camp. When official channels slow down, CBOs step up with urgency. While global systems may pause, these organizations remain a constant presence, providing vital services and bridging the gap between emergency aid and sustainable solutions. Their contributions span various sectors, including education, economic empowerment, literacy, feeding programs, and human rights. Notable CBOs include:

TakenoLAB: Specializes in ICT training, equipping refugees and Malawians with valuable tech skills.

Salama Africa: Focuses on dance and education, fostering cultural expression and learning.

Tumaini Letu: Engages in cultural exchange, promoting understanding and integration.

Fountain of Hope: Works on livelihood and food security, ensuring that basic needs are met and sustainable opportunities are created for both refugees and Malawians.

Many other Refugee-Led Organisations in Dzaleka are contributing positively to the lives of people living in and around the camp. Please visit Relon.org for more details.



Community Leaders

Dzaleka is a vibrant, multicultural community where residents from over 11 nationalities—including major groups from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Burundi, Rwanda, Somalia, and Ethiopia—live side by side. Unlike many other refugee camps, Dzaleka does not have designated zones for specific nationalities; instead, people of different backgrounds mix and coexist throughout the camp. This blending of cultures fosters a unique environment where collaboration and mutual respect are integral to daily life.

Each major nationality is represented by four leaders—two men and two women—who serve as the primary intermediaries between their communities and the various organizations operating within the camp. These leaders play a crucial role in advocating for their communities, ensuring that their voices are heard and their needs are addressed. In addition to the leaders of the larger national groups, smaller nationalities, which make up minority groups within Dzaleka, are each represented by one leader. These leaders ensure that even the smallest communities within the camp have a voice and are included in decision-making processes.

The camp is divided into several zones, some named after Malawian cities and neighbourhoods: Blantyre, Zomba, Karonga, Dzaleka Hills, Katubvya, New Katubvya, Kawale 1, and Kawale 2. In addition to the community leaders, each zone has its own leaders who represent the diverse mix of nationalities within their areas. Zone leaders play a key role in maintaining order, facilitating communication, and advocating for the rights and well-being of their communities. This structure ensures support for all residents, irrespective of nationality.



Donors

Donors are the lifeblood of refugee management, providing the essential funding needed to transform plans and mandates into tangible outcomes. Without their financial support, efforts to assist refugees would be severely limited.

In recent years there has been a noticeable decline in funding, largely due to donor fatigue. This fatigue stems from various factors, including the growing number of global conflicts, the protracted nature of the refugee situation in Malawi, and restrictive laws that hinder refugees from achieving self-reliance.

The primary donors to the refugee cause in Malawi include governments such as the United States—UNHCR's largest global donor—along with Japan, the United Kingdom, and Germany. These major donors provide funding directly to UNHCR and the Government of Malawi, playing a crucial role in determining how resources are allocated.

They also engage in advocacy, leveraging their diplomatic influence to push for improved conditions for refugees and to encourage additional support from other international actors.

In addition to these government donors, there are also numerous individuals, faith-based organizations, and foundations that contribute to local, international, and community-based organizations (CBOs) working within the refugee community.

These smaller-scale donors often provide targeted assistance, funding specific projects or services that directly benefit refugees at the grassroots level. Their contributions, while perhaps less visible on the global stage, are equally vital in supporting the daily lives and long-term aspirations of refugees in Malawi.



Personal Stories

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When the host country facilitates integration, we have great examples of refugees contributing to society, and at times having a global impact.

- Albert Einstein fled Nazi Germany in 1933 and transformed our understanding of physics, revolutionizing the fields of space, time, and energy.
- Madeleine Albright, born in Czechoslovakia, escaped to the United States during World War II and became the first female U.S. Secretary of State, championing human rights on a global scale.
- Joseph Pulitzer, a Hungarian immigrant, established the Pulitzer Prizes, which have become the gold standard for journalistic excellence.
- Sergey Brin fled anti-Semitism in Moscow and co-founded Google, revolutionizing global access to information.
- Malala Yousafzai, a Pakistani activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, survived an assassination attempt and became a leading advocate for girls' education worldwide.

In Malawi, despite the encampment policy, a few individuals have made a significant impact. No matter how much refugees contribute to their host country however, the generosity and safety offered by Malawi stand as an unparalleled act of humanity and compassion.

Innocent Magambi, a Burundian refugee, arrived at Dzaleka Camp in 2003. An encounter with an international church in Lilongwe led to a scholarship to study theology, marking a transformative moment in his journey. Determined to contribute meaningfully to both refugees and the host community, he founded **There is Hope** (TIH), an organization that today employs 60 people, assists over 300 individuals annually, and has extended medical support to Dzaleka Clinic, benefiting around 70,000 people.

Faced with the restrictive refugee policies that limited his impact, Innocent made the bold decision to relinquish his refugee status in 2007. He returned to Burundi to obtain a passport, enabling him to bypass the limitations and continue his higher education and lead TIH unhindered.

In 2021 he transitioned out of TIH's leadership after 15 years, leaving it in the safe hands of a large local team. Today Innocent leads **Inua Advocacy** remotely, in voluntary exile taken following security threats connected to dismantling systemic injustice against refugees in Malawi.



Left to right: Innocent Magambi, Trésor Nzengu Mpauni (Tumaini Festival), Remy Gakwaya (TakenoLAB) and Marcel Cirhuza (Fountain of Hope)

- **Remy Gakwaya** was a self-taught computer programmer who began teaching the skill to others in the camp, with increasing reach and success, through his organisation **TakenoLAB**. A few years ago Remy founded **Relon Malawi** (the network of all refugee-led organisations in Malawi).
- **Marcel Chiruza** came to Dzaleka having studied community development in the DRC. His organisation **Fountain of Hope** has contributed greatly to education and income-generation for both refugees and Malawians.
- **Menes la Plume**, whose off-stage name is **Trésor Nzengu Mpauni**, a Congolese poet and musician, has become a symbol of resilience and hope for refugees in Malawi. Through his art, he has empowered refugees and promoted cultural understanding. His efforts are best exemplified by the **Tumaini Festival**, the first music and arts festival in the world to be held in a refugee camp, an annual event that has significantly boosted Malawi's tourism industry and the camp's informal economy.
- **Salama Africa**: Started by **Freddy Farini, Toussaint Farini, Alain Tenta** and **Iris Nganji** have become a cornerstone of Malawi's dance scene, winning multiple national awards and performing at prestigious festivals and events alongside well-known Malawian artists.
- **Amahoro Burundian Drummers**: Started in 2006 by **Stanislas Nshimirimana**, a Burundian refugee born in Rwanda, raised in Tanzania, and now long-term resident of Dzaleka. Amahoro have captivated audiences across Malawi with performances at major festivals and events, including corporate and presidential galas, spreading a message of peace and appreciation for one's cultural heritage.
- **Mirash Films**: The film production company, founded by Congolese refugee **Raphael Ndabaga**, won a total of 6 awards at national and international film festivals in Malawi between 2023 and 2024.

Remy and Marcel were resettled to the United States a few years ago. Yet, they still consider Malawi "home", invest resources to enable the organisations they founded, and visit Dzaleka when they can.



Entrepreneurship

Despite restrictive laws, refugees have significantly impacted Malawi's entrepreneurship and food security sectors. They have transformed local commerce by establishing shops known for extended opening hours, reliability, and affordability.

In agriculture, their partnership with Malawian landowners in Dowa District has revolutionized tomato farming and boosted the value of soya and groundnuts, creating sustainable, long-term work for thousands of Malawians.

Education

In the past, Malawi's governments permitted refugees and asylum seekers with teaching backgrounds to work outside Dzaleka Camp. This policy filled essential teaching gaps in science, math, and French courses, benefiting the national education system and enabling refugees to improve their living conditions while practicing their skills and passions.

With Malawi's new focus on integrating French and Kiswahili into the curriculum, sustaining such a policy could be highly advantageous. Refugees often possess exceptional proficiency in these languages, positioning them as ideal contributors to language education and offering a unique asset compared to neighboring countries.

Healthcare

Despite the restrictive nature of Malawi's Refugee Act, refugees with medical qualifications have traditionally been permitted to work in healthcare institutions to help mitigate the shortage of national healthcare workers.

To practice, qualified refugees were required to complete an orientation process, which included supervised attachments, followed by an application for a professional license upon successful completion.



Faith Exchange

The resilient faith of refugee Christian leaders has led many to spread their message into Malawian villages, even establishing gathering points as far south as Nsanje District, creating stronger connections between refugees and the host community.

Through these efforts, Dzaleka's religious communities have contributed profoundly to Malawi's spiritual landscape, offering a reminder of faith's transformative power amid adversity. Credit is due to the late Rev. Bwabuhungu Norman, the vision setter for this missionary movement.

Support Refugees in Malawi

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Supporting refugees in Malawi can take many forms, depending on your interests and resources. At Inua Advocacy, we believe that helping should be specific, realistic and sustainable. In this section we provide a few options that will enable you to engage in supporting refugees in Malawi.

Volunteer with a Purpose

Volunteering is a great way to start. Whether with international, local, or grassroots organizations, it's essential to approach volunteering with a mindset of learning and contributing. Your engagement should focus on gaining knowledge, building relationships, and supporting ongoing efforts rather than attempting to fix everything quickly.

Partner with Organisations

Partnering with local and international organizations allows you to make an impact from the comfort of your home. Whether through financial support, skill-sharing, or raising awareness, these partnerships can extend your reach and effectiveness in supporting refugees.

Donate Thoughtfully

Many organizations, from large entities like UNHCR and WFP to small refugee-led initiatives, suffer from chronic funding shortages. Your donations or crowdfunding campaigns can make a significant difference, sustaining operations and expanding the reach of these organizations.

Remain Engaged

Subscribe to social media channels and newsletters that provide verified information about events in Dzaleka refugee camp. Strive to understand the deeper story, and to ask the right questions.

Advocate for Lasting Change

Advocacy is crucial for promoting the revision of discriminatory laws, such as the Refugee Act of 1989, that restrict refugees' mobility, employment and access to education. Changing these laws would enable many refugees to become self-reliant, reducing the burden on humanitarian aid.

Share Information

Debunking myths about refugees in Malawi requires all of us to be informed. You can make a difference by sharing factual information with those in your networks.

Please consider donating to the work of Inua Advocacy. Visit www.inuaadvocacy.org/donate and learn more about our impact on the next page



Connect with Inua Advocacy



Inua Advocacy is an independent civil society organisation that advocates for refugee rights in Malawi and beyond. We hold “Observer Status” with the African Commission for Human and Peoples’ Rights, a body of the African Union. This enables us to contribute to regional discussions on human rights and refugee issues.

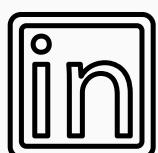


We focus on four areas of work:

Create accountability among refugee service providers, be it individuals or agencies, so that all respect and uphold the dignity of refugees at all times.



Lobby and campaign for an amendment of the 1989 Malawi Refugee Act and for the implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) according to the pledges made in 2016 and 2019.



Provide legal advice and representation through in-house lawyers, at no cost, to refugees who are facing injustice.

Support refugee leaders and provide emergency relief for urgent circumstances and crises affecting refugees.

Opposition to our Work

Our work in defending refugee rights has led us to consistently represent refugees in court, expose long-standing corruption, and reveal systemic corruption such as human trafficking ties involving government officials, particularly within the Ministry of Homeland Security and its Refugee Department. This dedication to justice has understandably created tensions with some high-ranking officials, who now regard our organization as an obstacle to their interests and make attempts to de-legitimize us.

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/22/malawi-rights-group-expelled-refugee-camp>



Our website, inuaadvocacy.org, contains Press Releases - factual statements and commentary on events that affect refugees in Malawi, written and published before they are covered by the news.

click here to [subscribe to our newsletter](#)

email us: info@inuaadvocacy.org
call/text : +265 882 717 995



WHITENKULIWA

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