

Examining the Link between Aid, Integration, and Support for Refugees: US Aid Cuts and Kakuma Camp, Kenya

Wave 3 Report

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1 Background

We are conducting a panel study to examine two key developments affecting refugees in Kenya: (a) the Shirika Plan, which seeks to promote the socioeconomic integration and self-reliance of refugees by transitioning from refugee camps to “integrated settlements,” and (b) recent cuts to U.S. refugee aid. Our objective is to understand how these changes influence the social and economic outcomes of both refugees and host communities. Additional details on each component of the study are available in their respective pre-analysis plans.

We have conducted three survey waves; this report presents the results from the third and final wave. The first wave of data collection took place in May 2025, the second wave in July 2025, and the third in Sept/Oct 2025. Each wave consists of two components. First, we conduct a face-to-face survey with 300 members of the Turkana host community residing near Kakuma refugee camp. This survey is administered by TIFA Research. A comparable survey is also conducted in Isiolo to serve as a comparison case, though this data is not included here. Second, the principal investigator carries out 18 in-depth interviews with refugee leaders living in both Kakuma camp and Kalobeyei settlement. The study is designed as a three-wave panel to track the impacts of key policy changes, including the complete cut to cash assistance (*bamba chakula*) in June/July 2025 and the rollout of *Differentiated Assistance* in August, which tailors aid based on assessed vulnerability levels.

Please note that the findings presented in this report are preliminary. All statistics should be considered provisional and may be subject to revision. This report should not be cited as a journal publication and a full academic manuscript is forthcoming, which will include causal analysis of the panel data. The project is generously supported by Innovations for Poverty Action (IPA) and Stanford University’s King Center on Global Development. This report provides an update since Wave 2, and readers should refer to the previous two reports for an initial assessment of the effects of the *bamba chakula* cuts.

2 Summary of Findings

Between May and October 2025, refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei experienced two major shocks to assistance: the suspension of *bamba chakula* cash transfers and sharp reductions in food rations in June/July, followed by the rollout of *Differentiated Assistance* in August. Under *Differentiated Assistance*, refugees are categorized by vulnerability, with Categories 1 and 2 receiving partial rations and limited cash, Category 3 receiving only a small monthly cash transfer (no food), and Category 4 receiving neither food nor cash. In late September, *bamba chakula* was partially reinstated for Category 3, but Category 4 continues to receive nothing.

Across the three waves, conditions in Kakuma and Kalobeyei have been defined by scarcity, insecurity, and uncertainty. Refugees describe continuing hunger, reduced access to services, and fear of violence. However, from July to September, there seems to have been an improvement in conditions, facilitated by the reinstatement of *bamba chakula* for Category 3, a reduction in protest-related disruptions, and a lessening of the psychological distress caused by uncertainty around *Differentiated Assistance*. It seems that coping mechanisms for refugees have moved away from demonstrations and crime and towards migration to South Sudan or urban areas. In parallel, local attitudes toward refugees in Turkana become more accommodating, not less. Respondents report greater willingness to allow refugees to live, work, and move freely in Kenya, even as they continue to be negatively affected by the cuts themselves.

Key findings:

- **Basic needs are still not being met, even after partial reinstatement of assistance.** Refugees report ongoing hunger, visible malnutrition (especially among children), and inability to afford healthcare and school fees. The current cash amounts are widely described as insufficient to feed a household for a month, and Category 4 receives nothing at all. Refugees describe selling assets (particularly iron sheets used for roofs) to buy food.

- **Refugees are coping by leaving.** There have been marked increases in refugees leaving Kakuma/Kalobeyei:
 - **Repatriation to South Sudan**, especially from Kalobeyei, often to Eastern Equatoria. Families report leaving without UNHCR assistance because they feel conditions in Kenya are no longer sustainable.
 - **Movement to Kenyan towns and cities** for those with some money or connections. This remains mainly an option for people with skills that translate to urban labor markets or access to remittances.
- **Differentiated Assistance is producing new inequalities and new coping strategies.** Refugees in Categories 1 and 2, who still receive at least some support, are sharing with neighbors in Categories 3 and 4. This informal redistribution is preventing immediate starvation but increasing stress on already vulnerable households.
- **There is a small but noticeable return of hope.** The reinstatement of *bamba chakula* for Category 3 in late September is seen as evidence that donors are stepping in to make up for USAID cuts. This optimism is fragile and not universal but it marks a shift from July, when interviewees repeatedly described the situation as hopeless.
- **Visible protest has decreased, largely due to police presence.** Refugee leaders report that there have been no demonstration attempts because of heavy police/security presence. At the same time, insecurity remains high: theft, assault, and fear of moving around at night are widely reported.

Some respondents say departures slowed slightly once Category 3 started receiving limited cash again, but many who have left do not intend to return.
- **The host community is still affected, but the way they describe the crisis is changing.** Turkana respondents continue to report lost income, loss of NGO jobs, reduced services, and insecurity. But between July and September some indicators stabilized or improved. Food insecurity among host households declined modestly. People are talking less about protest and violent unrest than in July, and more about shortages, refugees looking for work, and refugees leaving for towns or going back across borders.
- **Support for refugees rebounds in September.** After dropping from May to July, support for Kenya continuing to host refugees increases again by September. Respondents become more willing to allow refugees to work and move freely throughout Kenya – and even express more openness to eventual citizenship. This reverses the July pattern, where preferences had shifted toward encampment and return.
- **Blame for the cuts continues to move between actors.** In May, respondents split blame between Donald Trump and UN agencies. In July, more of the blame was placed on Trump. By September, people were again more likely to say UN agencies were responsible, and less likely to blame Trump.
- **The Shirika Plan remains unpopular, but the narrative around it is evolving.** Opposition to the Shirika Plan is still high. Much of that opposition is rooted in the belief that the Plan means automatic Kenyan citizenship for refugees, which is widely viewed as unacceptable. That specific fear appears to be weakening somewhat over time, and more respondents now describe the Plan in terms of work rights and service access. At the same time, refugees are increasingly alarmed about the handover of IRC-run health facilities to the government. Refugees believe that once the government is in charge, they will be asked to pay user fees they cannot afford, and that people will die for lack of treatment.

3 Interviews with Refugee Leaders

3.1 Differentiated Assistance Update

In August and September 2025, refugees in Kakuma and Kalobeyei continued to receive no *bamba chakula* cash assistance, and food rations were restricted to those in Categories 1 and 2. As a reminder, at the beginning of August, WFP rolled out a new *Differentiated Assistance* model in which refugees are categorized by level of vulnerability – from Category 1 (most vulnerable) to Category 4 (least vulnerable) – and receive food and cash support accordingly.

At the end of September, WFP announced that Category 3 would now receive *bamba chakula* because of new donor funding. Categories 1 and 2 continue to receive both food rations and cash transfers, while Category 4 remains excluded from all forms of assistance. It is important to note that Category 3 does not receive food rations; instead, their *bamba chakula* is intended to cover 20% of the standard food basket.

A new WFP-led verification survey was underway at the beginning of October to address concerns about misclassification, especially in Category 3. Many refugees in this group had initially declined to participate in the earlier assessment due to fears that it was connected to forced Kenyan citizenship under the Shirika Plan. This time, participation is reportedly higher.

Despite earlier commitments, no additional livelihood training or financial inclusion services have been provided to Categories 3 and 4. Rumors continue to circulate that Category 4 refugees must acquire a Kenyan ID, though there is no evidence to support this claim.

The amount of assistance remains extremely limited:

- Category 1 receives 55% of the food basket (including 173.3g rice, 50g lentils, and 35ml vegetable oil per person per day), plus KES 400 in *bamba chakula* (~USD 2.65) per month.
- Category 2 receives 35% of the food basket, plus KES 385 (~USD 2.55).
- Category 3 receives KES 530 (~USD 3.55) in *bamba chakula* but no food rations.
- Category 4 receives neither food nor cash.

These amounts are intended to last for a full month but are widely seen as insufficient. Many recipients in Categories 1 and 2 report sharing their food and cash with neighbors in Categories 3 and 4. As a result, even those deemed “vulnerable” are facing hunger, and food insecurity remains widespread.

In Kalobeyei, where refugees do not receive food rations, Categories 1 and 2 receive slightly higher *bamba chakula* amounts to compensate, but this support is still inadequate to meet basic needs.

3.2 Refugee Well-Being

Perspectives on the current situation remain mixed. Some respondents reported marginal improvements following the reinstatement of *bamba chakula* for Category 3 and the reduction in protest-related disruptions. The intense fear and confusion that characterized August – when food stocks were depleted and tensions peaked – have somewhat subsided. Refugees described that period as one of acute hunger and unrest, particularly after food distributions expected in early August were delayed due to strikes, and the previous two-month ration allocation (distributed in June) had already run out.

Several respondents noted that resistance to the new aid system has declined. Many refugees no longer believe that protesting will result in change, especially given the visible presence of armed police during food distributions. Others reported that mental health has slightly improved now that the structure of *Differentiated Assistance* is clearer. According to one respondent, the uncertainty surrounding the new system had previously generated significant anxiety – knowing what to expect has brought some emotional relief, even if material conditions remain poor.

However, others said that overall conditions continue to deteriorate:

- Malnutrition is rising, particularly among children. Those working in the healthcare industry said that they are seeing record rates of malnutrition.

- The local economy remains stagnant, with fewer goods available in markets and collapsing demand.
- Healthcare remains critically under-resourced, with shortages of medication (e.g., only paracetamol available for malaria) and reports that there was only one doctor performing C-sections in one of the camp hospitals for 100 days straight.
- Many refugees continue to rely on private clinics run by Somalis and Ethiopians in the town center.
- Education has not improved; hunger and poverty continue to drive dropouts as children no longer receive meals in schools.

Refugees are adapting by creating informal businesses – such as football halls showing Premier League matches – or selling parts of their homes (e.g., iron sheets) for food money, at the cost of protection from heat and rain.

3.3 Onward Movement and Repatriation

Refugees are increasingly leaving the camps:

- South Sudan: Many – especially from Kalobeyei – are returning to Eastern Equatoria (Lotuko ethnic group). They mostly travel via private taxis to the Nadapal border, where UNHCR has reportedly established support at Kapowita, a place further inland on the South Sudanese side of the border. Some make the journey on foot, particularly young men. Returnees are mostly from Categories 3 and 4, though some in Categories 1 and 2 have also left.
- Refugees are selling their homes, possessions, and iron roofing sheets at low prices to fund travel.
- Urban migration: A small number, especially refugees with family abroad, are moving to cities like Nairobi. Some said that this is more common among the Congolese, who often have urban-relevant skills (e.g., hairdressing, tailoring) and remittance support, giving them a slight advantage in city labor markets.
- Businesses are also relocating to urban areas (e.g., Kitale, Eldoret, Nakuru) as economic activity dries up in the camps.
- Some believe authorities are downplaying the scale of returns to maintain WFP ration quotas tied to camp population counts.

Returns have slowed since late September due to the reinstatement of *bamba chakula*, which has restored some hope. However, for many who have already left, return is unlikely – they have exhausted their resources and sold their homes.

South Sudanese retain *prima facie* refugee status, allowing them to return to Kenya without restarting the refugee status determination (RSD) process. This is not the case for refugees from other countries, such as Somalia.

Some families plan to delay departure until the school year ends, hoping to complete secondary exams and earn a Kenyan education certificate.

3.4 Security

Despite plans for protest during food distributions, no demonstrations occurred. Refugee leaders attributed this to the heavy police presence, particularly in August. Kenyan Police Reserves (KPR) – not regular police – were deployed to monitor distributions and deter protest. Refugees described them as more brutal and corrupt, often demanding bribes and failing to offer protection. Police presence has since decreased, limited mostly to food distribution days.

Curfews are being enforced by refugee leaders (and possibly the police), advising residents to remain indoors after 7–9pm to avoid crime. Those found outside of their homes by the police at night may be presumed to be criminals and punished by the police.

Theft, assault, and insecurity remain high, driven by desperation and the scarcity of resources. In Kalobeyei, some refugees reportedly burned down the distribution center in protest, prompting a temporary relocation of services to Kakuma.

Relations with the Turkana host community remain mostly calm. However, shared hardship has altered dynamics – refugees can no longer pay locals for firewood or water collection, creating tension over natural resource access.

3.5 Shirika Plan

The Shirika Plan was not a focal point of interviews in this wave. However, indirect references suggest it remains a source of concern:

- Refugees are alarmed by plans for the government to take over hospital management – which is in line with the Shirika Plan’s integration model but is not being perceived as part of the Plan among refugees. Many fear being required to pay for healthcare, which would be unaffordable.
- Hospitals are being renamed (e.g., IRC Main Hospital becoming Kapoko Hospital), reinforcing the perception of a government takeover.
- Respondents criticized the Shirika Plan’s model of self-reliance, pointing to Kalobeyei’s collapse as proof it is unworkable without sustained cash flow. “Differentiated assistance is hitting the model of self-reliance in Kalobeyei hard. This was supposed to be the model of what the Shirika Plan looked like, with people being able to socioeconomically integrate. But that’s not happening anymore because the economy cannot operate without cash. The cash was provided by WFP. So, with the cash gone, there’s no economy to run.”

3.6 Perceptions of UNHCR and WFP

Some respondents expressed frustration with UNHCR and WFP:

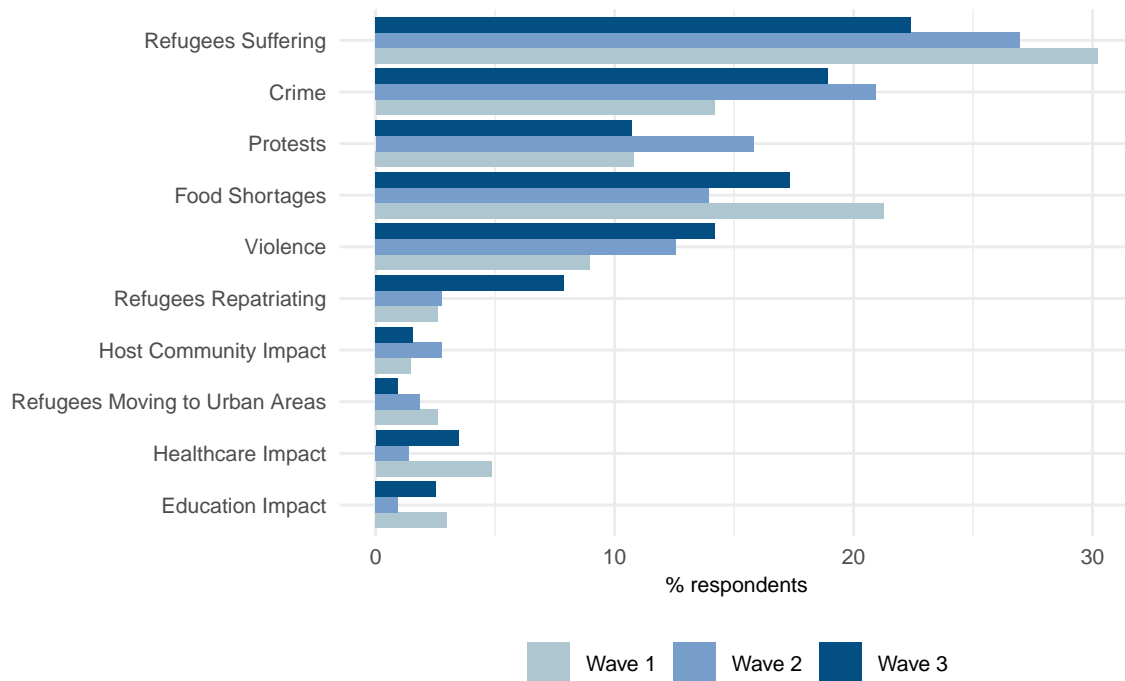
- Some criticized WFP for constructing a fortified fence while citing lack of funds for food rations. Meetings with refugee leaders are often held in expensive hotels, which has eroded trust.
- Refugees called for UNHCR staff to spend more time in the community rather than arriving in vehicles and speaking only to leaders. Several said this lack of interaction has undermined trust and contributed to protests.

4 Host Community Survey

As discussed in previous waves, the host community survey continues to show that local Turkana benefit from humanitarian assistance directed at refugees, and therefore feel the impact when that assistance is cut. Between May and July, willingness to host refugees declined and support for closing the camps increased. Between July and September, however, we see a notable reversal. Respondents in Turkana became more willing to host refugees, more supportive of allowing refugees to move and work freely throughout Kenya, and even more open to eventual citizenship. This shift may reflect the partial resumption of *bamba chakula* in early October and improvements for some of those in Category 3, which could have had spillover benefits for local households. It may also reflect increased humanitarian attention to refugees' visible hardship and suffering in this period, or information campaigns about integration and the Shirika Plan.

4.1 Aid Cuts

Figure 1: What changes you have seen as a result of these cuts?



Across all three waves, the most commonly mentioned impact of the aid cuts is continued and visible refugee suffering (Fig. 1). That said, the salience of refugee suffering declines somewhat by Wave 3. Compared to May and July, respondents in September were less likely to talk about suffering, protests, or crime. Mentions of protests in particular drop sharply in September, which aligns with the fact that there were notable protests in May and planned protests in July, but none in late September. At the same time, respondents in Wave 3 more frequently described food shortages and said that refugees were beginning to return to their countries of origin.

These changes are echoed in how people predict refugees will respond to the cuts (Fig. 2). By September, respondents are less likely to say refugees will resort to crime or violence, and more likely to say refugees will look for work, move elsewhere (including to towns), or repatriate. This suggests a shift in expectations away from immediate confrontation and toward movement and economic coping.

Host community members also report direct impacts on their own households (Fig. 3). Compared to July, slightly fewer respondents in September reported losing income overall, and fewer said they had lost employment provided by refugees. At the same time, a higher share reported losing NGO jobs relative to July.

Figure 2: What do you think refugees are already doing (or will do in the future) in response to this?

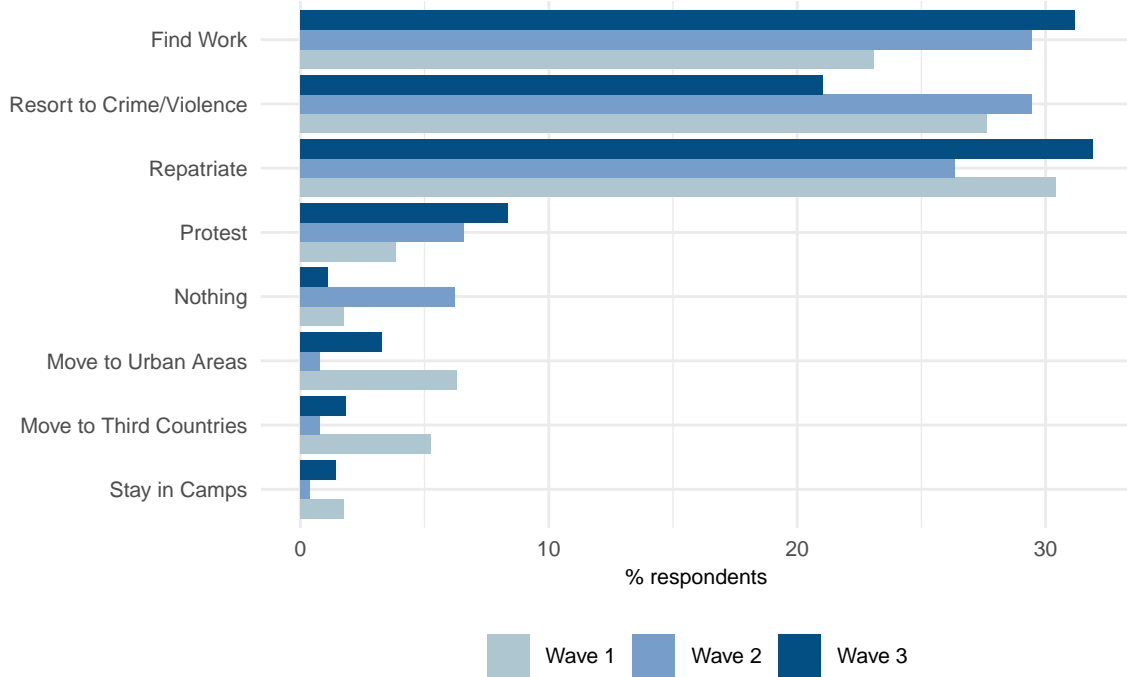


Figure 3: Has your household been negatively impacted by these cuts? If so, how?

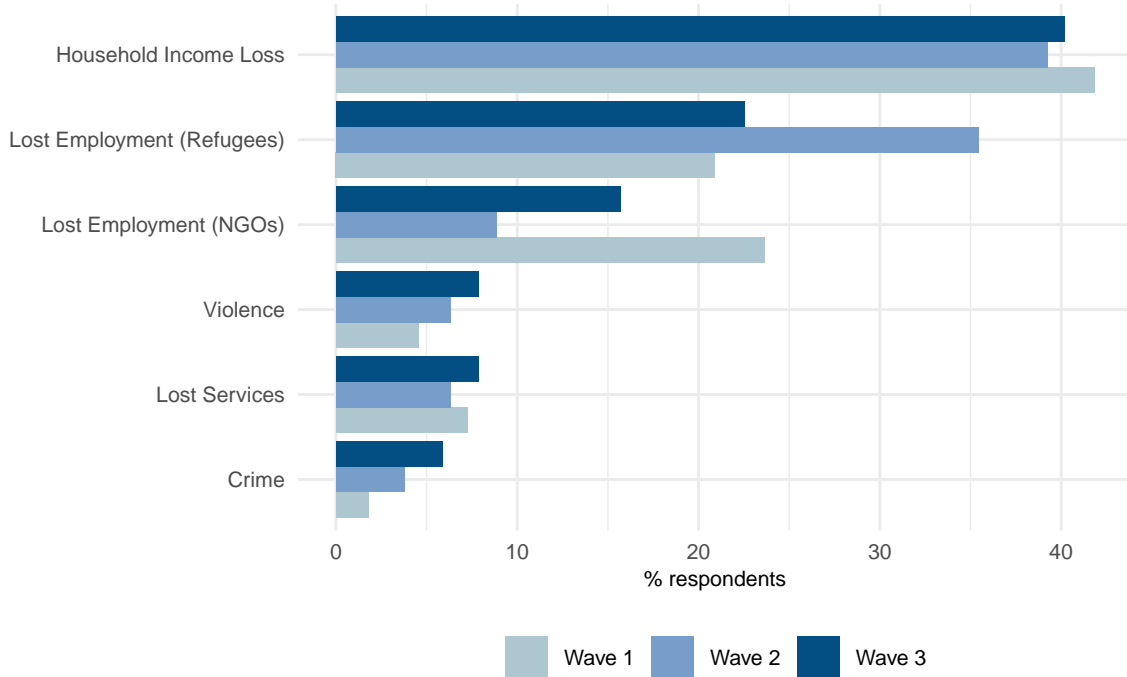


Figure 4: Interactions with refugees and Kakuma in the past month

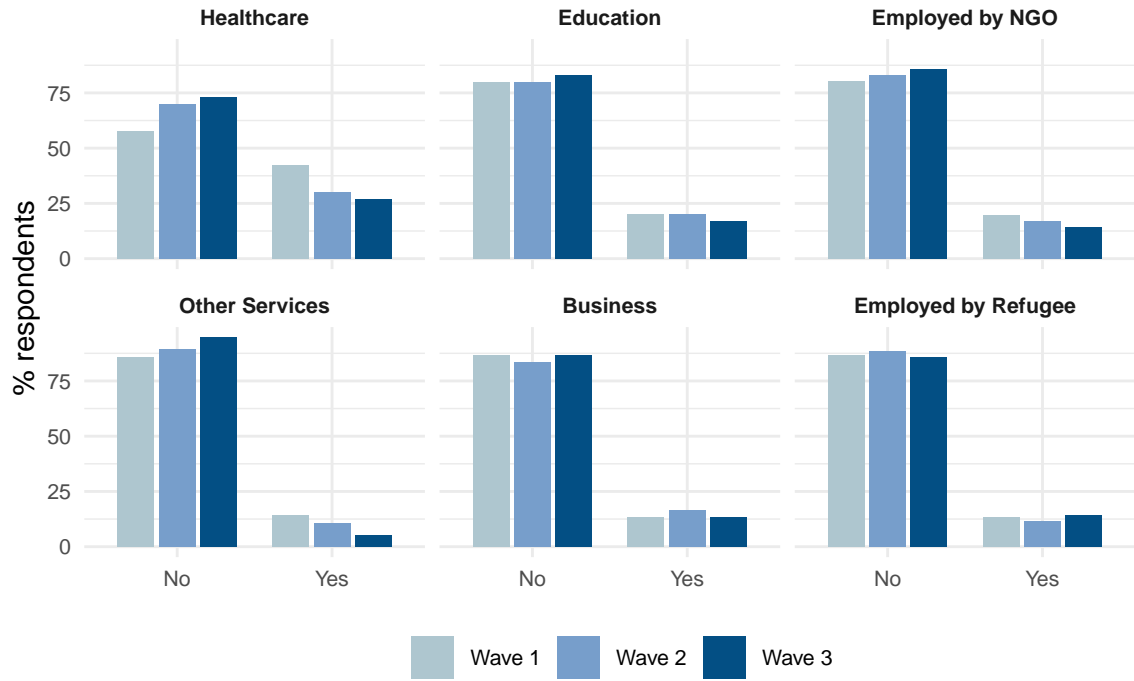


Figure 5: I feel safe walking alone in my area/neighbourhood at night.

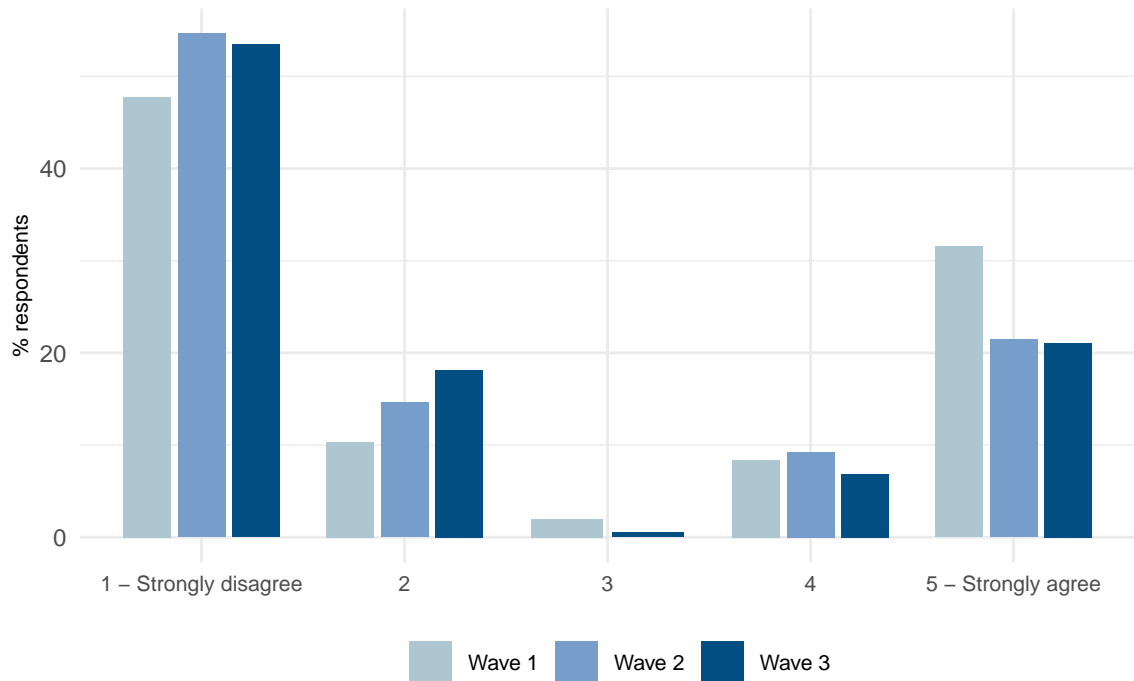
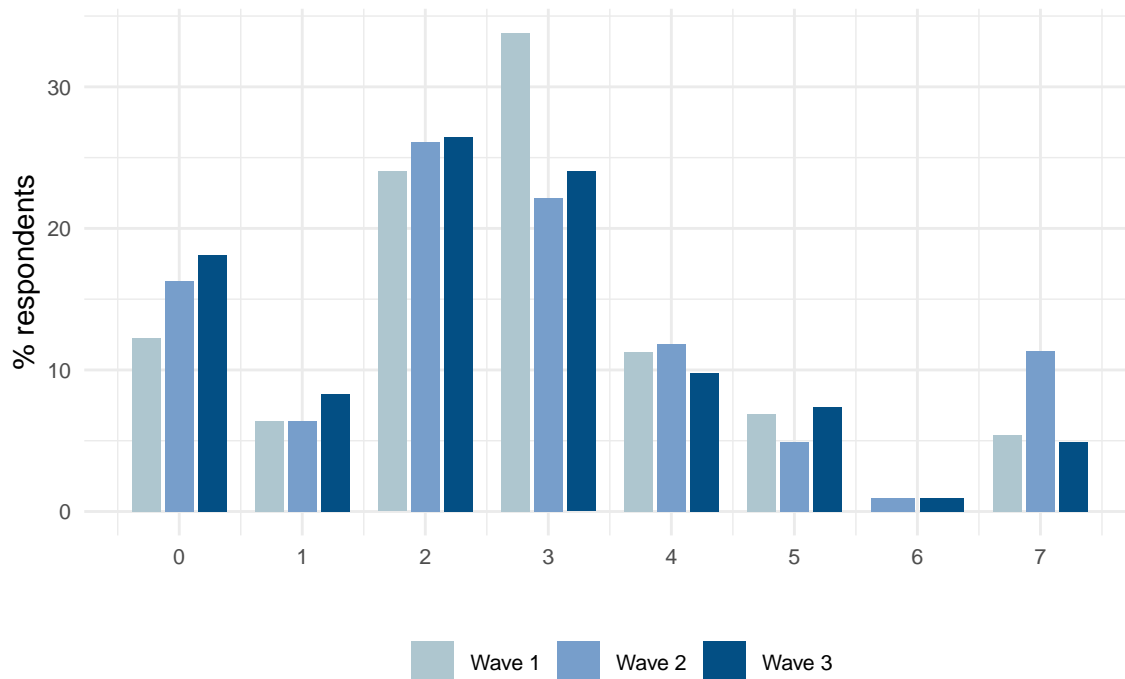


Figure 6: In the past 7 days, were there times when your household did not have enough food or enough money to buy sufficient food? How many days?



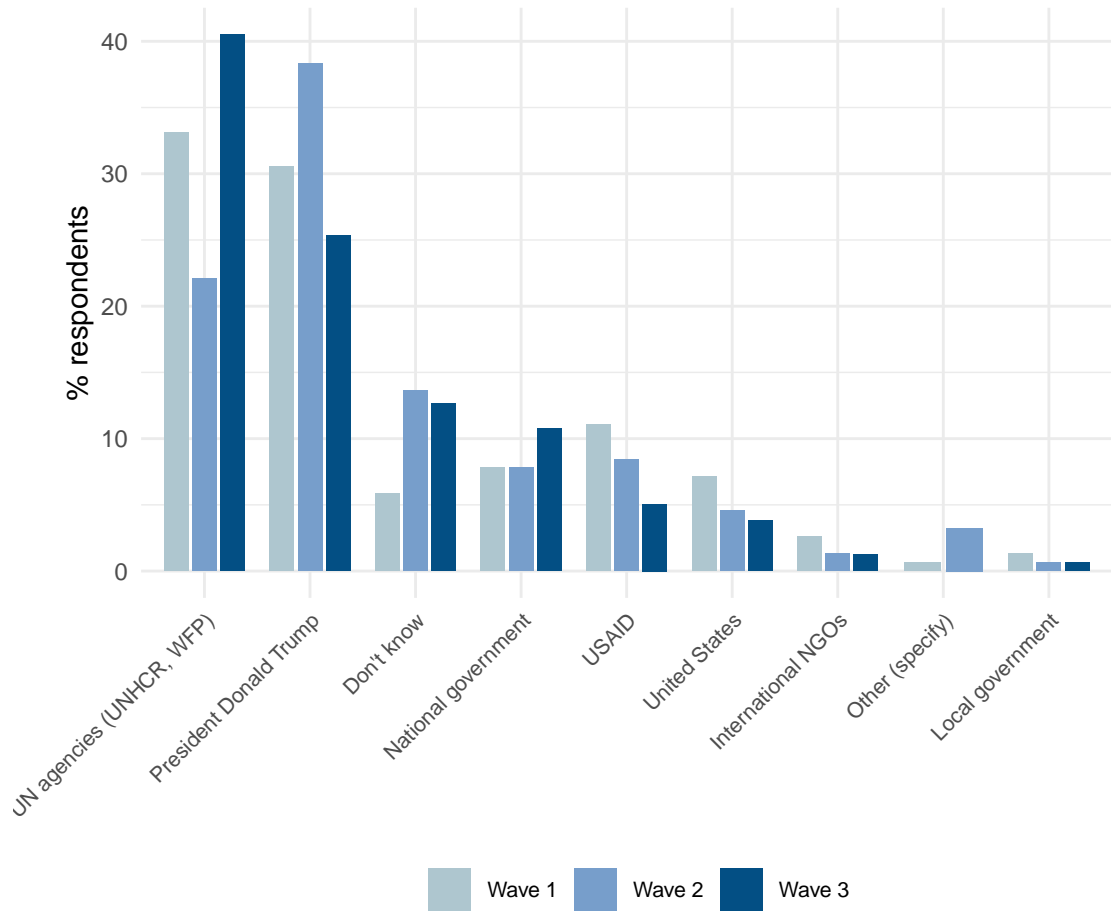
Respondents continue to describe disrupted access to services and employment opportunities that they link to the cuts.

Patterns of day-to-day interaction with Kakuma remain broadly similar between July and September (Fig. 4). Reliance on refugee-linked employment and commerce is still present. There is a slight decline in reported access to services such as healthcare and education, suggesting some ongoing pressure on shared systems.

Perceptions of personal safety remain a concern. Since the cuts, more respondents report insecurity and exposure to crime and violence in their area, and those concerns persist into September (Fig. 5). Food insecurity, by contrast, appears to ease somewhat between July and September. The average number of days in the past week without enough food or money to buy food falls from 2.82 in July (Wave 2) to 2.5 in September (Wave 3) (Fig. 6). This decline is statistically significant in the regression analysis (see forthcoming academic paper).

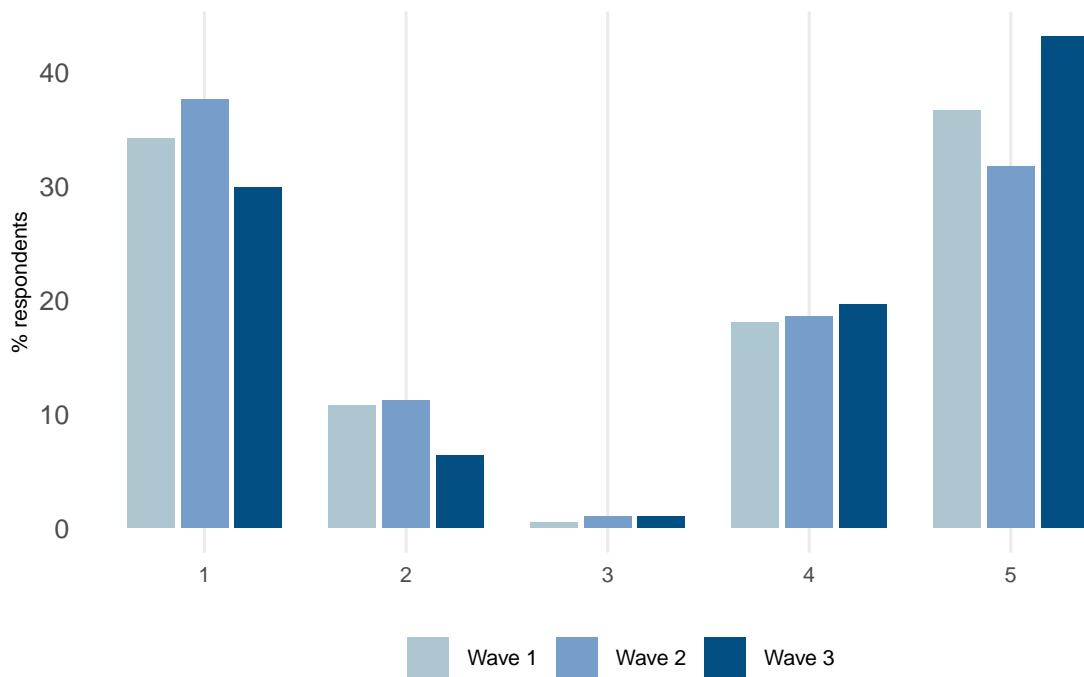
Finally, responsibility for the cuts and service reductions shifts over time (Fig. 7). In May, respondents divided blame roughly between Donald Trump and UN agencies. By July, more of the blame was assigned to Donald Trump and less to the UN. By September, this pattern reverses: respondents shift blame back toward UN agencies and away from Donald Trump.

Figure 7: Who do you think is most responsible for these recent cuts and reductions to services?



4.2 Attitudes Toward Refugees

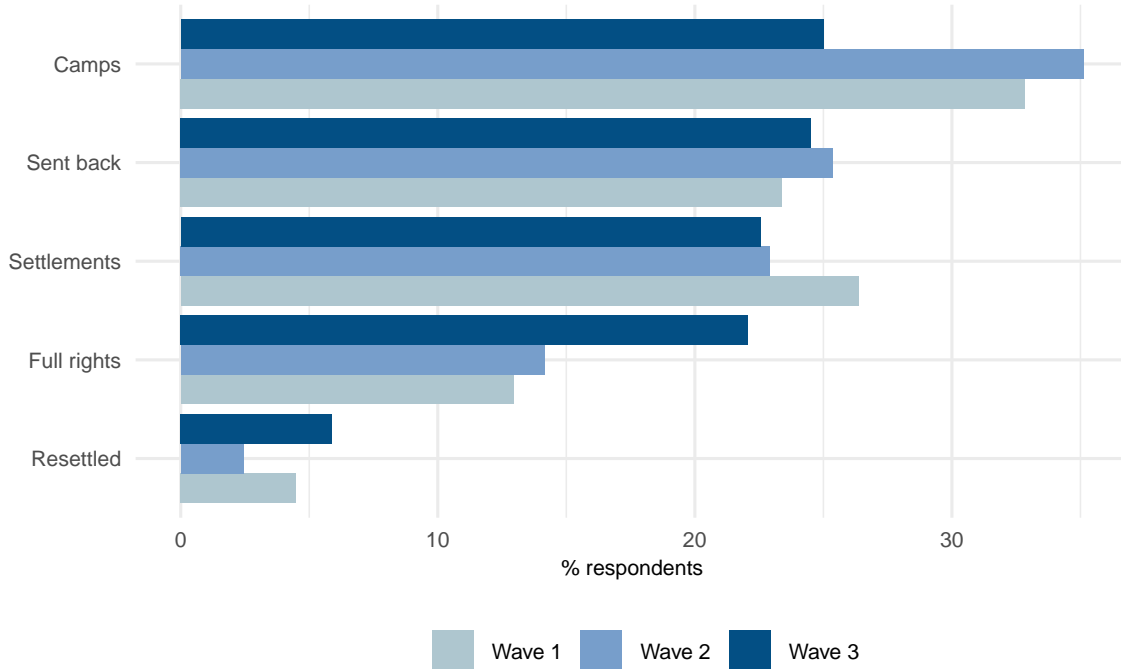
Figure 8: To what extent do you support or oppose Kenya hosting refugees?



Attitudes toward refugees become noticeably more welcoming between July and September. After the *differentiated assistance* change, support for Kenya continuing to host refugees rises (Fig. 8). In May, 54.6% of respondents expressed support for Kenya hosting refugees. This dropped to 50.2% in July. By September, support rebounds to 62.7%, exceeding the July level. This upward shift is also reflected in the regression analysis in the forthcoming academic paper.

We see the same pattern when we ask about concrete policy options (Fig. 9). By September, fewer respondents favor keeping refugees in camps, and more support giving refugees the rights to work and move freely across Kenya. This is a meaningful change from Waves 1 and 2, when preferences were trending toward more restrictive policies (camps, encampment, return) rather than integration. In Wave 3, support moves back toward local integration.

Figure 9: Preferred policy option for refugees



4.3 Shirika Plan

Opposition to the Shirika Plan remains high (Fig. 11). In September (Wave 3), 62% of respondents say they oppose the Plan. As noted in earlier waves, however, opposition to the Shirika Plan should not be read as blanket rejection of refugee inclusion. Much of this opposition reflects a belief – voiced repeatedly by both hosts and refugees – that the Shirika Plan means automatically giving refugees Kenyan citizenship, which is unpopular. However, this interpretation has become somewhat less common since Wave 1, suggesting that messaging from local leaders, NGOs, and government actors may be clarifying what the Plan does and does not include (Fig. 12). The Shirika Plan is increasingly being described as improving refugees’ ability to work.

Support for specific dimensions of integration remains mixed but is generally moving in a more permissive direction by Wave 3 (Fig. 13). Respondents in September are more supportive of refugees working and moving throughout Kenya, accessing services such as healthcare, and, to a lesser extent, naturalizing. The regression analysis confirms increases in support for movement and citizenship (see forthcoming academic paper). Citizenship and full naturalization continue to face strong resistance, but even here there are early signs of softening relative to July.

In Wave 2, we saw a rise in support for closing the camps. We followed up in Wave 3 and asked respondents to explain, in their own words, why they want camps closed. The dominant theme is security. Respondents frequently cited crime, fighting, and fear of violence, including statements such as refugees “like fighting and killing,” or that “there is a lot of protest among refugees during delay of assistance, there is a lot of robbery.” Some respondents linked camp closure to the recent protests and unrest. A smaller number framed the issue in economic terms: “Because there’s no more jobs, no relief food coming, businesses has deteriorated... so what’s the use of still keeping them here?”

Figure 10: Perceptions of negative effects of refugees

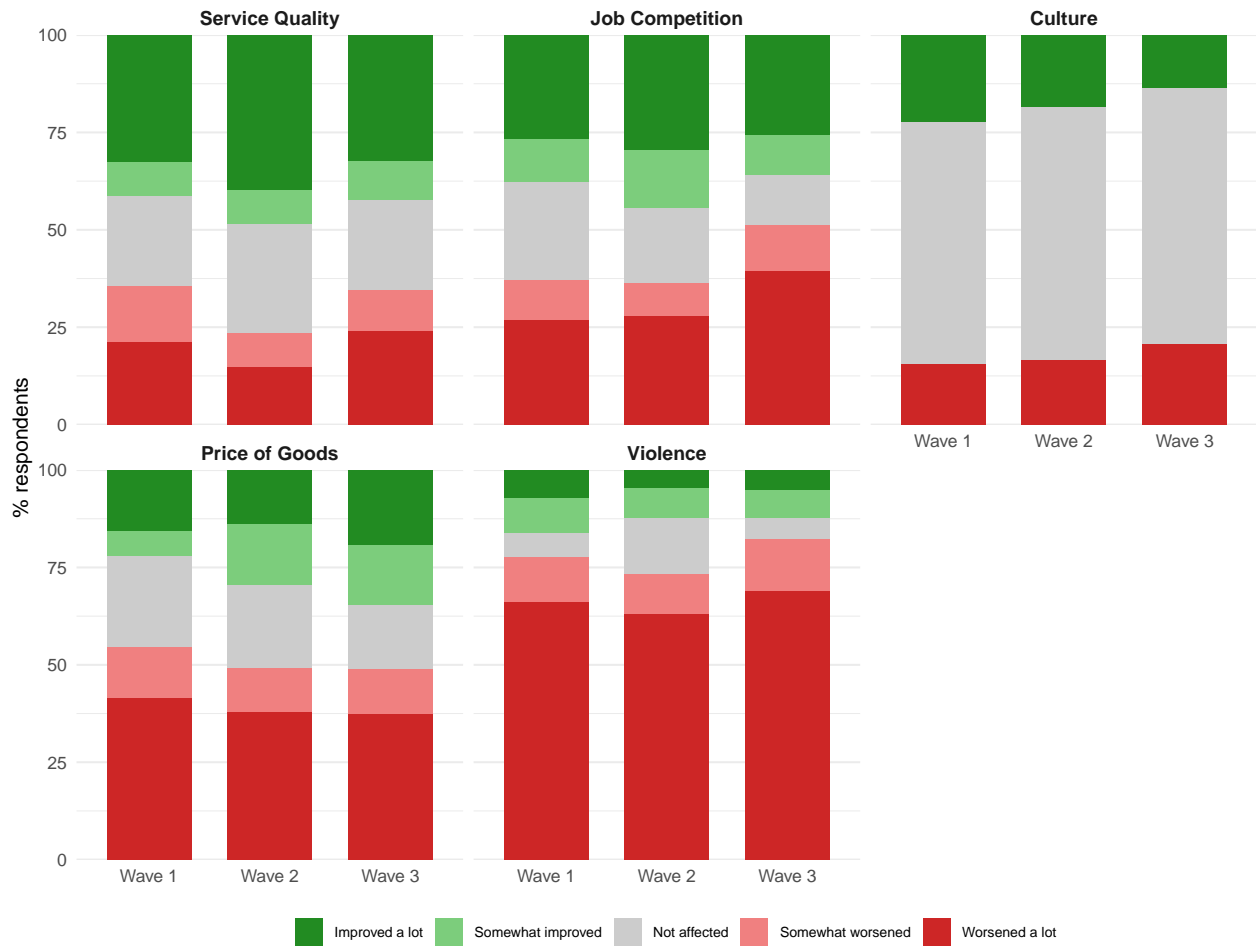


Figure 11: Do you support or oppose the Shirika Plan?

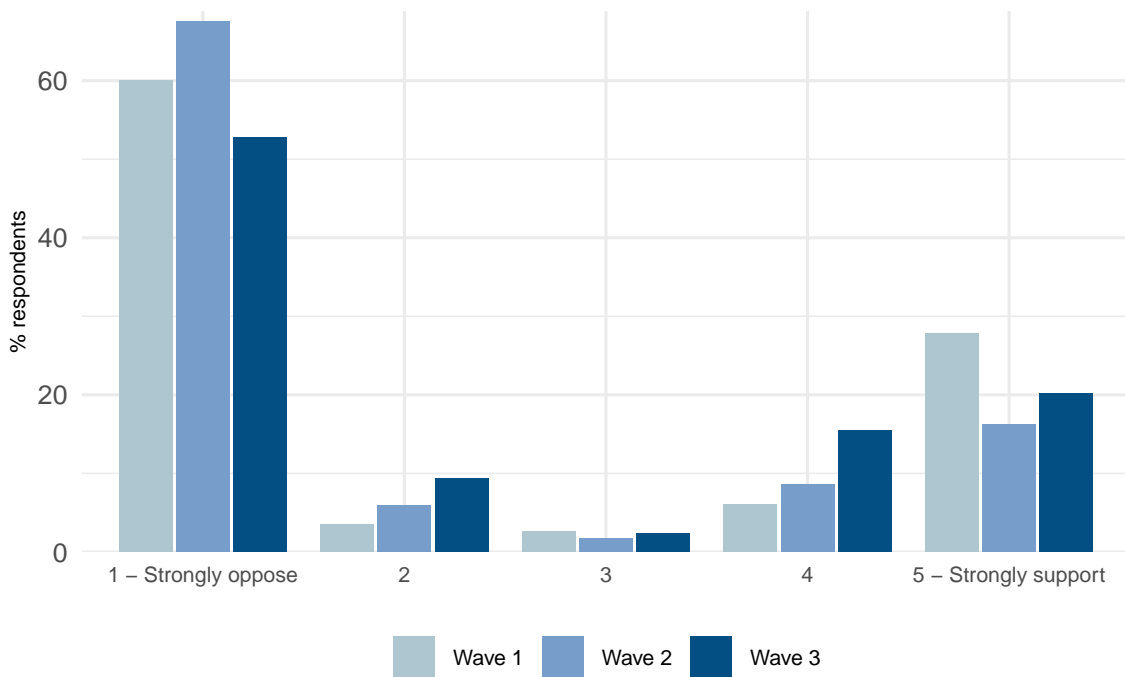


Figure 12: What have you heard about what the Shirika Plan entails?

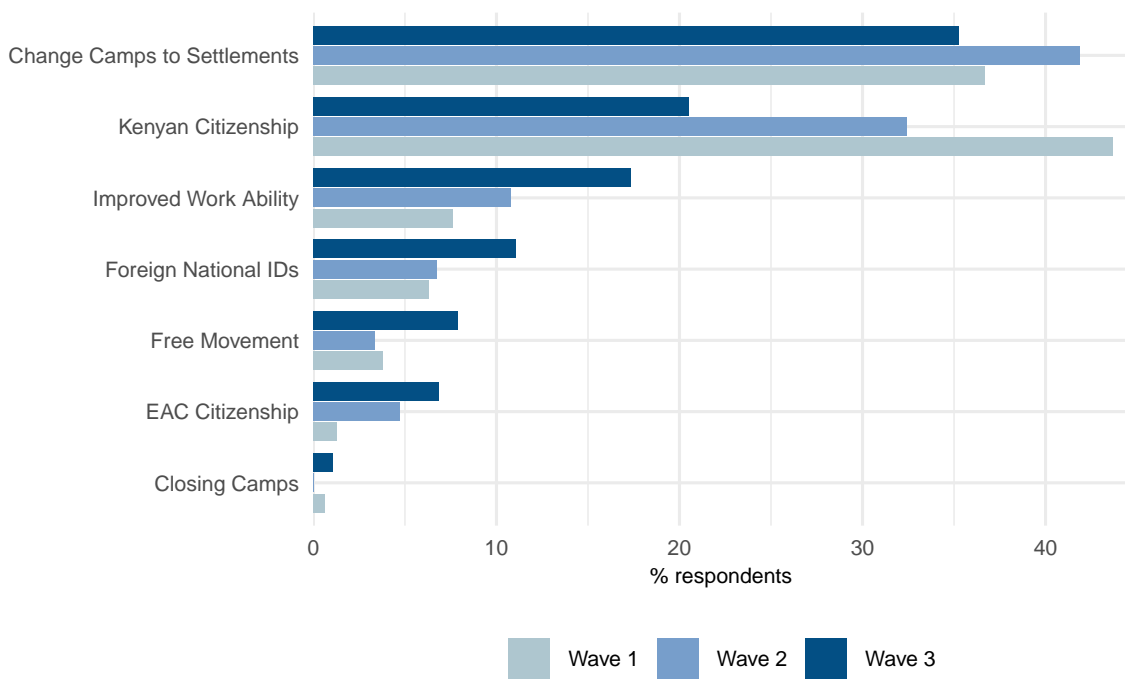


Figure 13: Support for different dimensions of integration

