



Push and Pull Triggers of Forced Displacement among Urban Refugees in Nairobi, Kenya

Stanley Odhiambo Jawuoro & Nicholas Ombachi

Masinde Muliro University of Science and Technology, Kenya

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Abstract

Forced displacement has become one of the key development challenges of the 21st Century, with armed conflict and climate change being some of its key drivers. While more than 85% of forcibly displaced people live in the Global South, data on push and pull factors of migration is limited. This study sought to determine the push and pull factors triggering the migration of urban refugees and asylum seekers to Nairobi, Kenya. The State fragility and institutional theory, the conflict theory and the push and pull migration theory formed theoretical underpinning. A mixed methods design was used. Quantitative data was collected by administering a structured questionnaire to 288 households while qualitative data was collected through Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews. Descriptive statistics was applied to analyse quantitative data while qualitative data was thematically analysed. Findings revealed that food insecurity (84.8%), armed conflict, (57.1%) and terrorism (65%) were among the leading push factors of migration, signaling the critical role of climate change in driving forced migration. The main pull factors were peace and political tolerance (94%), expectation for greater respect of human rights (86%), and prospects of resettlement into a third country (83%). Building upon the 1969 Organization of African Union (OAU) Convention governing the specific aspects of refugee problems in Africa, the East African Community (EAC) and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) should develop a legally binding framework addressing the root causes of forced migration in the region-armed conflict, poverty, and climate change.

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Introduction

Forced displacement is one of the key development challenges of the 21st century. By the end of 2022, about 108 million people had been forced to flee persecution, violence, conflicts, human rights violations, and severe threats to public order (Hossain, 2024). This represented a rise of 8% or 8.8 million people compared to the end of 2022. Worldwide, 85% of refugees under the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are hosted in the Global South (Citaristi, 2022). More than two-thirds (68%) of refugees globally came from five countries: Somalia (almost 1 million), Myanmar (1.2 million), South Sudan (2.4 million), Afghanistan (2.6 million), and Syria (6.3 million) at the end of 2018 (Chimni, 2018). Africa has experienced a notable displacement rate of both refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), making it the continent with some of the highest refugee-producing countries globally. Studies revealed that South Sudan (2.4 million) and Somalia (1 million) were among the top five refugee-producing countries by 2018 (Chimni, 2018; Zetter, 2020). Others in the top five were Syria (6.3 million), Myanmar (1.2 million), and Afghanistan (2.6 million). In 2017, nearly 1 million and 210,000 people were displaced from the Democratic Republic of Congo and the



Central African Republic, respectively (IDMC, 2019; Ferris and Donato, 2019). Conflicts were recorded to drive more than 75% of the population in Africa, affecting countries such as Ethiopia, South Sudan, Sudan, Somalia, the DRC, and Nigeria (Jacobsen, 2020). The displacement data in Africa shows the direct adverse impact forced displacement has on socio-economic and political growth and development (Betts et al., 2018).

Whereas most forcibly displaced people live in refugee camps in many nations across Africa, a significant portion reside in makeshift cities and host communities in neighbouring states (Nisbet et al., 2022). Kenya, located in Eastern Africa, has witnessed an increased influx of refugees since the 1990s due to relative peace (Omata, 2017; 2021). Although Kenya typically adopts an encampment policy (Mulati, 2024), with camp restrictions exacerbated by al-Shabaab terror attacks in Nairobi between 2013 and 2016 (Jaji, 2022; Douglas, 2022), the refugee population in Kenyan towns has grown significantly in recent years (Muindi and Mberu, 2019). To effectively understand the refugee problem and design solution-oriented policies, there is a need for a thorough analysis of the root causes of the crisis. Knee-jerk reactions to the refugee issue may not guarantee sustainable development in Africa and the Global South, which host up to 89% of refugees (Chimni, 2018). While studies have been conducted on the diverse causes of refugee flows (Ferwerda and Gest, 2021; Urbanski, 2022), data on the pull and push drivers of forced migration in the Global South is limited. Therefore, this study aimed to assess the push and pull factors driving migration among urban refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Theoretical Framework

State Fragility and Institutional Theory

The State Fragility and Institutional Theory was developed by Grävingholt et al. (2015) and offers invaluable insights into the displacement of people due to state fragility and institutional collapse. The theory emphasises the critical role of political instability in driving displacement. When established governments fail to guarantee the safety and well-being of their citizens, people are forced to flee their countries. The theory is pertinent in light of the displacement crisis in the Horn of Africa and the Great Lakes, which is causing a refugee crisis in Nairobi, Kenya, primarily due to states like Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo failing to meet essential obligations such as security provision, resilience to food insecurity and climatic shocks, and basic public and social services (Reinold, 2011). Consequently, many people flee their countries in search of stability and safety.

The conflict theory

The conflict theory, as described by Adresa et al. (2016) and Osman and Abebe (2023), asserts that conflicts are the main drivers of forced displacement in affected countries. This theory emphasises the need to address the root causes of conflict and displacement, such as social and political marginalisation and inequality, to ensure community protection, security, and stability. The relevance of the conflict theory is evident in the study area based on the push triggers of forced displacement.

Push and pull migration theory

Push and pull migration theory, as conceived by Ravenstein (1889), provides a mechanism for understanding the factors that influence people's movement from one place to another. According to Ravenstein, "push processes" are factors that force individuals or communities to leave their regions of origin; for instance, heavy taxation, oppressive laws, or conflicts. On the other hand, "pull factors" endear to people, attracting them to migrate; for instance, better living conditions or economic opportunities in other regions or countries. In the Eastern Africa region, the push and pull migration theory offers useful insights into the complex interplay of economic, sociocultural, political, and environmental factors that contribute to people's forcible displacement.



By combining state fragility, institutional conflict, and push-and-pull theories, this study comprehensively analyses the complex and multifaceted dynamics of forced displacement and its implications for livelihoods and economic well-being. The theoretical framework contributes empirical evidence to support targeted interventions aimed at addressing specific challenges faced by displaced populations, such as access to essential services, livelihood restoration, and the creation of economic opportunities.

Empirical review

Literature on forced migration provides critical insights into the drivers of forced displacement, highlighting conflict, socioeconomic instability, and climate change, among other factors. Scholarly work by Ghimire et al. (2015) and Abel et al. (2019) modelled how climate change intersects with civil conflict in triggering forced migration. Similarly, Clement et al. (2021) and Behnassi et al. (2022) offered broad overviews of the linkages between climate variability from a security perspective. However, while these studies contribute to macro-level intersections, their overreliance on global datasets overlooks local realities and the lived experiences of refugees, thus limiting their applicability to urban contexts such as Nairobi, Kenya. Furthermore, many studies, such as those by Qi and Bircan (2023) and Carril-Cassia et al. (2022), utilised economic simulations and predictive models to establish the impact of climate change on migration; yet, few of these studies employed pragmatic mixed-methods that complement statistical analyses with in-depth qualitative realities. As such, nuanced decision-making for forcibly displaced persons was overlooked. Studies that emphasised macro-level modelling to project refugee and international migration flows, such as Cohen et al. (2008), over-relied on aggregated secondary data, sidelining the lived experiences of forcibly displaced persons in urban areas.

Contextually, many scholars have disproportionately focused on rural and camp-based refugeehood and displacement, neglecting the upsurge of urban refugee populations. For instance, Crisp et al. (2012) and Murillo (2017) recognised the growing challenges of urban displacement. However, they failed to engage with the complex issues of urban contexts like Nairobi, Kenya, where refugees experience protracted displacement situations, navigating social exclusion, housing precarity, and informal economies. The dearth of urban context analysis within the literature creates a knowledge gap. While studies such as those by Papalexidou and Montanari (2019) and Edmonds et al. (2020) addressed the risks posed by climate change, such as extreme weather events and rising sea levels, they fell short of linking these climate shocks to urban migration outcomes. In regions like the Great Lakes and the Horn of Africa, where conflict and climate are intricately intertwined, this disconnect creates a knowledge gap, especially for contexts like Nairobi, Kenya, which receives massive inflows of migrants influenced by environmental stressors.

In addition, social and identity-based drivers of forced displacement have received little attention in African research, particularly among women, youth, the elderly, and LGBTQ+ persons. Although Alessi et al. (2016) and Hopkinson et al. (2017) stressed the role of gender identity, sexual preferences, and orientation in shaping structural persecution and forcible displacement, their scholarly work is situated in Western contexts with minimal consideration of the factors that drive migration among various social groups in Africa. There is also limited engagement with literature on refugee decision-making and agency. While Zetter (2007) and Castelli (2018) provide theoretical evaluations of political labelling and its influence on migration, they do not assess how factors such as access to livelihood opportunities, social networks, and legal status impact refugee movement into urban areas. Moreover, studies utilising the push-pull migration theory (Urbanski, 2022; Zaman et al., 2023; Khan et al., 2023) generalise the factors influencing migration decisions without disaggregating their findings by legal status, nationality, or gender- factors that drive migration into a refugee-hosting city like Nairobi.



Given the identified knowledge gaps, there is a need for compelling, mixed-method, localised research focused on Nairobi, Kenya, as a protracted refugee-hosting context. This study explores how refugees of different nationalities, genders, legal statuses, and lengths of displacement are influenced by push and pull factors. By situating refugee voices and triangulating data using both quantitative and qualitative methods, this study aims to contribute to the evidence on the critical dynamics of urban forced displacement, creating a platform for more inclusive refugee policy and practice.

Methodology

This study was conducted in Nairobi County, Kenya, home to approximately 109,400 refugees and asylum seekers, accounting for 16% of Kenya's total refugee population (UNHCR, 2025). Nairobi was chosen for the study because of its diverse refugee population, which includes individuals from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Ethiopia, Sudan, and other countries. This diversity provides a strong foundation for comparative analysis, enabling the study to explore how sociodemographic factors influence the experiences and economic outcomes of urban refugees.

The study employed a pragmatist mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to explore the multifaceted realities faced by refugees in Nairobi (Opaku et al., 2025; Strijker et al., 2020; Morgan, 2014). According to Ecke et al. (2016), mixed-methods research enhances the explanatory power of findings by triangulating quantitative and qualitative data, providing a more comprehensive understanding. Random sampling was implemented to ensure that every refugee had an equal chance of being selected, which allowed the findings to be generalised to the larger refugee population in Nairobi (Kothari, 2014).

From the total refugee population of 109,400, a sample size of 398 respondents was calculated using the sample determination formula described by Althubaiti (2023).

$$n = \frac{N}{1+N(e)^2}$$

Where n is the sample size, N is the population size, and e is the level of precision set at 0.05.

$$398.4 = \frac{109,400}{1+109400(0.05)^2}$$

However, due to typical access constraints in forced migration research, the study completed only 288 household interviews, representing a response rate of 72.61%. Response rates in forced migration research are often lower due to several factors, including mobility, trauma, legal insecurities, and language barriers (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003; Hynie, 2018; Moravska and Gill, 2019). Displaced people may fear repercussions or mistrust the research process due to their precarious legal status (Jacobsen and Landau, 2003), are constantly relocating (Hynie, 2018) and may face language barriers that impede communication (Turton, 1996). Additionally, contacts provided by most NGOs were out of service.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the findings, this study hired refugees with lived experiences as enumerators to build trust and overcome language barriers (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003), assured participants of confidentiality (Kumar, 2024), and combined phone and in-person interviews depending on participants' preferences and circumstances. Furthermore, quantitative survey data were triangulated using Focus Group Discussions and Key Informant Interviews. Data tools were also standardized and piloted (Jacobsen & Landau, 2003; Mackenzie *et al.*, 2007). These strategies ensured that the research effectively provided insights into the push and pull factors driving forced displacement among urban refugees in Nairobi.



Findings and Discussions

The section below presents the findings on push and pull factors among urban refugees in Nairobi County, Kenya.

Push factors of migration among urban refugees in Nairobi

Below are the factors that led to the flight (push factors of migration) of urban refugees in Nairobi Kenya from their countries of origin.

Conflict, violence and insecurity

The findings reveal that conflict, violence, and insecurity are critical drivers of forced displacement for urban refugees in Nairobi. Armed conflict was the most dominant factor, with 57.1% of respondents strongly agreeing and 32.5% agreeing that it forced them to migrate from their countries of origin. This was proportionately higher than those who disagreed or remained neutral. Similarly, ethnic, political, economic, and ideological conflicts also made significant contributions, with over 70% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that these factors influenced their migration. In contrast, religious conflict was a less significant push factor, as more than 70% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that it contributed to their forcible displacement. Finally, more than half (52%) cited resource-based and territorial conflicts as contributing to their displacement.

Table 1: Conflict types triggering displacement of refugees in Nairobi

Conflict Types Triggering Displacement of Urban Refugees in Nairobi					
All values represent percentages of total responses					
Conflict_Type	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree
Armed Conflict	32.5%	2.8%	5.9%	57.1%	1.7%
Economic Conflict	20.4%	12.8%	16.6%	39.1%	11.1%
Ethnic Conflict	26.6%	10%	8.3%	46.4%	8.7%
Ideological Political Conflict	34.3%	1.4%	13.5%	47.1%	3.8%
Religious Conflict	4.5%	40.1%	20.8%	3.8%	30.8%
Resource Based Conflict	23.2%	10.7%	17.3%	38.8%	10%
Territorial Border Conflict	31.5%	5.2%	18.3%	37.7%	7.3%

Source: Researcher, 2025

Different forms of violence were also key in shaping migration decisions. Terrorism was a significant influence, with about 65% of respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing to its contribution to their displacement. However, approximately half expressed disagreement, suggesting varying experiences. Widespread sexual violence, including mass rape, was a significant driver of forced migration for more than half of the respondents, while around 41% disagreed. Other major push factors included forced disappearances and kidnappings, with 64% acknowledging their contribution to fleeing their countries of origin.



Conversely, intimate partner violence (IPV) had little reported impact, with 85% of respondents disagreeing that it contributed to their forcible displacement. Genocide, mass murder, and ethnic cleansing were identified as serious threats, with approximately 60% acknowledging them as major causes. Gender-based violence (GBV) was recognised by nearly half of the respondents as a factor, although disagreement remained high, indicating its uneven impact across populations. The forcible separation of families emerged as one of the most widely acknowledged causes, with nearly three-quarters of respondents citing it as a reason for displacement. Detention without trial and the destruction of critical infrastructure were also noted as significant drivers, with more than 60% of respondents identifying them as reasons for fleeing.

Qualitative data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews supported these findings. Participants highlighted armed conflict, political tensions – especially during elections – and food insecurity as primary reasons for flight. Stories of loss due to killings, kidnappings, and disappearances revealed the personal toll of conflict and insecurity. Ethnic and clan-based tensions were cited as particularly acute in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions, with varying patterns depending on ethnic diversity or clan divisions. Overall, the findings underscore a complex web of conflict, violence, and systemic insecurity central to forced migration experiences as expressed below:

“Armed groups attacked villages, making women especially vulnerable. They would come at night, abduct people, and commit horrific acts. I saw people I knew vanish forever. My neighbour’s daughter was taken, and she was never seen again. The fear became overwhelming. I knew I had to leave before my family became the next target” (Congolese refugee).

“Men flee due to the risk of being killed or coerced into joining armed groups. Women, on the other hand, often escape primarily because of sexual violence, family losses, and the need to protect their children. The suffering women endure is distinct. When a woman experiences rape or assault, she bears that trauma for life. Moreover, society does not always offer her support” (Rwandese refugee).

“... we all know women are vulnerable to gender-based violence and sometimes face cases like rape from armed groups or security personnel. On the other hand, men were targeted by the Ethiopian government, which accused them of supporting the opposition group that was then called the Oromia Liberation Army” (Ethiopian refugee).



Table 2: Violence types triggering displacement of refugees in Nairobi

Violence Types Triggering Displacement of Refugees in Nairobi					
All values represent percentages of total responses					
Violence_Type	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	Strongly Agree	Strongly Disagree
Destruction Of Infrastructure	20.1%	16.3%	6.6%	47.8%	9.3%
Detentions Without Trial	24.2%	5.2%	7.6%	40.5%	22.5%
Ethnic Cleansing	19.4%	13.5%	11.4%	42.9%	12.8%
Forcible Separation Of Families	26.3%	6.9%	5.5%	47.4%	13.8%
Gender Based Violence	16.6%	29.8%	14.2%	32.9%	6.6%
Genocide Mass Murder	19%	15.2%	15.6%	40.8%	9.3%
Intimate Partner Violence	2.1%	51.2%	33.6%	5.2%	8%
Kidnappings Abductions And Disappearances	27.3%	15.6%	11.1%	36.7%	9.3%
Mass Rape Sexual Violence	14.9%	24.6%	18.3%	33.9%	8.3%
Terrorism	22.1%	16.6%	7.6%	42.9%	10.7%

Source: Researcher, 2025

This study highlights the critical role of conflict, violence, and insecurity in driving forcible displacement in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa regions. These findings corroborate those of Zaman et al. (2023) and Urbanski (2022), who linked forced migration to political instability, war, repression, and persecutions.

Pull factors of migration among urban refugees in Nairobi

Social factors

Table 3: Social pull factors of migration among urban refugees in Nairobi

Characteristic	agree	disagree	neutral	strongly agree	strongly disagree
Proximity to country of origin	39%	8.4%	38%	7.0%	7.7%
Social networks	38%	13%	19%	26%	3.8%
Similarity in culture	39%	13%	23%	18%	7.6%
Cultural and religious tolerance	45%	6.3%	23%	22%	3.1%
Prospects of family reunification	37%	9.0%	18%	30%	5.6%

Source: Researcher, 2025

As indicated in Table 3, proximity to the country of origin had a moderate influence, with 46% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it affected their decision, although 38% remained neutral. Social networks in Nairobi emerged as a strong motivator, with 64% concurrence, just as cultural similarity did at 57%. Cultural and religious tolerance, together with the prospect of family reunification, were the most positively perceived factors, with 67% citing them as important reasons for choosing Nairobi, reflecting the city's welcoming environment. These findings underscore the importance of social connections, cultural acceptance, and opportunities for reunification in shaping the migration choices of urban refugees.



Economic factors

Table 4: Economic pull factors of migration among urban refugees in Nairobi

Characteristic	agree	disagree	neutral	strongly agree	strongly disagree
Prospects of employment	38%	8.7%	16%	36%	0.7%
Prospects of education	41%	11%	19%	26%	3.5%
Prospects of better health	49%	8.0%	19%	23%	1.7%
Prospects of better WASH services	34%	13%	42%	8.7%	1.7%
Prospects of resettlement	28%	5.9%	8.1%	55%	3.3%

Source: Researcher, 2025

Due to economic pull factors, the prospect of third-country resettlement was the most compelling factor, with 83% of respondents identifying it as a major reason for migrating. Only 9.2% disagreed, and 8.1% remained neutral, indicating that many view Nairobi as a transitional point toward future resettlement opportunities. The employment opportunities ranked second highest, with a significant majority of respondents at 74%, followed by healthcare at 72%. Education was another important consideration, with 67% of respondents citing better educational opportunities as a motivating factor. In contrast, water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services had a less pronounced influence, with 42% being neutral and only 43% agreeing or strongly agreeing. Those who expressed disagreement totaled 14.7%, suggesting that while WASH access is important, it is not a dominant motivator.

Political and governance factors

Peace and political tolerance emerged as dominant factors influencing refugee migration to Nairobi, with a striking rating of 94%. This underscores the overwhelming importance of security and tolerance in migration decisions. The presence of functional government institutions was another significant pull factor, with a rating of 91%. Minimal disagreement (1.3%) and limited neutrality (6.9%) suggest that refugees are drawn to Nairobi's more stable administrative structures compared to those in their countries of origin. Expectations of improved human rights protections were another major driver, with a total of 86% of respondents citing better respect for human rights as a motivating factor. This could be interpreted as indicative of a widespread perception of Nairobi as a safer and more rights-respecting environment. Escaping mass displacement due to war or ethnic cleansing was also a strong motivator, but its rating was slightly lower at 64%.

Table 5: Political and governance pull factors of migration among urban refugees in Nairobi

Characteristic	Agree	disagree	neutral	strongly agree	strongly disagree
Peace and political tolerance	42%	0.3%	5.2%	52%	0%
Functional government institutions	38%	0.3%	6.9%	53%	1.0%
Escape from ethnic cleansing	35%	15%	13%	29%	8.3%
Greater respect for human rights	50%	1.0%	9.0%	36%	3.5%

Source: Researcher, 2025

Insights from Focus Group discussions revealed that many refugees chose Nairobi because of its social networks, better economic opportunities, and tranquillity.

“I heard that Kenya was one of the few countries in the region where refugees could live outside of camps. I didn’t want to be confined in a camp, dependent on aid. I wanted to work, to rebuild my life, and to have some dignity. That’s why I chose Kenya” (Burundian refugee).

“I can say that I have been to Uganda, but Uganda is not the same as Kenya. Kenya has plenty of opportunities. You can survive in this country if you are hardworking” (Rwandese refugee).

“For me, Kenya was a place of last resort. I first tried to stay in Tanzania, but I faced a lot of hostility there. I then moved to Uganda, but life was still difficult. Eventually, I came to Nairobi,



hoping for a fresh start. It's not perfect, but at least I don't have to fear for my life every single day"
(Congolese refugee).

Refugees were attracted to Nairobi because, among other factors, Kenya was close to their countries of origin and shared a similar culture (language and way of life). Additionally, existing social networks, including family members, made Nairobi an ideal destination choice. Our findings on how social factors influence migration pull complement scholarly works by Cohen et al. (2008), who identified family reunification as a strong pull of migration. Furthermore, our study corroborates findings by Qi and Bircan (2023) that having communities of origin in destination places pulled migrants, terming it "network effects." Whereas Cohen et al. (2008) and Qi and Bircan (2023) used gravity models and machine learning to analyse global data and identify trends, our mixed-method approach incorporates refugee voices to add perspective to this discussion. Refugees of Somali and Ethiopian origin were primarily found in Eastleigh, an estate traditionally associated with Kenyan Somalis, offering religious similarity and minimal language barriers.

Our findings also show that refugees were attracted to Nairobi because of economic factors-perceived employment, access to better healthcare, education, and water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services, corroborating findings by Zaman et al. (2023), Castelli (2018), Murillo (2017), and Crisp et al. (2012). Respondents cited disruptions to economic and livelihood systems in their countries of origin, which made access to basic services such as health and education difficult. As such, they were forced to migrate to Nairobi to seek employment, better schools, medication, and security.

Finally, a significant pull factor for refugees in Nairobi was political peace and stability, functional government institutions, and respect for human rights, complementing findings by Alessi et al. (2016) and Hopkinson et al. (2017) that countries with robust protection laws against community violence attracted immigrants. Zetter (2007) also argued that countries with progressive laws and guaranteed rights acted as pull factors for refugees. Respondents cited a greater civil society and media presence in Nairobi as key to continued advocacy for refugee rights and amplification of their voices and plights. These factors, they opined, significantly exposed them to the international community, attracting both humanitarian assistance and creating a platform for greater refugee response reforms.

Conclusion

Various forms of conflict, violence, and insecurity were the primary push factors driving forced displacement among urban refugees in Nairobi. While these push factors were common among refugees from the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa, striking differences emerged in how men and women experienced violence. Men were primarily killed, kidnapped, or forced to join armed groups, while women faced sexual violence. Urban refugees were largely attracted to Nairobi by a combination of social, economic, and political factors. The presence of community members from their country of origin was a key pull factor, with Horn of Africa refugees settling mainly in the Eastleigh area. Conversely, Great Lakes refugees were more dispersed, residing in various parts of Nairobi. Economic factors such as perceived job opportunities and access to better healthcare and education also drew refugees to Nairobi. With the presence of the UN in Nairobi, many refugees hoped for resettlement to third countries, particularly in the Global North. Finally, democratic institutions, peace and stability, and respect for human rights constituted the main political pull factors for refugees in Nairobi.

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