

## Dadaab Refugee Camp: to Close or not to Close?

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Oftentimes, we as a human race, overlook several internal conflicts within our community. One of these conflicts is the recent rise in the number of refugees all across the globe. From Afghanistan to Syria, to Africa and beyond, millions of people have fled home in search of a more promising and safer future. Dadaab Refugee Camp in Eastern Kenya is now home to over half a million refugees, and the Kenyan Government plans to close down the site due to various internal and external factors. The ethics of this proposed decision have been questioned by much of the world on platforms such as news outlets and social media, as well as in many forms of journalistic writing. An “ethical situation” is where a decision needs to be made, and that decision has the potential to be harmful to one or more of the groups involved. The potential closing of Dadaab itself is a situation in which a decision needs to be made, keeping in mind the stability of all groups. The two stakeholders involved in this situation are the people of Dadaab (those who live and work within the camp), and the Kenyan Government. Although this conflict may seem political, the decision will not take into account feelings, cultural norms, or even law. Thus, the closing of Dadaab holds more ethical value than political, legal, or historical value. In order to solve this conflict, it would be in the best interest of all stakeholders to keep Dadaab open for as long as possible.

Before delving into the discussion of what the possible outcomes for this ethical situation are, it is imperative to look at the physical and internal situation of Dadaab. Doing this would allow certain realities to come forward, as well as add detail that may be helpful when making an ethical decision on the camp. Dadaab Refugee Camp was established in 1991 by the United

Nations, in an effort to provide a temporary home for refugees who were escaping civil wars in their respective countries. Now, almost three decades later, the current state of Dadaab is that of uncertainty, and to some extent, fear of the unknown. In “Story of Cities #4: Will Dadaab, the World’s Largest Refugee Camp, Really Close” by Ben Rawlence, a British journalist and human rights advocate, Dadaab is described as a “veritable melting pot” (316). The camp is described in this fashion because of the coming together of many different nationalities under one roof, or area, in this instance. The most prevalent nationality found in the camp is that of Somalians. The Somali Civil War, which has been an ongoing issue since 1991, forced thousands of citizens out of the country due to political, economic, and social instability. The moment the citizens left the country, they would be considered refugees looking for somewhere to settle down. Dadaab was the most accessible to them, and the majority of Somali refugees populated the camp.

Having such a large number of refugees directly points to overall living conditions in the camp. “Ethical questions around returning Dadaab refugees ‘home’” by Mollie Gerver, an Assistant Professor in Political Theory at University of Essex, focuses on the lack of food, water, and other resources that many people face in the camp to this day. While interviewing South Sudanese refugees within the camp, she states “I learned that they relied on food from relatives or friends. But even this wasn’t enough to ensure their health. They also faced persecution outside of camps. Police would often stop and detain them if they failed to pay bribes. Those choosing to repatriate to South Sudan felt they had little choice” (Gerver). Many refugees are not able to provide enough for themselves on a daily basis, thus they have to depend on relations and others for basic necessities. “The leaders cited high numbers of school dropouts and lack of higher education, decreasing opportunities to be resettled to third countries and lack of specialized services for people with special needs as some of their challenges” (Fleming). Due to

the lack of resources, many refugees choose to repatriate and leave everything behind. According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, the term “repatriation” is defined as “the act or process of restoring or returning someone or something to the country of origin.” In recent times, the act of repatriation has become something which is very commonly heard in the camp, but not understood to the extent which it should be. Given the context of why refugees decide to leave their place of origin, it must be questioned why they decide to go back. The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has taken up this matter and is acting on it in a positive manner. “The UNHCR acknowledges that repatriation is often unsafe, but claims to be holding interviews with refugees considering return and repatriating only those whose choices seem voluntary. If choices are voluntary, perhaps the UNHCR’s repatriation assistance is ethical” (Gerver). There are clear indications of forced repatriation due to various reasons. Competition has taken the camp by storm, and refugees are willing to do anything to satisfy personal desires and goals, even if it means killing or attacking someone. Women specifically face greater challenges in this regard, as they have to keep themselves safe from predators at all times. “Widespread feelings of insecurity also exist in the camps, exemplified by pervasive sentiments of susceptibility to non-partner attacks and assaults, which particularly hinder the free movement of women and girls” (Izugbara et al.). While the lack of resources is apparent, the increasing number of threats should also be taken into account when refugees are repatriated forcibly. However, there is a group of people which try and act against this sort of repatriation, called anti-repatriation advocates.

“Anti-repatriation advocates portray the refugees as victims of violence and trauma, helpless, and are youth. This is in an attempt to empathize with their conditions and to further argue that such people should not be treated unfairly by any government” (Orwenjo et al.). As

mentioned before, there are many refugees who are actively being attacked, and while this notion from anti-repatriation advocates seems biased and sympathetic, the stand is based on facts which the whole world can see. Living conditions would be better if the Government of Kenya stepped in and took action against the perpetrators, however the main focus of the Kenyan Government is to prevent Dadaab from becoming a permanent settlement for these refugees. “The government recently required the UN to dismantle some newly built homes because they ‘looked too much like real homes’” (Rawlence, 316). While the Kenyan Government is disallowing structures that resemble the “real world”, they are, at the same time, taking advantage of the economic potential of the camp. Since Dadaab covers a vast area of land and has a growing population, there are many opportunities for businesses to go and invest in services that can be provided to the refugees. Investing in these sorts of opportunities means more money flow in the economic system, which in turn increases the chances for corruption and other unethical practices. The Kenyan Government has continued to deny any claims of money laundering and/or corruption in the case of Dadaab. However, evidence suggests that the long roads of the camp and bribe-accepting police officers provide ample access for government officials to smuggle millions of dollars out of the territory and to certain individuals with power. “By day, a government spokesman might blame Dadaab refugees for terrorist attacks in Kenya and call for the camp to be closed; by night, however, this illicit trade is pouring cash into the campaign coffers of some politicians...” (Rawlence, 317). The lack of a balanced, well-networked system has led to the increased levels of poverty in the camp, in spite of outsiders’ efforts to help the refugees.

Dadaab is now at a crossroads; either the Kenyan Government shuts the site down completely, or the camp remains open for refugees to come and leave. The way to determine the

best decision for the camp is by going through a systemic approach via ethical reasoning. A decision made on this issue holds the ability to damage one of the two main stakeholders involved: The Kenyan Government and the refugees in Dadaab themselves. Alternative options have been evaluated, but given the known facts of the condition of Dadaab, it is virtually impossible to find any sort of compromise. No refugees can afford to be forced out of a place in which they have shelter, and conversely, the Kenyan Government wants to close off the camp completely in order to keep the country's security in check. Partially closing the camp would drive out a large number of refugees into oblivion, perhaps to severe danger due to the terrorist activities that are still present in Eastern Africa. However, temporarily disallowing the exit or entrance of more refugees (while keeping the camp open) might work best in the current pandemic.

According to the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, there are five ways to evaluate (approach) potential outcomes for an ethical issue. The Utilitarian Approach focuses on the option which produces the most good and the least harm. One of the most important aspects of Dadaab to consider is the current COVID-19 situation in the camp. "Dadaab camp is overcrowded...but there is still no reported case of COVID-19 among these vulnerable groups..." (Dzinamarira et al.). Keeping this in mind, the Utilitarian Approach would yield the option of keeping the camp open, but only to refugees already present within the camp. The Rights Approach assesses the option which best respects the rights of all stakeholders. Refugees have the right to live in a place where they are able to attain basic necessities (even if quantities are limited). However, the Kenyan Government also has the right to run the country the way they desire. Closing the camp would lead to violation of basic human rights, so here too, keeping Dadaab open will be the best option. The Justice Approach looks for the option that treats people

equally or proportionally. The Kenyan Government's goal to secure the peace of the country might be best handled by closing Dadaab's borders temporarily. This way, even though the refugees inside the camp will be stuck, they will still have shelter, food, clothes etc. Both stakeholders would be treated equally with this option. When looking at the ethical issue from a community standpoint, the Common Good Approach is applied. The community as a whole will find its benefit with Dadaab remaining open. If the camp were to close, the outpour of refugees would be a massive concern for the health and safety department of the country. COVID-19 is on the rise, and having a large volume of people traveling all at once can potentially cause further spread of the virus. Increased numbers of infected persons would cause mass disturbance at a community level. The final approach to consider is the Virtue Approach, which finds the option that leads me to act as the person I want to be. I would not want to be a person who denies another being of their basic human rights unnecessarily. In my opinion, continuously taking peoples' rights away can lead to violence, which ultimately leads to a lack of stability and security in the community. Therefore, I would choose the option of keeping Dadaab open. However, given the health crisis, I would choose to temporarily close the borders of the camp until the health situation around the camp improves.

Considering all these approaches, the option of keeping the camp open best addresses the situation. Keeping the camp open would not only let the refugees continue to settle, it would also help the community on a larger scale. The Kenyan Government may well have to find alternative ways of increasing the security of the nation, such as additional violence prevention forces. This is an ethical decision because it is not based on any feelings, religion, law, cultural norms, or even science. The decision of keeping Dadaab open should be taken in a very careful manner, in which no one is devoid of human rights or access to basic amenities. To keep the community

safe, temporarily closing off the borders of Dadaab, while keeping the camp open for refugees who are already there, would be the safest and most effective option, especially during COVID-19. This would not only benefit the refugees, but also the Kenyan Government, in that it would save them from organizing a mass deportation during the pandemic. Readers should be able to gauge the appropriate way to address an ethical situation, such as the potential closure of Dadaab, through the use of an ethical framework, and with proper perception, understanding that saving Dadaab from closure could lead to the saving of other refugee camps around the world.

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