Incentive Labor

Case Study

January 2025

By Laura Kunreuther and Mulki Mohamed

Abstract

In this case study, we discuss a special category of refugee work in Kakuma Refugee Camp. 'Incentive labor' has been developed by the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), the governing body of refugees in Kenya and elsewhere, to enable refugees to work given the legal restrictions on employment imposed by the Kenyan state. Incentive work, or what some call "volunteer" positions, is for many refugees one of the few forms of paid labor. The case study, which should be read alongside the documentary film *Incentive Labor* (Kamoso Bertrand, dir.), asks the following questions: What kind of work do refugees do as incentive workers? How does this work relate to similar work done by Kenyan nationals in the same organizations? What do refugees who are employed as incentive workers think about this system and what kinds of solutions do they propose? What do experts in the International Labor Organization have to say about incentive work and its relation to the law – what solutions do they propose? By exploring these questions, alongside reports written by UNHCR and ILO, we show that despite widespread recognition of the inequities of incentive labor over the last twenty years, very little has been done to address these issues.

Keywords: incentive labor, refugee work, refugee dignity, ILO, UNHCR, Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya

This publication was supported by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

Executive Summary

In Kakuma Refugee Camp, refugees must find work not only to supplement the meagre allowances provided by humanitarian organizations and the camp's governing body, UNHCR, but also to support meaningful lives and foster dignity. As refugees, however, finding work that is economically stable is difficult, given regulations imposed upon them by the Kenyan state. The category of "incentive work" has been developed by the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), the governing body of refugees in Kenya and elsewhere, in part to bypass these legal restrictions. Incentive work, or what some call "volunteer" positions, is for many refugees one of the few forms of paid labor. What kind of work do refugees do as incentive workers? How does this work relate to similar work done by Kenyan nationals in the same organizations? What do refugees who are employed as incentive workers think about this system and what kinds of solutions do they propose? What do experts in the International Labor Organization have to say about incentive work and its relation to the law – what solutions do they propose? These are some of the questions this case study discusses.

This case study should be read in tandem with the documentary "*Incentive Labor,"* produced by three refugee filmmakers (Kamoso Jean Bertrand, Director, Adam Mohamed Bashar, Cinematographer, and Mulki Mohamed ,Editor, in collaboration with their anthropology faculty sponsor Laura Kunreuther of Bard College and film advisor Laura Menchaca Ruiz of Al-Quds Bard. The case study includes research conducted for the documentary in the form of interviews as well as academic research conducted by Laura Kunreuther and Mulki Mohamed, in her capacity as a Rift Valley Institute research fellow. The aim of this report and the film is to create greater awareness about the system of incentive work in Kakuma Camp, and to begin addressing some of the inequities that incentive work reproduces using the film and our research as the basis of activism and policy changes.

The case includes the following elements:

- Interviews with John Ajang, Richard Ntirampeba, Nasrun Titus, and Caroline Njuki
- Written Case Study: This Document

Introduction

Kakuma Refugee Camp ("Kakuma") is located in semi-arid northwest Kenya. It is one of the most diverse camps in the world, a home to approximately 300,000 refugees from more than twenty countries across Africa and Asia, such as South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Sudan,

Burundi, Rwanda, Eritrea, as well as Yemen, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Located in the economically-deprived Turkana region, this area has a history of fighting the British during the colonial period and the Kenyan government after independence. The camp was established in the early 1990s, following the war in Sudan as well as conflicts in Somalia, Ethiopia, and other countries in the Great Lakes region. Since that time, the camp has transformed from its initial emergency mandate into what Bram Jansen calls "an accidental city," rather than a space of "temporary permanence, or permanent temporariness (Picker and Pasquetti 2015)."[1] Each refugee in Kakuma faces unique and shared struggles as they navigate their new lives. Most of them have fled war, conflict, persecution, political instability, and ethnic violence, seeking a place where they can live in peace. However, when they arrive at the camp, they experience hardship due to the harsh climate and unwelcoming environment. Average temperatures reach around 104 degrees Fahrenheit, and residents must manage dust and floods, depending on the season.

The category of labor called "incentive work" is a unique feature of governance in Kakuma. Legally, in Kenya, refugees are not allowed to work in salaried positions, since, it is said, they are given housing, food, health care, water, and shelter for free from UNHCR. Furthermore, as is often repeated, refugees "don't pay taxes" – a sign of citizenship and economic independence. Despite the fact that only an estimated 3% of the population engages in incentive work, this labor force is nevertheless a critical part of Kakuma as it transformed from the initial, short term emergency mandate in 1992 into a much more long-term and permanent "zone of protection."[2] As Blair Sackett shows, incentive workers often comprise the majority of workers in many humanitarian organizations. Sackett writes that "[T]he largest NGO in the camp employed zero international staff, 336 Kenyan national staff, and 2,234 refugee incentive workers."[3] Providing a steady, if minimal, source of income for those employed as incentive workers, refugees effectively have become the civil servants of the humanitarian regime in many contexts.

Recent literature exploring refugee issues has focused on income generation, employment opportunities, and resource distribution.[4] While these factors are significant, they provide an incomplete picture of refugees' experiences. Refugee livelihoods extend beyond economics, and can only be fully understood via

[1] Bram J. Jansen, "Kakuma Refugee Camp: Humanitarian Urbanism in Kenya's Accidental City," Politics and Development of Contemporary Africa (London, England: Zed Books, 2018), 5, https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350220942.
[2] Blair Sackett, "A Uniform Front?: Power and Front-Line Worker Variation in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya," *Ethnography* 24, no. 1 (2023): 114, https://doi.org/10.1177/14661381221104288. This is an estimate of the number of incentive workers based on sociological research done in Kakuma between 2014 -2018.
[3] Sackett, 114.
[4] Alexander Betts et.al, *Refugee Economies: Forced Displacement and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

a broader exploration of agency, identity, and dignity features that emerge from community networks and cultural practices.[5] These connections are central to creating a meaningful life for all people, and are crucial to consider in relation to incentive work. Incentive labor programs aim to offer refugees a means of support in a legally constrained environment, but the actual outcome (i.e., how this manifests itself in people's lives) often tells a different story of the aid sector. Many refugees' experiences entail frustration, rejection, and a deep sense of dissatisfaction with these opportunities, revealing the limitations of relying solely on economic models to understand refugee livelihoods.

To a large extent, incentive labor programs are envisaged as humanitarian interventions that might promote self-reliance. These programs are typically run by international humanitarian organizations that provide different services and offer refugees this temporary work called "incentive work." Positions offered include teaching, interpretation, patient attendance, dance, or community outreach, with a small stipend in return for work called an incentive. In theory, the programs allow refugees to earn an income, gain work experience, and contribute to their community, creating a semblance of self-reliance in an environment where formal employment is restricted. Yet, as recent research shows and as demonstrated in the documentary, the very idea of "self-reliance" carries problematic assumptions and rarely takes into account the complex precarity of life in the camp.[6]

Refugee Response to Incentive Labor

Arguments in support of incentive labor are routinely rejected by refugees living in Kakuma. The fact that refugees receive services for free is belied by the fact that no one can truly thrive on the rations and services provided by UNHCR. Food rations, for example, are determined by the average caloric needs of a standard sized adult yet refugees attest most of relief food is neither tasty nor enough to adequately satisfy a person more than simply keeping their body alive. During his research between 2008-2011 in Kakuma, Rahul Oka demonstrated the importance of consumption of non-relief food (sugared or spiced tea, soft drinks, meals with meat, fish, and pasta) as a way to purchase dignity and normalcy in a context of constant waiting and passive reception of inadequate and often demeaning relief services. "The conventional relief discourse is

[5] Mohamed, Mulki, "Livelihoods and Prosperity: Exploring Self-Reliance Beyond Economics in Kakuma Refugee Camp," Rift Valley Institute's Research Communities of Practice (Nairobi, Kenya: Rift Valley Institute, December 2024).
[6] Blair Sackett, "Barriers and Backslides: How Economic Instability Impedes Refugee Self-Reliance in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, August 24, 2024, feae066, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feae066.

based on a deeply rooted perception of the inalienability of charity and donation," writes Oka, "and it focuses on measurable criteria for calculating refugee nutritional necessities: that is, calorific value of the given food as opposed to quality or taste (Crisp 2003; James 2008)"[7] Instead, Oka demonstrates that almost all refugees participate in what he calls "agentive consumption," which is "to have the ability and resources to choose, purchase, and consume small but comforting familiar, and desired 'non-essentials'. Here I focus on the consumption of food items *that would not be considered as luxuries or even comforts for most readers*."[8] Incentive work is one of the few ways for people to find paid work in the camp that enables such modest consumption.

In the "Incentive Labor" documentary, there are several examples where incentive workers question the adequacy of the rations or services they receive. One of the young women interviewed in the documentary, Nasrun Titus, works as a teacher – a job that falls within the incentive labor category. She describes the rations she receives from UNHCR each month ("I don't want to hide that," she says) – 1 kg. per person per month – and then provocatively asks the viewers to "empathize with that scenario," questioning if they would be able to handle that. "It is not enough," Titus states, matter-of-factly.[9]

In another interview in the documentary, Richard Ntirampeba asks the interviewer whether the education or health care provided to refugees in Kakuma is at all adequate to justify the low incentive pay. Classrooms in Kakuma are filled with over 150 children, and Ntirampeba rhetorically asks: "Do you think those children are learning? No, they are not."[10] This is why, he notes, the only people who send their children to school in the camp are those who cannot afford to send them to private schools outside of the camp, which is where refugees "who are a bit rich" send their children. Similarly, Ntirampeba argues that adequate healthcare cannot be a justification for meagre payment of incentives. He shows that refugees can be seen in private hospitals in Kakuma town, outside the camp, and in the Mission hospital. Why? "Some refugees are there because there is no health care here in camp," Ntirampeba explains.

The main complaint refugees have about incentive work is the radical difference in treatment and in pay between incentive and national Kenyan workers. These differences exist even if the qualifications and the workload of the national and incentive workers are identical.

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[7] Rahul Chandrashekhar Oka, "Coping with the Refugee Wait: The Role of Consumption, Normalcy, and Dignity in Refugee Lives at Kakuma Refugee Camp, Kenya," *American Anthropologist* 116, no. 1 (2014): 24, https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.12076. See also Oka's citations: Crisp, Jeff. "No Solutions in Sight: New Issues in Refugee Research. Working Paper, 75. Geneva, Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, UNHCR (2003); James, De

[8] Oka, 25. Italics added.

[9] *Incentive Labor* documentary.

[10] *Incentive Labor* documentary.

As Titus explains: “Look at the workload of the teacher, the national teacher, and the refugee teacher. They are just the same. I sometimes wonder why we are given 9,000 Kenyan Shillings and below while the nationals are given 50,000 Kenyan Shillings and above. So, for me, it is a bit unfair. [11]

Another incentive worker interviewed for the film, John Ajang, who has been in the camp since it was established in 1992, noted that this payment differential has nothing to do with qualifications. “We have people with a master’s degree in the camp, but they are paid lower because they bear an ID for being a refugee. You are told, minus your qualifications, you have your refugee card. So you cannot be paid higher than that.”[12] These differences are justified in part by the fact that Kenyan workers pay taxes and refugee workers do not. Most incentive workers interviewed, however, would prefer to be paid equally and pay taxes. “We don’t mind if they give us the same amount,” says Titus, “then we pay taxes. There’s no problem.”[13]

These differences are baked into the structure of all humanitarian work, and echoes the contrast in mobility between international, national, and refugee workers.[14] Blair Sackett documents quite clearly these distinctions in pay and benefits between workers in humanitarian agencies in Kakuma camp, during the time of her research (2014 – 18).

[11] *Incentive Labor* documentary.
[12] *Incentive Labor* documentary.
[13] *Incentive Labor* documentary.
[14] Peter Redfield, “THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF EX-PATS: Double Binds of Humanitarian Mobility: THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF EX-PATS,” *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 2 (May 2012): 358–82, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2012.01147.x.

Table 4. Types of workers in kakuma refugee camp.

Type of worker	Nationality	Role in camp	Median annual pay ($USD)	Benefits
International	Outside of Kenya	Worker only	$73,000	- 1 week of paid R&R every 8 weeks - Included in org. Emergency evacuation plan
National	Kenya	Worker only	$17,832	- 1 week of paid R&R every 10 weeks - Included in org. Evacuation plan
Refugee incentive	Outside of Kenya	Worker, refugee beneficiary	$840	- No paid R&R - Not included in org. Evacuation plan

Figure 1: Table reproduced from Sackett 2023.[15]

Such dissatisfaction expressed by incentive workers in the film highlights the emotional toll of incentive labor for refugees. Despite the humanitarian agencies framing "incentive labor" as a way to foster community engagement, workers find themselves trapped in low-paying, unstable jobs that do not offer advancement. There is clearly a need to reform the wage structures to ensure that refugees are compensated more equitably, fostering both economic stability and, perhaps more importantly, a sense of dignity.

History of Debates about Incentive Labor

Debates about the nature and inequality of incentive work are long-standing in Kakuma and in other field locations where UNHCR is based. In 2009, the online Kakuma newspaper *Kanare* published an editorial called "Are Refugees Entitled to Equal Pay for Equal Work?"[16] In it, the editorial staff detail some of the same complaints voiced by incentive workers in the documentary, but frame their discussion around several key legal documents: 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the Kenya Refugee Act 2006. Citing articles from each of these legal doctrines on the right to work and receive "just and favorable" wages (UDHR), *Kanare* notes that the 2006 Refugee Act stipulates that refugees are subject to the same

[15] Sackett, "A Uniform Front?," 115.
[16] Kanare, "Are Refugees Entitled to Equal Pay for Equal Work," *Kanere.Org* (blog), 2009, https://kanere.org/are-refugees-entitled-to-equal-pay-for-equal-work/.

restrictions as other foreigners working in Kenya, and that it thereby "fails to explicitly state that refugees have a right to wage-earning employment."[17]

In the documentary, filmmakers interviewed Caroline Njuki from the International Labor Organization (ILO) to discuss her views on incentive labor. "From a legal angle," Njuki says, "there is really no excuse." She notes that no literature on decent work makes reference to incentive labor. In fact, she goes so far to say that incentive labor "goes against every possible Kenyan law. It goes against minimum wage. It goes against the employment act. It goes against the Refugee Act." In conclusion, Njuki notes that ILO is pursuing this conversation with UNHCR in order to come up with a better solution for refugee workers.

But the ILO has been having this conversation with UNHCR for a very long time. As far back as twenty years ago, in 2005, ILO and UNHCR issued a joint report called *Self Reliance and Sustainable Livelihoods for Refugees in Dadaab and Kakuma Camps*.[18] Nine years later, UNHCR issued another report called *Discussion Paper on UNHCR's Policy and Practice of Incentive Payments to Refugees*.[19] Within the humanitarian sector, in these and other reports, debates about incentive labor center on whether incentive work should be considered "volunteer work" or a form of employment.[20] Those favoring a volunteering approach emphasize, in classic neoliberal terms, the importance of helping one's own community to "promote empowerment rather than dependency."[21] Some arguments in favor of volunteering suggest a slightly different progressive intent that is couched in right-wing language, noting that in contexts like Kenya, where refugees are not allowed to work without a special permit, to frame incentive labor as volunteering enables humanitarian organizations to offer paid employment to refugees without breaking the law. Incentive payments are, after all, not a salary but referred to as a motivation or a reimbursement for expenses.

Both the 2005 and 2014 reports issued by UNHCR repeat many of the same arguments about refugees' right to just employment. The joint report from 2005 issued by UNHCR and the ILO notes that "[i]t may be worthwhile from the point of view of ILO Core International Labour Standards to review this situation

[17] Kanare.
[18] Alfred Dube and Andreas Koenig, "FINAL REPORT Self-Reliance and Sustainable Livelihoods for Refugees in Dadaab and Kakuma Camps" (Geneva: UNHCR and ILO, 2005).
[19] Helen Morris and Frances Voon, "Discussion Paper on UNHCR's Policy and Practice of Incentive Payments to Refugees" (Geneva: UNHCR, December 2014).
[20] Dube and Koenig; Morris and Voon; Clacherty, G & Clacherty, J., "The Lives and Work of Refugee Incentive Workers: A Qualitative Research Study in Three Refugee Contexts in Africa" (Africa Refugee Network: OXFAM, 2022).
[21] Morris and Voon, "Discussion Paper on UNHCR's Policy and Practice of Incentive Payments to Refugees."p. 3.

[of incentive labor]. In the same context, the ILO may feel motivated to raise this issue and the strict prohibition of refugees working in Kenya with the national Ministry of Labour."[22] The 2014 UNHCR report compares the volunteer vs. working rights approach, and ends with the recommendation that incentive work should be grounded in a labor rights-based approach that acknowledges refugees' right to work. Even in contexts where refugees are not legally allowed to work, the report argues, UNHCR should "build a favorable policy environment for refugee self-reliance, including recognition of rights to employment and freedom of movement."[23] Furthermore, the 2014 report urges UNHCR to develop clear written guidelines about the status of incentive workers, noting there are none to this date, though some humanitarian organizations have developed their own guidelines.[24]

Nearly a decade after this 2014 report, the tension between volunteering vs. the right to work has been inadvertently reproduced in a study conducted by African Refugee Forum and Oxfam on incentive work in three African countries (Malawi, Kenya, Uganda).[25] This qualitative study framed incentive workers within the category of "incentive workers/volunteers," noting that in some situations there was no payment (so they were literally volunteers) and because NGOs themselves described refugee workers who received small payments as volunteers.[26] Throughout the report, however, quotations from refugee participants as well as citations of prior reports and scholarship consistently reinforce an employment rights-based approach to incentive work. As the report concludes, "there will need to be ongoing advocacy and political will to change the legal context in the countries where this research took place."[27] Published in 2022, this report comes nearly twenty years after the other previous reports that seem to be suggesting the very same thing.

Aside from formal reports, those administering programs in Kakuma sometimes argue, in side remarks or offhand comments, that the incentive "motivation" should be closely tied to the existing wage economy of

[22] Dube and Koenig, "FINAL REPORT Self-Reliance and Sustainable Livelihoods for Refugees in Dadaab and Kakuma Camps," 28–29.
[23] Morris and Voon, "Discussion Paper on UNHCR's Policy and Practice of Incentive Payments to Refugees."p. 18.
[24] There is one inserted box in the 2014 devoted to the subject of "Guidelines on refugee interpreters." The report notes that it is *only* in relation to refugee interpreters who work for IOM that there are set guidelines for incentive work. In our previous research, with this same research team, we learned that most interpreters who worked for IOM felt the conditions were considerably better than in other humanitarian agencies, including and especially the UNHCR. Morris and Voon, "Discussion Paper on UNHCR's Policy and Practice of Incentive Payments to Refugees," p. 20.
[25] Clacherty, G & Clacherty, J., "The Lives and Work of Refugee Incentive Workers: A Qualitative Research Study in Three Refugee Contexts in Africa."
[26] Clacherty, G & Clacherty, J., 5.
[27] Clacherty, G & Clacherty, J., 43.

the working class in Kenya.[28] Asking for more than this implicitly demonstrates what Oka refers to as a common humanitarian sentiment of "refugee ingratitude," the result of problematic ideas of charity.[29] This logic resonates with longstanding assumptions within a humanitarian worldview about what constitutes a "real" refugee. Based on her research among Hutu refugees in the 1990s, Lisa Malkki shows that in the social imagination of refugee administrators, refugees are universalized as a generalized population of displaced peoples and that "a real or proper refugee should not be well off."[30] One troubling effect of this dehistoricized and universal category is that refugees become what Malkki calls "speechless emissaries," whose stories are not to be trusted and who "speak" to the world largely through conventional images of mass suffering and anonymous bodies that flicker across television screens far away.[31] Such images tend to eviscerate the politics and histories behind *why* people became refugees in the first place, as well as the politics and histories behind the humanitarian work that aims to serve them. These are complicated histories of philanthropy and charities, histories of empires and colonial rule, histories of international law, histories of civilizational and liberation discourses, histories of independence and decolonization. Such images provoke compassion, Malkki argues, but they have the unfortunate effect of making it "difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply mute victims."[32]

Conclusion

Since the time of Malkki's writing, there has been a notable effort to include more refugees in policy conversations, an effort to begin addressing refugees' wish and need to work, and to at least gesture towards hearing more "refugee voices." The 2023 Global Refugee Forum held in Geneva, where the global organizations that serve refugees gather and make pledges on their next commitments, included 320 refugee or stateless participants, 8 % of the total number of participants and more than four times the number of refugee participants at the previous Forum in 2019. The scripts through which many of the refugees publicly speak, however, remain written (literally or figuratively) by the humanitarian world. Thus, many of Malkki's observations still ring true, especially within mainstream representation. Within this representational landscape, the film "Incentive Labor" (and the filmmakers' previous film, "*The Bridge")*

[28] In one conversation between the researchers and a person administering programs in Kakuma, the administrator asked rhetorically whether we knew how much Kenyan nannies were paid? The implication was that incentive labor (regardless of skill or qualification) should not be paid more than a Kenyan working-class worker.
[29] Oka, "Coping with the Refugee Wait," 25.
[30] Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization," *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 383, https://doi.org/10.1525/can.1996.11.3.02a00050.
[31] Malkki, "Speechless Emissaries."
[32] Malkki, 378.

seeks to intervene as a platform for advocacy about incentive work more generally through scripts that have been written by refugees outside of a humanitarian setting.

There are other signs that change in incentive labor may be occurring in small, slow, and perhaps under-the-table ways. The Refugee Act 2021 explicitly states:

> A refugee recognized under this Act shall have the right to engage individually or in a group, in gainful employment or enterprise or to practice a profession or trade where he holds qualifications recognized by competent authorities in Kenya.[33]

In the documentary, Ajang tells the filmmakers that there are a few international organizations that do not rely on the incentive labor system, and pay nationals and refugees equally according to their skills and expertise. When the filmmakers of "Incentive Labor" approached this model organization to ask further about their practices, they were told that the organization was not willing to be part of the film, suggesting potential controversy arising from not relying on incentive labor schemes. Several months later, Sara Leedom, the Chief of Operations for Inkomoko, met Kamoso Bertrand, the director of *Incentive Labor*, and agreed to be interviewed for the film. In the film, Leedom states that the organization always considers "fairness and equality as one of our core drivers" and suggests that "some organizations see refugees as cheap labor. That if you hire an incentive worker on incentive wage rather than paying market rates. To me," Leedom continues, "that's exploitive labor practices." Both the film and Leedom herself suggest that Inkomoko could become a model for other organizations. As Leedom suggests, following the Kenya Shirika plan, "the concept of incentive worker is something that will hopefully die out."[34]

In conclusion, we suggest that "incentive work" reveals what has been called "Janus-faced humanitarianism."[35] Like the two-faced Roman god, the same humanitarian organization can be both a protector and a transgressor of refugee rights. Consider, for example, the following description of a typical day for an incentive worker that Richard Ntirampeba recites in the documentary:

> We are challenged psychologically. You know, when you see someone is treated well and you are not treated the same. Let me give you an example. When it reaches 12:00 at lunchtime, the vehicle

[33] Republic of Kenya, "The Refugees Act 2021" (Government of Kenya, November 23, 2021), 218.
[34] Republic of Kenya, "Shirika Plan" (Ministry of Interior and National Administration, April 2023). This plan aims to promote the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees by transforming camps into integrated communities.
[35] Guglielmo Verdirame and Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, *Rights in Exile: Janus-Faced Humanitarianism*, Studies in Forced Migration ; v. 17 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005).

> comes to pick up national stuff. They then go for lunch. You are left there. And later they come back in the afternoon to go on with work with you. Whether you eat or not, no one cares, and then you have that feeling in your mind, saying, 'Oh - I am a refugee. I am not a national staff like others." And, of course, you will work, but your heart will not feel good.

This separation during meal times, enforced by the differences in pay, adds to the sense of indignity and social hierarchy that constitute incentive work. Clearly, these words reflect extremely broad issues in which incentive labor has come to be entangled, highlighting how, despite its promise of empowerment, it has come to be emblematic of the marginalization it seeks to address. Perhaps it is time to ask whether incentive labor is actively undermining refugees' sense of purpose, working to achieve a kind of economic self-reliance that is not sufficient to create a meaningful life.[36]

Incentive labor still suffers from many of the same problems identified by the ILO and UNHCR back in 2005. How long will this conversation continue among humanitarian organizations? When will these reports begin to start promoting the real changes they suggest are needed? When will organizations like ILO and UNHCR begin to listen to what workers like John Ajang, Richard Ntirampeba, and Nasrun Titus are saying about incentive labor – and the possible solutions they suggest?

Will it be another 20 years?

[36] Mohamed, Mulki, 2024. "Livelihoods and Prosperity: Exploring Self-Reliance Beyond Economics in Kakuma Refugee Camp." See this report for further discussion on these points. https://riftvalley.net/publication/livelihoods-and-prosperity-exploring-self-reliance-beyond-economics-in-kakuma-refugee-camp/

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This case was written by Laura Kunreuther and Mulki Mohamed with inputs from Ifigenia Gianne, Kamoso Jean Bertrand, and Adam Mohamed Bashar, and is based on the video case by Photofilm4Change (Kamoso Jean Bertrand, Mulki Mohamed, and Adam Mohamed Bashar). The faculty advisor is Laura Kunreuther.