



Building Climate-Resilient Livelihoods for Urban Refugees:

Lessons from Re:BUiLD Program in Nairobi

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Introduction

Re:BUiLD - *Refugees in East Africa: Boosting Urban Innovations for Livelihoods Development* – is a five-year initiative that presents a unique opportunity to explore how climate resilience can be integrated into urban refugee livelihoods programming. Launched in 2021 by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) with a €30 million grant from the IKEA Foundation, Re:BUiLD is one of the largest private investments in urban refugee livelihoods in East Africa (IRC, 2024). The program is implemented in two cities, Nairobi (Kenya) and Kampala (Uganda), reaching a total of + **20,000** refugee and vulnerable hosts. In Nairobi, Re:BUiLD works in refugee-concentrated neighborhoods to provide skills training, business support, and financial services that lead toward economic self-reliance. From the outset, Re:BUiLD recognized both the challenges and opportunities of a changing climate and worked to support clients in developing climate-resilient livelihoods that also contribute to broader climate solutions (IRC, 2024).

Challenges to youth employment in the green sector, with a focus on refugee livelihoods:

According to UNHCR Statistics, Nairobi is home to a significant population of urban refugees and asylum-seekers – roughly 114,000 as of 2025, which is about 14% of Kenya's total refugee population (UNHCR Kenya, 2025). These refugees mostly live in the city's informal settlements (such as Eastleigh, Kibera, Kayole), alongside low-income Kenyan hosts. They face dual vulnerability: economic precarity linked to displacement, and climate-related risks tied to living in poorly serviced low-income neighborhoods. Climate change impacts in Nairobi are acute and worsening. Episodes of extreme rainfall regularly trigger flash floods that wash away homes along rivers (e.g. the Ngong River) (Pashayan, 2024).

These climate stresses compound the economic challenges urban refugees already face. Until recently, refugees in Kenya had restricted rights to work and move, pushing many into informal, marginal jobs mostly in confined zones. They often lack social safety nets or financial reserves to cushion them to recover from shocks. However, there is a growing recognition that improving refugees' livelihoods and building climate resilience must go hand-in-hand in cities like Nairobi (Refugees International, 2024).

Youth employment in Nairobi's green economy is hindered by deep-rooted structural obstacles, particularly for refugee populations. Employment prospects in green sectors remain limited and highly competitive. National data reveals that overall unemployment in Kenya is at 6.2%, but among youth aged 20–24, the rate jumps to **16.8%**, while those aged 15–19 face an **11.1%** unemployment rate, underscoring fierce competition for entry-level positions—including those in emerging green industries (Mayors Migration Council, 2023).

Few private-sector employment opportunities for refugees: Private enterprises are often hesitant to onboard refugee employees due to legal and administrative constraints, such as lack of clear documentation or permits (UNHCR Kenya, 2025). The availability of green-skills training institutions is scarce—most TVET colleges lack market-aligned curricula in fields like solar energy, e-mobility, waste recycling, and sustainable agriculture.

A further challenge lies in the **absence of a standardized national green skills framework**, which undermines the credibility and recognition of training outcomes. Without a harmonized certification system, refugees struggle to demonstrate competencies across employers or sectors. Social and perceived barriers further complicate matters. Green jobs—particularly in recycling or urban farming—are often viewed as low-status or “dirty,” reducing their appeal among the youth. When refugee youth do enter the sector, they often encounter **insecure, informal working conditions**, which expose them to exploitation and lack of labor protections.

Investing in “green” livelihoods offers a promising solution to these intertwined challenges. Green jobs – those that contribute to environmental sustainability and climate adaptation – can provide refugees with more stable incomes and help mitigate the very climate threats endangering their communities (IRC, 2023b). At the same time, such jobs foster a healthier business environment and contribute to a more sustainable future. For example, employing refugees in sectors like renewable energy, waste recycling, sustainable agriculture, and urban greening creates economic opportunities that also reduce pollution, expand clean energy, and make neighborhoods safer. “Good green jobs” (Mayors Migration Council, 2023) offer opportunities for reducing emissions and improving living conditions for the most vulnerable. Crucially, the Nairobi County Plans are pushing for inclusion of marginalized groups in these opportunities (UNHCR Kenya, 2025). This policy shift means urban refugees can now be active participants in the green economy, rather than being treated only as victims of climate change (Refugees International, 2024).

Re:BUiLD Climate-Resilient Livelihood Strategy:

A distinguishing feature of Re:BUiLD is its deliberate focus on **climate-resilient livelihoods** (jobs and enterprises) that can withstand climate shocks and contribute to environmental sustainability. The program recognized early that many conventional livelihoods were becoming untenable due to climate change. Thus, Re:BUiLD piloted new livelihood pathways in the “green economy,” aiming to simultaneously boost refugee incomes and enhance the city’s climate resilience. By June 2025, Re:BUiLD had offered green livelihood services to **143 clients (41 Female, 102 Male)** in Nairobi. All the services were delivered in underserved urban areas where refugee and Kenyan youth face similar livelihood struggles. Re:BUiLD’s inclusive approach supports both refugees and host community members to acquire skills and access work opportunities together fostering social cohesion and strengthening community support for refugee integration (IRC, 2024).

Importantly, Re:BUiLD was designed as an evidence-driven and adaptive program. The team continuously monitors outcomes and conducts evaluations to learn what works. By integrating learning and adaptation, the program stays responsive to Nairobi’s dynamic urban economy and evolving climate reality. The strong partnership network (including local businesses, government agencies, and community organizations) further enable Re:BUiLD to link program clients to real economic opportunities (IRC, 2024).

Green Livelihood Interventions in Re:BUiLD Nairobi

Re:BUiLD’s climate-resilient livelihoods work in Nairobi prioritized potential innovative interventions. Key interventions that were implemented include:

- **Solar Energy Technicians:** The program placed clients in solar photovoltaic installation and maintenance training. The clients gained skills to work in the growing off-grid solar sector, helping expand clean energy access in low-income communities. This supports Nairobi’s goal of achieving 100% renewable energy by 2030 while creating new jobs. A total of **45** Re:BUiLD clients have already entered the solar industry, installing solar home solutions in informal settlements that lack grid electricity (IRC, 2024).
- **Electronic Repair and E-Waste Recycling:** Re:BUiLD partnered with e-waste recycling firms ([WEEE Center in Nairobi](#)) to train 33 refugees in electronics repair and safe recycling of electronic waste. E-waste is a **rapidly growing environmental challenge** – Kenya generates over 50,000 metric tons of electronic waste each year (National Environment Management Authority -NEMA 2022). Through Re:BUiLD apprenticeships, participants learnt to refurbish discarded devices (phones, computers, appliances) and extract recyclable materials, turning “garbage” into economic opportunity. One success story is [Kennedy Swara](#) (IRC, 2023a)



Photo Credit: May 24, 2022, Nairobi, Kenya. The Re:BUiLD program supported clean energy solutions by equipping female clients with market relevant skills in fields like solar technology and electrical wiring, sectors that are typically male dominated. (PHOTO: Moses Odokonyero for the IRC).

Waste Recycling and Circular Economy: Beyond e-waste, Re:BUiLD promotes other circular economy ventures. The program clients were trained in **upcycling textiles** (transforming waste fabrics into marketable products) and sustainable fashion production in collaboration with Refugee Led Organization – L’Afrikana. Others have engaged in community recycling initiatives for plastics and organic waste. By developing small businesses that convert waste into value – such as making eco-friendly building materials or compost from organic waste – refugees are earning income while cleaning up their neighborhoods. These activities reduce waste in streets and dumps, contributing to flood prevention and a healthier environment. By engaging refugees and host community members in these diverse green initiatives, Re:BUiLD has demonstrated that **climate action can be a driver of employment creation**. Refugee youths, often overlooked in economic planning, have shown aptitude in trades like solar installation and recycling when given training and support. Many of these sectors (renewables, waste management, clean cooking) are growth areas in Nairobi, so skills gained are likely to remain in demand (IRC, 2024).

Green Livelihood Interventions in Re:BUiLD Nairobi

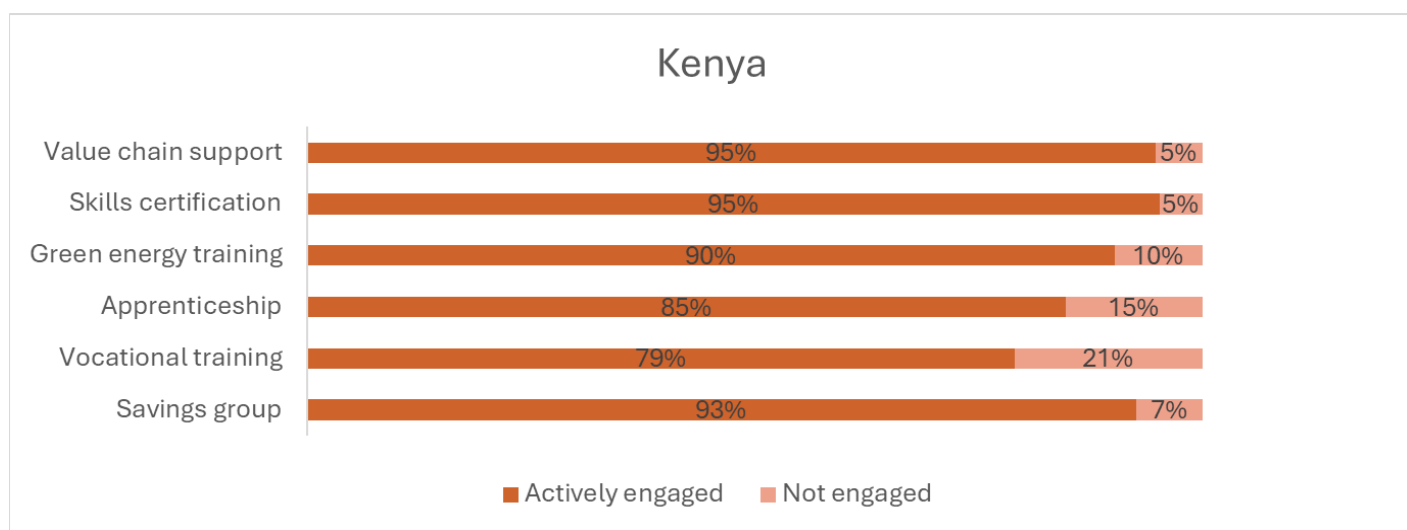
After two years of implementation, Re:BUiLD's approach of linking refugees to green livelihoods has yielded encouraging results in Nairobi. **Program monitoring and an independent evaluation** (covering services delivered in 2021–2025) provide data on who was reached and how their economic status changed (IRC, 2024). Table 1 below summarizes some key metrics from Re:BUiLD's green and other sector livelihoods efforts and overall outcomes:

Key Metric (Nairobi Program)	Result
Clients served (Nairobi 2021–June 2025):-	10,221 total (5,800 refugees; 4,421 hosts; ~60% female)
Clients in “green” skills tracks (Kenya):	~143 in Green Energy training
Economic activity rate post-program:	~88% of graduates were found to be engaged in income-generating activity following the skilling interventions (employment or business)
Improved income after program:	49% of those working (1479) reported increased income
Green track employment rate:	90% of clients in the “Green Energy” service track gained employment or started a business.

Table 1: Select outcomes from Re:BUiLD Nairobi's green livelihoods efforts and related initiatives.

Several patterns emerge from the data. First, **participation was highly inclusive** of women and host community members. Nearly two-thirds of Re:BUiLD's Nairobi clients were female, reflecting an intentional effort to empower women (IRC, 2024). About half of participants were Kenyans from host communities, half refugees or asylum seekers. This mix has reportedly improved social cohesion – focus groups noted that joint training of refugees and hosts helped break down stereotypes and build mutual support.

Secondly, a significant proportion of graduates were able to translate training into **meaningful economic activities**. By June 2025, 88% of surveyed clients (1,299) in Nairobi and Kampala were engaged in income generating activities with 52% being in self-employment, 42% in wage-based employment and 6% in seasonal labor. Within the sample, 48 green energy clients were sampled and 90% reported having income generating activities (see the 3rd bar in the figure below). This is notable given the challenging labor market and suggests the program's market-driven approach is paying off. Those not yet economically active (around 12%) were often still in training or searching, and Re:BUiLD planned additional “bridging” support to assist them. (IRC, 2024).



Clients engaged in meaningful economic activities in Kenya

Re:BUiLD's interventions have also begun to **yield broader benefits for the community and environment**. The e-waste program, for instance, not only created jobs for people like Kennedy Swara (IRC, 2023a) but also helped recycle hazardous materials that would otherwise leach toxins into the soil and water. Solar trainees have contributed to expanding clean energy in informal settlements, bringing electricity to homes in a sustainable way. These co-benefits are hard to quantify but significant: refugees are emerging as contributors to Nairobi's climate goals, whether by reducing waste through recycling or by greening public spaces. This positive narrative – *refugees as agents of resilience* – has started to replace the old narrative of refugees as passive victims.

Finally, the program's impact on individuals is best illustrated by stories: Beyond Swara's case, many refugees have launched micro-enterprises after training. For example, some refugee women used business grants and skills from Re:BUiLD to start **upcycled clothing businesses**, selling refurbished garments in local markets. In another case, a youth from the host community who apprenticed in solar installation now earns a steady income installing panels on kiosks and apartment rooftops (IRC, 2024). These success stories show the **transformational potential** of climate livelihoods when the right support system is in place.

Lessons Learned from Implementation

The experience of implementing Re:BUiLD in Nairobi over the past few years offers several **lessons and best practices** for climate-resilient livelihood programming:

- **Intentionally Link Livelihoods to Climate Adaptation:** Programs should design livelihood activities that **directly address climate risks**. In Re:BUiLD, choosing to develop green sectors (renewable energy, waste recycling, climate-smart agriculture) created a win-win: refugees gain employment, **and** their work makes the community safer and more sustainable (IRC, 2023b). This intentional linkage amplifies impact. Livelihoods support and climate adaptation need not be separate silos – they can be integrated for mutual benefit.
- **Ensure Training is Market-Driven:** Skills training should target *growth industries* in the urban economy. Re:BUiLD found success focusing on emerging sectors like e-waste management and solar energy where there was growing demand for labor in Nairobi. By contrast, training in oversaturated trades yields limited employment. Market-driven, financially viable activities also mean graduates can sustain themselves without long-term subsidies (IRC, 2024).
- **Partner with Local Enterprises for Hands-On Experience (Dual Training):** Collaboration with businesses, government initiatives, and NGOs is **vital**. Re:BUiLD formed partnerships for apprenticeships (e.g. with WEEE Center for e-waste, with local solar companies, and with city greening projects) to provide trainees on-the-job exposure (IRC, 2024). These apprenticeships not only build practical skills but also often lead to job offers (as employers come to trust the trainees' capacities).
- **Prioritize Inclusion (Women and Hosts):** Making programs inclusive of women and host community members is both equitable and **strategically smart**. Re:BUiLD set a high female participation target (60%) and achieved ~64% women, which has empowered many women in non-traditional trades. Including host community youth alongside refugees has reduced social tensions and fostered a sense of shared purpose. This is critical in urban areas where refugees live amongst locals (IRC, 2024). An inclusive approach also broadens the program's impact – climate shocks do not discriminate by status, therefore building resilience among all vulnerable urban residents creates a stronger communal safety net.

Scaling Up: Opportunities and Recommendations

The positive outcomes from Re:BUiLD and similar initiatives in Nairobi point to a clear opportunity: **scaling green jobs and climate-resilient livelihoods for urban refugees**. To expand impact, concerted action is needed from multiple stakeholders – local government, donors, NGOs, private sector, and the refugee communities themselves. Below are recommendations for each, to build on Nairobi's momentum:

- **Nairobi City Government:** *Integrate refugees into urban climate plans and job programs.* The county should explicitly include refugees in its climate adaptation projects and green economy strategies (Refugees International, 2024). This means allocating slots for refugees in city-run green job initiatives (e.g. tree planting crews, waste management teams) and ensuring they can access any green enterprise funds or climate resilience resources. City-led hubs like the [CHOICE Innovation Center](#) are a great model – it is training 100+ youth, including refugees, for green jobs and incubating eco-startups cleaning the Nairobi River. The county can expand such hubs in more neighborhoods. Local authorities could also create incentives (tax breaks, public recognition) for companies that hire refugees in green sectors.
- **National Government and Policy Makers:** *Fully implement Kenya's progressive refugee law and commit funding to refugee inclusion.* The 2021 Refugees Act is a game-changer, granting freedom of movement and work rights to refugees. Now it needs robust implementation – issuing refugees with work permits, IDs, and inclusion in national programs. Specifically for livelihoods: ensure refugees can enroll in public vocational institutes for green skills, and benefit from national climate finance (Refugees International, 2024). The national government should also invest in infrastructure in refugee-hosting urban areas (e.g. flood drainage, electricity) as part of its climate adaptation plans, which will amplify the impact of individual livelihoods by reducing external risks. Finally, **coordinate donors and agencies** under a national urban refugee strategy so that successful pilots like Re:BUiLD can be expanded or replicated in other cities (e.g. Mombasa, Nakuru, Kisumu) facing similar challenges (IRC, 2024).
- **Donors and Development Partners:** *Invest in scaling up and replicating green livelihood programs* for urban refugees. The Re:BUiLD pilot benefited from patient, flexible capital from a private foundation; more donors (bilateral, multilateral, philanthropic) should now step in to grow these efforts. This could fund an expansion of Re:BUiLD to reach thousands more in Nairobi or support new initiatives in other urban centers with refugee populations. Priority areas for funding include: dual vocational training facilities focused on green trades, **micro-grants or seed capital** for refugees starting green businesses, and incubation of social enterprises that employ refugees in recycling, urban farming, etc. Donors should also support rigorous research (RCTs, impact evaluations) to continue building evidence on what works. In designing funding, it's crucial to allow adaptive management – programs should be able to iterate and not be penalized for course corrections.
- **NGOs and Program Implementers:** *Adopt holistic, partnership-based approaches* when rolling out livelihood interventions. NGOs should incorporate climate risk assessments into livelihood program design – e.g. choose training that is forward-looking given climate projections (like solar solutions for a renewable energy future, or drought-resistant farming techniques). Where possible, implementers should collaborate rather than work in silos. For instance, coordination between humanitarian NGOs and environmental organizations can create stronger programs (one provides community trust and livelihood expertise, the other technical climate knowledge). In Nairobi, Re:BUiLD linked with local CBOs, the private sector, and even global initiatives (Global Compact on Refugees, n.d.) to enhance effectiveness (IRC, 2024).
- **Private Sector:** *Engage refugees as part of the green workforce and supply chain.* Companies in renewable energy, waste management, manufacturing, and agribusiness can benefit from the talents of refugees, while fulfilling corporate social responsibility goals. Employers should partner with programs to offer internships, apprenticeships or job placements for refugee graduates – much like WEEE Center did (IRC, 2023a). Additionally, businesses can support refugee entrepreneurs through

mentorship or by integrating them as suppliers. For example, a recycling company could source collected plastics from refugee-led collection groups, creating market linkage. The private sector should also collaborate in creating **innovative challenges or incubators** targeting climate solutions from refugee and host youth (perhaps with seed funding for the best ideas in solar, waste recycling, etc.). With the right enabling environment (credit, documentation), many refugees can become successful green entrepreneurs – representing a fresh market segment for banks and investors to serve. Overall, the private sector’s resources and market access are critical for scaling what began as donor-funded pilot projects into sustainable enterprises.

Conclusion

The objectives and outputs of Re:BUiLD from piloting green-skills (solar installation, e-waste recycling and circular-economy enterprises), reaching over 7,529 clients in Nairobi and Kampala with targeted green cohorts, delivering high post-training economic-activity rates and strong inclusion outcomes translate directly into operationalizing the IRC’s Climate-Smart programming priorities.

Scaling such successes is not just a humanitarian imperative, but a **smart development strategy** for cities. As climate change accelerates, all vulnerable urban populations (refugees and nationals alike) will need livelihood support that weathers the storms – literally and figuratively. Programs that equip communities with green skills and tools will pay dividends in reduced disaster losses and strengthened local economies. Nairobi’s bold steps – including policy reforms to integrate refugees and initiatives to grow green jobs – have set the stage. The challenge now is to expand on this foundation so that thousands more refugees and low-income youth can benefit from climate-resilient livelihoods. This will take coordinated effort, long-term commitment, and resources, but the case has been made that it is indeed achievable.

By intentionally linking livelihoods to climate adaptation, using market-driven training, building local partnerships for apprenticeships, and embedding learning and adaptation in program design, Re:BUiLD exemplifies the IRC Climate Strategy’s guiding principles (informed, partner, adapt, client-centered, transformative) and advances core outcomes such as climate-resilient livelihoods, green jobs, and risk-informed programming. Re:BUiLD converts IRC’s climate resilience strategy into measurable, scalable practice i.e. reducing environmental harm, strengthening urban resilience, and creating sustainable economic pathways for refugees and hosts that the IRC can replicate and scale across other fragile, climate-vulnerable contexts.

In conclusion, the case of Re:BUiLD in Nairobi offers a hopeful message: by **reframing refugees as contributors to the green economy**, we unlock new solutions to urban poverty and climate change at the same time. Development organizations and city leaders would do well to replicate and adapt these lessons. With the right support, urban refugees can be innovators, workers, and entrepreneurs at the forefront of building climate-smart cities – transforming their own lives and the future of the communities they call home.

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In partnership with the IKEA Foundation, Re:BUiLD brings together the International Rescue Committee (IRC), the Center for Global Development (CGD), Open Capital (OCA), Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA) and Nairobi City County Government (NCCG). Re:BUiLD is committed to generate and share evidence for innovative, sustainable livelihood solutions that can be adopted to support refugees and host residents in other cities in East Africa and beyond.

The opinions expressed in this brief belong to the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Re:BUiLD's funding entities and partners.

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