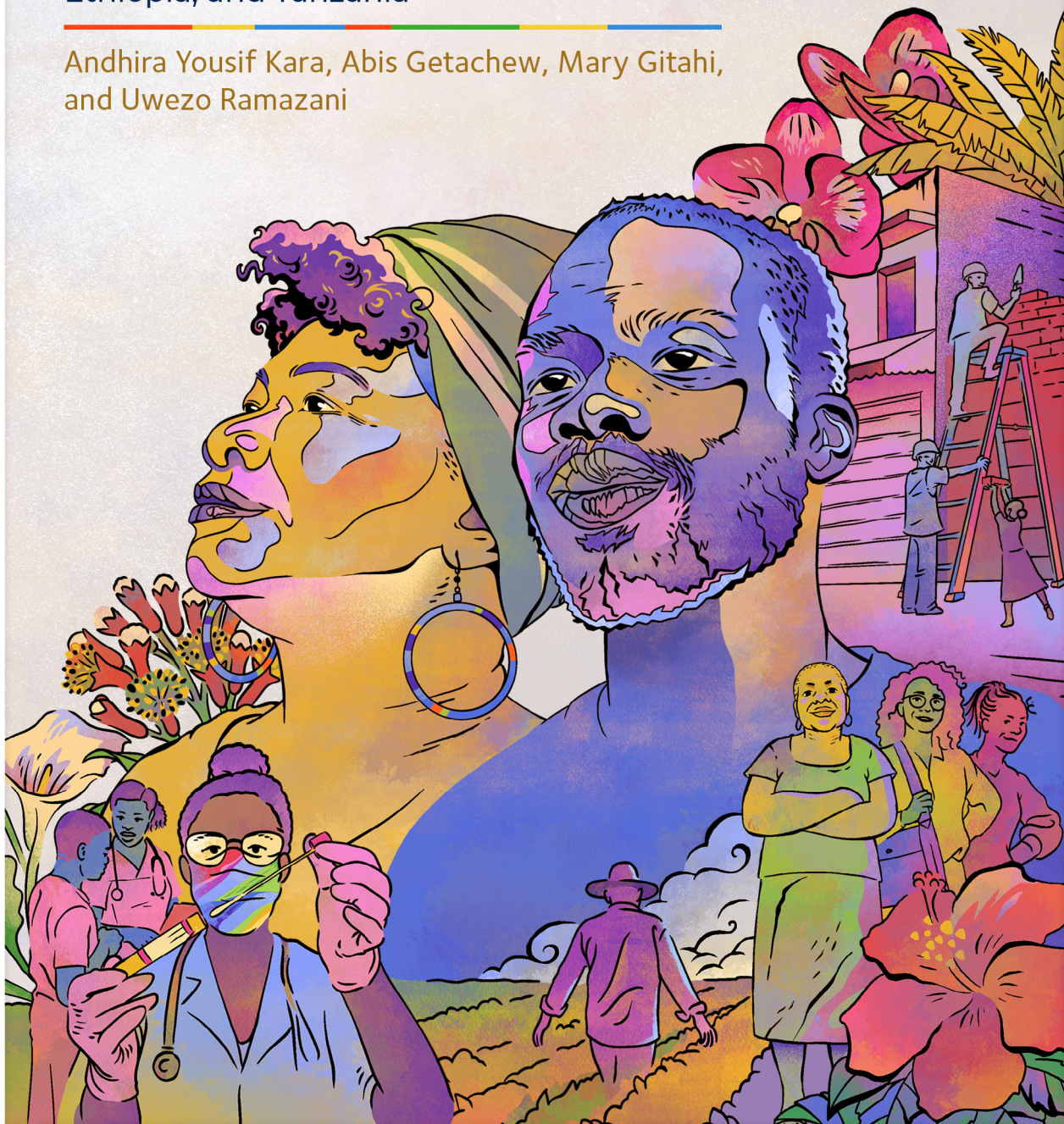


REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS IN EAST AFRICA

Community Perceptions in Kenya, Uganda,
Ethiopia, and Tanzania

Andhira Yousif Kara, Abis Getachew, Mary Gitahi,
and Uwezo Ramazani



About the Refugee-Led Research Series

The Refugee-Led Research Series publishes primary and secondary research that has been authored by individuals who have been affected by forced displacement. The Series is comprised of 'Research Reports' and 'Working Papers'. We prioritise papers that apply ethical and rigorous research methods to capture the priorities of displaced communities. Through the Refugee-Led Research Series, we aim to provide evidence to stakeholders to advance policies and programmes that are responsive to refugee community needs.

About the RLRH

The Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) is an initiative of the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) at the University of Oxford. RLRH supports individuals with lived experience of displacement to become leaders in the field of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies. We do so by creating opportunities for researchers with displacement backgrounds to lead primary and secondary research studies, from start to finish. Our main research interests relate to 1) livelihoods and self-reliance; and 2) leadership and participation of displaced populations in humanitarian response and policy. RLRH also offers complementary academic programming to a global cohort of students who have been affected by displacement, supporting access to graduate degrees and professional development opportunities. The mission of RLRH is embodied in our leadership structure: the majority of our team have lived experience of displacement. Our offices are in Oxford and in Nairobi at the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA).

About LERRN

LERRN is the Local Engagement Refugee Response Network. We are a team of researchers and practitioners committed to promoting protection and solutions with and for refugees. Our goal is to ensure that refugee research, policy, and practice are shaped by a more inclusive, equitable, and informed collective engagement of civil society. Through collaborative research, training, and knowledge-sharing, we aim to improve the functioning of the global refugee regime and ensure more timely protection and rights-based solutions for refugees.

Funders

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About the study

This study was supported by the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) at Carleton University, and the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) at the University of Oxford. In East Africa, LERRN and RLRH also collaborated with the Dadaab Response Association (DRA), which led a case study in the Dadaab Refugee Camp. The report was prepared by Mary Gitahi (Uganda), Andhira Kara (Kenya), Abis Getachew (Ethiopia), and Uwezo Ramazani (Tanzania), with support from Pauline Vidal (Research Facilitator, RLRH).

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Acronyms

ACBON	Association of Community-Based Organisations in Nakivale
CBO	Community-Based Organisation
DRA	Dadaab Response Association
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
DRS	Department of Refugee Services
FASSA	Fighting Against Silliness School in Africa
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IBIEN	Institut Biblique International Evangelique de Nundu
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
IRC	International Rescue Committee
KII	Key Informant Interview
LERRN	Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (Carleton University)
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Associated Communities
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
OSF	Open Society Foundations
POC	People of Concern
RADO	Rural Aid and Development Organization
RAI	Resilience Action International
RCC	Refugee Central Committee
RCO	Refugee Community Organisation
RELON	Refugee-Led Organization Network
RLI	Refugee-Led Initiative
RLO	Refugee-Led Organisation
RLRH	Refugee-Led Research Hub (University of Oxford)
RRLI	Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative
RSC	Refugee Studies Centre (University of Oxford)
SIR	Solidarity Initiative for Refugees
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
YARID	Young African Refugee for Integral Development

Executive summary

Introduction

Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in East Africa play a vital role in meeting community needs. To date, however, there is a lack of rigorous evidence on the impact of RLO responses on displaced communities, how RLOs are perceived by the communities in which they operate, and what factors condition the variation in response and impact of RLOs.

This study, led by Carleton University’s Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) at the University of Oxford, seeks to fill this gap in 11 urban and camp/settlement sites across Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. A team of researchers affected by displacement led the study from start to finish and implemented two phases of data collection between May 2021 and June 2022.



Conceptualising RLOs in East Africa

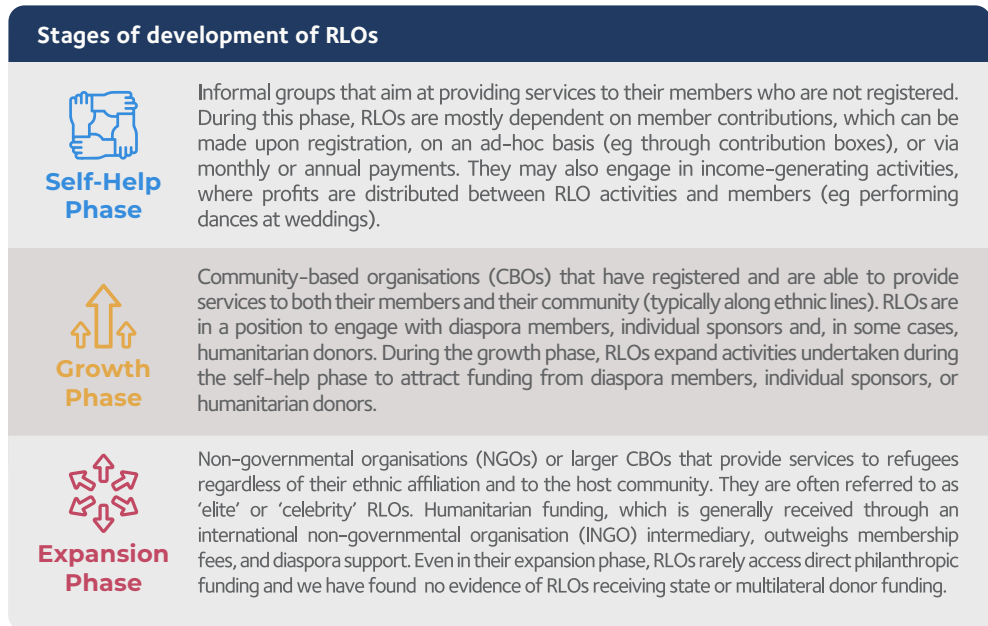
Our definition of RLOs is adapted to the diversity of forms they take in East Africa. RLOs include any organisations, associations, coalitions, formal or informal networks, faith-based groups, and initiatives led by refugees or asylum seekers in urban, rural, camp, and settlement settings. They may be registered or unregistered groups.

Their function is to respond to the humanitarian, developmental, or cultural needs of refugees and related host communities. They support their own members (self-help groups), their communities (special interest groups, ethnic groups), other refugees, and the host community. They generally prioritise their national community or the refugees who live where they operate, but also provide services to host community members where they are more integrated with nationals. RLOs may provide direct services or focus on advocacy. They may have for-profit elements, but those are used (fully or partially) to fund not-for-profit activities.¹

¹ We exclude from this definition refugee leadership bodies set up by authorities and UNHCR as they were not set up independently and their decisions are thus bound by authorities and UNHCR. We also exclude groups created as part of INGO programmes unless they have expanded their activities beyond their original objectives.

RLOs may include non-refugees in their boards and management teams, but key decision-makers and founders have lived experience of displacement. The team did not identify any RLOs that were organically set up by the host community and/or where the host community plays a role in decision-making. Management of larger RLOs tends to include one or two host community members from urban centres who are hired to facilitate registration and access to funds and networks.

We propose a conceptualisation of RLOs divided into three main stages of development, linked to their funding capacity.



Perceived impact of RLOs

Across organisations, beneficiaries speak positively about their experiences with RLOs. They note that RLOs treat them with more dignity; are better understanding of and adapted to their needs; provided fairer service delivery; are more accessible and less bureaucratic; enable more direct communication; offer more accountability; and are more open to serving unregistered refugees. RLOs also provide better paid opportunities for volunteers or staff.

Beneficiaries note that RLO services have impacted their well-being and self-reliance. This is particularly the case for marginalised or otherwise excluded beneficiaries or when the RLO provides a service which might not be legal. Positive impacts include the provision of micro-loans and emergency support; skills training; orientation and information; COVID-19 safety measures; culturally appropriate mental health support; and community cohesion. A minority of respondents note negative impacts, which include concerns over ethnic favouritism and RLOs functioning in a self-serving capacity for leaders. Refugees with limited knowledge on RLOs perceive no impact.

The importance of networks on RLO impact

If RLOs are unable to access further funding from humanitarian donors or diaspora support, and/or if they are unable to register, they stagnate at the self-help stage.

RLO success is significantly dependent on the leader's ability to access a range of networks, in particular humanitarian networks (Kenya, Uganda) and diaspora networks (Tanzania, Ethiopia). Personal and professional relations, gender, nationality and education influence access to these networks. Urban-based, English-speaking educated men are more likely to gain access. Women-led RLOs are more likely to remain at the self-help stage and struggle in obtaining further resources due to structural barriers and self-censorship. In most locations, RLO leaders tend to be current or former incentive workers hired by aid organisations.

Access to the diaspora and church-based organisations alleviates some challenges where access to aid organisations is restricted (Ethiopia, Tanzania). In efforts to generate alternative sources of funding, some RLOs establish larger income-generating operations. The private sector offers bank loans adapted to RLO needs in some locations (eg Nakivale in Uganda).

The regulatory framework as a major constraint in operating

Each state's regulatory framework affects RLOs in different ways. RLOs in Uganda and Kenya can operate openly even without registration, although it hinders access to funding. Unregistered RLOs in Ethiopia and Tanzania are unable to operate safely, and experience difficulty in opening bank accounts to receive funds. Despite significant progress and support from a range of stakeholders, registration in all four countries remains a challenge for RLOs led by refugees with low literacy levels or limited education, who lack networks with area chiefs and refugee supporting institutions, and who might not have funds to move from the camp/settlement to the relevant office. Restrictions to freedom of movement in Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania also impedes leaders' ability to develop their organisations.

The need for – and challenges with – partnerships

Partnerships bring exposure to RLOs and legitimise them to the donor community and, in some cases, to the refugee community. Many INGOs engage RLOs to access communities. In Uganda and Kenya, RLOs implement projects on behalf of INGOs on a short-term basis, the parameters of which are often pre-defined by aid organisations. In those instances, RLOs act as intermediaries between the community and aid organisations. In Ethiopia and Tanzania, partnerships largely consist of small-scale in-kind contributions.

Providing capacity building to RLOs is common in Kenya and Uganda and emerging in Tanzania and Ethiopia. RLOs are more likely to access partnerships when they are registered, have an online presence, have professionally connected leaders and can advocate publicly for inclusion. In Tanzania and Ethiopia, the restrictive environment does not grant RLOs power to contribute to discussions on localisation or on setting priorities for the refugee response.

Meaningful engagement remains sparse. While some aid organisations play an active role in transferring funding opportunities for RLOs (eg Cohere in Kenya), the funding models in the humanitarian sector, and larger INGOs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are slow to change.

Recommendations

When implementing recommendations, stakeholders should pay special attention to which RLOs are included, and which ones are excluded; how to engage them in meaningful, non-tokenistic ways; and how to ensure the sustained independence and added value of RLOs as they are increasingly included in the aid sector.

To donors

- **Provide direct funding to RLOs.** Both philanthropic and state donors should prioritise core funding and long-term projects. Donors should consider funding consortia of RLOs to ensure all RLOs can meet their objectives and enable RLO-to-RLO learning.
- **Consider funding unregistered self-help groups led by marginalised refugees.** Promoting women-led RLOs requires supporting groups in the self-help stage.
- **Adapt funding requirements to the specific needs of RLOs.** Donors should engage RLOs to set performance indicators jointly and continuously engage with them on key community priorities.
- **Consider setting up refugee-led monitoring groups to keep RLOs accountable.** These groups could include a donor representative, community members and community leaders. Participation in those groups should be funded and facilitated.
- **Advocate for policy change at the government level.** Donors should advocate for policy changes on RLO registration, recognition of existing initiatives, refugee documentation and access to infrastructure (eg banking).
- **Create space for RLOs to influence the humanitarian sector.** Donors should involve RLOs in meetings and fund associated participation and translation costs.

To governments and authorities

- **In Kenya and Uganda: simplify and communicate the registration process.** Governments should make registration systematic and straightforward and communicate clearly the steps required to register.
- **In Ethiopia and Tanzania: create policies that allow RLOs to register as CBOs.** In Tanzania, the government should set up a policy and guidelines for registration in line with the reality of RLOs. In Ethiopia, the government should implement provisions from the Refugees Proclamation of 2019 that allows refugees to create associations.
- **In camp and settlement settings: allocate land fairly to RLOs to set up their activities.** Authorities should continue providing land to RLOs and develop clear criteria for what activities and under which conditions RLOs can access land. To UNHCR

To UNHCR

- **Improve communication channels with RLOs.** In each country, UNHCR should develop a database of registered and unregistered RLOs and disseminate information about opportunities to RLOs in ways adapted to their needs. UNHCR should consider dedicating

a staff position to RLO engagement, held by a member of the refugee community with experience of community engagement across nationalities. This could help UNHCR meaningfully involve RLOs when planning their annual operations.

- **Implement and adapt global UNHCR policies towards RLOs at the field level.** UNHCR should set up regional advisory boards to promote the implementation of these policies and to adapt them to regional specificities. UNHCR should ensure that approved policies are known by UNHCR staff at the regional, national and field level.
- **Advocate for policy change at the government level.** UNHCR can partner with donors to advocate for changes on RLO registration, recognition of existing initiatives, refugee documentation and access to infrastructure with local and national authorities.

To aid organisations

- **Involve RLOs in decision-making through equal-partner consortia.** Aid organisations should engage RLOs as project co-owners from the outset.
- **Embed capacity development with funded projects.** Capacity-building activities that are embedded with project delivery are more likely to yield long-term results. Aid organisations should include capacity development as a core activity in the design of consortia.
- **Support the operationalisation of a remote one-stop service centre for RLOs.** Aid organisations should set up a team of accessible mentors that can help RLOs articulate and develop their projects and ensure it aligns with requirements.
- **Be long-term allies.** Aid organisations should manage expectations of what RLOs can achieve, engage in long-term support and partnerships, promote the ideas of refugees, give credit and recognition, and make space for RLO participation in decision-making.

To RLOs

- **Set up RLO-to-RLO partnerships on projects.** RLOs with better access to networks should include smaller RLOs in the delivery of services and set up equal partnerships with them to unlock access to partners and resources.
- **Ensure that networks are inclusive.** RLO networks should take transparent steps to include a range of marginalised groups in their structures.
- **Take steps to ensure community accountability.** RLOs should set up systems for record-keeping and record-sharing at the community level.

Beyond the findings of RLOs, this study demonstrates that researchers affected by displacement can lead methodologically rigorous studies from start to finish if provided with appropriate resources. We call for partners to continue supporting refugee-led research in topics that are meaningful to refugee communities through funding, facilitation and mentorship.

Introduction

Rationale and objectives

Emerging evidence suggests that refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in East Africa play a vital role in meeting community needs.² RLOs increasingly took centre stage during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing protection and assistance to refugee communities while other humanitarian organisations struggled to respond effectively.³

However, there is little discussion and a lack of systematic evidence to demonstrate and explain 1) the nature and scope of RLOs in East Africa; 2) the impact of RLOs on displaced communities; and 3) the factors that condition RLOs' varied responses and impact on displaced communities.

The study seeks to fill these knowledge gaps in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda by responding to the following research questions:

- 1. Nature of the response:** What is the nature, scope, and practices of RLO activities in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia?
- 2. Perceived impact of the response:** How is the impact of RLOs' responses on the displaced communities they serve perceived by diverse stakeholders (including regional actors, states, local authorities, humanitarian and development service providers, host communities, and refugees)?
- 3. Factors that condition the response and impact of RLOs:** What are the common factors that determine the response and impact of RLOs? What factors explain the variations in response and impact of RLOs in East Africa?

Research methods

To understand the nature and the changes brought about by RLOs, the study relies on the perceptions of RLO impact from a range of stakeholders, including the communities they serve and other members of the humanitarian system (including national and local authorities, and traditional humanitarian and development service providers).⁴ The study uses a qualitative approach to triangulate different data sources and ensure that different perspectives are captured and analysed, over two phases.

Phase 1 of data collection

Phase 1 of the study consisted of mapping RLOs in the four countries through a desk review, an online search, and rapid phone-based interviews. Preliminary mapping was critical to avoid overlooking smaller RLOs that may not have considerable resources, but still contribute to the well-being of their communities.

² See for instance: Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria. *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³ Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria, and Kate Pincock. 'Localising public health: refugee-led organisations as first and last responders in COVID-19', *World Development*, 139 (2021): 105311.

⁴ The term 'impact' is commonly used by donors in the development and humanitarian sectors, but it has not been consistently defined or conceptualised. In the context of impact evaluations, many use the term 'impact' to refer to an organisation's specific and measurable role in affecting a social result, requiring a counterfactual for assessment. This study adopts a broader definition of 'impact' and focuses on the 'significant or lasting change in people's lives' brought about by RLOs' activities. Chris Roche. *Impact Assessment for Development Agencies: Learning to Value Change*, Reprinted, Oxfam Development Guidelines (Oxfam, 2002).

- **Desk review:** This review followed a structured approach to allow the team to thoroughly explore the literature on RLOs in East Africa. This method entailed: 1) deriving specific and relevant sub-questions from the overarching research questions for the RLO study; 2) generating a list of keywords (eg ‘refugee’, ‘faith group’) and modifiers (eg ‘Kenya’, ‘Dadaab’); 3) inputting keywords into Google and Google Scholar; 4) rapidly screening these sources by recency and relevance; and 4) analysing the sources to assess their credibility. The strength of the findings of this desk review was limited by the lack of evidence on RLOs in East Africa. In Kenya and Uganda, the team relied heavily on *The Global Governed* by Betts, Easton-Calabria, and Pincock⁵ as the only high-quality academic publication that focuses on RLOs in both Uganda and Kenya. There was limited available information about RLOs and the forms that they take in Tanzania and Ethiopia. See [Annex 1](#) for the bibliography.
- **Online search:** The team also mapped out and gathered information about 178 RLOs in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Ethiopia by conducting a systematic online search, using a set list of keywords. This therefore excluded RLOs that do not have an online presence, impacting the team’s ability to identify a larger preliminary sample, especially in Ethiopia and Tanzania. Furthermore, when searching for RLOs online, the team used an aparameters were wide, some forms of RLOs may have been excluded from the mapping.
- **Rapid phone-based interviews:** As many RLOs do not have an online presence, further data collection was needed to map out active RLOs in each country and to better understand the diverse forms they can take. The team conducted rapid semi-structured interviews over the phone.

Stakeholder category	Ethiopia	Kenya	Tanzania	Uganda	Total
Refugees and community members	10	15	20	20	65
RLO representatives	2	5	7	7	24
Community leadership structures	2	6	6	6	20
Refugee supporting agencies	3	5	5	5	18
Representatives from mandated government institutions	3	3	3	3	12
Academic institutions and experts	2	2	2	2	8
RLO networks administrators	0	2	0	2	4
Total	25	38	43	45	151

Phase 2 of data collection

The team selected 15 RLOs per country (five in each study site) for in-depth examination. The selection of the RLOs was based on a mix of purposive and convenience sampling in all countries and on a set of criteria for selection that reflected the diversity of RLOs and a more exploratory approach. Special attention was given to the diversity in the sample,

⁵Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria. *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

and researchers set a minimum criteria for RLOs based on: 1) the RLO setting (camp versus urban); 2) registration status; 3) nationality, religion, gender, social status, education level, or age of RLO leaders; 4) the level of external relations and influence of non-refugee actors (including co-led organisations between RLOs and host community members); 5) their resources and access to funding; and 6) their stated objectives (eg social protection, artistic, for-profit).

The research team collected in-depth qualitative data on the 15 RLOs per country and the actors that benefit from them or are involved in refugee response.

- 60 key informant interviews (KIIs) with RLO leaders.
- 53 KIIs with external stakeholders, including state representatives, local authorities, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), other humanitarian and development service providers, academics, experts, and community leaders.
- 120 focus group discussions (FGDs) with beneficiaries and potential beneficiaries. FGDs took place with both direct beneficiaries – those who have received services from RLOs selected for the study – and potential beneficiaries. Potential beneficiaries refer to community members who fall under the stated mandate of RLOs selected for the study but who have not received services at the time of the study. Each FGD included five to eight participants.
- 60 FGDs with RLO managers, staff, and volunteers.

Tool	Ethiopia	Kenya	Tanzania	Uganda	Total
KIIs with RLO leaders	15	15	15	15	60
KIIs with external stakeholders	15	14	4	20	53
FGDs with beneficiaries of RLOs	15	15	15	15	60
FGDs with potential beneficiaries of RLOs	15	15	15	15	60
FGDs with RLO managers, staff and volunteers	15	15	15	15	60

Locations

The study was implemented in 11 urban and camp/settlement sites across East Africa (urban and camp):

- **Ethiopia:** Addis Ababa, Melkadida Refugee Camp, and Nguenyiel Refugee Camp
- **Kenya:** Nairobi, Kakuma Refugee Camp, and Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement⁶
- **Tanzania:** Nyarugusu Refugee Camp, and Dar es Salaam
- **Uganda:** Kampala, Nakivale Refugee Settlement, and Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement

⁶ Numbers for Kenya do not include the Dadaab case study. The Dadaab Response Association is collecting data on 5 RLOs in Dadaab and will conduct 15 KIIs with RLO leaders, 15 KIIs with external stakeholders, 15 FGDs with RLO beneficiaries, 15 FGDs with potential beneficiaries of RLOs, and 15 FGDs with RLO managers, staff, and volunteers. Findings from data collection in Dadaab will be published in a separate report prepared by the DRA.

A refugee-led study

Refugee researchers are typically included in research projects as assistants and data collectors, which creates exploitation and power imbalances between insider and outsider researchers in research projects.

This study was led by a team of four current and former refugee researchers based in the four countries. What makes our study different is that it is conducted by ‘us’ with displaced backgrounds from the start to the end, including the development of research questions, its methodology, data collection, data analysis, and report writing. It offered us an opportunity to enhance our research skills through supervision and mentorship from a pool of experienced non-refugee and refugee researchers. It also demonstrated that, given the right resources and support, refugee researchers can lead studies and contribute to knowledge production in the field of forced migration, thanks to our unique positionality as both professional researchers and displaced persons.

RLOs and beneficiaries reacted positively to being approached about this research project. RLOs were generally enthusiastic to know that research was being conducted on their work, especially smaller-scale initiatives, special interest groups (eg LGBTQ+ RLOs) and women-led groups that typically felt excluded from discussions around refugee participation. They had many questions about the research and what benefits it could bring to them. The research team took time to explain the scope and objectives of the study and to mitigate expectations. In Uganda and Kenya, women-led RLOs were particularly excited about being interviewed by a woman refugee researcher. In Tanzania, there was more suspicion among RLOs and two declined to be interviewed. This can be attributed to the difficult regulatory framework in Tanzania, explained later in the report. In general, local authorities were easier to access and engage than national authorities and UNHCR.

There are significant challenges to being refugee researchers implementing a large-scale study. Stakeholders tend to perceive refugee researchers as more biased than external researchers. One of the most critical challenges we faced is being recognised as legitimate researchers by stakeholders such as international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), United Nations (UN) offices and government officials. While we had better access to the refugee community compared to outsider researchers, we struggled to secure interviews with humanitarian stakeholders locally; we often had to rely on non-refugee colleagues for introductions or on support from local professors. Once we were able to access these stakeholders, they acknowledged the relevance of the study as many are currently developing engagement plans with RLOs.

As researchers with a displacement background, we navigated the outsider–insider continuum in the field⁷ as we travelled from one location to another in the country where we also live in. In some cases, we were total insiders; we lived in the settlement we were studying. In some cases, we were partial insiders; we used to live in the camp but returned

⁷ Our thinking on the outsider–insider divide is based on Chavez (2008), Merton (1972) and Green (2014). See: Christina Chavez. ‘Conceptualizing from the inside: advantages, complications, and demands on insider positionality’, *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 3 (2008): 474–94; Robert K. Merton. ‘Insiders and outsiders: a chapter in the sociology of knowledge’, *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 1 (1972): 9–47; Melanie J. Greene. ‘On the inside looking in: methodological insights and challenges in conducting qualitative insider research’, *The Qualitative Report* 19, no. 29 (2014): 1–13.

as a researcher with a higher level of education and thus new forms of power. In some cases, we were outsiders who were not seen as belonging, despite our shared experience of displacement. As a result, our level of attachment and distance evolved throughout the research process and was dependent on interactions with research participants.

We acknowledge that we want to see RLOs succeed, and for more power and resources to go towards groups led by fellow refugees. Throughout the data collection phase, we took steps to mitigate our personal biases. We focused on the perceptions that community members have of RLOs and their impact – this framework helped us look at trends among respondents and mitigate individual biases in our analysis. We provided justification to the selection of the 60 RLOs based on criteria related to diversity. We triangulated the findings through multiple sources and stakeholders. We kept structured fieldwork journals (including weekly checklists and prompts for pictures) to record our reflections, commentaries, and ideas. We developed a codebook and coded all transcripts from Phase 2 of the research using the open-source software Taguette. We organised a one-week, in-person retreat in Kampala to compare and contrast findings between the four countries of the study. The report was also reviewed by a group of academics and donors, and we shared preliminary findings with some RLOs and aid organisations before publication.



Image 1: FGD with RLO beneficiaries in Kalobeyi Village 1, Kenya.
© Andhira Yousif

Nature and scope of RLOs in East Africa

What are RLOs?

There is no universally accepted definition of RLOs (see [Annex 1](#) for a list of existing definitions).⁸ In this report, we use the term RLO to describe any group, organisation, initiative or network led by refugees or asylum seekers that has the characteristics outlined in the visual below.

Definition of RLOs



Refugee-led initiatives (RLIs) and organisations may include both registered and unregistered groups. They can be found in urban, rural, camp, and settlement settings. They can be organisations, associations, coalitions, networks, faith-based groups, or initiatives. They may include informal religious and cultural support networks.



Their function is to respond to the needs of refugees and related host communities, whether these are humanitarian, developmental, or cultural. They may provide direct services or focus on advocacy. Activities include self-reliance, protection, and assistance for the community or special interest groups (eg LGBTQ+, albinos), advocacy and awareness-raising, research, and orientation for newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees. They can also focus on artistic promotion and cultural preservation or play a role as intermediaries with the diaspora to raise funds to support individual members in times of need.



They aim at supporting their own members (self-help groups), their communities (special interest group or ethnic group), other refugees and/or the host community they live with.



They may have for-profit elements, but profits are used (fully or partially) to fund not-for-profit activities. This differs from refugee-led businesses and cooperatives that strictly aim to make a profit.



They may include non-refugees in their boards and management teams, but the main decision-makers and founders have a displacement background. Evidence suggests that there are organisations characterised by shared leadership, but that co-leadership does not characterise most RLOs in the locations studied. We need to examine refugee leadership in those co-led initiatives on a case-by-case basis, looking in particular at the balance of the leadership in the management and board, and transparency in the decision-making process.



We exclude refugee leadership bodies set up by authorities and UNHCR as they were not set up independently, hence their decisions are bound by authorities and UNHCR. This includes health, hygiene, and education committees in refugee camps; councils of elders or peace committees that exist in established refugee sites; and refugee community leadership structures that are implemented by INGOs such as block and zonal leaders in Kakuma Refugee Camp or Refugee Central Committees (RCCs) in Ethiopian refugee camps.



We exclude groups created as part of INGO programmes (eg groups of beneficiaries that received business support, committees that review programme objectives) unless those groups have expanded their activities independently beyond the original INGO objectives.

⁸The team reviewed 79 sources – including academic articles and books, policy papers, and INGO and NGO reports – out of which 43 focused on RLOs specifically (including 30 in East Africa and 13 in other regions of the continent and globally). The team also consulted with refugee researchers at RLRH and DRA.

Development stages of RLOs

We conceptualise RLOs in three main development stages, linked to their funding capacity.

Stages of development of RLOs



Informal groups that aim at providing services to their members only. These groups are not registered. This includes smaller or recent RLOs in Uganda and Kenya, and most RLOs in Tanzania and Ethiopia. During this phase, RLOs are mostly dependent on member financial contributions, which can be paid upon registration, ad-hoc (though contribution boxes), monthly, or annually. They may also engage in income-generating activities whereby profits are distributed between RLO activities and members (eg performing dances at weddings). In Uganda and Kenya, RLO networks (including the Refugee-Led Organization Network [RELON] and the Global Refugee Network) provide direct funding to smaller RLOs (eg the Somali Women Association in Kampala has received funding from RELON Uganda). In the case of membership-based organisations, inactive members who do not pay the monthly fee might not be supported in case of need. For example, Communauté Congolaise de Tanzanie in Dar es Salaam expects members to purchase a TZS 10,000 membership card and to contribute TZS 5,000 a month; they do not support inactive members.



CBOs that have registered and are able to provide services to both their members and their community (typically along ethnic lines). At this stage, RLOs are able to engage with diaspora members, individual sponsors and, in some cases, humanitarian donors. This applies to medium-scale RLOs in Uganda and Kenya. During the growth phase, RLOs use the activities they conducted during the start-up phase to attract funding from diaspora members, individual sponsors or humanitarian donors. Individual sponsors may include researchers who engaged RLO leaders as research assistants and international former aid workers or volunteers who developed personal connections with RLOs. In such cases, they either provide direct financial support or support with fundraising and network-building. RLOs may or may not continue collecting membership fees. RLOs typically try to register during this phase.















Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or larger CBOs that provide services to refugees regardless of their ethnic affiliation and to the host community. They are often referred to as 'elite' or 'celebrity' RLOs. Humanitarian funding, which is generally received through an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) intermediary, outweighs membership fees and diaspora support. Most RLOs that receive humanitarian funding do so through an INGO intermediary (eg Cohere in Kenya gets funded by donors such as OSF, and then distributes the money to RLOs). Even in their expansion phase, RLOs rarely access direct philanthropic funding and we have found no evidence of RLOs receiving state or multilateral donor funding.

This report highlights how some RLOs have managed to grow into medium-sized groups and, in some cases, expand into elite groups, and examines what sets them apart from RLOs that remain at the self-help stage. We nonetheless acknowledge that self-help groups and smaller-scale RLOs play a significant role in their members' lives.

RLOs remain stuck in the start-up phase if they do not have access to alternative funding or the ability to register. This is the case of RLOs in Nguenyiel Refugee Camp, which have limited access to NGO decision-makers and little internet access with which to engage the diaspora. In Ethiopia, the research team did not identify any RLO that received funding from humanitarian donors or international organisations. Women-led RLOs tend to be more likely to stay in the start-up phase due to lack of networks and literacy. In Uganda, potential beneficiaries often argued that organisations that had affiliation with aid partners would be able to expand, unlike more independent organisations that focused on real refugee

needs. In Tanzania, most RLOs do not have fundraising plans or proposals in place because of the lack of opportunity to receive humanitarian funding. We demonstrate that RLOs get stuck in the self-help stage largely as the result of external factors: if they are unable to access further funding (beyond membership fees) from donors or diaspora support, and/or if they are unable to register. We see that leaders with more professional connections, who are generally educated men with professional experience as incentive workers at aid organisations, are more likely to access funding and expand their organisations. Women-led RLOs are less likely to move on from the self-help stage due to structural barriers and self-censorship.

	Registration	Gender	Funding	Location	Networks
Self-help groups		 Women and men	Membership-based	 Camp	 Low
Medium-sized groups	(CBOs) 	 Mostly men	Diaspora, individual sponsors	 Camp and urban	 Medium
Elite groups	(NGOs) 	 Men	Traditional funding	 Camp and urban	 High

Some groups do not intend to expand their activities and reach. A few groups avoid visibility because their activities are not politically or legally acceptable (eg LGBTQ+ groups, groups with political aims), and some groups did not express ambitions to serve members beyond their community (in particular in Ethiopia).

Some RLOs have tried to set up alternatives to humanitarian funding by establishing larger income-generating operations but nevertheless remain dependent on humanitarian funding. For instance, Resilience Action International (RAI), an RLO operating in Kakuma Refugee Camp, owns a profit-making enterprise called Okapi Green Limited that provides solar powered electricity in the camp. Profits are used to fund the activities, in addition to private funding from the diaspora and humanitarian funding.

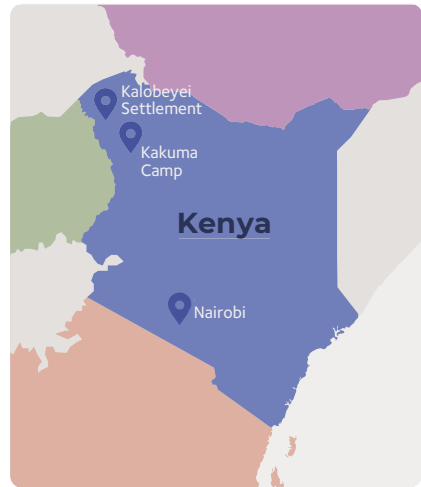
Diaspora funding remains a significant source of support to RLO activities. RLOs tend to receive diaspora support when their founding member/leader is resettled abroad and continues to provide support, or when they have the capacity to raise awareness on their activities online. For instance, in Ethiopia, Eritrean RLOs use YouTube and Facebook to raise awareness and request money to fund individuals (eg GoFundMe) or to fund their own activities.

The private sector is starting to emerge as a source of funding. In Uganda, and particularly in Nakivale, RLOs can now apply for loan products specifically adapted to their needs in one of the two banks established in 2022 in the settlement. These banks accept dwellings built by refugees on land owned by the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) as collateral, increasing access to loans significantly. Some NGOs also provide loans for RLOs (eg in Kenya, RefuSHE provided a KES 20,000 loan for a women-led RLO).

The RLO landscape

Kenya

Nairobi: RLOs in Nairobi are diverse in nature and size and are generally bound to a particular area, nationality or ethnic group within Nairobi. Most RLOs started as self-help groups after the arrival of large influxes of refugees to urban areas in the 2010s.⁹ The COVID-19 pandemic was an accelerator for many RLOs to scale up their activities. Larger-scale RLOs, such as Kintsugi, Youth Voices Nairobi, and L’Afrikana, focus on livelihood, adult education, orientation for newly arrived urban refugees, and advocacy. Many RLOs are registered as CBOs, although women-led groups tend to operate informally. Most RLOs rely on volunteers, but some do have a membership structure.



Kakuma: Kakuma Refugee Camp was set up in 1992.¹⁰ RLOs started to organise themselves as self-help groups in the late 2000s. The most influential RLOs in Kakuma, such as RAI, URISE, and Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR), focus on education (eg online certificates and diplomas, digital training, and permaculture). RLOs do not typically have a membership structure, and only larger-scale RLOs have managed to register.

Kalobeyei: Kalobeyei Settlement was set up in 2016 to promote the integration of services between refugees and host community members.¹¹ Most influential RLOs, such as the Wasafi Group, focus on hygiene and sanitation – a key need in the settlement. There is limited co-leadership with the host community, given the set-up of the settlement (specifically the distance between the refugee villages and host community villages). Few groups have managed to register.

Mapping of RLOs in Kenya

The team identified 138 groups that fit the RLO definition in Kenya. Among those, we identified 59 in Nairobi, 58 in Kakuma, 15 in Kalobeyei, and six that operated in multiple locations.

Among those RLOs, three were networks, seven were self-help groups, 69 were medium-sized, and 13 were elite. Elite groups were more commonly found in Kakuma (7). We lacked information to assess the remaining 46 groups, which are likely to fall under the self-help group category.

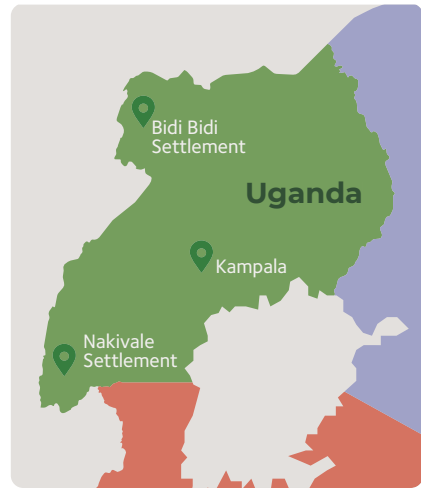
⁹ See: Urban Refugees. 'Nairobi, Kenya: concerned population', 14 August 2014. <http://www.urban-refugees.org/nairobi/>

¹⁰ See: UNHCR. 'Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement'. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kakuma-refugee-camp>

¹¹ See: UNHCR. 'Kalobeyei Settlement'. <https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kalobeyei-settlement>

Uganda

Kampala: Refugees in Kampala began setting up groups in the early 2000s, but many groups did not survive due to lack of funds, low literacy levels, and the resettlement of many leaders. Young African Refugee for Integral Development (YARID) is one of the oldest RLOs and was formed in 2008. Since 2015, there has been a rise in the number of RLOs in Kampala, as refugees' access to higher education and, therefore, networks, increased. For example, African Youth Action Network (AYAN) was created by South Sudanese refugee students. Most RLOs in Kampala registered and formalised their activities after receiving support from larger RLOs and RLO networks. Larger-scale RLOs, such as YARID and AYAN, are registered as NGOs. RLOs in Kampala mainly focus on livelihood, medical support, education, and special interest groups (eg human immunodeficiency virus [HIV] survivors, LGBTQ+ groups). Most rely on volunteers and members, but larger-scale RLOs have staff. RLO leaders are conscious of continuity challenges and often set up structures to ensure that RLOs can continue functioning if the leader is resettled or passes away.



Nakivale: Nakivale Refugee Settlement is the oldest refugee settlement in Uganda, opening in 1960. The population increased in 2015 following the crisis in Burundi.¹² Most groups were established in the past ten years because of the increase in the number of refugees and general support towards localisation of aid. Most RLOs are informal and of small scale. Some RLOs formed as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant decrease in aid support; in some cases, these RLOs adapted their previous services. There are a few 'celebrity' outliers, such as Opportunigee and Wakati Foundation, that receive funding and are registered as NGOs. Most influential RLOs are located in Base Camp, while other locations host more informal RLOs. Groups often focus on agricultural livelihood (eg animal rearing, agriculture), special interest groups (eg Committee to Protect Albinos), or access to job opportunities for youths (eg Wakati Foundation and Opportunigee). Most RLOs rely on members (self-help groups) or volunteers (medium and large-scale organisations). Some have salaried staff, including Ugandan nationals from Kampala.

Bidi Bidi: Bidi Bidi Refugee Settlement was established in 2016 to host refugees from South Sudan.¹³ Most groups are small-scale, informal, and focus on single issues (eg HIV survivors, support for widows) and cultural preservation. Some organisations were founded in South Sudan but continued in the settlement (eg artistic groups). Community Technology Empowerment Network is the only refugee-led NGO that provides education and livelihood services: it was established in another district and extended its services to Bidi Bidi. Medium-scale groups tend to be intermediaries between the youth and NGOs for cash-for-work projects.

¹² See: UNHCR. 'Nakivale Settlement profile: Isingiro District, Uganda', July 2020. <https://reliefweb.int/report/uganda/nakivale-settlement-profile-isingiro-district-uganda-july-2020>

¹³ See: UNHCR Operational Data Portal. 'BidiBidi Settlement HLP factsheet 2019'. <https://data.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/71907>

Mapping of RLOs in Uganda

The team identified 63 RLOs in the three locations, including 21 in Kampala, 29 in Nakivale and 13 in Bidi Bidi. Most elite groups were found in Kampala (7) compared to Nakivale (2) and Bidi Bidi (1). 14 RLOs were categorised as medium-sized groups, and 36 as self-help groups.

Tanzania

Dar es Salaam: There are about 200 urban refugees in Dar es Salaam. Except for the Congolese Community Organisation (set up in 1997 and registered in 2015), most groups were set up recently through educational networks (eg DAFI scholarship). Most active groups are small in size and tend to be led by legal immigrants and former refugees from a single nationality (Congolese and Malawian). These groups do not necessarily identify as RLOs. The Congolese and Malawian community groups focus on advocacy for those living irregularly in the city and on access to permits. They have established relationships with the immigration office. One CBO led by former refugees and Tanzanians runs a nursery school. Inactive organisations plan to focus on self-reliance activities (eg entrepreneurship training, small loans, education, literacy) but have no access to funds because of registration issues. Because of those challenges, many have stopped their activities or stopped trying to raise funds. All organisations still rely on membership contributions for their activities.



Nyarugusu: RLOs in Nyarugusu Refugee Camp tend to be small-scale, led by a single national group and operate informally. They are considered self-help groups and can register with NGOs that provide relevant services (eg International Rescue Committee [IRC] for livelihood and education, Norwegian Refugee Council [NRC] for construction) but they cannot register at the camp or authorities' level. RLOs tend to focus on English language education because it is accepted as a legitimate need by camp authorities as it allows refugees to apply for scholarships. Some groups also focus on livelihood (eg tailoring, soap-making) and awareness-raising (one women-led group provides education on sexual and reproductive health). Institut Biblique International Evangelique de Nundu (IBIEN) and Group MISA are outliers in terms of scale as they have many volunteers and provide regular services. Some groups already existed before their leaders moved to Nyarugusu (eg IBIEN started in 1993 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC]; Fighting Against Silliness School in Africa [FASSA] started in 2006 in Mkabila refugee camp in Kigoma, which subsequently closed). The number of groups has increased because groups are increasingly receiving remittance from refugees who have resettled.

Mapping of RLOs in Tanzania

The team identified 42 RLOs in Tanzania. This included seven RLOs in Dar es Salaam (all self-help groups except for one medium-sized group) and 35 RLOs in Nyarugusu (including 33 self-help groups and two medium-sized groups).

Ethiopia

Addis Ababa: RLOs in Addis Ababa are set up along ethnic lines (eg Eritrean, Yemeni). The team was unable to identify any South Sudanese groups. Eritrean RLOs started as informal community structures that subsequently developed formalised structures. Most groups are recent and started as a reaction to COVID-19 and the 2020 Tigray War. None of the groups have been able to register, but they receive support from the diaspora and international and Ethiopian faith-based organisations. Most groups rely on membership fees. The range of support offered by RLOs is diverse: some provide business support (eg help to buy a coffee-making machine), while others act as intermediaries between the diaspora and urban refugees by sharing stories of individual refugees on social media. Some groups also engage in protection: one RLO in Addis Ababa went to Tigrayan camps during the 2020 war and transported people back to Addis Ababa. Urban groups rarely interact with INGOs and actively avoid local authorities. Local authorities prefer to interact with refugee communities through the formal RCCs.



Melkadida: The team originally included Melkadida due to the presence of refugee-led cooperatives that focus on agriculture, renewable energy, environmental conservation, and the livestock value chain supported by the IKEA Foundation. However, upon further examination, it became apparent that those groups only aimed to make a profit and did not fall under the RLO definition. The focus on cooperatives left little space for self-help groups to emerge. Outliers in Melkadida include a furniture shop that provides free training to young refugees to learn the trade; ayutos, which are informal refugee-led micro-finance structures whereby members meet to place small amounts of money into group savings and take out and repay micro-loans.¹⁴

Nguenyiel: Most groups in Nguenyiel, in the Gambella region, were recently set up and reflect pre-existing South Sudanese clan and sub-clan-based structures. These groups focus on peaceful coexistence among sub-clans and play a role as self-help groups (eg support for a sick member, support for funeral costs, organisation of events for graduation

¹⁴ For information about these types of structures in other locations, see: Evan Easton-Calabria and Robert Hakiza. 'In the interest of saving', *Development Policy Review* 39, no. 1 (2021): 22–38; Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria. *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Delina Abadi. 'IDP-led women's assistance: new roles for traditional groups,' *Rethinking Refuge*, 14 April 2021. <https://www.rethinkingrefugee.org/articles/idp-led-womens-assistance-new-roles-for-traditional-groups>.

of members). These groups are registered with camp authorities. Oxfam has played a significant role in supporting the development of these groups, from traditional cultural network groups to a group of formalised CBOs that meet regularly and are working on the formalisation of their structures.¹⁵

Mapping of RLOs in Ethiopia

The team identified 61 RLOs in Ethiopia, including 14 in Addis Ababa, ten in Melkadida and 37 in Nguenyiel. Only four groups fell under the medium-sized category, and one can be considered elite. All are in Addis Ababa. All other groups remain in the self-help phase.

Profile of RLO leaders

Nationality

In single-nationality camps, such as Melkadida, Nguenyiel, Bidi Bidi, and Nyarugusu, RLO leaders' nationalities reflect the camp demographics. In most urban settings (Nairobi, Kampala, and Dar es Salaam), leaders of medium-sized and elite RLOs are often from the Congolese community, which is the Wmajority refugee community in all three locations.¹⁶ Respondents explained that Congolese-led RLOs are prolific because the Congolese have a longer history of displacement and that other nationalities rely on traditional and informal community mechanisms.

Many RLOs are built along ethnic or national lines but there are efforts among elite organisations in Uganda and Kenya to include other nationalities in their management teams. When RLOs have mixed nationality membership, it tends to be reflected at the staffing or volunteer level, but not at the leadership level.

Gender

The team made a conscious effort to identify women-led RLOs in all locations, but this was a challenge as they tend to take different forms and be smaller in scale. Women tend to lead self-help groups and struggle to gain resources to expand their activities. In Kenya and Uganda, women-led groups often begin as beneficiary groups from aid organisations that continue working together to promote their products and expand their activities.

Some male-led RLOs are trying to integrate more women in their decision-making structures (eg one RLO that promotes women's empowerment in Nyarugusu decided to include more women in their board to reflect their values). In Kenya and Uganda, women are often found in leadership boards, having worked their way up after starting as volunteers. Larger male-led organisations in Kampala are also trying to raise the profile of women-led RLOs with funders.

The lack of women RLO leaders can be explained by structural and cultural issues. Women have less access to higher education, where leaders often meet; they have competing

¹⁵ Oxfam. 'More local is possible: recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response', Briefing Paper, 1 December 2021. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/more-local-is-possible-recommendations-for-enhancing-local-humanitarian-leaders-621311/>

¹⁶ The majority of registered refugees in Nairobi are Congolese (37%) followed by Somalis (27%), Ethiopians (15%) and South Sudanese (10%). The majority of registered refugees in Kampala are Congolese (52%), Somalis (32%) and Eritreans (26%). See: UNHCR Operational Data Portal. <https://data2.unhcr.org/>

priorities such as childcare and house management; and they face barriers when seeking leadership positions and might not be seen as legitimate leaders for issues that are not women-specific. For example, the woman leader of Nege Yeshala, a Yemeni RLO in Addis Ababa that seeks to promote gender equality, said she was told to stay at home by the Yemeni embassy when raising the question of RLOs. As she has five children and runs a business, she has limited time to scale up her organisation.

Furthermore, while women undertake important work for the community, they do not always perceive themselves as leaders or feel that they are having an impact on the community. Our research supports arguments that 'historic systems and imbalanced power relationships' have created insecurities among refugees regarding their 'own power, capabilities and the valuable and innovative solutions they have', thereby limiting ambitions. This appears to be particularly true for women leaders.¹⁷

Some women leaders also reported cases of harassment when delivering services from authorities, aid workers, and male RLO leaders.

Education

Many RLO leaders are highly educated, notably in Tanzania where ten out of the 15 leaders had bachelor's degrees. It appears that more successful RLOs are led by more educated leaders: educated refugees are more likely to have access to networks and are seen as more legitimate to implement their work.

Age

Most RLO leaders are between 25 and 40 years of age. We did not identify any leaders under 30 in Tanzania. RLOs led by older people mostly focus on cultural preservation and arts. In Dar es Salaam, community associations that supported legal access are led by leaders over 50 years old who have been in the city for a long time and are thus able to share their experience and networks. In Nairobi, women-led group leaders tend to be in their 50s.

Motivation to start RLOs

There is some discrepancy between how RLO leaders describe their motivations behind starting initiatives, and how aid organisations and the community perceive their motivations.

In all locations, the vast majority of RLO leaders explained that they founded RLOs to respond to community needs and fill gaps that were left unaddressed by aid organisations. In many cases, RLOs are founded as self-help groups for members to support each other and to advocate for more support with aid organisations; they then expand their activities to the community more generally. In urban settings, RLO leaders generally referred to the lack of support provided to urban refugees, who are assumed to be more well-off. Special interest groups (eg LGBTQ+) and refugees in camp settings often referred to services previously provided by UNHCR and other aid organisations that ceased, despite the continuing need for them (eg decline in food rations). In Nyarugusu, most RLOs were founded to help refugees improve their English skills. While scholarship and incentive work opportunities are accessible to English speakers, Congolese and Burundian refugees in the camp follow their national curricula in French.

¹⁷ WUSC. 'Time to act: how to be an ally to young refugees' (2021). https://wusc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/HLOM-VirtualSpace-WUSC_GRYN.pdf.pdf

Several RLOs are set up for cultural identity purposes. In Bidi Bidi, many RLOs were founded as a way to preserve the culture while in exile. In Melkadida, some RLOs aim to entertain the community through art while creating awareness about community issues (eg COVID-19, women's empowerment, peaceful cohabitation).

Most organisations studied were founded in the country of asylum to respond to asylum-related challenges. However, some RLOs are the continuation of pre-existing organisations and aim to continue activities in their members' country of origin after they return.

Modelling successful RLOs also appears to be a significant motivation in starting RLOs. This is especially the case in Kenya and Uganda, where smaller RLOs are motivated to follow the footsteps of large-scale organisations like YARID (Uganda) or RAI (Kenya). These newly formed RLOs sometimes focus on the same areas of work as more popular RLOs because they perceive this a better strategy to access humanitarian funding (eg education in the Kakuma camp).

In locations with very few opportunities for young and educated people, creating an RLO grants refugees a status and potential livelihood opportunities at the individual level. Many RLOs, especially in Kenya and Uganda, are created by former or current volunteers or incentive workers of UNHCR and aid organisations.

Some aid organisations and community members argue that RLOs are created only for the self-interest of the leaders. This is a delicate topic: initiatives are typically motivated by both altruistic and personal factors, which does not take away from the impact they have in many settings. RLO leaders were generally aware of these perceptions and countered them by talking about the personal sacrifices they made to grow their operations. They identified these perceptions as one of the challenges they face in building and maintaining trust with communities that are not part of their national or ethnic affiliation. The specific position of RLO leaders in the community means that RLOs are more accessible but still need to show transparency and accountability in their operations to build and maintain community trust.












Inclusion of the host community

Host communities engage with RLOs in different capacities:

- **Beneficiaries:** RLOs tend to provide services to host community members in urban locations and settlements. Involving host communities allows RLOs to maintain good relationships with the local community as they share infrastructure and amenities. In Tanzania, it is challenging to identify refugee beneficiaries and it therefore makes more sense to provide area-based services than services based on the status of beneficiaries. In Uganda, RLOs are required by law to provide 30% of their services to host community members. RLOs nevertheless tend to prioritise refugees in service delivery. In some places, RLOs might not be able to reach this objective due to lower levels of integration, for example in Bidi Bidi.
- **Co-managers:** In Kenya and Uganda, requirements for registration stipulate that at least one national is involved in the registration of an RLO, that RLOs are required to have nationals within the board of directors and general membership, and that they should

engage in activities pertaining to the local community.¹⁸ In Tanzania, only nationals can register organisations; some have done so on behalf of refugee friends and relatives. Registered RLOs tend to involve the host community more than informal RLOs, which tend to focus on their national or ethnic community. However, the team did not identify any RLOs that were set up organically by the host community or RLOs where the host community plays a role in decision-making, although management tends to include one or two host community members who are hired to play the role of enablers. In camp settings, those community members do not belong to the area but are professionals from urban centres hired for their networks and skills.

- **Enablers:** Some host community members play a role in facilitating access to resources and registration. They can be involved as staff, board members, or as supporters. For example, in Dar es Salaam, a Congolese RLO managed to register due to support of a community member who came from the same ethnic group that spans both countries, although the member is not actively involved in the day-to-day operations of the organisation. In Nakivale, nationals who work with NGOs or educated nationals sometimes become friends with RLO leaders and put them in touch with potential funders or provide technical support.
- **Inhibitors (Uganda):** In Bidi Bidi, there appears to be tension between RLOs and the host community because of conflicts over resources and cultural clashes between Ugandans and South Sudanese refugees. In one instance, an RLO farmed on a piece of land but host community members claimed the land as theirs and took the crops. RLOs are actively trying to improve relationships with the host community. In locations where there is little funding for RLOs, there seem to be no real tensions. We can however hypothesise that, should RLOs get more humanitarian funding, it could exacerbate tensions between the host community and RLOs.

	Setting	Beneficiaries	Co-managers	Enablers	Inhibitors
■ Nairobi		✓	✓	✓	-
■ Kakuma		-	-	-	-
■ Kalobeyei		-	-	-	-
■ Kampala		✓	✓	✓	-
■ Nakivale		✓	-	-	-
■ Bidi Bidi		✓	-	-	✓
■ Addis Ababa		✓	✓	-	-
■ Nguenyiel		-	-	-	-
■ Melkadida		-	-	-	-
■ Dar es Salaam		✓	✓	✓	-
■ Nyarugusu		-	-	-	-

¹⁸ Mohamed Duale. "To be a refugee, it's like to be without your arms, legs": a narrative inquiry into refugee participation in Kakuma Refugee Camp and Nairobi, Kenya', Local Engagement Refugee Research Network Paper no. 7, May 2020.

The main factor that explains variation in the involvement of the host community is whether RLOs are operating in urban or camp settings.

In urban settings and Nakivale, refugees live alongside host community members and share similar challenges. Refugees and vulnerable host community members (or special interest groups) share similar challenges. For instance, in Nairobi, LGBTQ+ RLOs share knowledge and resources with local LGBTQ+ groups because they face the same lack of recognition by the government. In Addis Ababa, one RLO that originally targeted urban Yemeni refugees has included Ethiopian returnees from Yemen in their activities because of the recognition that they faced similar challenges. While Ethiopian returnees are involved as beneficiaries and members, they are not part of the management team.

In camp settings, there is less integration with the host community. In Kakuma, refugees are isolated from community members – only community members who know RLO leaders personally might benefit from activities. The situation is similar in Kalobeyei, despite being an integrated settlement: refugees are in one village, while host community members are in another village, meaning that there is little integration. As RLOs in camps have limited funding, there is no incentive for host community members to come and volunteer, especially as they have to pay for transportation across long distances. One exception in Kenya is RAI, a refugee CBO turned NGO that is able to pay two Kenyans as employees. In Ethiopian and Tanzanian refugee camps there are strong encampment policies, which means integration is even less likely than in Kenya and Uganda. The team was indeed unable to identify any co-led RLOs. In Tanzania, refugees require registration and authorisation to leave the camp to conduct activities. Nevertheless, a few RLOs in Tanzania hope to provide services to the host community, as stipulated in their constitutions, because they feel that they share the same challenges and that it would allow them to access more opportunities.

Shared history can also explain the inclusion of host community members in RLOs. The boundaries between local communities and refugees can be more nuanced in some contexts. For instance, in Dadaab, because of the legacy of colonialism and arbitrary borders, the conventional definition of ‘refugee’ and ‘host’ are intertwined, and host communities are thus more involved in RLIs. In Addis Ababa, one RLO accepts members who come from the same neighbourhood in Asmara, whether they are Ethiopians who moved to Addis Ababa before Eritrean independence or more recent Eritrean refugees. The management team is mostly Eritrean and Ethiopians are members or beneficiaries.

Partnerships with aid organisations

Many RLOs engage with the humanitarian and development sector in urban and camp settings, but these partnerships tend to be light-touch and short-term. Partnerships bring exposure to RLOs and legitimise them to the donor community and, in some cases, to the refugee community.

Types of partnerships between the humanitarian and development sector and RLOs include:

- **Mobilisation and access to the refugee community:** Many INGOs engage with RLOs as a way to access communities or consider them an intermediary between INGOs and the community. However, in Tanzania and Ethiopia, RLOs are not the key actors in mobilising

refugees. In Ethiopia, INGOs rely on RCCs, which are set up for that purpose. One exception appears to be special interest groups. For example, Rural Aid and Development Organization (RADO) reaches out to the Melkadida Disability Association when they need to mobilise refugees with disabilities.

- **Light information sharing and (two-way) referrals:** Some RLOs have established linkages with INGOs that allow them to refer community members to services. For example, one RLO in Uganda sometimes refers members to Jesuit Refugee Service for further medical diagnosis. In some cases, INGOs refer refugees to RLOs. In Nguenyiel, for example, UNHCR refers orphans to the orphanage run by the refugee-led Presbyterian Church.
- **Implementation:** In Uganda and Kenya, RLOs implement projects on behalf of INGOs on a short-term basis. In those instances, RLOs act as intermediaries between the community and aid organisations. RLOs often report that these partnerships are not sustainable. Typically, larger RLOs with more networks and that are more structured act as implementers on projects set up by aid organisations. The parameters of those programmes are often pre-defined by aid organisations, although there are a few exceptions. For example, in Nakivale, Opportunigee and Wakati Foundation were involved in the development and led the implementation of a project to supply sanitary material and raise awareness about COVID-19 funded by Alight.
- **In-kind contributions:** In Ethiopia and Tanzania, partnerships with INGOs and NGOs largely consist of in-kind contributions that are based on written agreements. In Melkadida, RADO provided wheelchairs to the Melkadida Disability Association. These in-kind contributions can be regular and significant. In Nyarugusu, IRC provides classrooms, white boards and exercise books for refugee-led English clubs, while NRC sometimes provides some iron sheets to RLOs to improve refugee housing.
- **Capacity building:** Providing capacity building to RLOs is common in Kenya and Uganda and emerging in Tanzania and Ethiopia. In Kenya, Refuge Point and Cohere have provided extensive training to RLOs on topics related to financial management, structure set-up, and proposal writing. In Tanzania, Dignity Kwanza often invites groups to their training sessions on refugee rights.
- **Initiation:** Oxfam has approached groups in Nguenyiel and provided them with in-kind resources (eg water, chairs, office rooms). They also host regular RLO meetings.
- **Facilitation:** In some cases, organisations play a role in facilitating the work of RLOs by unlocking access and providing day-to-day resources. For example, in Ethiopia, Act of Good Samaritan has a partnership with Mercy Gate International, which is a religious humanitarian organisation registered as an NGO. While Mercy Gate does not provide funding to Act of Good Samaritan, they have provided letters to access camps and an office space.

	Kenya	Uganda	Ethiopia	Tanzania
Mobilisation	✓	✓	-	-
Implementation	✓	✓	-	-
Information sharing and referrals	✓	✓	-	-
In-kind contributions	✓	✓	✓	✓
Capacity building	✓	✓	-	✓
Initiation	-	-	✓	-
Facilitation	-	-	✓	-

RLOs are more likely to access partnerships when they are registered, have an online presence, or their leaders have a personal connection within the partner organisation. Elite RLOs often develop Memoranda of Understanding with aid organisations on different projects, but do not typically have a framework agreement.

COVID-19 brought an increased visibility of RLOs, and made them crucial partners to deliver services and support when aid workers were not allowed to access communities. This raised the profile of RLOs and increased partnership plans but did not lead to significant changes in the ways that aid organisations interact with RLOs. This can be attributed to the lack of clear strategies and guidelines to engage RLOs and continued challenges with financial and auditing requirements.

Partnerships rarely involve RLOs as equal partners in setting programme objectives. There are no clear guidelines for the UN and INGOs on how to engage RLOs “equitably, systematically, and effectively.”¹⁹ The Global Compact does not explicitly mention RLOs and their roles. However, at the global level, UNHCR has developed a RLO definition and set of guidelines (see [Annex 2](#)).

Some refugee leaders blame aid organisations for stealing and taking credit for RLO ideas. This was mentioned in several locations, and it prevents RLOs from sharing ideas openly.

At the global level, there are ongoing initiatives to provide multi-year core funding to RLOs. The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) fund, an RLO-to-RLO fund housed within Asylum Access, of which YARID in Uganda is a founding member, is one such initiative. Within East Africa, this fund is currently only available to RLOs in Uganda.²⁰

RLO networks

In Kenya and Uganda, RLOs have come together as networks with varying degrees of reach and influence. RELON is a network of RLOs which was originally created in Uganda in 2015 by a group of Congolese leaders with the intention of linking RLOs all over Uganda; it was replicated in Kenya in 2021. These national networks were created to coordinate the activity of RLOs, share opportunities, help with registration, advocate on behalf of RLOs, and gain legitimacy in the refugee response.

¹⁹ Betts, Alexander, Evan Easton-Calabria, and Kate Pincock. “Localising Public Health: Refugee-Led Organisations as First and Last Responders in COVID-19.” *World Development* 139 (2021): 105311.

RELON networks face challenges related to outreach and trust-building with RLOs given their limited resources, especially with RLOs that are not in urban centres where networks have their offices. RLOs pursue membership in these networks to get access to opportunities but are likely to cease engagement if they do not see benefits or if they feel that advocacy does not reflect their specific needs, which may alienate camp-based RLOs or RLOs led by marginalised groups. In an environment of scarcity, RELON networks are sometimes perceived as gatekeepers to resources. This puts networks in a challenging position as they have limited resources to operate, which impedes their ability to redistribute.

RLOs in Kenya and Uganda have also set up networks at the camp level to address challenges to funding and facilitate access to networks, partnerships, and legal recognition. RLOs in Nakivale came together as a network and formed the Association of Community Based Organisations in Nakivale (ACBON) in 2018, which was registered in 2020. It is mostly composed of small to medium-sized groups from the Congolese community, with limited inclusion of other groups due to language barriers. Larger organisations in Nakivale, such as Wakati Foundation, are not part of ACBON due to its focus on smaller-sized CBOs. Congolese RLO leaders recently started the Kakuma Refugee-Led Initiatives Network for the same purpose.

In addition to formal networks, refugee-led groups also belong in community-based networks based on ethnic affiliation. For example, in Bidi Bidi, smaller refugee-led groups meet up for advocacy, information sharing, and events (eg the South Sudanese Union).

There are no formal national RLO networks in Ethiopia and Tanzania. RLOs interviewed for this study in these two countries were not involved in international RLO networks such as the Global Youth Refugee Network or the African Refugee Network. Nevertheless, RLOs engage in some light networking. For example, the DAFI Students Organization in Tanzania – an association of DAFI scholarship holders in Tanzania – represents RLOs headed by former DAFI scholars (eg Equipping Hope International, Refugee Youth Empowerment Network) in meetings.

Aid organisations encourage RLOs to come together as networks in both Tanzania and Ethiopia. In Tanzania, IRC stated that RLOs need to form networks to advocate for their communities' needs instead of staying independent. In Nguenyiel, Oxfam is currently supporting the recently founded Refugee Youth Network Association, which plans to act as a network for clan-based groups.

Dynamics between RLOs

There are varying degrees of coordination between RLOs at the local level. RLOs tend to coordinate more effectively when two conditions are met: 1) they are in the same formal RLO networks; and 2) they are in the same professional and personal networks.

The best example of effective coordination between RLOs can be found in Kampala, where RELON Uganda has created platforms for RLOs of different sizes to meet up and find areas for cooperation. Beyond the role of RELON Uganda, leaders of RLOs in Kampala tend to know each other because they belong to the same elite refugee networks – they have received

²⁰RRLI. 'Who we are: mission and vision'. <https://www.refugeeslead.org/who-we-are>

similar scholarships, worked together, are part of the same steering committees, and attend the same conferences. This pre-existing kinship plays a key role in supporting coordination.

In Bidi Bidi, refugee leaders often have a research background, such as acting as research assistants for international researchers. While they meet regularly, they do not coordinate on their RLO work because they lack resources to implement joint projects.

Other coordination mechanisms help with creating ties between RLOs. In Nguenyiel, RLOs meet up during the RCC meetings. In Nairobi, RLO leaders often meet in capacity-building training or leadership meetings organised by NGOs and will share contacts and/or set up WhatsApp groups.

Some RLOs do engage in informal information sharing or support. For example, in Dar es Salaam, the Congolese Community Association sometimes hosts the Malawi Community Association in their offices. In Nyarugusu, FASSA, a Burundian RLO, uses a classroom from IBIEN in the Congolese side of the camp and the Refugee Youth Empowerment Network received books from Book-Aid and fundraised in the camp to transport the books from Dar es Salaam to Nyarugusu. Typically these organisations know one another due to kinship ties (same nationalities) or because they work in the same sector (eg education). Working in the same sector allows members and leaders to meet in capacity-building training and coordination meetings, especially in Uganda; or to just be aware of others' work (eg Tanzania).




















It is common for RLOs to not know one another or seek coordination, especially in urban settings or large camps. In Dar es Salaam, RLOs are dispersed geographically and would only know of one another if there is a personal tie between leaders. In Addis Ababa, RLOs do not seek coordination given risks associated with their activities.



Image 2: Women members of the Tumaini Group, Nakivale, Uganda.
© Mary Gitahi

Impact of RLOs on communities

Knowledge of RLOs among community members

	Setting	High	Mixed	Low
 Nairobi		-	✓	-
 Kakuma		✓	-	-
 Kalobeyei		✓	-	-
 Kampala		✓	-	-
 Nakivale		-	✓	-
 Bidi Bidi		-	✓	-
 Addis Ababa		-	-	✓
 Nguenyyiel		✓	-	-
 Melkadida		-	-	✓
 Dar es Salaam		-	-	✓
 Nyarugusu		-	✓	-

Refugee community members are generally aware of RLOs that operate in the district in which they live, whether in urban or camp settings. In Nguenyyiel, as organisations are based on clan affiliation, refugees know their clan-led groups as they follow traditional ways of organising within the South Sudanese community. In Nairobi, refugees have a high level of knowledge of the RLOs created in the areas where they live for their community (eg Tawakal in Eastleigh). In areas where refugees are more dispersed, inhabitants are significantly less familiar with the work of RLOs. For example, in Kakuma, refugees only know the RLOs that operate in their area (eg URISE in Kakuma 1, RAI in Kakuma 2).

Large-scale RLOs tend to be known among refugee communities regardless of their location, especially if they are partnering with aid organisations, which grants them more visibility. For example, most refugees interviewed in Nakivale knew about Wakati Foundation, and most refugees in Kampala knew about YARID. Their leaders are often ‘celebrity refugees’ who are known among the community for their achievements with their RLO and beyond.

Depending on their activities, some RLOs are more visible than others. For example, in Kalobeyei, the Wasafi Group is well-known because they engage in community cleaning activities. Moreover, refugees are more likely to know the RLOs that target them. Young people in Nakivale are familiar with Opportunigee and Unleash, which both focus on youth needs, such as free internet access within the settlement. Women and older people across locations are less familiar with RLOs, which is likely because most RLOs are led by – and target – younger people across all locations. Women are more familiar with women-led groups.

In some cases, refugees describe RLOs in general terms but are unable to name specific organisations. This is the case in Nyarugusu where refugees were able to name larger RLOs such as Group MISA. Recently formed RLOs are typically less known. In some cases, refugees can name specific types of groups but are unaware of all RLOs. For instance, in Melkadida, refugees could talk about cooperatives but not self-help groups.

Refugees who are aware of RLOs but have not benefited directly generally have accurate information about the type of activities that RLOs implement. In Tanzania, there is some confusion between refugee-led groups and national groups that employ refugees. Refugee respondents sometimes assumed that a national organisation that worked with incentive workers and community volunteers was led by refugees, although there are no refugees in their decision-making board.

Knowledge about RLOs is particularly poor in locations where refugees are dispersed and the regulatory framework is restrictive. This is the case in Dar es Salaam, where almost no community member could mention refugee-led groups. Groups in Dar es Salaam that are more active do not identify or advertise themselves as refugee-led and are dispersed within the city. This is also the case in Addis Ababa, where RLOs tend to operate more secretly when implementing activities.

Refugees are more likely to know of RLOs that are comprised of members of their own nationality (eg South Sudanese in Kampala know of AYAN, and Congolese refugees know of YARID). Congolese refugees are the most knowledgeable about RLOs across all nationalities, while South Sudanese, Sudanese, Eritrean, Ethiopian, and Somali refugees have limited knowledge of RLOs across all locations.

Knowledge of RLOs among aid organisations and government institutions

Knowledge of RLOs is determined by the degree of openness or restrictiveness in the operating environment.

In Kenya and Uganda, where RLOs operate more freely, aid organisations are generally aware of RLOs but are mostly familiar with the medium and large-sized RLOs that operate in central parts of cities, camps, and settlements. UNHCR and aid organisations are also more likely to know about RLOs led by their volunteers or incentive workers (eg SIR in Kakuma). Aid organisations are less likely to know about women-led, smaller-scale RLOs that operate as self-help groups or serve a specific segment of the population. They are more likely to know about RLOs that operate in their sector of interest as these RLOs have likely approached them or been approached at the field level to help with mobilisation (eg INGOs interested in LGBTQ+ groups are familiar with related RLOs, while NGOs interested in women's rights were more familiar with women-led RLOs). Local authorities (including OPM and local chairmen) are generally aware of larger RLOs that operate in their jurisdiction and maintain databases of the RLOs that approached them for registration (a requirement to register is to get a letter from the local OPM office). In Nairobi, some RLOs actively engage local chiefs and the police in events, but generally are not registered with the Department of Refugee Services (DRS).

In restrictive urban settings where RLOs operate secretly (eg Addis Ababa) or as national groups (eg Dar es Salaam), there is no knowledge of RLOs among aid organisations. When asked about RLIs, local authorities (such as Refugees and Returnees Service [RRS]) would refer to RCCs, which are set up to act intermediaries with the refugee community but do not act independently like RLOs.

The controlled environment in camp settings means that aid organisations and government institutions are very familiar with RLOs as groups are generally registered either formally

(eg Ethiopia) or informally (eg Tanzania, where the camp commander maintains a list of RLOs and grants informal authorisations to RLOs that approach him).“ Aid organisations also tend to focus on certain types of initiatives over others: in Melkadida, aid organisations know about business cooperatives but are less likely to know about social initiatives.

Experience of RLO beneficiaries

Across organisations, interviewed beneficiaries generally spoke positively about their interactions and experiences with RLOs. The main arguments they gave in favour of RLOs, compared to aid counterparts, are:

- Beneficiaries are treated in a more dignified manner and with more respect by RLOs.
- RLO services are more adapted to their needs and detail-oriented because they know the community better. For example, in Nyarugusu, beneficiaries of English classes noted differences between classes provided by RLOs and IRC: RLO classes are more regular and in-person, increasing the chance of learning the language, while the IRC class is online and only once a week.
- RLOs are fairer when delivering services within their own groups than aid organisations. A minority of refugees raised concerns that RLOs may favour their own group over the general community.
- RLOs are more accessible and less bureaucratic; there is less waiting time and paperwork to receive services. Interactions are more direct because of shared experiences of difficulty in accessing aid. Refugees in Kalobeyei mentioned that most aid organisations' offices are in Kakuma, meaning that transport is needed to access them, whereas RLOs are based within the settlement. Refugees in Kakuma mentioned that they did not typically need appointments to access RLOs, unlike aid organisations.
- RLOs are more accountable to communities because beneficiaries feel more able to give them direct feedback on activities. They are also more likely to clearly state if they cannot help in a given instance, whereas INGOs/NGOs might not deliver a clear message. Direct access to RLO leaders within communities means that beneficiaries often trust RLOs more compared to aid organisations.
- Communication with RLOs is easier due to cultural understanding and shared language. Beneficiaries gave examples where they felt that translators for aid organisations could distort their words or that messages get lost.
- RLOs are seen as more open to serving refugees who are not registered or to provide support that could be considered illegal by aid organisations. For instance, South Sudanese refugees in Nairobi said that RLOs provide services even if they live in the city with camp documentation, unlike other aid organisations.
- RLOs create opportunities for volunteers or staff that are better paid than aid organisations, as they do not follow incentive work requirements. For instance, in Kenya and Uganda, an RLO worker could be paid up to USD 500 per month, compared to USD 80 as an incentive worker. In Tanzania, the difference is less but still significant: teachers paid by RLOs could receive USD 35 per month compared to USD 25 from aid organisations.

While some RLOs provide services that are similar to aid organisations, others cover the same sectors using more localised approaches (eg traditional discussions for psycho-social support). In some instances, RLOs provide services that communities consider important but that are not considered key priorities among aid organisations (eg cultural preservation).

Refugees are generally understanding of RLOs' resource limitations. In Nyarugusu, refugees acknowledged the discrepancy in size and reach between RLOs and aid organisations but nonetheless expressed satisfaction with RLO services, noting they could do more if given more resources. In Addis Ababa, refugees noted their appreciation for RLOs providing transportation money so they could receive training from an aid organisation. Refugees were also generally understanding towards membership-based RLOs that only provided services to their members, unless they received humanitarian funding that they felt should be distributed beyond the group.

Community members who had not received services were less positive about their experiences with RLOs. This is because some did not want to access RLO services as they expected that RLOs only provide services to members of their national or ethnic group; or because they had been rejected from service provision.

Descriptions of impact

When talking about the impact of RLOs on the community, it is important to distinguish between the priorities set by aid organisations and priorities set by refugees. In Nguenyiyiel, for example, there was a disagreement between Oxfam and an RLO on the relevance of using funds to organise a graduation party for recent graduates. Refugee respondents saw the graduation party as an important community event that would positively impact their well-being, while Oxfam did not see it as a key priority in the context of humanitarian response. It is therefore necessary to consider that community priorities may differ from external priorities.

There is also a significant difference in how members or beneficiaries of RLOs and non-beneficiaries describe the impact of RLOs on their community.

Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries gave specific examples of how services had impacted their well-being and self-reliance. This was particularly the case for beneficiaries in situations of irregularity or marginalisation that excluded them from services or when the RLO provided a service that might not be legal. For example, beneficiaries in Ethiopia talked about a group that came to rescue them from Tigrayan camps when they were stranded at the beginning of the war and took them to Addis Ababa.

Beneficiaries of both self-help groups and groups that provide services to wider members of their community noted the positive impact of RLOs.

- Self-help group members and beneficiaries explained how receiving micro-loans helped them engage in business and receive a necessary income, and how they received direct support in cases of emergency (eg funeral, hospital visit, provision of a wheelchair).
- Beneficiaries in both urban and camp settings talked about how the service they received filled a gap that humanitarian organisations had not met. In urban settings, beneficiaries often talked about the importance of RLOs in providing them orientation information

upon arrival. In camp settings like Nyarugusu and Kakuma, many refugees emphasised the role of RLOs in bridging educational gaps. In Nyarugusu, for example, the camp-based education system follows the francophone Congolese curriculum; refugee-led English clubs therefore enable refugees to access higher education and opportunities within aid organisations – both refugees and authorities acknowledged the significance of this. In Kakuma, refugees talked about how accessing online training helped them access scholarships and opportunities to study outside of the camp.

Refugees also talked about the importance of RLOs during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly in Kenya, Uganda, and Ethiopia, where RLOs became crucial service providers, distributing masks, water, soap, and information about the virus.

Some refugees also talked about how RLOs played a key role in providing more appropriate mental health and psycho-social support services that fit with the cultural norms of the community (eg Tawakal in Nairobi, Together we Can Women Group in Bidi Bidi). Some also talked about the importance of RLOs in creating community ownership and promoting social cohesion (eg Nguenyiel).

Non-beneficiaries

Perceptions of impact are more mixed among those who have not received RLO services directly.

Non-beneficiaries who perceive RLO impact as positive generally have friends or family members who have received RLO services. In terms of broader impact, they have a sense of positive impact and acknowledge the work of RLOs, but could not provide further details.

In locations with limited knowledge of RLOs, community members do not describe RLOs as important to their community. For example, in Dar es Salaam, the general refugee community does not see any impact of RLOs on the well-being and safety of their community, arguing that those groups serve their members only.

There is variation by nationality, gender, and age in the descriptions of impact. Generally, non-Congolese refugees perceive RLOs to be less impactful than Congolese refugees. Older refugees do not consider RLOs as impacting on their own well-being as RLO activities tend to focus on younger people, especially in Kenya (where there is a strong focus on education); but they nonetheless acknowledge the importance of RLOs for the younger generation.

A minority of refugee respondents and aid organisations across all locations talked negatively about RLOs and their impact on the community. These respondents raised concerns over tribalism and how this might lead to tensions if some groups are prioritised over others. There is no evidence that there are existing tensions given the little support that RLOs currently receive, however, it is a risk identified by some community members. Some refugees also pointed out that RLOs may be self-serving and founded to create opportunities for their leaders, rather than for humanitarian reasons. There were concerns that this might be diverting resources from the community members who need it most.

Defining RLO success

Refugees and stakeholders typically described successful RLOs as those with the characteristics of aid organisations such as official registration, sustainable humanitarian funding, regular activities, quality infrastructure, and human resources. However, a

successful RLO was defined as having additional characteristics (added value) linked to the displacement background of its leaders and their more flexible ways of working:

- **Better response to needs:** RLO leaders understand the needs of refugees better (and remain independent in identifying needs) and can respond and adapt appropriately when these needs change.
- **Better treatment:** A successful RLO treats beneficiaries with more dignity than traditional aid organisations.
- **Better accountability:** RLOs are accountable to the community, do not discriminate between groups of refugees, and visibly achieve their goals.
- **More independence:** RLOs are more independent and more likely to respond to refugees' needs compared to donor priorities. There are mixed community perspectives on RLO collaborations with the traditional aid sector: some refugees see it as a sign of success because it shows their legitimacy, while others see it as a loss of independence.



Image 3: Training session led by the Global Village Initiative, Kalobeyi, Kenya.
© Raphael Bradenbrink

Variations in response and impact

Networks

The most significant factor in determining the success of a given RLO is the leader's ability to access a range of networks, in particular humanitarian networks (Kenya, Uganda) and diaspora networks (Tanzania, Ethiopia). Personal and professional relations, gender, nationality, and education all influence a leaders' ability to access networks, which in turn unlocks their ability to raise funds, set up partnerships, and provide regular services to a greater range of beneficiaries. Congolese, urban-based, English-speaking educated men are more likely to have opportunities to build these networks.

Networks with aid organisations: In most locations, RLO leaders tend to be current or former incentive workers hired by aid organisations. Such professional experience enables RLO leaders to raise their profiles and hence their reach; they are also more likely to be invited to meetings and conferences where they can create additional connections and cultivate their capacity to apply for humanitarian funding. Working with INGOs also helps RLO leaders access top management, present their projects, and request support.²¹

Networks with the diaspora: In locations where access to aid organisations is restricted (Ethiopia, Tanzania), leaders' access to the diaspora alleviates some funding and access challenges. Some RLOs are founded by refugees who are subsequently resettled in the Global North but who nonetheless continue supporting activities financially or via fundraising. Individual diaspora networks also play a role in determining the success of RLOs. Reliable internet access makes it easier to maintain diaspora networks.

Networks with authorities: Personal connections with local authorities and RCCs (Ethiopia) enables smoother implementation of RLO activities. It also facilitates access to information about the registration processes and opportunities. Close relations between RLO leaders and authorities are sometimes perceived negatively by refugees in the community. For example, a few community members accused some RLOs in Uganda of being puppets of the camp authorities and UNHCR.

Networks with faith-based organisations: A leader's connection with faith-based organisations can alleviate some funding and access challenges. In these instances, the religion of the RLO leader is relevant, enabling them to obtain support from churches (locally or abroad) and mosques. One successful RLO in Nyarugusu, Group MISA, was able to obtain funding from churches in the USA. Furthermore, Tawakal, in Eastleigh, Kenya, receives direct support from a local mosque's Islamic leader during Ramadan month and Act of Good Samaritan in Addis Ababa was able to obtain support from a church.

Networks with nationals: Elite organisations have successfully managed to include professional nationals to help with professionalisation of activities, registration and access to networks.

²¹ This confirms previous findings from Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria (2020, p.88) that suggested that 'the trajectories of some RCOs were linked to the relationships of their leaders with UNHCR and its implementing partner organisations'. Thanks to those personal connections, positions as community intermediaries and their personal reputations, those RLO leaders were able to access institutional partnerships and funding opportunities. See: Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria. *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Regulatory framework

The regulatory framework has a significant influence on RLOs' ability to access resources and partnerships and to implement their activities safely and openly. The impact of the regulatory framework affects RLOs differently in each country. While RLOs in Uganda and Kenya are not able to access formal resources and partnerships, they can still implement activities safely. In Ethiopia and Tanzania, RLO members risk physical harm when implementing activities, especially in urban settings. One RLO leader in Addis Ababa was imprisoned for two months after filming an interview with a homeless refugee from their community to share on social media.

Restrictions to freedom of movement also affects RLOs' ability to develop their organisations. With the exception of Uganda, refugees in camp settings must seek authorisation to leave their camp, or in some cases the zone within the camp they reside in.

- **In Kenya**, the Kenyan Societies Act of 1968, which regulates community organisations, does not mention refugees' right to create associations. The lack of regulation makes it difficult for RLOs to register, hence most RLOs in Kenya are unregistered and informal. RLOs are required to 'have a large number of Kenyan nationals within the board of directors and general membership and to have activities pertaining to the local community.'²²
- **In Uganda**, the Refugee Act 2006 states that refugees have the right to association for non-political and non-profit-making associations and trade unions. RLOs are registered as NGOs or CBOs. However, there are several bureaucratic challenges that refugee leaders encounter in the process of registering an organisation compared to their national counterparts, including delays, excessive scrutiny, limited access to information and registration costs.
- **In Ethiopia**, Article 27 of the revised refugee proclamation of Ethiopia (Refugees Proclamation No.1110/2019) allows refugees to create associations, stating that 'recognized refugees and asylum seekers have the right to association, as regards non-political and non-profit-making associations and trade unions in the same circumstances as the most favorable treatment accorded to foreign nationals pursuant to relevant laws.' Anecdotal evidence suggests that, since the Refugees Proclamation was issued only two years ago, there are no regulations and directives for RLOs to register and operate on the ground.
- **In Tanzania**, the 1998 Refugee Act and the Non-Governmental Organizations Act do not mention whether refugees are allowed to register organisations they create. In camp settings, refugees are unable to register their organisations with the camp commander, who is the representative of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

In Kenya and Uganda, the vast majority of RLOs reported that they aspire to register in order to unlock opportunities to increase their impact. In Kenya, RLOs are able to register as CBOs; while in Uganda, RLOs can register as either CBOs or NGOs depending on the

²² Mohamed Duale. "To be a refugee, it's like to be without your arms, legs": a narrative inquiry into refugee participation in Kakuma Refugee Camp and Nairobi, Kenya', Local Engagement Refugee Research Network Paper no. 7, May 2020.

scale of their activities. RLO leaders noted that RELON provides support and information for registration in both countries. RLOs that are not registered are able to operate without safety challenges or harassment from local and refugee authorities. Government officials in both locations support the registration of RLOs. In Kenya, DRS reported that they were trying to consolidate the registration process to make it more systematic through the implementation of the Refugee Act of 2021, and to allow refugees to register in Kakuma instead of making them go to Lodwar.

In Uganda, there is evidence that bureaucratic challenges are easing due to the support of more experienced RLOs and aid organisations, as well as stakeholders' common goal of registering organisations. Nevertheless, registration remains a challenge for RLOs led by refugees with low literacy levels or limited education, for refugee leaders who lack networks with area chiefs and refugee-supporting institutions, and refugee leaders who might not have funds to move from the camp/settlement to the relevant office.

Across all locations, it tends to be easier for RLOs to apply for and attain registration in camp and settlement contexts compared to urban contexts. Kenya is the main exception: in Nairobi, RLOs are typically able to register due to the facilitation of area chiefs; while in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, RLOs must first be vetted through an NGO (typically NRC or Swiss Contact) before getting support from the DRS office and then the county government. In Kenya, registration requires networks with the host community, which is more likely to be the case in urban settings. There is an informal rule that RLOs can register only if they have 'a large number of Kenyan nationals within the board of directors and general membership and to have activities pertaining to the local community'.²³ However, some RLOs encountered during the study in Nairobi managed to register with no host community members.

In camp locations in Kenya and Uganda, some RLOs (both registered and unregistered) are allocated land from the local refugee body (DRS and OPM) for their offices and activities. This is contrary to Nairobi and Kampala, where the ability to acquire premises is dependent on the RLO's relations with authorities, their visibility, and perceived legitimacy.

In Tanzania and Ethiopia, RLOs cannot register formally with national authorities. In camp settings, RLOs can register with camp authorities, which tends to be easy and straightforward, but they are not registered as formal organisations. In Nyarugusu, groups do not receive written proof of acknowledgement from the commandant; this hinders their ability to successfully obtain funding or partnerships with aid organisations, even if they express an interest to do so.

In Tanzania, RLOs require permits to conduct activities, the provision of which can be arbitrary and complex to navigate. For example, in Nyarugusu, one group wanted to repair a water tank and requested permission from the village leader, the zonal leader, the camp leader and, finally, the camp commandant. The commandant ultimately denied their request, stating that a humanitarian organisation was already responsible.

Respondents in Tanzania and Ethiopia had few expectations of change to the regulatory framework. In Ethiopia, despite a more liberal proclamation that allows refugees to create associations, there is no plan for operationalisation.

²³ Mohamed Duale. "To be a refugee, it's like to be without your arms, legs": a narrative inquiry into refugee participation in Kakuma Refugee Camp and Nairobi, Kenya', Local Engagement Refugee Research Network Paper no. 7, May 2020.

Some organisations are looking for alternative ways to register and implement activities despite the strict regulatory context. One group in Addis Ababa is planning to register in Europe and then return to Ethiopia as an INGO; another group in Addis Ababa used the licence from an allied, registered faith-based organisation; one group in Nyarugusu had managed to register as a business by not indicating the nationality of directors when submitting their documentation; groups in Dar es Salaam often register as a national group or national committee under a different ministry.

Summary of differences between urban versus camp-based RLOs

Throughout the report, we distinguish between RLOs in urban and camp/settlement settings and how their challenges differ.

- RLOs tend to be larger in urban settings or in central parts of camps because RLO leaders have more access to networks (external actors and the diaspora) in those locations. Refugees in urban settings are also generally more educated and can access more opportunities to attend coordination meetings, to build networks and to access funding.
- RLOs in urban settings tend to include host communities as beneficiaries or staff members more so than those in camp settings.
- Urban refugee communities are less aware of RLOs than camp-based communities.
- Urban RLOs have less access to refugee authorities and therefore receive less support from them, which makes it more difficult to register.



Image 4: Office of the Kalobeyi Initiative for a Better Life, Kalobeyi, Kenya.
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Conclusion

RLO challenges

The key challenges identified by RLO leaders and members are:

- **Access to funds:** Across all contexts, access to funds is the main challenge that RLOs face. Limited access to diversified sustainable sources of funding – whether it comes from state donors, private donors, aid organisations, the diaspora, income-generating activities, or individual sponsors – prevents RLOs from operating, scaling up their activities and providing quality services.
- **The regulatory framework:** The regulatory framework affects RLOs in the four countries in different ways. RLOs in Uganda and Kenya can operate openly even without registration, but lack of registration hinders their ability to access funding. RLOs in Ethiopia and Tanzania are unable to operate safely, and RLOs in Addis Ababa are at risk of being arrested while implementing activities. The regulatory framework also makes it difficult for RLOs to open bank accounts to receive funds. Restrictions to freedom of movement also affect RLO leaders' ability to develop their organisations.
- **Lack of meaningful partnerships:** RLOs are generally able to access project-based or event-based partnerships, but this does not ascribe them the credibility required to foster partnerships with potential state and private donors.
- **Lack of capacity:** Many RLOs lack capacities that relate to financial management, proposal development, and operations. These challenges further impact their credibility with state, multilateral, and private donors.

RLO plans

A key priority for most RLOs is the creation of more solid networks – whether with their community, other RLOs, aid organisations, faith-based organisations, or the diaspora. In more open regulatory contexts, this would entail more public exposure, such as improved websites and social media presence.

Larger-scale RLOs in Kenya and Uganda are more ambitious in their plans and aspire to expand to different areas within the country and the wider region (in both their country of origin for South Sudanese and Sudanese, and in other asylum contexts for others). They also hope to diversify their programmes.

Smaller RLOs and RLOs in Ethiopia and Tanzania often have no clear plan or strategy given the limited space in which they have to operate. Their priority is to register and/or follow-up on registration.

Partnership plans

RLO partnerships with aid organisations are dependent on their ability to be visible and to advocate publicly for their inclusion. In Tanzania and Ethiopia, the restrictive environment does not grant RLOs the power to contribute to discussions on localisation or on setting priorities for the refugee response.

In Kenya and Uganda, where RLOs are able to operate publicly without fear of repercussions, larger-scale elite RLOs are increasingly seen as competing with national and international aid organisations. In locations like Kakuma, RLOs operate in a marketplace and compete for funding to implement projects on behalf of donors.²⁴ Only RLOs that replicate the structures and models of traditional aid organisations are able to compete for funds; and even when they do successfully, they still only receive a small percentage of the total aid money granted to the refugee response. RLOs that obtain funds are typically the ones able to acquire further funding, which has created a group of elite RLOs.

From the perspective of aid organisations, plans to develop partnerships in Ethiopia and Tanzania are limited. Aid organisations are reluctant to engage with unregistered organisations beyond some in-kind contributions at the field level.

In Uganda and Kenya, aid organisations are more open to continue supporting RLOs in terms of funding, network development, and capacity building. In Kenya, Cohere has created a platform (Re-Frame) that displays the work of RLOs and advertises funding and project opportunities. Refuge Point continues to provide grants to some RLOs through their self-reliance programmes.

Meaningful engagement nonetheless remains sparse. While some aid organisations play an active role in transferring funding opportunities for RLOs (eg Cohere in Kenya), the funding models in the humanitarian sector, and larger INGOs and UNHCR, are slow to change. RLOs are often involved in projects already set up by INGOs as a way to promote localisation, but there is no associated transfer of power or resources that they could use as core funding for sustainability.

Most INGOs said they would like to increase the involvement of RLOs in planning future programmes. However, the majority do not have a clear plan on how to do so, and some suggested that they lacked proof of concept to further engage RLOs. The plans of larger INGOs do not address power imbalances between RLOs and aid organisations – they appear to be an expansion of current partnership models. These organisations cite financial constraints and challenges faced by the humanitarian system as a whole as the main reason for being unable to engage in long-term financial commitments and permanent partnerships with RLOs.



Image 5: Rice harvesting, Nakivale Green Environment Organisation, Uganda.
© Mary Gitahi

²⁴ Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria. *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Recommendations

This section provides recommendations based on RLO priorities outlined during fieldwork: 1) Access to funding opportunities; 2) Capacity building for RLO leaders and staff; 3) Meaningful partnerships with aid organisations; 4) Ability and support to register; 5) Access to infrastructure.

There are challenges associated with most of the recommendations provided in this report. These generally pertain to which RLOs are included, and which are excluded; how to engage RLOs in meaningful ways, non-tokenistic ways; and how to ensure the sustained independence and added-value of RLOs.

- **Exclusion of certain groups over others:** Successful leaders often have professional connections with aid organisations and are typically educated, urban-based men. While it is worth supporting them, there is a risk that the same elite group will be engaged while others, such as minorities or women, are excluded from refugee participation efforts. This could exacerbate a hierarchy between RLOs and between refugee communities. The solution is not to exclude more visible RLOs, but to make more room for smaller RLOs which have a tangible impact on their communities.
- **Tokenistic engagement:** There are risks that the participation of RLOs in decision-making remains tokenistic. Significant efforts are needed to ensure meaningful participation that is 'ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially.'²⁵ Previous efforts to include refugees in decision-making have often been limited to ad hoc consultations, project implementation and events.²⁶ Tokenisation can also create harmful competition between RLOs: as opportunities are scarce, RLOs are pushed to compete, limiting opportunities for cooperation and support.
- **Loss of independence:** To be included in aid organisations, RLOs might be forced to change their ways of working and address priorities set by donors rather than priorities identified at the field level. When engaging with RLOs, stakeholders should respect their autonomy in terms of decision-making and avoid co-opting their agency.²⁷

To donors

- **Provide direct funding to RLOs.** Both philanthropic and state donors should prioritise core funding and long-term projects. Long-term or start-up funding is needed to allow RLOs to become sustainable and equal partners with aid organisations. Donors should consider funding consortia of RLOs to raise the profile of more marginal groups – so that all RLOs can meet their objectives – and facilitate RLO-to-RLO learning.

²⁵ Global Refugee Youth Network. 'Meaningful refugee participation as transformative leadership: guidelines for concrete action', Asylum Access, December 2019. https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf

²⁶ 'Tokenizing practices in refugee participation continue to permeate the refugee response space. In order to overcome these practices, the sector must hold one another accountable to a meaningful version of participation. Participation should not be limited to low numbers or specific initiatives, to consultation or presentation, or to insensitively prompted storytelling. Such practices can re-victimize and re-traumatize, create damaging competition between refugee-led groups, and fundamentally limit the positive impact refugees can have on future responses to refugee situations.' See: Global Refugee Youth Network. 'Meaningful refugee participation as transformative leadership: guidelines for concrete action', Asylum Access, December 2019. https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf

²⁷ Ibid

- **Consider funding unregistered self-help groups led by marginalised refugees.** Many women and minority groups remain at the self-help stage of their development and are not able to provide services beyond their own members, despite their aspiration to do so. Promoting women-led RLOs requires supporting these groups in early stages of development. There could be a division of priorities between philanthropic donors and state donors: philanthropic donors could focus on smaller RLOs, while state and multilateral donors could fund larger RLOs with a higher level of formalisation and more experience.
- **Adapt funding requirements to the specific needs of RLOs.** RLOs often cannot compete for funding due to their size, reach, or registration status. Donors should engage RLOs to set performance indicators jointly. They should also continuously engage in conversation with RLOs on key community priorities.
- **Consider setting up refugee-led monitoring groups to keep RLOs accountable.** Accountability to the community and to donors is a critical component of humanitarian support but monitoring and evaluation models that are applied to aid organisations might not be appropriate for RLOs. Donors should support refugee-led monitoring groups to keep RLOs accountable. These groups could include a donor representative, community members, and community leaders to track the progress of RLOs and raise potential flags to the donor. Participation in these groups should be funded and facilitated.
- **Advocate for policy change at the government level.** The regulatory framework can hinder the realisation of RLOs' potential, limiting their access to resources and ability to implement projects. Donors have a key role to play in advocating for policy changes on RLO registration, recognition of existing initiatives, refugee documentation, and access to infrastructure (eg banking).
- **Create space for RLOs to influence the humanitarian sector.** Participation in humanitarian fora is limited to a small group of elite RLOs and is often tokenistic. Smaller RLOs, and RLOs in Tanzania and Ethiopia, are not involved in these meetings. Donors should involve RLOs in both donor and humanitarian coordination meetings. Donors could ensure that RLOs are involved in the cluster system and are able to take leadership in clusters. In the short term, there could be co-leadership between an aid organisation and an RLO at the cluster level, and subsequently RLO leadership. For the sake of inclusivity, donors should fund costs associated with participating in those coordination meetings and implement translation mechanisms.

To governments and authorities

- **Simplify and communicate on the registration process.** In Kenya and Uganda, RLOs are able to register as CBOs and NGOs, but several barriers remain in terms of information and access. Governments should make access to registration systematic and straightforward and communicate on the steps needed to register.
- **Create policies that allow RLOs to register as CBOs.** In Ethiopia and Tanzania, RLOs are not able to register as CBOs and can only register as self-help groups at the camp level. This prevents them from seeking funds and implementing projects. In Tanzania,

the government should set up a policy and guidelines for registration that are in line with the reality of RLOs. In Ethiopia, the government should implement provisions from the Refugees Proclamation of 2019 that allows refugees to create associations.²⁸

- **In camp and settlement settings, allocate land fairly to RLOs to set up their activities.** In most countries, camp authorities grant access to land for some RLOs to set up their offices or to implement their activities. Authorities should continue providing land to RLOs as it is critical to their sustainability. Authorities should also develop clear criteria for what activities and under which conditions RLOs can access land.

To UNHCR

- **Improve communication channels with RLOs.** In each country, UNHCR should develop a database of RLOs that includes registered and unregistered groups and that is in line with the definition developed at the global level. To ensure inclusion and diversity, it is crucial that information is disseminated to RLOs about opportunities in ways that are appropriate to their needs. UNHCR should consider dedicating a staff position for RLO engagement in each country, to be held by a refugee who has experience with community engagement with a diversity of nationalities. This staff position would allow UNHCR to be more consistent in its communications with RLOs and to implement a communication strategy that is adapted to the needs of RLOs (eg WhatsApp, calls for illiterate leaders or those who have no internet access). This position would also allow UNHCR to meaningfully involve RLOs when planning their annual operations, beyond consultations and assessments.
- **Implement and adapt global UNHCR policies towards RLOs at the field level.** UNHCR in Geneva has made significant progress in developing guidelines on how to engage RLOs. UNHCR should set up regional advisory boards to promote the implementation of these policies and to adapt them to regional specificities. Once these are approved, UNHCR should ensure that policies are known by UNHCR staff at the regional, national, and field levels.
- **Advocate for policy change at the government level.** UNHCR can partner with donors to advocate for changes on RLO registration, recognition of existing initiatives, refugee documentation, and access to infrastructure with local and national authorities. Recognising and promoting the role of existing initiatives can raise the profile of RLOs and encourage the government to facilitate their activities.

To aid organisations

- **Involve RLOs in decision-making through equal-partner consortia.** RLOs are often involved as implementers only, which does not give them the power to make decisions or to gain valuable experience in decision-making. Aid organisations should set up equal-

²⁸ While the legal position in relation to refugee-led organizations should be increasingly enabling, it remains unclear how far aid agencies working with refugees are willing to go without further clarification. RRS should clarify the implications of the new law so that refugees can take advantage of any new opportunity to formally register organizations.' See: Oxfam. 'More local is possible: recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response', Briefing Paper, 1 December 2021. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/more-local-is-possible-recommendations-for-enhancing-local-humanitarian-leaders-621311/>

partnership consortia that engage RLOs meaningfully from the project development phase onwards as co-owners of the project.

- **Embed capacity development with funded projects.** Capacity development is a key need for many RLO leaders in terms of project development, implementation and proposal writing. However, current models of capacity development – which mostly consist of short-term training sessions – are unlikely to yield long-term results or gains for RLOs.²⁹ Capacity-building activities that are embedded with project delivery are more likely to yield long-term results. Aid organisations should include capacity development as a core activity in the design of consortia.
- **Support the operationalisation of a remote one-stop service centre for RLOs.** RLOs have limited access to support systems unless they have a personal relationship with professional aid workers. This deepens inequalities between RLOs and penalises women-led groups which remain at the self-help stage. Aid organisations should gather resources to set up a team of mentors that all RLOs, whether registered or not, can access in-person or remotely. These mentors can help them articulate and develop their projects and ensure their activities align with requirements.
- **Be long-term allies.** RLOs have significant value-added qualities to assist in the refugee response, but are hindered by structural weaknesses due to the displacement status of their leaders. Aid organisations should manage their expectations of what RLOs can achieve and engage in long-term support and partnerships. They should also promote the ideas of refugees, give credit and recognition and make space for RLOs to participate in decision-making at the policy and project levels.

To RLOs

- **Set up RLO-to-RLO partnerships on projects.** Larger-scale RLOs can play a critical role in raising the profile and increasing the capacity of marginalised RLOs. RLOs with better access to networks should consider including smaller RLOs in the delivery of services and set up equal partnerships with them in order to unlock access to partners and resources.
- **Ensure that networks are inclusive.** Networks are often criticised for not being inclusive to different groups and promoting more elite groups over others. RLO networks should take transparent steps to include a range of marginalised groups in their structures (eg LGBTQ+, women, minority nationalities).
- **Take steps to ensure community accountability.** While RLOs tend to be seen as more accountable to refugees themselves, there are concerns that they might not stay accountable to the community as they access more resources. RLOs should set up systems for record-keeping and record-sharing at the community level (eg use of social media, public consultations, and events).

²⁹ For a discussion on the pitfalls and weaknesses of capacity building training sessions in the humanitarian sector, see: Ian Christoplos, 'Institutional capacity building amid humanitarian action', in *ALNAP Review of Humanitarian Action in 2004* (ALNAP, 2005), pp.29–72. <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/rha04-ch2.pdf>

Further research needed

- **Impact of funding:** More systematic research should be conducted to understand how different types of humanitarian funding and support given to RLOs will continue to shape their activities, reach and impact. This applies to RLOs at aid organisations and the community level in both urban and camp/settlement settings, and in both protracted displacement settings and emergency settings.
- **Inclusion of women in the RLO landscape:** There is global interest in women-led RLOs, exemplified by UNHCR's emphasis on women-led RLOs in the 2022 NGO Innovation Award.³⁰ However, few women-led RLOs have emerged beyond the self-help stage. More research is needed to understand and unlock the challenges that women-led RLOs face.
- **Inclusion of host communities in RLOs:** Emerging evidence suggests that the existence of co-led RLOs is location-dependent (eg in Kenya, they are common in Dadaab but not in Kakuma). More research is needed to understand the power dynamics within co-led RLOs and the factors that enable meaningful co-leadership.
- **Engagement with the private sector:** There is little evidence on how the private sector can support RLOs in accessing resources or include RLOs in their corporate social responsibility activities. Further research is needed to better understand the opportunities and challenges related to RLOs' current and potential engagement with the private sector.
- **The role of diaspora in sustaining RLOs:** Diasporas play a key role in supporting RLOs financially and with technical skills. More research is needed to understand the roles that diasporic individuals and groups can play in supporting RLOs as more humanitarian donors are engaging in the RLO space.
- **Review good practices in engaging RLOs:** Aid organisations have piloted several ways of working with RLOs. As more organisations start working with RLOs to promote localisation and refugee participation, research is needed to gather and review previous practices. Specifically, to what extent they are meaningful, what works, what does not, and under which conditions. This could also include an examination of current capacity-development models and how they contribute to the sustainability of RLOs.
- **Replicating the study in other locations:** This study could be replicated in other locations within the countries examined in this report (eg other camps in Ethiopia, rural areas in Tanzania) and to other refugee host countries to provide evidence on the landscape of RLOs, their impact on communities affected by displacement, and their financial and non-financial needs.

³⁰ See: UNHCR. 'UNHCR NGO Innovation Award 2022'. <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/unhcr-ngo-innovation-award-2022/>

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Annex 2: Definitions of RLOs in the literature

The research team identified eight definitions of RLOs, including refugee community organisations (RCOs) and RLIs, developed in different geographical contexts.

1. **Open Society Foundations (OSF)** defines RLIs as ‘formal and informal organizations, coalitions, and networks that prioritize meaningful inclusion of refugees in governance, program design, and decision-making.’³¹
2. **UNHCR** defines a people of concern (POC)-led organisation as an ‘organisation entirely established and led by refugees, asylum-seekers, Internally Displaced People (IDPs), returnees or others of concern to UNHCR that has more than 50% of such populations in positions of leadership and decision-making.’ It is ‘a group of people who gather to accomplish a common goal that provides services at community level.’ It is also ‘Non-profit, grassroots organisation whose activities are based mostly on volunteer efforts.’³²The use of POC in this definition has received push-back from refugee-led networks as it ‘reinforces a subordinate status for organisations and initiatives led by affected communities but inherently defining them in relation to their eligibility for protection by UNHCR.’³³
3. **The Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN)** defines refugee-led organisations/initiatives as ‘organizations which are founded and/or led by those with lived refugee experience, and may include both formal, registered organizations and informal initiatives.’³⁴
4. In their paper on RLOs in Europe, **Torfa** (2019) makes a distinction between RCOs and RLOs and states that ‘the term RCOs is used for refugee communities that are active in refugee service provision but are not necessarily officially registered as an organisation. The term RLO, however, refers to those who are officially registered as non-profit organisations.’³⁵
5. **Pincock et al.** (2020) define RLOs as ‘organisations created and led by refugees themselves [and who] serve members of their communities in significant ways.’³⁶
6. According to **Gleason** (2006), the ‘defining features of RLOs are the composition of their staff, their mission, and the fact that they are grassroots initiatives’ (quoted by Montoya, 2017).³⁷

³¹ See: Funds For NGOs. ‘Refugee leadership in Lebanon – open call for proposals’. <https://www2.fundsforngos.org/latest-funds-for-ngos/refugee-leadership-in-lebanon-open-call-for-proposals/>

³² See: UNHCR. ‘Grant agreements with organisations led by persons of concern (PoC)’, Briefing Note, February 2022. https://help.unhcr.org/indonesia/wp-content/uploads/sites/42/2022/02/UNHCR-Grant-Agreements-with-POC-Led-Organisations-Briefing-Note_Dec-update-v.4.pdf

³³ Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, R-SEAT, Global Refugee-Led Youth Network, Act for Peace, Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders. ‘Use of the term “Persons-of-Concern-led Organisations”’, 25 May 2022. <https://twitter.com/APNORefugees/status/1532559928053100544/photo/1>

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³⁵ Masooma Torfa. ‘Refugee-led organisations in Europe: policy contributions, opportunities and challenges’, ECRE Working Paper, 2020.

³⁶ Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria and Kate Pincock. ‘Localising public health: refugee-led organisations as first and last responders in COVID-19’, *World Development* 139 (2021): 105311.

³⁷ Montoya, P. E. C.. ‘Refugee-led organizations and the obstacles they face: a comparative study of Syria Bright Future and the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh’, (2017) 86.

6. In their paper focusing on Burmese refugees in Kuala Lumpur, **McConnachie** (2019) provides an inclusive definition of RLOs by stating that ‘some “community-based” organizations are created organically by refugees in situ, while others are established by external agencies or encouraged by diasporic movements.’³⁸
7. In their paper on refugee and migrant-led initiatives in the United Kingdom, **Lukes** (2009) finds that ‘RCOs are [...] defined by who they are and so, essentially, an RCO is any organisation that is not only working with refugees but is also run by them.’³⁹

³⁸Kirsten McConnachie. ‘Securitization and community-based protection among Chin refugees in Kuala Lumpur’, *Social & Legal Studies* 28, no. 2 (2019): 158–78.

³⁹Sue Lukes. ‘The potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy’, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 21 January 2009. <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/potential-migrant-and-refugee-community-organisations-influence-policy>

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