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, supported by the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN), based at Carleton University, 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

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.

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³We exclude from this definition refugee leadership bodies set up by authorities and UNHCR because they are not set up independently and their decisions are thus influenced by authorities and UNHCR. We also exclude groups created as part of INGO programmes unless they have expanded their activities beyond the original objectives.
Executive summary

Perceived impact of RLOs

Across organisations, beneficiaries speak positively about their experiences with RLOs. Beneficiaries note that RLOs treat them with more dignity, have a better understanding of and adapted to their needs, provide 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 leaders’ 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 to obtain 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 that are 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 enhance access to 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 is 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 are excluded; how to engage RLOs in meaningful, non-tokenistic ways; and how to ensure the sustained independence and added value of RLOs as they are increasingly integrated into 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.
Executive summary

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

• 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 that are adapted to their needs. UNHCR should consider dedicating a staff position for RLO engagement, to be held by a refugee who has experience working with a diversity of 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 donor requirements.

• Be long-term allies. Aid organisations should manage expectations of what RLOs can achieve with limited resources, 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.
Executive summary

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.

To RLOs

- **Set up RLO-to-RLO partnerships on projects.** RLOs with better access to networks should include smaller, less-developed RLOs in the delivery of services and should set up equal partnerships with them to open access to partners and resources.

- **Ensure that networks are inclusive.** RLO networks should make transparent efforts 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.

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