

# REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS IN EAST AFRICA: COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS IN KENYA

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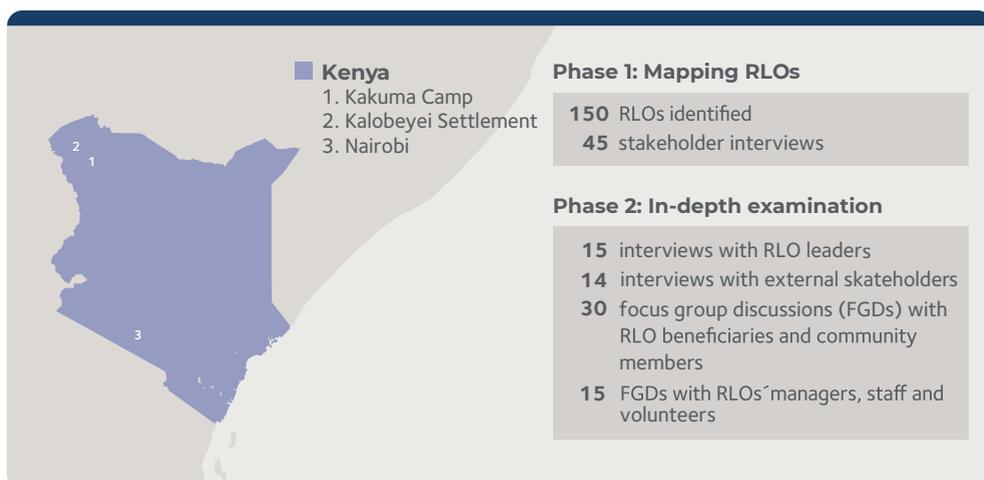
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Executive Summary

## Executive Summary

This study was motivated by emerging evidence that refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in East Africa play a vital role in meeting community needs. While there was some evidence on the landscape and activities of RLOs in Kenya, no prior study had engaged community members and RLO beneficiaries to understand how they perceive the impact of RLOs on their own communities. This study was led by a person with a displacement background from the start to finish.



### The RLO landscape

- RLOs in Kenya are diverse in nature; they range from small groupings and associations within various communities to larger organisations that are registered as community-based organisations (CBOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Other groups also include formal and informal faith-based organisations and savings groups.
- Refugees in Kenya create RLOs to fill existing gaps left by aid organisations and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in service provision and delivery. In urban areas, RLOs are the first point of contact for new arrivals, and some provide safe

houses for refugees who cannot afford to pay rent.

- RLOs provide services in education (adult education, English training, and digital training), livelihoods, hygiene and sanitation, and agriculture, particularly in the camp settings. RLOs in both urban and camp settings played an important role in the distribution of food and other necessary items during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Most formal RLOs are led by educated Congolese nationals. This is because they tend to have wider networks, and other communities tend to rely on informal ethnic associations. Congolese-led RLOs do, however, often employ other nationalities and host community professionals as staff. In areas where refugees tend to be from one nationality, RLOs tend to be established by that nationality.
- Most RLOs are created by men, with few groupings led by women. This is due to structural and cultural barriers that most women face; women have fewer network connections, are often excluded from decision-making, and most have only informal education.

### Perceived impact of RLOs

- In urban areas, RLOs are known by refugee communities within their area of operation. In areas where there are few refugees, they do not typically know about the existence of RLOs. In camp settings, RLOs are widely known, especially the elite and larger RLOs. Younger people tend to be more aware of the RLOs operating in their community.
- Government officials in the camps, such as the Department of Refugee Services (DRS), are aware of both registered and unregistered RLOs as they oversee the registration of CBOs. In urban areas, the local chief and police know about RLOs. The chief oversees access to registration, and the police sometimes consult RLOs if a refugee is accused of committing an offence.
- NGOs and UNHCR are aware of the existence of larger RLOs within both urban and camp settings.
- Member contributions facilitate the establishment of most RLOs. Subsequent activities generate interest and funding from NGOs and external donors, and RLOs may stop collecting membership contributions. Some RLOs source funds from online fundraising, diaspora aid, and contributions from activities such as livelihood projects or cultural activities.
- RLOs that have broader connections and networks are known as elite RLOs. In the camps and urban settings these elite RLOs are part of networks such as RELON-Kenya.
- Beneficiaries describe RLO service provision as fast and efficient. Some say they are treated with understanding and respect, and others add RLO services to meet their needs. However, women and older people feel excluded from services as most focus on young people. Other non-beneficiaries in the community feel RLOs established by a particular ethnic group may only target those of the same ethnicity.
- The refugee community considers service provision by RLOs as more easily accessible because, contrary to aid organisations and UNHCR, RLOs are formed within the community. RLOs permit beneficiaries to use their native language and provide assistance despite documentation challenges, unlike many NGOs and the UNHCR. Some feel RLOs

more effectively target beneficiaries and create better paying jobs for refugees than NGOs and UNHCR.

- RLO leaders, beneficiaries, and some external stakeholders consider RLOs as highly impactful because of their proximity and ability to better understand the community. RLOs are the first point of contact by new arrivals in urban areas and are crucial sources of information sharing for refugees. This was particularly evident during COVID-19 when RLOs took centre stage in service provision.

### Variations in impact

- RLO impact in Kenya is reliant on access to networks and the regulatory framework. RLO leaders with previous experience with UNHCR and other aid organisations are better able to access funds from NGOs, UNHCR, and the diaspora, and RLO leaders with connections to government officials are better able to access registration. RLOs that are registered are able to apply for external funding and sometimes work in partnership with NGOs, while unregistered RLOs face challenges when applying for funding and grants.
- RLOs in Kenya have limited meaningful partnerships with NGOs or UNHCR; however, some RLOs receive grants from NGOs to implement projects.
- Challenges that RLOs encounter include financial limitations, lack of registration, lack of capacity building for staff and RLO leaders, and replication of services by multiple RLOs.
- Measures that RLOs have taken to deal with challenges include networking with other RLOs to gain exposure and collaborate on projects. Some RLOs conduct income-generating activities, such as performing at weddings and providing electricity in camps.

### Recommendations

- Donors should provide high-quality, direct long-term funding to RLOs. In addition, they should consider funding unregistered self-help groups led by marginalised refugees.
- Authorities should simplify and communicate the registration process.
- The UNHCR should improve communication channels with RLOs, and disseminate information about opportunities to RLOs in ways that are adapted to their needs.
- Aid organisations should involve RLOs in decision-making through equal-partner consortia, and embed capacity development with funded projects so they yield long-term results. Aid organisations should also set up a team of accessible mentors that can help RLOs articulate and develop their projects and ensure they align with donor requirements.
- 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. RLOs should also set up systems for record-keeping and record-sharing at the community level.

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