

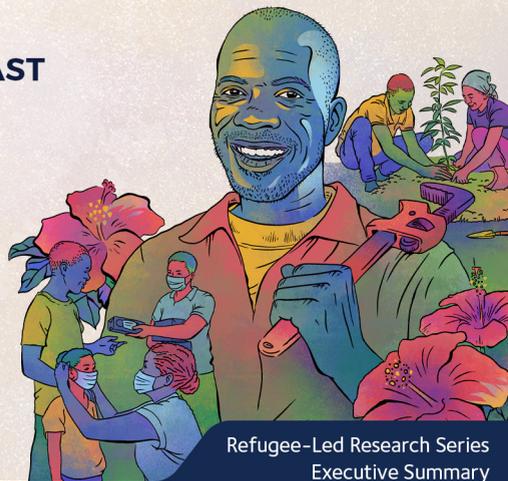
REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS IN EAST AFRICA: COMMUNITY PERCEPTIONS IN UGANDA

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REFUGEE-LED RESEARCH HUB

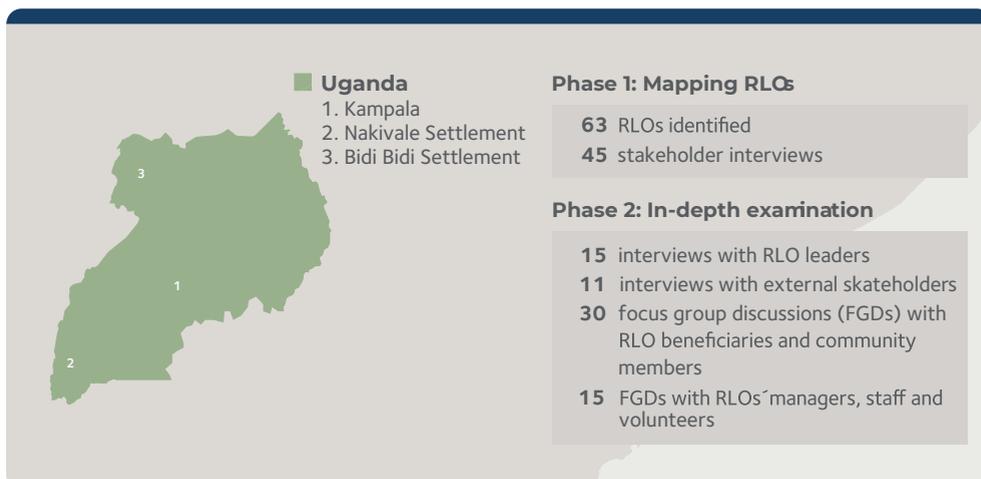


Refugee-Led Research Series
Executive Summary

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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 Uganda, 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

- In Kampala, most RLOs are registered and have formalised their activities due to support from the larger RLOs and RLO networks. Larger-scale RLOs are registered as non-governmental organisations (NGOs). RLOs focus on livelihood, medical support, education, and special interest groups (e.g. HIV survivors, LGBTQ+ groups). Most rely on volunteers and members, but larger-scale ones have paid staff.
- In Nakivale, most RLOs are informal and of small scale. There are a few outliers that receive funding and are registered as NGOs. Most influential RLOs are located in base camp,

while other locations host more informal RLOs and village savings and loan associations. Groups often focus on agricultural livelihood, special interest groups, or access to job opportunities for youths. Most RLOs rely on members or volunteers for support. Some have salaried staff, including Ugandan nationals from Kampala.

- In Bidi Bidi, most RLOs are small-scale, informal, and focus on single issues (e.g. HIV survivors, support for widows) and cultural preservation (due to the shared nationality of beneficiaries). Medium-scale RLOs tend to act as intermediaries between the youth and NGOs for cash-for-work projects.
- The team identified two RLO networks in Uganda: the Refugee-Led Organization Network (RELON) Uganda based in Kampala and the Association Of Community Based Organisations in Nakivale (ACBON) in Nakivale, which were both created for advocacy, access to opportunities, and to address registration challenges. In Bidi Bidi, there is a community-based network based on ethnic affiliation (South Sudanese Union), which focuses on advocacy, peace and reconciliation, and cultural preservation.
- Educated nationals act as enablers for larger RLOs, providing technical support at the managerial level. In Uganda, RLOs are required under the ReHope strategy and the current Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework to provide 30% of their services to host community members, maintain good relationships, and promote integration. RLOs nevertheless tend to prioritise refugees in service delivery; they also may not be able to reach this objective in less integrated locations such as Bidi Bidi.

Perceived impact of RLOs

- Across organisations, beneficiaries speak positively about their interactions and experiences with RLOs. They note that RLOs treat them with more dignity, are better understanding of their needs, provide fairer service delivery, are more accessible and less bureaucratic, facilitate more direct communication, 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, regardless of RLO size. This is particularly the case when beneficiaries are in situations of irregularity or marginalisation or when the RLO provides a service which might not be legal. Examples include the provision of micro-loans, emergency support, skills training, orientation and information, COVID-19 safety measures, mental health support, and community cohesion. Negative perceptions pertain to ethnic favouritism and RLOs functioning in a self-serving capacity for leaders.
- Refugees are aware of RLOs and their activities in both urban and settlement settings. Some RLOs are more popular than others due to the influence they have in the community. Influence is attributed to the RLO leader, the sector in which they intervene, their affiliation to aid organisations, their ability to offer visible and regular services to the community, and, finally, their location. Aid organisations and authorities are aware of larger RLOs, but their knowledge is limited when it comes to more informal, smaller RLOs.

Variations in impact

- There is variation between RLO members/beneficiaries and non-beneficiary community members regarding the impact of RLOs on their community. Non-beneficiaries are generally neutral on RLO impact, but a minority claim there are negative impacts.
- The most significant factor in determining RLO success is the leader's ability to access a range of networks, in particular humanitarian networks. Elite RLOs tend to be led by male refugees with higher qualifications (bachelor's and masters degrees) and who are part of existing networks, including with aid partners and international bodies.
- Women-led RLOs are more likely to remain at the self-help stage and struggle to expand their activities due to structural barriers and self-censorship. While most RLO leaders are under 40 years old, nationality-based RLOs and cultural preservation or cultural support groups tend to be led by older people in the community.
- The regulatory framework has a significant influence on RLOs' ability to access resources and partnerships, but not their ability to operate. The Refugee Act 2006 states that refugees have the right to association for non-political and non-profit making associations and trade unions. RLOs can register as either community-based organisations (CBOs) or NGOs depending on the scale of their activities. Barriers to registration have eased due to support from RLO networks, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), and local authorities, but smaller-scale RLOs may still face administrative challenges.
- 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 in the eyes of the donor community and, in some cases, the refugee community. Many INGOs start engaging with RLOs as a way to access communities.
- Meaningful engagement remains sparse. While some aid organisations play an active role in transferring funding opportunities for RLOs, the funding models in the humanitarian sector, and larger INGOs and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), are slow to change.
- Diaspora funding remains a source of support for RLO activities. In Nakivale, RLOs can now apply for bank loan products specifically adapted to their needs. These banks accept dwellings built by refugees on Office of the Prime Minister (OPM)-owned land as collateral, increasing access to loans significantly; and there are indications that support for RLOs and RLO members will be further increased.
- RLOs have plans to work on access to networks and opportunities, gain exposure, and advertise their work through aid networks and social media. Informal RLOs aspire to register in order to access partnerships and funding opportunities.

Recommendations

- Donors should provide more extensive and tailored funding to RLOs, particularly for marginalised communities; expand their support to unregistered RLOs; engage more directly with RLOs and RLO communities to support activities and facilitate networking; and advocate for policy change at the government level. Government authorities should simplify the registration process and allocate land and resources fairly. RLOs can increase community accountability and inclusivity, expand networks, and set up RLO-to-RLO partnerships on projects.

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