Refugee participation and leadership

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About HPN

The Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN) at ODI is an independent forum where field workers, managers and policy-makers in the humanitarian sector share information, analysis and experience. The views and opinions expressed in HPN's publications do not necessarily state or reflect those of the Humanitarian Policy Group or ODI.

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Cover photo: The UN Resident Coordinator in Bangladesh organised a gathering of Rohingya Women Leaders to discuss common challenges, issues, demands. **Credit:** UN Women

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Contents

Earthquake response in North-west Syria. Credit: Molham Team

Editorial

This edition of the *Humanitarian Exchange*, co-edited with Emily Arnold-Fernández, former CEO of Asylum Access, focuses on refugee participation and leadership in addressing forced displacement. While the importance of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and the support they provide to people in displacement is now widely acknowledged by both policymakers and practitioners, ensuring RLOs' leadership, decision-making power and sufficient flexible funding lags far behind. The erroneous assumption that all RLOs are small and lack financial and administrative capacity is reflected in the unequal partnerships and power relations between them and international organisations.

Five years on from the first Global Summit of Refugees organised in 2018 by the Global Refugee Network, **Emily Arnold-Fernández** reflects on three key questions about refugee participation and leadership: where are we, what have we learned and what's next? The recently established **United States Refugee Advisory Board** explains how it aims to ensure that forcibly displaced people have a meaningful and equitable role in influencing global policies and **Bahati Kanyamanza** makes the case for refugee representation on the Executive Committee of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR). **Farah Al Hamouri and her co-authors** from the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and the Refugee-led Research Hub (RLRH) share findings from an 18-month research project they conducted in East Africa and the Middle East which investigated the nature, scope and impact of RLOs and what factors condition their impact. Drawing on this research as well as other experience in East Africa, **Foni Joyce Vuni, Buhendwa Iragi and Pauline Vidal** advise humanitarian actors and donors that prioritising systems for community accountability over donor accountability will achieve better outcomes for affected people. **Abdullwahid Dahir**, President of the Somali Society in Idaman Sutera Condominium in Kuala Lumpur, recounts action his organisation took to prevent local authorities and building management from illegally evicting him and his fellow Somali refugees. Referencing his experience of starting a Social Innovation Hub (SHiFT) in Lebanon and later working with the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), **Hane Alrustm and Gabriella Kallas** highlight the transformative impact refugee-led organisations can have on communities.

The response of Syrian civil society organisations to the recent earthquakes in Syria and Türkiye feature in the article by **Muzna Dureid**, who notes that with the support of local people these organisations responded more quickly and effectively than the UN. **Sarah Smith, Lauren Post Thomas and Barri Shorey** look at what role philanthropy can play in supporting the meaningful and systematic participation of refugees and refugee leaders in global and national refugee policymaking, while **Christina Thompson** highlights the importance of supporting meaningful participation of refugees at all levels. **Maha Kattaa and Nathalie Both** look at the positive impact of refugees' participation in the labour market on decent work and social cohesion, citing examples and evidence from two International

Labour Organization programmes in Jordan. The edition ends with an article by **Serwah Asante and co-authors** who report on the resistance they encountered when trying to promote the decolonisation of their refugee-supporting organisation, concluding that achieving a decolonial future will require concrete actions to transition power from international non-governmental organisations to affected communities, including RLOs.

Refugee participation and leadership

Displacement and decolonisation: refugee participation and leadership in the forced displacement sector

Emily Arnold-Fernández

The movement for refugee participation and leadership just hit a five-year milestone: in June 2018, the Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) was born out of the first Global Summit of Refugees, a refugee-led convening that called for greater leadership by forcibly displaced people in decisions about displacement response. This call reverberated across the humanitarian sector, sparking a reckoning that continues today.

At the five-year mark, this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* asks three questions about refugee participation and leadership: *Where are we? What have we learned? What's next?*

Where we are

The refugee leadership movement has seen some wins. Tools like GRN's Meaningful Participation Guidelines have helped organisations that are not led by refugees to improve their engagement and solidarity with refugee communities. Multiple governments now include a refugee advisor in their delegations to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

By other measures, progress remains elusive. Refugee leadership within the UNHCR still has little or no traction: an undemocratic system leaves refugees unrepresented on UNHCR's Executive Committee. This is coupled with tacit patronage agreements that restrict day-to-day agency leadership to candidates from wealthy donor countries.

Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) still receive a negligible percentage of aid funding, even as aid budgets grow to unprecedented levels. Meanwhile, organisations not led by refugees sometimes respond poorly to calls to address systems and practices that exclude and marginalise people with lived experience of forced displacement.

At the same time, refugees continue to lead as they have always done. With or without funding, with or without recognition, refugees organise in their communities to address problems and seek remedies for injustice. Famous examples – such as the multinational gatherings of the 1960s in Dar es Salaam and the international leadership appointments of refugees such as Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma and Louis Henkin (the latter a drafter of the Refugee Convention) – tell only a fraction of the story. Less-recognised efforts take place every day, in communities around the world, and have for generations. Although conversations about refugee leadership have been trending over the past five years, refugee leadership itself has always existed.

Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, South African politician, medical doctor and former anti-apartheid activist addresses Kwibuka20, Kigali. Credit: Paul Kagame

What we've learned

While refugee leadership is not new, broad and growing evidence from the past five years affirms that refugee-led organisations are among the most impactful service-providers and advocates for refugee communities. This overturns an erroneous but prevalent assumption in the humanitarian sector that the most effective or trustworthy organisations are those with proximity to power and resources. It also demonstrates that good leadership may look different from the ways donors, policymakers and other powerful actors tend to envision it.

The past five years have taught us the importance of dismantling faulty or limiting visions of leadership, effectiveness and responsibility. Equally important but perhaps harder to achieve is the dismantling of entrenched systemic barriers. Often, these barriers are created or reinforced by operational structures that implicitly privilege certain people and groups.

Some of the barriers might appear unbiased at first glance, but have inequitable impacts. For example, convenings to discuss policy changes, databases used to manage cooperation between humanitarian service-providers, and financial systems to channel funding to humanitarian operations tend to be designed in ways that assume all individuals involved possess legal status in their country of residence and a valid passport that is safe for them to use. Because such assumptions are frequently incorrect for people who have been forcibly displaced, operational structures that rely on such assumptions are biased in ways that obstruct refugee leadership.

Other barriers are explicitly designed to ensure power remains within a specific group rather being than equitably shared. Many wealthy governments have legal or policy restrictions that privilege humanitarian organisations headquartered and registered in their own country, even when those organisations are not best placed to provide the support refugees seek, or achieve the change they desire. For example, Denmark's humanitarian policy accords Danish organisations 'special status' for 'both long-term development assistance and acute humanitarian interventions'.

Such policies are problematic not only because changing them can require convincing large numbers of lawmakers or state administrators to agree, but also because power and self-interest intertwine to resist such change. Danish non-governmental organisations (NGOs), which are arguably the best positioned and equipped to convince Danish lawmakers or administrators to change the country's humanitarian policy, have little direct incentive to do so.

These perverse incentives are not unique to Denmark or to any subset of the humanitarian community. Humanitarian actors that receive preferential outcomes have built on such preferences in myriad ways. Because they are privileged in this way, they receive greater resources and improved positioning, which in turn allows them to achieve better or broader impact, hire more staff, and operate in more locations and communities. Dismantling systems that privilege these actors could have negative consequences for them, even as it opens doors for others – currently privileged actors may have to terminate staff, close operations in places where people today seek their assistance, or accept a reduced voice in policy decisions.

In the face of such consequences, privileged actors have strong incentives to resist changes that expand opportunities for RLOs and other forms of refugee leadership. Even more insidious, a reluctance to embrace these shifts can be excused by, or (at least partly) founded on, good motives. It can be easier for leaders of privileged NGOs to focus on the harms caused to staff who are terminated, or participants who must find new programmes and services, than on the benefits that come from redirecting resources and power to refugee-led initiatives, especially where such benefits are still future prospects rather than contemporary realities.

Designing solutions that shift power to refugee leadership while minimising collateral harm requires creativity and good change management – but also and most importantly, equitable collaboration. What we've learned over the past five years is that when humanitarian actors share a genuine commitment to shifting power, well-designed collective approaches can help reach that goal in ways that work for everyone.

The NGO I founded, Asylum Access, has experimented over the past five years with various collaborative approaches aimed at dismantling barriers that keep refugee leaders and refugee-led organisations from accessing power and resources. Asylum Access has used its access to policy dialogues to advocate for the participation of Global South-based and refugee-led organisations in these discussions – which then shifted the ideas proposed, and potentially the decisions made. It built a consensus-based decision-making structure for the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, the first funding mechanism designed specifically to drive funding to refugee-led organisations, such that each of the six partners (Asylum Access and five RLOs) could contribute and refine ideas and had equal power in strategic decisions. Some initial lessons from these experiments – mistakes and stumbles as well as successes – are captured in the organisation's Equitable Partnership Guidelines.

Other humanitarian organisations not led by refugees, including some who have written for this issue of *Humanitarian Exchange*, are using similar strategies to work more equitably and collaboratively with RLOs and their allies. These collective approaches have resulted in new funds flowing to refugee-led organisations, and greater inclusion of refugee leaders and RLOs in policy discussions. Such approaches have generated new ideas and possibilities for dismantling unjust systems while minimising the problems that can accompany big changes.

What's next

Perhaps the biggest lesson of the past five years is that we still have a lot left to learn – and a long way to go. Many articles in this issue offer practical ways for humanitarian NGOs to support the existing leadership of people experiencing forced displacement and to amplify their power. These are actionable ideas that can help humanitarian actors take the next step on our collective journey toward equitable participation and leadership of refugees in the decisions that affect them.

Looking further ahead on the route, however, the systemic barriers loom large. Most of the lessons thus far have focused on achieving change within humanitarian NGOs. Over the coming five years, my personal hope is that we can broaden our focus to give more attention and energy to the systemic barriers that lie not only within humanitarian organisations but beyond them.

Global governance structures such as the United Nations and the Bretton Woods institutions are undemocratic in ways that reflect outdated and unjust colonial hierarchies – but also, because they assume that states are proxies for their citizens, they leave refugees fundamentally unrepresented. Even much smaller obvious steps to include refugees in global decision-making are overlooked. For example, UNHCR touts the 2019 Global Refugee Forum as 'a true milestone in building solidarity with refugees', but only around 2% of participants were refugees. Increasing that percentage seems like an obvious next step – but the Concept Note for the 2023 forum says nothing about refugee participation, and includes no discussion of plans to address even basic practical barriers such as visas for refugee participants.

Meanwhile, the global legal framework remains a deeply underutilised resource to expand refugees' participation, leadership and access to rights. International laws establish refugees' human rights in

theory, including foundational rights such as free movement and work as well as specific political participation rights. However, almost no resources or other support are available to refugee-led organisations and their allies to enforce those rights through national courts or international mechanisms such as treaty bodies and regional courts. As a result, mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council's Universal Periodic Review, human rights treaty complaints processes, the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights and others are rarely utilised to push governments to honour their obligations to refugees – even though these mechanisms represent a powerful possibility in advancing refugees' participation and leadership in decisions that affect them.

These are only a few of the ways in which the humanitarian sector still has a long way to go in ensuring refugees are central decision-makers in forced displacement response. The good news is that the movement for refugee participation and leadership is just beginning. Humanitarians, both refugees and their allies, have an opportunity to grow the movement together, ensuring it is powerful enough to achieve its boldest visions. This issue of *Humanitarian Exchange* is one way the humanitarian sector is coming together to assess the journey so far and prepare for our next steps, side by side.

Emily Arnold-Fernández is the founder and former CEO of Asylum Access.

Centring forcibly displaced people in policymaking

United States Refugee Advisory Board

Across the world, we are experiencing unprecedented levels of forcibly displaced people due to violent conflict, political persecution, resource insecurity and climate change. Based on the latest data from the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), over 100 million people are currently forcibly displaced, and 10 million more are classified as stateless. These numbers and the worrisome trend pose significant policy, institutional and resource challenges for governments, civil society organisations and the international community.

Dealing with mass migration on an ad hoc basis inevitably leads to polarising political pressures that deter inclusive policymaking, further motivate nationalistic and anti-refugee sentiment, and ultimately are ineffective. Global challenges of this kind must be met with scalable solutions that rethink current systems. As we build toward a more agile and durable model, we must do so with a protection-first posture, and key to that effort is centring forcibly displaced populations' (FDPs) ingenuity, skills and experiences.

Embracing the leadership of those with forced displacement backgrounds across policymaking circles is now, more than ever, mission-critical in addressing the multifaceted challenges of FDPs worldwide. More specifically, examples of participatory policymaking show that fostering a more inclusive process helps to

capture diverse perspectives, ensures meaningful participation that leverages the unique capacities and intelligence of impacted communities, contributes to greater transparency around decision-making, and inevitably increases efficiency when implementing solutions.

Founding of the United States Refugee Advisory Board

Last year, Refugee Congress, Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), and Georgetown University's Institute for the Study of International Migration (ISIM) came together to launch the United States Refugee Advisory Board (USRAB), whose mission as a self-governing initiative is to ensure that forcibly displaced people have a meaningful and equitable role in influencing global policies. Combined, current advisors on the board have decades of experience in humanitarian protection, resettlement processes, administrative and legislative advocacy, and strategic communications.

As part of the onboarding process, advisors undertook a weeklong training course headed by Dr Elizabeth Ferris (Director of ISIM), covering various topics, including a comprehensive overview of the current global refugee system, governance mechanisms, durable solutions, externalisation, and simulation modules. This was followed up by a six-month process to establish by-laws, which yielded an executive governance structure and the inaugural election of USRAB's Chair and two Deputy-Chairs. Establishing these structural components ensures the board is built with long-term sustainability in mind and strengthens internal accountability mechanisms for future advisor cohorts.

Parallel to the operational process above, USRAB also advanced critical discussions to serve as a trusted and formal mechanism for US-based refugees and forcibly displaced people to be meaningfully engaged in policy discussions at the global level. As a result of that effort, Basma Alawee (Co-Design Committee Member and USRAB Advisor) accompanied the official US delegation to the UNHCR Executive Committee, where she became the first refugee to share floor remarks at the invitation of Julieta Valls Noyes, Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the US Department of State. Separately, Olga Morkova (Deputy-Chair) accompanied the US government delegation to the High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges – Development Cooperation Programme. More recently, Hourie Tafech (Advisor) was selected to join the US government delegation to the 2023 Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement. These indicators showcase the increasing confidence in USRAB as a formal advisory mechanism, and because of the values-driven leadership of the US government, it also signals to the world the critical importance of centring forcibly displaced people in global policymaking arenas.

Lastly, USRAB's agenda and priorities must be directly informed by the needs and interests of forcibly displaced communities across the United States, including refugees, asylees, stateless individuals, etc. As such, the board is currently designing a national mechanism for identifying stakeholder groups through consultation with FDP-led initiatives and is developing a guide for gathering feedback regarding the issues most pressing for forcibly displaced populations. USRAB will then synthesise from these discussions the

key challenges and solutions to share across policymaking arenas. Over time, USRAB will continue to provide regular opportunities for discussion and feedback to ensure its strategic priorities consistently represent the broader interests of those who have directly experienced forced displacement.

Implicit assumptions and structural barriers

It is worth noting that there remain assumptions and barriers surrounding the participation of forcibly displaced people in global policymaking arenas, and they should be recognised and addressed. These elements can stem from numerous factors and often hinder progress across the ecosystem.

Foremost, there remains an implicit perception of dependency across institutions, whereby forcibly displaced people are seen only as recipients of aid and assistance, as opposed to potentially becoming active contributors or decision-makers. This systemic perception can undermine the recognition of their leadership potential and their ability to shape policies that directly affect their lives. Separately, negative stereotypes may also perpetuate longstanding racial and ethnic biases, which creates prejudicial conditions that could lead to questioning the expertise of forcibly displaced people and hinders building toward more inclusionary decision-making processes.

More technically, language and cultural differences, as well as unfamiliarity with bureaucratic protocol, often impede effective participation and communication between forcibly displaced people and policymaking spaces. This is exacerbated by the barriers to accessing relevant information, data, networks and resources to engage in meaningful discussions and negotiations.

Lastly, power imbalances and positionality within institutional structures remain systemic issues that subtly exclude forcibly displaced people. The design of existing systems and power dynamics prioritises the voices and interests of government officials, experts and established stakeholders, leaving little room for the perspectives of those directly affected by displacement.

Protecting migrants and children on the move in Mexico. Credit: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid

By naming these assumptions and barriers, we hope that it prompts stakeholders worldwide to engage in meaningful discussions to rethink the current design of their practices and, ultimately, anchor more inclusive frameworks that better harness the expertise and perspectives of forcibly displaced people.

Centring forcibly displaced people contributes to better policymaking

The mass displacement among the world's populations has created an essential impetus for including those with forced-displacement backgrounds because it can unlock significant innovations to meet the demands of the coming decade. When combined with the institutional resources of governments and the broader global refugee regime, there is great potential to establish more efficient governance and policymaking across the ecosystem. As part of the case-making for launching USRAB, it became evident that global actors who centred FDP leadership did so because of many motives.

The first is that forcibly displaced people have firsthand knowledge of the challenges and needs of their communities. Because their expertise is grounded in the unique complexities of displacement, they often have key insights into the gaps in existing policies and potential solutions that could be implemented. Second, including forcibly displaced people in policymaking ensures that diverse perspectives enrich the decision-making process, recognises the importance and respect for situational and geographical nuances, potentially can streamline policy adjustments, and sustain positive outcomes over the long-term. Third, democratising platforms in this way to embrace a more representative process powerfully acknowledges the status of forcibly displaced people as active citizens with a real stake in shaping the policies that impact their lives and those of their community members. Operationalising such a process can yield greater legitimacy and transparency of the decisions made – thus, reducing the risk of unintended consequences. Finally, cultivating greater social cohesion and belonging across host countries is a key factor in sustaining support for increased investment in solutions. Often, forcibly displaced people possess skills that can contribute directly to this work, such as conflict resolution, community development, and cultural mediation expertise – which only furthers understanding and intergroup cooperation between newcomers and local communities.

There are several ways to begin including the voice and expertise of forcibly displaced people across policymaking arenas that would complement existing decision-making processes and advance a more solutions-oriented agenda. Some practical strategies and affiliated examples include:

1. Actively creating opportunities for refugee leaders to participate in decision-making processes, such as establishing national advisory boards (i.e., USRAB). Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT) is an international initiative working to enhance the effectiveness of global refugee responses by co-designing mechanisms to amplify refugee leadership ecosystems and increase the participation of refugees at state levels in a meaningful, sustainable and transformative way. USRAB has significantly benefited from R-SEAT's expertise, and it continues to lead the way in institutionalising advisory boards across the globe.

2. Ensuring diversity and representation by actively including refugee leaders as members, consultants or advisors helps provide a broader range of perspectives and experiences to advance projects. For example, the Refugee Advocacy Lab – an initiative of Refugees International, International Refugee Assistance Project, International Rescue Committee, and Refugee Congress – centres the perspective and leadership of displaced people to support advocacy projects, develop strategic communications resources, and champion inclusive policies that build capacity for the field.
3. Elevating the positionality of forcibly displaced people across organisations to senior-level and/or decision-making roles is often a crucial first step in establishing an organisation's commitment to this journey. Therefore, a compositional review of one's organisation might offer a window into the necessary decisions that would need to be made to become more representative of the populations one is serving.

These ideas and examples are a few ways institutions and states could embrace the expertise of forcibly displaced people. Any effort being considered should be designed to be sustainable over the long term to achieve the desired goals.

Conclusion

Across the world, every day, thousands of people are being forcibly displaced. Upon every step, they witness new realities, adapt to changing conditions, and painstakingly journey toward shores that can protect them and their families. Their journey is not so dissimilar from millions of people across history who have had to do the same. Forcibly displaced people are the carriers of a collective history and embody the resolve and hope of all those who have journeyed to realise a better future. Centring their wisdom can help anchor a new consciousness for our policymaking, cement a more representative pathway toward building durable solutions, and ensure that yesterday's tragedies have no place in our shared future.

The United States Refugee Advisory Board supports and facilitates the involvement of current and former forcibly displaced people in policymaking that affects refugees and displaced people.

Reimagining refugee leadership at the UN: forcibly displaced people should sit on UNHCR's Executive Committee

Bahati Kanyamanza

The United Nations (UN) Palais des Nations is an idyllic place. Grassy lawns dotted by trees slope down to crystal blue Lake Geneva. It couldn't feel further from the violence and tragedy that force refugees like me to flee our homes. But the decisions made there – and at UN headquarters in New York – have profound implications for us.

Unfortunately, the democratic ideals of the UN are a false promise for refugees today. But they could be reality tomorrow: if democratically selected refugee representatives sat on the governing body of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), just like workers do for the International Labour Organization (ILO), we would begin to be represented in the global decisions that affect us.

It's time we have a voice. It's time for refugees to sit on the UNHCR Executive Committee (ExCom).

My father's stolen corn

In the mid-90s, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) started experiencing both internal and external rebel attacks that led to a series of wars in the eastern part of the country. It is estimated that these wars have caused over six million deaths, internally displaced around six million people, and an additional one million Congolese have sought asylum in various neighbouring countries.

As a 14-year-old teenager, I fled my home country to Uganda where I lived as a refugee for 17 years before I was resettled to the United States (US). For about 25 years, I remained a refugee. Though the camp had its unique challenges, like thousands of refugees in my settlement, I believed that the refugee settlement would be a safe haven from the war in DR Congo. I later came to realise that huge challenges awaited: lack of sufficient laws to protect me, no right to work, no free movement, no access to quality education and healthcare were just a few.

To survive, we farmed land that had been allocated to us by the government of Uganda. It took six months to harvest beans and corn, which were the major crops. This was the only way to survive. After six months of hard labour to grow corn, my father took his harvest to a market in the city 60 miles from the refugee settlement. The police blocked him from leaving because refugees were not allowed out of the settlement. He decided to 'sell' his corn to a Ugandan middleman, but this man later refused to pay him a single coin for the crops. My father had no recourse. Neither the government of DR Congo nor of Uganda upheld his rights or safeguarded his interests.

Maize, or corn as it is known in much of the world, feeds millions of people throughout the world. These kernels are from maize grown in Uganda. Credit: Plant Stories Project

This was one of many moments when I saw first-hand how refugees are left unprotected by the laws and the authorities of our host countries. The police in Uganda did not protect my father's right to be paid for his goods. Rather, they enabled a Ugandan thief to steal his goods and prevented my father from leaving the camp to pursue his right to be paid.

At the same time, I could not rely on the government of DR Congo to protect me either. The government had already failed to protect me from the rebels that invaded my country, which is the reason I ended up being a refugee. There was no way it could protect me from property theft beyond its borders.

Witnessing this, I thought about returning to my home country where I was a citizen, not someone barely tolerated, confined and without rights. At the same time, tens of thousands of refugees arrived daily, fleeing the same persecution I had fled. The new refugees shared with me the atrocities rebels continued to commit including raping women and girls, massacres and recruiting children into their rebel groups.

I was forced to accept the reality that my new home, and that of millions of people around me, was Uganda, even when I saw that the Ugandan government did not serve us.

We need our own representatives

After what happened to my father, I had many questions about who was supposed to defend me and other refugees in my settlement from such injustices – and how I could help hold them accountable when they failed. When I left the settlement, I continued to find ways to advocate for the same issues

I faced that affect millions of refugees across the globe. When I took a job with Asylum Access, an organisation advocating for refugee rights, I realised that these issues can be found in most refugee-hosting countries.

The international systems and institutions that respond to humanitarian crises, support global development and facilitate peace around the world are built on the assumption that states represent the people within them. This assumption is at best an approximation of reality: we know many governments are authoritarian, that votes are sometimes suppressed, that governments are often more responsive to the wealthy than the poor.

For refugees like me – at least for 25 years of my life – the assumption that a state represents us is not just imperfect, but definitively false. From the time I fled my home country at age 14 until I received my US citizenship last year as a 38-year-old, no state was even notionally responsible for representing my interests. As a result, I had no voice and no representation in the global decisions that affected my life every day.

In my work with Asylum Access, I've learned more about the UN structures, particularly the UNHCR, an institution mandated to protect refugees. UNHCR is governed by an Executive Committee or 'ExCom', which is composed of diplomats representing UN member states. Refugees' origin states – the states that, like DR Congo, failed to protect them even from loss of life or liberty – are represented. So are refugees' host states, the ones that confine them in camps, turn a blind eye to crimes against them, and put the interests of their citizens ahead of equity and rights for refugees. Donor states, too, are represented. Only refugees are not. Left without state representation, refugees have no representation in the supposedly democratic UN structure.

Follow the ILO model: refugees on ExCom

If we truly believe in a democratic global system where everyone is represented, we need to rethink representation for refugees.

I fled my home country because the country failed to protect me. However, even a lawless country with a broken political system, a country that allows its people to be raped and massacred, has more voice on ExCom than I do. This is not right.

Nor is it right that a country like Uganda has a voice when I do not. Uganda could even select the man who stole from my father to serve as a representative on UNHCR's ExCom, while my father and I have no voice.

That's why I believe refugees should elect their own representatives to ExCom. Such a model has a precedent at the UN: the ILO is governed by a tripartite group representing states, workers and employers. Because the ILO's decisions directly affect workers, workers are directly represented by delegates selected by their largest unions.

Refugees today have global and regional networks, the equivalent of workers' unions. These networks could elect delegates to represent them on UNHCR's ExCom. If UNHCR was governed by at least 50% refugees, with the remaining 50% divided between refugee-hosting states and donor states that fund the bulk of displacement response, the people most affected by UNHCR's decisions would have the greatest say. This is what a democratic global system requires. It's time we made that a reality.

ExCom isn't everything, but it's a start

UNHCR isn't the only global entity that makes decisions that affect refugees. World Bank institutions, also governed entirely by states, are increasingly involved in decisions that aim to address the development challenges that arise when people are forcibly displaced. Similarly, most UN agencies (all except ILO) are governed entirely by states – even when their decisions affect refugees, stateless people, and others who are left out of state representation.

We need new solutions that ensure equitable representation at the UN and throughout our global governance institutions. This may mean rethinking UN governance entirely – although doing so is not without its own challenges and risks. I'm not sure what the answer is when it comes to the UN or the World Bank as a whole, but I do know that having refugees on UNHCR's ExCom is an important step for representation and legitimacy of the institution.

People with experience of forced displacement understand better than anyone else what it means to be displaced. They have experienced the isolation and injustice of systems that strip them of rights and power. They know what is needed to fix those systems, and can set better priorities for UNHCR's interventions and aims. Refugees, like other citizens around the world, should have a central voice in the decisions that determine our destinies.

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From anecdote to evidence: researching RLOs in East Africa and the Middle East

Farah Al Hamouri, Mustafa Hoshmand, Watfa Najdi, Oroub El-Abed, Abis Getachew, Andhira Kara, Uwezo Ramazani, Pauline Vidal and James Milner

Introduction

How do refugees organise to respond to the needs of other refugees and members of the host community? This question became more urgent in the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic. While international actors were limited in their mobility and access to intended beneficiaries, greater attention was paid to the impressive impact of refugee-led responses. Far from waiting passively for assistance to arrive, refugees organised to respond to the needs of their community.[1]

This response came as no surprise to those engaged with the everyday politics of refugee responses in diverse contexts across the Global South. In East Africa and the Middle East, for example, evidence was mounting on the significance of refugee-led initiatives and the tendency for refugees to turn first to other refugees, not international actors, with needs ranging from social protection to economic support.[2] While we knew that refugee-led organisations were important actors in the refugee response ecosystem, their roles and scope of activity were poorly understood. How could we move from anecdote to evidence, to better understand the nature and scope of refugee-led responses to the needs of refugees?

A different kind of research project

In response to this question, the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and the Refugee-led Research Hub (RLRH), based in Nairobi and run by the University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre, launched a different kind of research project in early 2021. With support from a range of partners,[3] we formed two teams of researchers who live and work in close proximity to the phenomenon of displacement. Many of us are refugees or have experienced displacement. We leveraged our access to refugee communities and other local actors, along with our nuanced understanding of the diverse

1 Alio, M., Alrihawi, S., Milner, J. et al. (2020) 'By refugees, for refugees: refugee leadership during COVID-19 and beyond', 20 April (www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/refugees-refugees-refugee-leadership-during-covid-19-and-beyond).

2 See: Pincock, K., Betts, A. and Easton-Calabria, E. (2020) *The Global governed? Refugees as providers of protection and assistance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; and Mencutek, Z.S. (2021) 'Refugee community organisations: capabilities, interactions and limitations' *Third World Quarterly* 42(1): 181–199 (https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1791070).

3 This research was made possible thanks to support from the Open Society Foundations, the Robert Bosch Foundation, Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC), the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, the Global Whole Being Fund, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the IKEA Foundation.

contexts in which refugee-led organisations operate, to co-design and co-conduct research on the impact of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) on protection and assistance to displaced communities in East Africa and the Middle East. Over an intensive 18-month period, we undertook fieldwork in a total of 22 sites across four countries in East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda) and three countries in the Middle East (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey).

Drawing on the results of mapping exercises and fieldwork involving hundreds of interviews and focus group discussions, we identified more than 600 RLOs across the two regions and answered three core questions:

- What is the nature and scope of RLOs?
- What is the impact of RLOs?
- What factors condition the impact of RLOs?

In light of the changing nature of humanitarian programming and debates on the localisation of humanitarian action since the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit and the Grand Bargain, our answers hold profoundly important lessons for the future of refugee responses, while the results of this research provide a solid evidence base on which new policies and programmes can be developed.[4]

What is the nature and scope of RLOs?

Across countries and contexts, we found that there was nothing new about the existence of RLOs. Throughout history, refugees have been active in responding to the needs of their communities.

Regardless of context and scale, what all RLOs have in common is the fact that they are led or managed by refugees themselves, situated within refugee communities, and are organised for the purpose of responding to the needs of refugees and related communities.

RLOs can take on different forms. Some are small, informal, and not registered with local authorities. Some are large, established, registered, and manage diverse programmes with significant budgets and staff. No matter the setting, we found that RLOs are distinct in their deep connection to refugee communities, the level of trust they enjoy with the communities they serve, and their ability to identify and address long-standing and emerging needs among refugees.

In East Africa, we found that RLOs can be found at various stages of development, from a more informal self-help phase, through stages of growth and formalisation, to an expansion phase where RLOs come to resemble non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or larger community-based organisations, able to deliver a diverse range of services. A prominent example of a well-established RLO in East Africa is YARID (Young African Refugees for Integral Development) in Uganda. Likewise, in the Middle East, RLOs can be organised in subtle and arguably covert ways. For example, a prominent restaurant in one capital city

4 The final report for the East Africa research is available at: https://refugeeledresearch.org. The final report for the Middle East research is available at: https://carleton.ca/lerrn/2023/rlos-middle-east-communities-mobilising/.

serving traditional Yemini food also sponsors Yemini students studying at national universities. Although not registered as an RLO, it is refugee-led and serves an important function in providing for the needs of members of the Yemini refugee community.

Also striking is the range of activities undertaken by RLOs and the impact they are seen to have by refugee communities, especially in responding to the diverse needs of refugees. Across the seven countries we examined, RLOs were found to be active in diverse areas, including:

- **Social protection**, including advocacy, awareness-raising, and advocating for the rights of particular groups, such as the elderly or the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) community. For example, in Nairobi, Kenya, LGBTQ+ RLOs provide important support for members of the LGBTQ+ refugee community that require advice on legal and physical protection measures.
- **Service provision**, including education, health, livelihoods and skills training. A prominent example of this type of activity is found in SAWA for Development and Aid and the Molham Team, both in Lebanon, which provide a wide range of services to Syrian refugees, from livelihood support to housing and training programmes.
- **Recreating homeland**, by organising cultural activities and heritage preservation and education activities, such as the Adungu Music Group in Uganda or the community in Istanbul that has established a training centre to preserve the Syrian music of Sabah Fakhri and the Al-Qudoud al-Halabiya musical tradition.

Three different sizes of adungu in a Baptist church in Adjumani Settlement in northwestern Uganda. Credit: Rwhaun

More generally, and beyond institutional measures of programme delivery, RLOs provide a mechanism through which refugees demonstrate agency. In camp and urban contexts, whether they are larger, more established RLOs or smaller, less visible initiatives – and despite the policy environment in which they work – RLOs represent a critical and vibrant way that refugees are engaged in identifying and responding to the needs of fellow refugees and related communities.

What is the impact of RLOs?

Given the nature of the relationship between RLOs and the communities they serve, it might come as no surprise that community members across contexts reported that the impact of RLOs is positive and significant. RLOs were found to have an impact that was distinct and complementary to the impact of international NGOs and United Nations (UN) agencies.

Community respondents noted that their experience with RLOs was often more positive than their experience with international actors, that RLOs treat them with more dignity and respect, have a better understanding of their needs, provide services in a fairer and more predictable way, are more accessible, and are more accountable to the communities they serve.

RLOs were found to have a tangible impact on the wellbeing of members of the community they serve, especially in relation to groups within communities that are marginalised or excluded from international assistance programmes. Many respondents noted that RLOs, of various sizes and capacities, were able to consult more readily with the community to ensure that their needs and priorities were reflected in the design of new programmes, respond quickly to new needs, and were able to ensure that programmes were delivered in an accessible and accountable way. In Addis Ababa, refugees expressed their gratitude to RLOs for meeting the costs of transportation so that refugees could attend programming provided by a humanitarian organisation. In the Middle East, many organisations provide services and assistance for Palestinian refugees that would otherwise fall through the cracks of the refugee response system.

Only a small minority of respondents noted any negative impact from RLO activities, but these responses highlight the need to be aware of the potential for RLOs to privilege or prioritise some segments of the community over others.

In contrast, representatives of humanitarian agencies were found to have a narrower understanding of the role of RLOs and their potential impact. Many respondents had a limited understanding of the range of RLO activities and the scope of their activities. Where RLOs were known to representatives of international NGOs and UN agencies, they were seen primarily as useful liaisons for sharing information with refugee communities, potential implementers of programmes designed by non-refugee actors, and targets of capacity-building initiatives.

Changing this perception of RLOs on the part of international humanitarian actors is critical for realising the full potential of the complementary contribution that RLOs can make to refugee responses.[5]

What factors condition the impact of RLOs?

The strong bond of trust between RLOs and refugee communities was universally identified as being the single greatest factor that conditions the impact of RLOs. Refugees often felt more comfortable approaching RLOs for help or accessing services provided by RLOs, thus enhancing the impact of RLOs.

But not all RLOs were found to have the same level of impact. Significant variation was identified both within and between regions, and even within the same operational context. Understanding the factors that create this variation is important for understanding where and how barriers faced by RLOs might be overcome.

The single greatest factor conditioning the work of RLOs was the policy environment within which they function. Simply put, RLOs working in more permissive or open policy environments faced fewer restrictions on their activities and were therefore able to implement more ambitious programmes. In contexts where refugees could register their RLOs, work legally and open bank accounts, RLOs were able to develop more public and visible programming and receive and manage external funding. In more restrictive domestic and local conditions, RLOs were required to operate more informally, minimise their public communications, and function as more clandestine initiatives for fear of exposure and punitive responses by local authorities.

In East Africa, for example, RLOs have wider scope to operate in Kenya and Uganda but face significant constraints on their work in Ethiopia and Tanzania. Likewise, in the Middle East, several RLOs have been able to function in Lebanon while registered in European countries, while a much more restrictive environment in Jordan places considerable constraints on the ability of refugees to form RLOs.

Between these two extremes, however, was the more common reality for RLOs: a complexity of formal and informal policies that needed to be navigated. In response, RLOs have found innovative ways of navigating bureaucratic ambiguities and restrictions, by registering under the name of a host national, presenting their organisation as a social enterprise, or situating their work under the umbrella of an established, national organisation.

Clarifying and improving the policy environment to allow RLOs to register and function legally to serve humanitarian needs would be a significant way to enhance the complementary impact of RLOs.

That said, it should not be presumed that all RLOs want to grow in size and scale. A number of RLOs reported their desire to remain small, informal, and active only in moments of particular need. The

5 See, for example: Asylum Access (2021) *Building equitable partnerships: shifting power in forced displacement* (https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Building_Equitable_Partnerships.pdf).

danger, however, is to presume that this is the desire of all RLOs. Far from it. In fact, our research included an equal number of RLOs with the capacity to respond at scale to complex needs – such as shelter, education and health – throughout a region.

Another critical factor determining the impact of RLOs was their ability to **access networks**. We found significant variation between those RLOs that were able to connect with other RLOs across local, national and regional contexts, and those who could not due to language, power relations, or access to communications technology or the means to travel.

This variation became more acute between those RLOs who were able to access global and transnational networks and those who could not. The larger, more prominent RLOs identified in this study were all connected to global networks and able to mobilise resources through these networks or through transnational networks with members of their diaspora located in the Global North. While a small but growing number of RLOs have been able to access funding through private foundations or other external sources, most RLO funding continues to come from members of the community. In cases where this community includes members who are located in the Global North and able to access larger sources of funding, the capacities of associated RLOs are typically significantly enhanced. Therefore, reducing the barriers to accessing networks is a critical way that the contribution of RLOs can be more fully realised.

Conclusion

Far from being passive recipients of assistance, refugees are active agents in organising and mobilising responses. Across East Africa and the Middle East, RLOs are demonstrating the capacity to develop and implement programmes that respond to the ongoing and emerging needs of refugees and related communities. It is time to recognise the distinct and complementary contribution that RLOs bring to refugee responses.

To further enhance the impact of RLOs: international humanitarian actors need to recognise their contributions and enter into equitable partnerships with RLOs; host states need to enhance the domestic administrative environment for RLOs; and the wider humanitarian community needs to reduce the barriers for RLOs to access networks within which they can thrive and their many contributions be recognised and celebrated.

Farah Al Hamouri, Mustafa Hoshmand and **Watfa Najdi** were Lead Country Researchers for the study on RLOs in the Middle East. **Oroub El-Abed** was the Regional Research Coordinator for the study on RLOs in the Middle East. **Abis Getachew**, **Andhira Kara** and **Uwezo Ramazani** were Lead Country Researchers for the study on RLOs in East Africa. **Pauline Vidal** is Research Facilitator at the Refugee-led Research Hub in Nairobi, Kenya. **James Milner** is Project Director of the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network, based at Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

Refugee-led organisations: towards community-based accountability mechanisms

Foni Joyce Vuni, Buhendwa Iragi and Pauline Vidal

Introduction

Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) have gained recognition as significant players in the local and global refugee response system. Refugees have long relied on each other for support, creating both formal associations and informal networks to meet their basic needs. However, it has taken the humanitarian sector some time to recognise the value of RLOs. The Covid-19 crisis demonstrated the importance of RLOs as they stepped up to provide crucial assistance to their fellow refugees at a time when humanitarian agencies were unable to operate at their usual capacity. RLOs and refugee-led networks are also increasingly participating in decision-making spaces and advocating for greater power and resources to be transferred to them.

In this context, some RLOs have been successful in accessing donor humanitarian funding and have formed formal partnerships within the humanitarian ecosystem. For many RLOs, transitioning from smaller community-based networks to more formal structures is likely to present significant challenges. RLO leaders are already navigating dilemmas between kinship-based accountability to their beneficiaries and more rigid accountability requirements to their donors and partners.

Accountability has been a key focus of the humanitarian sector since the 1990s, and has received renewed attention in the context of the localisation turn. However, there has been little discussion on how RLOs practise accountability and who RLOs are accountable to. As more humanitarian organisations and donors engage with RLOs, this article provides recommendations to humanitarian actors and donors on how to engage with RLOs while preserving RLOs' autonomy and added value. Drawing from previous experiences in East Africa, this study urges the humanitarian sector to prioritise systems for community accountability rather than placing undue emphasis on donor accountability, in order to achieve better outcomes for affected communities.

Kinship-based accountability: RLOs' accountability to the communities they serve

Recent research conducted by a team of refugee researchers in East Africa, supported by the Local Engagement Refugee Response Network (LERRN) and the Refugee-Led Research Hub, finds that RLOs have several advantages compared to their international counterparts, especially in terms of community-level trust, access and local embeddedness. As a result, beneficiaries of RLOs often report more positive experiences: RLOs treated them with greater dignity and respect, had a deeper understanding of their needs, and provided better-suited services in a more equitable and consistent manner (Box 1).

Box 1 Better-suited RLO services

RLO services are more adapted to their needs and are detail-oriented because they know the community better. Beneficiaries noted that RLOs involve them in problem identification before proceeding to provide support: '[The RLO] comes to the ground and if they identify a problem then they support us' (RLO beneficiary, Nakivale).

While some RLOs provide services that are similar to aid organisations, others might cover the same sectors using more localised approaches (e.g. traditional discussions for psychosocial support in Bidi Bidi by the Together We Can women's group). In some instances, RLOs provide services that communities consider important but that are not considered key priorities among aid organisations, such as cultural preservation (e.g. Adungu Malembe music group in Bidi Bidi, which educates and entertains the community through traditional music).

Likewise, RLOs, like other locally based movements, have a significant advantage in terms of accountability to the communities they serve (Box 2). In East Africa, beneficiaries of RLOs and residents of the communities where they operate generally agreed that RLOs were more accountable to communities in comparison to other organisations because of their accessibility. Refugees mentioned that they were able to give direct feedback to RLOs on their activities. RLOs were also perceived to be more transparent. Many cited instances where RLOs clearly communicated their inability to provide assistance in a particular situation, while international organisations provided ambiguous information. Better access to RLO leaders also helped build trust: due to the direct access that beneficiaries have to RLO leaders within their communities, beneficiaries often said they trusted RLOs more than aid international organisations.

Women who run a small restaurant in Rhino Camp refugee settlement, Uganda. Here they share some leftover food. Credit: Ayo Degett/Danish Refugee Council

Why accountability matters

In East Africa, few organisations have managed to receive donor funding. When they do receive funding, it is generally small in scale, tied to a specific project designed by other humanitarian stakeholders, or received through an international organisation that acts as an intermediary.

Still, with some RLOs now accessing donor funding and humanitarian partnerships, and as more RLOs are likely to receive funding due to growing interest, it is important to collectively think through issues of accountability. Accountability requires, at the very least, clear identification of the audience that RLOs are accountable to, as well as consequences for RLOs if they fail to deliver what they are supposed to. The issue of RLO accountability was brought up by several RLO leaders, beneficiaries and community members during consultations in Uganda and Kenya, where RLOs are more integrated into the humanitarian system and receive more funding compared to more restrictive policy contexts. Navigating upward accountability (from the organisation to donors) and downward accountability (organisation to beneficiaries) can create complex challenges for RLOs.[6]

Box 2 RLOs' community accountability

RLOs are more accountable to communities because beneficiaries feel able to give them direct feedback on activities. RLOs are also more likely to communicate clearly, particularly if they cannot help in a given instance, unlike non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international NGOs (INGO) which might not deliver a clear message. For example, in Uganda:

> [The RLO] is successful because it attends to everyone without partiality. They may not have the resources to satisfy everyone but at least they will receive you and explain to you regardless of who you are (refugee community member, Kampala).

RLOs that access resources and implement activities as per their set objectives tend to be more successful and have a longer lifespan in their communities. As research shows, 'In instances where an RLO misappropriated funds, they face rejection and in some cases are even forced to stop operating in the community.'

RLO accountability to donors

RLOs, like other humanitarian organisations, are expected to establish a working relationship with their donors. When RLOs receive direct funding, they become legally and financially accountable to their donors and must regularly disclose their spending and comply with the guidelines set by their donors.

6 The conceptualisation of upward and downward accountability can be found in: Hilhorst, D., Melis, S., Mena, R. and van Voorst, R. (2021) 'Accountability in humanitarian action' *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 40(4): 363–389 (https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdab015).

Typically, this is done in the form of audits, evaluations and reports. Donors are hesitant to provide direct funding to RLOs due to concerns that they may not meet their reporting requirements or international standards. RLO leaders often describe these standards as inadequate for the context in which they operate, citing issues such as registration, access to infrastructure, and limited capacity for activities beyond their primary focus on providing assistance. This can have direct consequences on RLOs' ability to have a positive sustainable impact on their community: RLO leaders expressed concerns over the consequences of donor-imposed conditions and inadequate funding, as it may hinder their ability to maintain services that align with the priorities of their communities rather than the priorities of donors.

This issue is similar to the one faced by other local organisations that also struggle with navigating donor funding. There is growing evidence that current donor funding mechanisms can result in priority distortion, erode local ownership and leadership, and ultimately fail to deliver better outcomes for populations.

The nature of RLOs means that upward accountability goes beyond just donors. RLOs often receive funding through NGO and INGO intermediaries that act as donors and implement similar conditions. A few INGOs have sought to change the ways that RLOs are funded by providing direct, multi-year funding and more flexible requirements, such as the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) fund, an RLO-to-RLO fund housed within Asylum Access.

RLO accountability to communities

Although RLOs are often considered to be more accountable due to their accessibility and proximity, it does not imply that they should not focus on enhancing their accountability, particularly as they expand and grow. As RLOs have more resources and make choices on how to allocate them, it is probable that there will be growing demands for accountability from the communities they serve. In Kenya and Uganda, a small number of community members have already expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of accountability of RLOs, and argued that RLOs only serve the self-interests of their leaders. Unless these perceptions are addressed, they could gradually erode the trust between RLOs and the communities they aim to serve.

Moreover, as the number of RLO beneficiaries increases, informal accountability mechanisms may prove insufficient. Many RLOs were originally formed to serve specific communities, such as special interest or ethnic groups, but have since expanded to serve a broader segment of the population, including refugees and the host community. In these cases, RLOs may not have the same level of kinship or close relationships with all beneficiaries.

Ways forward: centring community accountability

We recommend that RLOs, donors, and other actors of the humanitarian system work together towards **a system of accountability that centres community accountability over donor-focused accountability**.

- RLOs must demonstrate transparency and accountability in their operations to establish and maintain community trust. RLOs should set up systems for listening to suggestions, sharing their records, and receiving (and acting upon) feedback. This can be achieved through a mix of formal and informal mechanisms based on the nature of their activities and the communities they work with. For instance, RLOs could use social media, public consultations and events.
- RLOs often face a trade-off between allocating their time and resources towards conducting activities and engaging in community mechanisms versus meeting the reporting requirements of donors. If reporting demands are excessive, RLOs may be forced to prioritise reporting over their primary activities and community engagement. Donors and humanitarian organisations should engage RLOs to set up funding and reporting requirements that are adapted to RLOs' ways of working and put the emphasis on community-based accountability mechanisms.
- Donors and humanitarian organisations should embed capacity-building activities in their engagement with RLOs. Cohere, for example, has already taken a step in this direction in East Africa by providing capacity-building sessions to RLOs, including training on reporting. Donors can further expand on this by directly providing training on existing projects and overseeing the implementation of such training. Such efforts not only improve the quality of reporting but also foster trust and collaboration between donors, humanitarian organisations and RLOs.
- Donors should support community-based monitoring mechanisms. RLOs, like any organisation, can face issues related to corruption and misuse of power. Rather than more traditional approaches to monitoring and evaluation, donors could support refugee-led monitoring groups to keep track of the progress of RLOs and raise potential flags to the donor. Participation in these groups should be funded and facilitated.
- Lastly, donors, humanitarian organisations and RLOs can work together to document their efforts in promoting community accountability mechanisms and changing ways of working. Sharing experiences and lessons learned through systematic documentation can be instrumental in promoting more equal partnerships and new solutions in the refugee response system.

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Wahid's story: fighting for the rights of the displaced

Abdullwahid Dahir

My name is Wahid, and I was born in Somalia. My immigration story started when my family left Somalia for Syria, where we all lived, until the Syrian Civil War began in 2011. Once again we were forcibly displaced, this time to Malaysia.

I have always been passionate about reading, especially about politics. I believe that communities, especially refugee communities in Malaysia, have the right to demand better policies that govern our lives and should have a seat at the table where these policies are created. That is exactly what I do alongside other Somali refugees. We recently took action in Kuala Lumpur to protect our rights to live safely in Malaysia – to prevent local authorities and our building management from implementing illegal, discriminatory policies that would evict our families from buildings for no legitimate reasons other than being Somali immigrants.

Malaysia is a country that hosts refugees from all over the world. Where I live, 60–70% of the residents in our condominium are Somali refugee families. Like my family, these people were forced to flee their homeland due to war and persecution, and they are here to pursue a better life and contribute economically and socially to Malaysian society.

Although host to close to 200,000 refugees, Malaysia does not provide protection or support to the thousands of forcibly displaced families who have fled here – and continue to flee here – in search of safety. Refugees' lack of protection and legal status in Malaysia makes them highly susceptible to arrest, detention, and deportation, as well as workplace discrimination, harassment, unsafe working conditions, withheld wages, sexual and gender-based violence, and unfair dismissal. Women, children and other marginalised groups face a particularly profound risk of violence and poverty in Malaysia.

Legal limbo

Unfortunately, Malaysia's lack of legal or administrative framework for recognising and protecting refugees means we are denied legal protection and treated as 'illegal immigrants'. Malaysia is a non-signatory country to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has no existing national asylum system. As such, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) undertakes all activities related to the protection of refugees, including registration, documentation, and mandating refugee status determination (RSD) in Malaysia. Although there have been discussions over the years with the government to potentially establish an asylum system, the current primary protection mechanism available to refugees in Malaysia is through UNHCR documentation. Malaysian authorities do not use the term refugees but 'UNHCR cardholders in Malaysia'. UNHCR certificates do not result in a formal, legal status conferred by the Malaysian government.

A full RSD process can take up to two years. Once it is completed, the UNHCR issues a refugee card to people determined to be refugees, providing some de facto status, whereby its holders will have some protection against arrest and detention, as well as access to healthcare and other services.

Unfortunately, even when refugees like me have UNHCR documentation, there is no safety or longer-term stability without access to formal legal status. As a result, we often face exploitative and discriminatory environments where we live and work. These challenges have a compounding effect on our community and make us feel excluded and unable to access protection and/or justice when facing rights violations.

Empowering refugee communities

The lack of a consistent policy on refugees in Malaysia has also enabled increased chances of deportation after detention, violating the principle of non-refoulement. This process is precisely what our building management was trying to plot in cooperation with some local politicians by creating false accusations against our community. The impact of living in an unsafe discriminatory environment – without opportunity indefinitely – is profound.

There needs to be more support for refugees, with long-term sustainable solutions that allow us to access safety and protection in Malaysia. Therefore, despite the risk to our security, we organised our communities to advocate for our rights.

As a focal point for Somalians living in my building, I started hearing about changes our condominium management decided to roll out. They were collecting signatures from other residents to make a case for immigration authorities to raid our building and take Somalians to detention centres or leave them homeless in the streets. That meant displacing almost 100 families and setting a precedent for other condominiums in the area to do the same.

The lack of laws to protect refugees in Malaysia from such violations, and because all refugees in Malaysia are considered illegal residents, means that we are not covered under the same eviction laws as other local tenants. Therefore, we realised we needed to do something as a community to call out these violations and ask for help.

When our community leader Mohammed and I considered reaching out for legal help, Asylum Access Malaysia (AAM) was the first organisation that came to our minds because of its flexibility in responding to emergencies like this and taking quick actions, and its wide-ranging legal expertise on the rights of refugees in Malaysia. With a notable gap for asylum seekers and refugees in Malaysia in accessing protection mechanisms beyond receiving UNHCR status and documentation, we knew that AAM had already helped forcibly displaced people to leverage domestic legal frameworks to access protection and justice following rights violations. It also works directly with our communities to help us access justice mechanisms following rights violations such as unfair eviction, unpaid wages, or unfair working

conditions. We have a close relationship with members of the AAM team, and we knew from previous interactions that they have fewer bureaucratic processes than other organisations working with refugees in Malaysia.

Our issue was very time sensitive because the management of our building, a private company also known as the joint management body that includes a few landlords on its committee, was pressuring a member of parliament (MP) to issue a law that would ban the leasing of apartments to refugees in general and specifically to Somali and Sudanese refugees. When AAM was alerted, it sent lawyers to us. They helped us file a police report against the MP who was trying to assist our building's management in harassing our people and kicking us out of our homes.

It was a special moment for us to walk into a government official's office and be confident in the support we had from the AAM lawyers. We could tell the MP that what she was doing was wrong and violated specific human rights laws.

In addition to assisting with the court case, AAM also held workshops with both refugee tenants and Malaysian landlords separately in our area that informed people about their rights and the legal actions they can take if they are faced with eviction threats or pressure from the management to evict tenants. These workshop sessions were critical for reflecting on and learning from our experience. In the workshops, AAM addressed gaps in knowledge or skills to enable us to participate in and lead response and protection meaningfully. Additionally, we had an equitable partnership with AAM that ensured the transfer of knowledge and skills necessary to build refugee leadership in response and protection.

Through our community partnership with AAM, we can ensure that our community is empowered with the information we need to understand our options, make choices about safety, access critical services and protection, and advocate for our interests and concerns.

Knowing our rights greatly impacted how the management treated us after this incident. We, as community leaders, refugee tenants and landlords, filed an official complaint against this attempt to evict us to the Commission of Buildings (COB) of the Kuala Lumpur City Council. In addition to the complaint, AAM requested the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) to investigate the issue and endorse our complaint to the COB. As a result, the COB issued a letter that listed our rights under the law and how such acts violate the law. In its letter, it advised our building management to look back at their discriminatory house rule. They reminded them they should not evict anyone based on race, religion, culture, or skin colour.

Right now, we are well prepared to defend our rights with the knowledge and the alliances we formed. If our management tries to evict our people again, we know how to stick together and voice our concerns and where to go when we need support.

This body of work equips our communities with the knowledge and skills to shift the power dynamics, support our access to protection, and ultimately enable us to take the lead in refugee response. As we

continue to identify the needs of our community and communicate emerging trends and concerns, we will be situated to learn about and respond to the needs of our people. The more we know about our options and the available services, the more we can leverage our voices and speak up against rights violations.

Skills training for refugees. 20 Somali women and 44 girl participants were selected in the 2-days skills training on sewing and tailoring organised by ROCKA Atelier with the support from YSEALI YOUnified 2018 and the US Embassy Malaysia. Credit: YSEALI Malaysia

Ensuring the human rights of displaced communities

From my experience as a refugee community leader, access to human rights knowledge has been critical to putting more power in the hands of our community. We know systemic change encompasses a wide range of actors, and we feel equipped to engage with those actors to assert our rights strategically.

Forcibly displaced people enhance communities and make countries more inclusive. We bolster economies and raise the political bar for protecting and including all marginalised groups, not just refugees. The evidence is clear: to welcome forcibly displaced communities is to improve society for all.

To rebuild our lives and achieve self-reliance, we need the ability to safely enter the country, obtain legal status, move freely, gain employment, and access private services on an equitable basis with others. Therefore, the government's laws, policies and practices are key to achieving this reality. Inclusive systems help unleash refugees' human potential, productivity and entrepreneurship.

Most refugees are forced to depend on direct aid. They are immediately tied to government or international aid systems that deny their ability to be autonomous by depending on their own skills to be productive members of society. If we have support that is based on basic human rights rather

than direct aid, we can build a future for our families and contribute to the prosperity of our host countries. In contrast, those of us who cannot build a future – those in refugee camps isolated from local communities or those of us living in the shadows for fear of detention or deportation – have difficulty creating positive outcomes for our host countries.

Local laws that deprive refugees of basic human rights are the primary barrier to refugees from achieving autonomy, and governments must take greater responsibility for ensuring effective solutions for refugees. Refugee communities and the local civil society organisations that support our inclusion are among the key actors that can inform and advise government agencies in Malaysia. When our voices are combined with knowledgeable, connected, and locally led non-governmental organisations, we have a unique position to provide host governments with technical assistance on legislation, argue persuasively for policy reform based on evidence and practices, and bring refugee voices to the table. Currently, our communities are totally underutilised. Refugee representation will help achieve more effective governance frameworks that benefit us and our host communities.

Forcibly displaced communities in Malaysia need long-term solutions now. Families deserve to feel safe walking down the street and not feel at risk of arrest and detention. Forcibly displaced individuals should not worry about being exploited at work and wondering how they will put food on the table. Children should be able to go to school and live a happy, healthy childhood. Refugees should be able to safely and meaningfully rebuild their lives in Malaysia.

Abdullwahid Dahir is President of the Somali Society in Idaman Sutera Condominium.

The transformative impact of refugee-led organisations on communities

Hane Alrustm and Gabriella Kallas

Introduction: a community centre in Tripoli

After being forcibly displaced by the war in Syria, I found myself living as a refugee in Lebanon. At the time, the former conflict areas in the city of Tripoli in the north of Lebanon were considered red zones, and international non-governmental organisation staff were not permitted to deliver services there. The communities were in desperate need, and so a group of friends and I got together to start our own initiative in 2015 called the SHiFT Social Innovation Hub.

We were not just driven by the fact that international organisations could not reach Tripoli; we were also driven by our own poor treatment at the hands of staff from outside our communities providing services to us. In my own process of resettlement, which took over seven years, I was made to wait for hours in

long lines in the sun before being taken in for humiliating, retraumatising hours-long interviews. We were identified by bar codes that were scanned at the entrance of the building as if we were supermarket items, and the security outside made us feel like criminals. In establishing our own initiatives, we were reclaiming power and ensuring that our fellow community members were treated with respect and dignity.

My friends and I started by rehabilitating a destroyed community centre in one of the former hotbeds of violence in Tripoli, a deserted neighbourhood with buildings ravaged by bombs and bullet holes. The programming grew rapidly from the needs of our community. We created safe spaces for children and teenagers to play and get psychosocial support, hosted women's support groups for their mothers and other women in the community, and mobilised funding to support business owners by providing small grants and mentorship. Something remarkable happened as the number of programmes grew: people who left the neighbourhood started to come back. Our one-floor office became a flourishing seven-floor community centre with more than 10 different programmes for children, teenagers and adults. A deserted conflict zone became home to a bustling community. I also am proud to say that most of the staff working at the community centre today are people who at one time benefited from its services. Our organisation not only provided services, it revitalised a community. The effect of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in a community is transformational, as community members take ownership of the solutions that change their lives and the lives of their children, parents, friends and neighbours.

Syrian refugees face an uncertain future Line of refugees in front of the UNHCR registration center in Tripoli, Lebanon. Credit: Mohamed Azakir / World Bank

The transformational impact of RLOs

My co-author and I believe firmly that solutions should come from the ground up, and that when community members lead and implement initiatives, they are ultimately more effective, sustainable, and accountable to the populations they serve. It is with this conviction that we decided to work at the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), a coalition of six RLOs around the world dedicated to transferring power and resources to refugee-led organisations through four key strategies:

- unlocking funds for RLOs;
- strengthening RLOs through peer-to-peer programming that helps overcome context-specific barriers;
- advocating for the direct funding of RLOs and the inclusion of forcibly displaced people in decision-making and strategising processes;
- generating evidence on the importance and impact of RLOs.

As the promotion of refugee leadership becomes a hot topic among institutions of power in the refugee response sector, the same questions continue to be asked: are RLOs ready to receive funding? Do they have the 'capacity' needed to provide and scale services? What proof do we even have that RLOs are impactful? Studies have been commissioned and pilot programmes started with the aim of 'testing' whether refugee-led organisations are ready to serve their communities. At RRLI, though, both through our personal experience and the data we have collected from RLO partners, we can say with certainty that RLOs are already providing impactful, life-changing services, and that continued investment will only lead to greater transformation in communities of forcibly displaced people around the world.

We commissioned external evaluations of five of our coalition member RLOs to measure impact, and a metasynthesis to identify trends across the evaluations. The metasynthesis found that RLOs:

- provide accessible services, including to those who typically face significant access challenges;
- demonstrate high community connectedness, responsiveness, availability and cultural awareness;
- provide services that are holistic, mutually reinforcing, and highly responsive to community needs;
- offer both lifesaving support and life-changing solutions;
- demonstrate capacity to navigate and overcome legal, political and economic challenges.

RLOs are doing all of this and more – even with significant resource constraints – as described in a variety of emerging studies about RLO impact.

While much can be said about the impact of RLOs, we will highlight their transformational capacity – an aspect of RLOs that cannot be replicated by organisations that are not community-led. Often, refugees are painted as helpless victims waiting in long lines for aid provided by overburdened international organisations. In communities with thriving RLOs, refugees are leaders, community organisers, advocates, healthcare providers, teachers, and more. RLOs do not just provide critical services: in and of themselves, they are life-changing solutions as they provide skills development for community members, create community knowledge, and serve as sustainable community institutions.

RLOs develop community skills

RLOs transform their communities through the skills they build for staff, volunteers and programme participants who then utilise those skills in their daily lives to support their friends, families, neighbours and communities. Hiring community members is undoubtedly a form of community impact; for larger organisations, this can mean hundreds of jobs for community members. However, the impact goes beyond job creation. Through paid and volunteer roles, and even peer-led programming, community members hone skills ranging from conflict resolution to community organising to accounting that can benefit their communities beyond the specific services they provide through the RLO.

For example, Refugee and Asylum Seekers Information Centre (RAIC) in Indonesia provides a peer-led, community-based mental health programme known as COPE. This programme was created based on staff's personal and professional knowledge of high rates of suicide, depression and anxiety among the community. COPE works on two levels: providing support for participants' mental health and training participants to become community wellness facilitators. This programme strengthens the overall ability of the community to address mental health needs, including psychological first aid material that specifically helps participants support families and friends in crisis. Because these services are refugee-led, they are also available in a variety of languages spoken by the community and are led by fellow community members who understand the cultural sensitivity of different issues. Psychosocial services received by individuals can be life-changing for those individuals, but refugee-led services like COPE are invaluable in transforming whole communities' approaches to mental health.

RLOs create knowledgeable communities

Beyond specific skills that RLOs teach, the act of establishing and running an organisation in a new country requires leaders, staff, volunteers and community members to learn to navigate difficult circumstances and processes in their new homes. When community members find their own solutions, as opposed to others finding ones on their behalf, they are able to own and implement these solutions for themselves, and they are more likely to be workable for other community members, creating a greater base of community knowledge.

Refugiados Unidos (RU) in Colombia had difficulties both renting an office and opening a bank account as Venezuelans – issues that not only affect organisational leaders, but all community members. Now that they have managed to find solutions to these issues, they can share lessons learned with other organisations, entrepreneurs and community leaders. RU has also developed a variety of strategies to hire community members despite a complicated legal environment. They are supporting other partners to do the same to ensure that Venezuelan applicants are not neglected due to difficulties with hiring.

The impetus to hire staff from refugee communities generally leads to creative solutions for community members who might otherwise have difficulty accessing work. In RRLI's own Strengthening RLOs

Partnership Program, RLOs share strategies and provide support on hiring community members in legally complicated environments. The lessons they learn from these processes can be shared with employers and workers alike to promote livelihoods within their communities.

RLOs provide sustainable community institutions

Finally, RLOs themselves create and sustain vibrant communities. Many of us have experience with models of international organisations that develop 'exit strategies' to leave communities, or perhaps close their doors due to a lack of funding, changing funding priorities, or even for security reasons. When these organisations leave, community members are left without services, sometimes in their most difficult moments. This was made very clear during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, when international organisations and multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) closed their doors and were unable to carry out services during a time when need was highest, while RLOs continued serving their communities.

Communities with thriving RLOs have support in spite of changing donor priorities, security situations and media attention. Though we know that funding enables RLOs to provide sustained and scaled services, refugee leaders serve their communities with or without funding, and regardless of changes in country context. In addition, the skills, networks and knowledge built by RLOs remain in the community and can be utilised informally, even in situations where formal organisations are unable to run full operations due to a lack of funding or other external emergencies such as government crackdowns.

The need for sustainable community institutions is also true in the 'opposite' situation – when a community is improving and an international organisation chooses to focus resources on an area that seems more in need. Again, in these cases, RLOs remain to serve those who are still in need, and to ensure that their communities not only survive, but also thrive and build on their successes.

Challenges to and recommendations for scaling impact for RLOs

Many challenges still remain for scaling impact for RLOs. They still do not have access to sustainable funding as many funders have requirements that are difficult for RLOs to meet, such as formal registration or bank accounts, or effectively requiring English fluency through application materials only available in English (and difficult English with sector jargon at that).

As a funder, we at RRLI have minimised such barriers to accessing funding. Our own RLO-to-RLO Fund does not require registration or a bank account, and we have developed solutions for RLOs to safely receive funds if they do not have access to a bank account. We also permit organisations to submit materials in any language they prefer and provide interpretation as needed in meetings with grantee partners.

Even as leaders of RLOs, we still come up against challenges to ensure that processes are truly shifting power to communities and enabling the most impactful programming possible. We are always working to make our processes even more participatory to make sure that power is in the hands of communities

to decide what is funded. We are also always in conversation with our grantee partners to make sure that grant-making and reporting processes are based on trust, and do not create undue burdens that take away from their ability to serve their communities (usually, such processes might prioritise organisations with experience in funding applications or with the resources to produce better written materials).

In order to support the impact of RLOs, we recommend that donors and other institutions that provide grants (such as multilateral agencies and international organisations) review their policies to see how they might prevent refugee-led organisations from securing funding. We are available to discuss any barriers organisations may have to directly funding RLOs, and can also offer our own refugee-led intermediary, the RLO-to-RLO Fund, for institutions that are not yet ready to directly fund RLOs.

Refugees need to be at the forefront of the sector meant to serve their needs. Institutions of power must explore their own role in a sector that often puts white and/or non-refugee 'experts' in positions of power to make decisions about the lives of communities of people who have experienced forced displacement. Partnering with and sustainably funding RLOs is key to a larger transfer of power and resources to forcibly displaced communities that will enable them to build and sustain their own solutions. Our own initiative has launched a campaign to urgently fundraise for sustainable, community-led grantmaking in 2024. You can support us here.

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Syrian RLOs and the earthquake response: have we learned a lesson?

Muzna Dureid

Earthquake response in North-west Syria. Credit: Molham Team

Since the start of the Syrian uprising in 2011, against the backdrop of the Arab Spring, hundreds of thousands of grave human rights violations have been committed, mainly by the Syrian regime (headed by Bashar al-Assad) and its allies. There has been overwhelming evidence that the Assad regime has engaged in repeated violations: disproportionate attacks on civilians, siege tactics, use of prohibited weapons such as chemical weapons, rape, torture, and attacks on humanitarian aid and medical facilities. According to former war crimes prosecutor Stephen Rapp, there is 'better evidence' against the Syrian president than was used against 'the Nazis at Nuremberg'.

During the Syrian uprising, the international community attempted to hold the perpetrators accountable in Syria, either through the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) or the Human Rights Council. Unfortunately, these attempts failed for numerous reasons. First, the international geopolitical interests in Syria perpetuated the conflict and caused it to grow rapidly, by supporting the regime with air and land military forces. The most prominent support comes from Russia and Iran. The second reason is that there are limited ways to hold the Syrian regime accountable through existing justice mechanisms because Syria is not a signatory to the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court. The adherence of the 123 states to the Rome Statute would allow a referral from the Security Council to attribute jurisdiction to the International Court of Justice with the objective of investigating the war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity committed by all conflicting parties in the Syrian conflict. The third reason is that the referral for responsibility to protect civilians under humanitarian intervention from the Security Council has failed because of the veto system at the UNSC, which allows the five

permanent member states to use the veto to block international intervention to protect civilians and to maintain peace and international security. Thus, 'the double vetoes' by Russia and China represent one of the major obstacles to bringing Syria to the International Court of Justice or allowing the international community to intervene.

Therefore, these human rights violations were not only the result of a dictatorial regime but also a consequence of the international community's apathy. Throughout the conflict, discussions about the crisis in Syria have been driven more by political interests than a focus on human rights.

Silence kills

During the past 13 years, Syrians have been subject to international complicity and apathy, even when confronted with a natural disaster that disregards borders. During the February 2023 earthquake that hit northwest Syria, over 4.5 million individuals were affected, 60% of whom were internally displaced persons (IDPs) who had already experienced multiple displacements in the past. The earthquake tragically claimed the lives of 4,191 Syrians in northwest Syria, 394 in regime-held areas, and 5,439 Syrian refugees in Türkiye. Among the casualties, one-third were children and women, while many others were injured or forced to flee their homes.

This raises the question of whether this lack of concern stems from the identity of the victims: the international solidarity with Ukraine wasn't equalled when it came to other countries located outside Europe. The broken aid system failed people in Syria and beyond.

While humanitarian aid and rescue teams swiftly arrived in Türkiye within 24 hours of the earthquakes, the northwest region of Syria received zero international assistance. The border remained closed to humanitarian aid, but Türkiye opened it for the repatriation of the bodies of Syrian refugees who lost their lives in southern Türkiye. The White Helmets (or Syria Civil Defence), an IDP-led organisation, have used their expertise gained from rescuing victims of bombardments since 2014 to extricate survivors from under the rubble. They worked tirelessly, though they lacked even the assistance of search-and-rescue dogs to identify trapped victims. The White Helmets declared a state of emergency in northwest Syria, emphasising the crucial importance of the first three days, known as the 'golden period', during which the chances of finding survivors are highest. During this critical period, international assistance should be deployed in the form of personnel and equipment to support local rescuers.

Local actors were left to face this natural disaster alone with few resources and an already weak infrastructure. The White Helmets usually receive funding from governments and individual donors, with an annual budget of $21 million. Yet, the earthquake flipped the power dynamic because it was the support that the White Helmets received from local communities in northern Syria, rather than international funding, that enabled them to significantly ramp up their response capacity and cover approximately 60% of the affected areas in the first three days. In the first six days, the daily reports shared by the White Helmets pointed out that zero international assistance was received while daily donations continued from refugee-led organisations (RLOs), IDP-led organisations, and civilians who donated their fuel, funding, trucks, cars, and equipment. These donations saved lives.

The White Helmets rescued 2,950 injured individuals and recovered the bodies of 2,170 deceased individuals. Their search-and-rescue operations spanned 182 sites across 60 communities during the initial phase, witnessing the destruction of over 551 buildings and partial damage to more than 1,578 structures. It took the UN seven days before the first aid convoy entered northwest Syria. Martin Griffiths, the head of the UN's relief efforts, acknowledged the failure of the UN's response and the profound sense of abandonment felt by Syrians when the expected supplies still had not arrived.

In Syria, civil society work was and still is prohibited, even in the northwest, which is an opposition-held area. Local organisations can't register without a legitimate government in the northwest, which is needed to regulate the activities of organisations led by Syrian refugees. Thus, they had to register in Türkiye to receive funding and manage grants. Since mid-2011, the city of Gaziantep has been a hub for Syrian civil society. Consequently, the earthquake's devastating impact on Gaziantep had an unforeseen and overwhelming effect on RLOs, given their limited capacity. In the first week after the earthquake, banks in Gaziantep were closed, preventing and complicating any financial transactions, and making it difficult for RLOs to raise funds.

Additionally, Syrian RLOs lost their offices and colleagues, resulting in a significant setback for Syrian civil society in its recovery efforts. However, despite this tremendous loss, Syrian RLOs (including the White Helmets) were at the forefront of the humanitarian response. It was remarkable to witness my bereaved and displaced colleagues participating in response meetings via their mobile phones while on the streets or in their cars. Despite the political circumstances, including control of the area by the Türkiye-backed Syrian National Army and extremist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, as well as ongoing aerial bombardment, numerous RLOs continued their recovery work in the northwest. Nevertheless, the ability of these organisations to secure funding remains uncertain due to the current humanitarian aid system and the business-as-usual approach to aid delivery, which devalue the role of local actors and limit them to a passive role. The main challenge is that, when it comes to aid funding, preference is given to international organisations rather than local groups or RLOs. Even if the local organisations receive funds, these are very limited in terms of priorities and the scope of work, which have already been identified by international actors who have neither lived experience nor relevant connections to affected communities in the conflict countries. Adopting a one-size-fits-all approach without considering the politics behind the flows and the priorities where money is spent doesn't work.

Fixing the system through accountability

The genocide in Rwanda, the ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the use of chemical attacks in Syria – these are just a few examples where the same system has failed civilians. Over the years, the international aid system has not changed its approach; it considers survivors only as victims who are waiting for it to save them, rather than enabling survivors and local initiatives to achieve meaningful solutions.

The unequal power dynamics and the absence of meaningful roles for local organisations have contributed to the mismanagement and failure of aid efforts. Unfortunately, this pattern repeats itself because no significant structural changes have been made to address the gap between local organisations and international actors, which is necessary to prevent future failures.

In Syria and Haiti, the challenges faced in responding to and recovering from earthquakes vary. Yet in both countries, the political dynamics and geopolitical interests impacted decision-making processes, resource mobilisation, coordination, and the overall effectiveness of the response efforts. Therefore, some parallels can be drawn regarding the shortcomings in responding to these crises:

1. **Inadequate international coordination:** In both cases, there were challenges in effectively mobilising and coordinating resources from various countries and organisations. The lack of a unified and well-coordinated response hindered the delivery of timely and efficient assistance to those in need.
2. **Slow humanitarian response:** In both Syria and Haiti, there were delays in providing essential supplies, medical assistance, and other forms of aid to affected communities. The delays were partly due to logistical challenges, limited access to affected areas, and difficulties in coordinating relief efforts.
3. **Insufficient local capacity-building and preparedness:** The response to the earthquakes in both Syria and Haiti revealed the need for stronger local capacity-building. There were challenges in effectively utilising and empowering local organisations and responders. Strengthening local capacity to respond to emergencies can help ensure a more timely and effective response, as local actors possess knowledge of the context and can navigate challenges more efficiently.

Finally, there is an enduring asymmetric power dynamic between RLOs and international actors. Even in Ukraine, where there was the international political will to help civilians there, local organisations and RLOs were still overlooked by the international community. According to Humanitarian Outcomes, Ukrainian national non-governmental organisations 'have received only 4.4 million in direct funding, or 0.003%', between February and May 2022.

Decision-making in humanitarian aid does not include the voices of local organisations. While the importance of localisation is often emphasised by the UN system and donors, the rhetoric does not always align with the practical reality. Responding effectively to such a large-scale tragedy requires strong coordination between local and international actors to avoid duplication and efficiently meet the needs of affected communities. RLOs in Syria and beyond must have a seat at the decision-making table. Power asymmetry must be addressed to ensure agency for local actors. In conflict-affected countries, local organisations and leaders should be involved at every level of the humanitarian response including clusters and donor conferences as well as in other related forums such as the UN General Assembly, the Human Rights Council, and the Grand Bargain, among others.

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Philanthropy's role in supporting refugee inclusion and leadership: lessons learned

Sarah Smith, Lauren Post Thomas and Barri Shorey

Venezuelan refugees in Bogotá selling crafts made of Venezuelan cash. Credit: Reg Nataraja

Over the last three decades, due to an unprecedented rise in global forced displacement, we have all attended many refugee-related conferences, forums and meetings – so many, in fact, it would be impossible to count them. Yet we could undoubtedly count the number of times there was a refugee in the room, with a seat at the table, empowered to make a prepared and meaningful contribution to the discussion. When we at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation sought to create the Refugees Initiative in 2020, one of our core objectives was to change this trend. We asked ourselves: what role can philanthropy play in supporting refugees and refugee leaders to participate in global and national refugee policymaking? How can we ensure this participation is meaningful and systematic?

To answer this question, we took a big step back to examine the state of play. Despite improved rhetoric around refugee inclusion and leadership in recent years, the system remains largely unchanged. It is well known across the humanitarian and development sectors that refugee responses, including policies and programmes, are more effective when informed by the real needs and lived experience of refugees. It is refugees who are best placed to surface the on-the-ground challenges, for example, of obtaining a work

permit, even in a country where refugees have the right to work. We've seen this in Ethiopia, Colombia, Jordan and many other countries where refugees reside. However, refugees still have no official and systematic way to be represented or have a voice in global or national policies affecting them.

The lack of refugee voices at decision-making tables is a cause and symptom of the refugee regime. Because refugees have not had a way to meaningfully influence the policies and programmes that affect them, refugee responses tend to be short-sighted, focusing mostly on immediate needs. More specifically, responses mostly favour the creation of parallel systems instead of integrating refugees into communities and services, despite the protracted nature of crisis and experience which show that integration is more effective (and includes benefits for host communities) and sustainable. Because of this shortsightedness and parallel system creation, refugees are locked out of national development and policy-planning arenas – which are reserved for national governments, donors, and citizens with voting power.

Although a systems change has yet to happen, promising new norms and practices have emerged that may open opportunities for refugee leaders. Going back to 2015, the Grand Bargain increased attention to and garnered commitments from actors across the humanitarian system to achieve a target of at least 25% of humanitarian funding being allocated to local and national actors (with an initial deadline of 2020). Progress towards this commitment has been slow, largely due to signatories' lack of accountability in achieving the Grand Bargain's vision; but some major donors, like the United States (US) Agency for International Development, have started to make a more concerted effort to achieve it.

The increased attention and commitments created valuable space for locally led organisations, including refugee-led organisations (RLOs),[7] to urge states to become more inclusive. And there's been progress: Canada, Germany and the US have stepped up in a significant way by each including a refugee advisor in their delegations to the 2022 United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) Executive Committee meeting. The US, Canada and New Zealand have created Refugee Advisory Boards, and other states – both donor and refugee-hosting states – are considering establishing them as well.

These models of inclusion – advocated by refugee leaders themselves – are very promising. But the RLOs and coalitions of RLOs behind this advocacy have been underinvested in and many have been working on a voluntary basis. This is where the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation decided we could have the greatest added value. We are therefore seeking to use our funding and influence in the system to resource, encourage, support and amplify the work of refugee leaders, RLOs and others who are nudging the system. We also recognise the deep need to influence major institutional donors and UN agencies to become more inclusive and put refugees at the centre of decision-making.

The Hilton Foundation seeks to increase meaningful refugee leadership, participation and representation in policymaking in three ways. First, we are, ourselves, asking for refugee leaders' advice about our

7 We recognise RLOS are a subset of a larger group of organisations led by people affected by forced displacement; we are using the term RLOs here because the Hilton Foundation has a specific – though not exclusive – focus on refugee populations.

strategy. The Refugees Initiative consulted more than 120 refugee leaders as we developed our strategy. The process provided invaluable insights, which shaped our decision to focus on (among other things) the procedural barriers RLOs face, such as when they seek to register, hire staff, and open bank accounts.

Second, we are investing in programmes – such as those run by Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table, Refugee Congress, the Wilson Center's Refugee and Forced Displacement Initiative, and the Global Refugee-led Network – to support refugees to have a seat and meaningful voice at the table of global decision-making forums like UNHCR's Executive Committee meeting and the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. Preparation and participation in these forums can come with significant costs, which we're helping offset.

Third, we are investing directly in RLOs with flexible, multiyear funding to support a shift in power whereby refugees not only have a seat at the table, but also drive solutions. For example, we are funding YARID, a Uganda-based organisation led by Congolese refugees, to help improve the economic resilience of refugee women, youth and caregivers in Kampala through entrepreneurship and vocational trainings, seed funding and loans, and early childhood development programmes. We are also funding Refugiados Unidos, a Colombia-based organisation led by Venezuelan refugee women, to provide community-based legal services and to provide Venezuelan refugees and migrants with employment opportunities in Bogotá. We believe these investments can serve both as a model for how easy it can be to invest in RLOs, as well as a way to build these organisations' résumés so they are more likely to receive larger, longer-term funds directly from government donors.

Several lessons have emerged as we identified these priorities and built a portfolio of investments. Chief among them is that RLOs are ripe for investment. In the first 18 months of the Refugees Initiative, we have directly funded nine RLOs working at the international and national levels, and there are many more we would like to fund. RLO participation is also rising thanks to refugee leaders addressing this challenge head-on, and there is significant promise that the Global Refugee Forum in December will be noticeably more inclusive than it was in 2019, when a mere 2% of participants were refugees.

However, despite much promise and progress, systemic barriers remain. UNHCR was, and still is, set up to respond to displacement crises, not to ensure the integration of refugees into the governance and systems of a host country. Shifting to a model more focused on refugee integration and inclusion will require host governments to be in the driver's seat, with support from actors like the multilateral development banks (MDBs), which can offer longer-term funding and development solutions. But these development banks will also have to change their ways of working; they have a long way to go in terms of engaging refugee populations to meaningfully inform MDB investments in national policy reforms and development projects – and to avoid situations where consulting with refugees turns into a tick-box exercise. We are proud to be supporting Refugees International to help facilitate refugee leaders' and RLOs' access to World Bank staff at their headquarters. Critically, this type of engagement also needs to happen at the country level.

Another barrier is that there remains little evidence on, but a lot of fears and assumptions about, the impact of refugee integration on host communities. That's why we are supporting research to generate the evidence that can drive a shift in this narrative. We are working with Dany Bahar to further investigate this in Colombia, where his research has demonstrated that Colombia's amnesty programme – which allows Venezuelan refugees and migrants to participate in the formal labour market – does not have a negative impact on Colombian workers, despite common assumptions that it would.

Finally, traditional donors are not set up to directly fund local organisations, including RLOs, both because of procurement policies as well as limited human resources to manage a high number of smaller grants. At Hilton, we are not only demonstrating how it can be done, but also exploring different types of intermediaries as pathways for RLOs to access more significant funding from bilateral and multilateral donors. For instance, we are supporting the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, hosted by Asylum Access, to provide grants to RLOs and to help them build their capacity to apply for funding from institutional donors. We are also supporting ShareTrust's Local Coalition Accelerator, which supports local and national organisations to play a role in shifting funding, resources and power to local actors and refugee-led organisations so they can drive their own development priorities. Uniquely, both efforts focus on minimising the intermediary costs of funding RLOs, so that as much of the funding as possible gets to the refugee-led organisation, and on ensuring that the governance and decision-making is led by refugees, as opposed to the intermediaries. Critically, these innovative approaches are creating entry points for institutional donors to increase their funding to RLOs, while at the same time supporting RLOs to build their capacity to apply for and take on more significant, longer-term funding from traditional donors.

The Hilton Foundation is doing its part to mitigate these systemic barriers to refugee integration, participation and funding, but we – and philanthropic organisations writ large – cannot do it alone. The multilateral development banks should continue to use their research, relationships and funding to support the inclusion of refugees in national systems and to move the needle on the integration of refugees into host communities. UNHCR and government donors should ensure refugee leaders have a significant role at the next Global Refugee Forum – through both consistent, meaningful engagement in the Forum's planning, and through inclusion as advisors to state delegations. And institutional donors – especially those that have a mandate to serve refugee populations, like the US Department of State's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration – should build on lessons learned from existing efforts and make, and deliver on, a commitment to fund RLOs, even if they need it to be through an intermediary for now. From the Foundation's perspective, we will be supporting our partners and collaborating with the international community to make these shifts a reality.

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Supporting meaningful refugee participation at all levels

Christina Thompson

Introduction

The global refugee crisis has become one of the most pressing humanitarian challenges of our time. In 2023, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has estimated that there will be 117.2 million displaced or stateless people worldwide. The demand for urgent needs, assistance and protection is unprecedented. Crises the world over keep this number growing every day in Sudan, Syria and Ukraine, among other places, and yet the traditional approach to providing aid to refugees has remained largely the same: often top-down, with little or no meaningful participation of refugees in the decision-making process that affects their futures. This approach has limited the effectiveness of aid and support for refugees, leading to a call for more meaningful participation of refugees in the humanitarian sector. It also serves to dangerously perpetuate colonial power dynamics and sustain cycles of dependency.

Cohere has been working with refugee communities in East Africa since 2008, formerly as Xavier Project. Despite having worked closely with refugee communities for years before, it was in 2016 in Uganda when our team connected with some refugee-led groups in Kampala and in Rwamwanja Refugee Settlement in southwest Uganda.

The organisation in Rwamwanja, Tomorrow Vijana, started as a group of teachers who understood that their community needed to learn English (the national language of Uganda) in order to live more independently and start small businesses. They started regular lessons under the shade of a large tree in the settlement. Our partnership with them began there. Through close collaboration and learning together we became acutely aware of the numerous barriers that existed that limited their participation and their ability to serve their community in the way that they felt was best. As we connected with other refugee-led organisations (RLOs) across Kenya and Uganda, we saw more and more potential and recognised that often these groups were facing similar barriers. It was a transformative time for our organisation, reflecting both on the limitations of our own response and role over the years, as well as the sector's response more generally. We could see the gaps in funding, capacity, coordination and advocacy, and we wanted to work together with our partners to fill them.

Learning and evolving

One of our main solutions was to develop a Capacity Strengthening and Sharing course that supported these organisations with a range of courses including Governance, Resource Mapping and Financial Management. Each module responded to specific challenges that our partners were having on the ground. Thanks to the support of multiple donors we were able to offer small grants to our partners to enable them to expand their projects and grow their organisations. These RLOs achieved more with this

money than Cohere could have; the RLOs' response was more relevant for their contexts and, because it was led by them, it was more sustainable. For example, Tomorrow Vijana, the refugee-led group in Rwamwanja, was able to build a three-classroom hub for 30% less than it would have cost Cohere. It was able to source cheaper local materials and its own community members made the bricks.

In 2019, we began shifting all of our efforts to focus on supporting the needs of our RLO partners and the projects they were leading and to stop our own direct implementation. As the Covid-19 pandemic spread across the globe in 2020, we saw many humanitarian organisations forced to put a halt to many of their interventions. In East Africa we were able to continue our work because our partners were on the ground, delivering and responding specifically to the needs of their communities during lockdowns. This monumental global shift strengthened our case, further demonstrating that the localisation of humanitarian response was not just better but critical, especially during emergencies.

In order for refugees to lead their own responses, their power and influence cannot just sit at the local level; they have to participate in all levels of decision-making. In 2022, we produced a report, *Addressing five barriers to implement 'Meaningful Refugee Participation' in the Refugee Response*, which identifies precisely what the humanitarian sector needs to consider to go beyond just including refugees, and instead ensure meaningful participation.

A South Sudanese refugee girl harvests from backyard of her family home at Rhino refugee settlement. Uganda's policy of giving land to refugees to settle and farm has greatly improved their livelihood and reduced dependence on relief aid. Credit: EU/ECHO/Edward Echwalu

What is refugee participation?

> When refugees — regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics — are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies), in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially. – Global Refugee-led Network definition

From our experience through close partnership with refugee-led organisations, we have observed that there tends to be a spectrum of how 'refugee participation' is defined, ranging from tokenistic to real refugee leadership. It is for humanitarian agencies to implement this approach on a local level, but it takes much bigger shifts and compromise to meaningfully realise this on national and global levels. This was identified as a key barrier in our report findings. This spectrum of meaning has often distorted progress within the sector and even perpetuates some of the barriers to participation. Humanitarian actors can believe they are enabling refugee participation, when in fact it is selective and restrictive. For example, there tends to be handpicking of refugee spokespeople to contribute in predefined ways in specific fora. This explains why so much emphasis has been placed on what makes the participation 'meaningful'. At Cohere, our focus has tended to be on refugee leadership and refugee-led initiatives rather than solely participation, because it gives more agency and ownership to refugees. The emphasis is on refugees holding power and not just measuring participation.

Cohere's understanding of the degrees of meaningful refugee participation has been strengthened by referencing the Global Refugee Network's Eight Step Ladder of Refugee Participation. The ladder identifies the least to the most meaningful levels of participation, with each step progressing closer to international organisations ceding decision-making powers and working more equitably with refugee leaders. It is a valuable tool to reference in all levels of design and implementation across organisations. If an organisation is not equally sharing power with refugees and RLOs when it develops or implements a programme, then it is not meaningful. This tool has also helped us look beyond our own measurements of success and consider our progress in relation to greater and more ambitious shifts. We know that Cohere and other international organisations, which hold power and resources in the field of forced displacement response, must make conscious shifts in our position to make space for refugees to step in, and refugees must be enabled to do so. It has to be about shifting the power dynamics rather than just sharing. That is where real and meaningful change will happen.

Why is meaningful participation essential?

> 'Responses are most effective when they meaningfully involve those they are intended to protect and assist' [see Global Compact on Refugees]. So nothing for us is without us, because we believe that when we're involved in decision-making the response will be more effective. Refugees are experts of the challenges they are facing and they know better than anyone what they really need to be able to reach their full potential.' – (Paul – RLO Bondeko Livelihoods Centre, Kampala, Uganda)

Meaningful participation has considerable benefits for refugees, as well as strengthening partnerships and the effectiveness of interventions. It allows refugees to exercise their right to self-determination, which is enshrined in international law. By participating in decision-making processes, refugees are able to shape their own future and the future of their communities. This, in turn, helps to build their sense of agency, which is critical for their wellbeing and self-worth. Meaningful participation enhances the quality, the effectiveness and the sustainability of humanitarian interventions. It is well known that in crises local community members are the first and last responders. They can understand the needs and priorities of their communities better than anyone. Not centring programme design and implementation on refugees' experience, knowledge and understanding is a missed opportunity, but it also risks being destructive. Refugee participation can lead to more effective and sustainable solutions that address the root causes of displacement and support refugees in rebuilding their lives.

This process also helps to nurture trust between refugees and humanitarian actors. By involving refugees in decision-making processes, humanitarian providers can demonstrate their commitment to transparency, accountability, and respect for refugees' rights and dignity. For this reason, in 2022, we at Cohere introduced a Refugee Advisory Board to our governance structures. Having oversight and input from refugees enhances our work and adds different layers of accountability and expertise to our coordination and approach. We have also changed our recruitment processes to ensure that people with lived experience of displacement are prioritised. This gives space to cooperation on shifting the power imbalance between refugees and various stakeholders, and promotes more collaborative and mutually respectful relationships. At Cohere, we believe one of our most useful roles in partnerships is creating space for our partners. Space for them to lead, to design, to learn, to grow, and to decide for themselves and their communities.

The barriers to 'meaningful refugee participation'

> 'Refugees are best placed to speak about the challenges that they face, and equally they should be able to control or give priority recommendations and engage in the full process of decision-making in the project and programmes developed for them.' – Jean Marie, Youth Voice Community

In our aforementioned 2022 report, our research identified and investigated the challenges that are limiting refugee participation in decision-making processes. These barriers include divergent conceptualisations of what 'meaningful participation' is, requirements for impartiality and representativeness, challenges related to skills and organisational cultures, and restrictive national regulatory frameworks. Just like the Global Refugee Network's ladder for participation, we hope these barriers can inspire reflection from other organisations in the sector to do better.

The barriers can be categorised into four main areas.

Barrier 1: Divergences in conceptualisation and mechanisms

One major barrier is the lack of a common conceptual framework and guidelines for meaningful participation. This has led to divergent interpretations of what meaningful participation is and mechanisms developed by responding organisations and RLOs. There are variations in the degrees of refugee participation, phases of the project cycle where participation is sought, and internal versus external participation. To address this barrier, it is recommended that organisations adopt a common definition of meaningful participation and commit to diversity, equity and inclusion values.

Barrier 2: Requirements for impartiality and representativeness

There are significant barriers relating to impartiality, representativeness and confidentiality of refugee leaders. Concerns about conflicts of interest, selection processes, and privileging certain communities pose obstacles to refugee participation. The requirements for full impartiality and representativeness were questioned as being impossible and potentially used as excuses to exclude refugees from high-level decision-making. It is suggested that organisations base selection criteria on skills, develop inclusive governance mechanisms, and have conversations on reducing the gap between refugees in leadership positions and the populations they serve.

Barrier 3: Skills and organisational cultures

The study found that challenges related to skills and workplace cultures impact the implementation of participation pledges. Difficulties were reported relating to finding qualified refugee candidates, acclimatising them to organisational cultures, and providing ongoing support. Also highlighted in the report were the recruitment criteria that favour privileged backgrounds, and the perception of hypocrisy in advocating for refugee-led solutions but failing to recruit refugees. Recommendations include adopting inclusive recruitment strategies, revisiting human-resource policies and workplace cultures, and developing mapping and database programmes for refugee talents.

Barrier 4: Restrictive national regulatory frameworks

National regulations that restrict refugee access to rights and services pose significant barriers to meaningful participation. Respondents reported adapting participation pledges to comply with legal restrictions. In countries where refugees lack legal recognition, risks and operational challenges hinder their inclusion in high-level management and compensation mechanisms. Work permit requirements and limited access to rights in practice also discourage the recruitment of refugee staff. Proposed solutions include: advocacy efforts to address these restrictive frameworks, documenting the outcomes of refugee staff inclusion, and engaging with universities for more flexibility in refugee enrolment.

The recommendations aim to address the barriers and promote the adoption of inclusive practices; diversity, equity and inclusion values within humanitarian organisations, and collaborative efforts with RLOs to ensure meaningful refugee participation. The process has also exposed our own gaps in these areas and where we are failing in our mission, but it is also providing a framework for shifting our work.

Walking the walk

> 'Refugees like me are aware that the international community is realizing that there is a need for refugees to have a greater say in the responses and policies that affect them. There has been some progress toward greater inclusion, but it has been slow. In reality, we are still largely excluded from most meetings and conversations about the very programs designed to help us.' – Jonas Ndayisenga Proud-Lion, Co-Founder & CEO, Umoja Refugee Group, Nairobi, Kenya

There has been much discussion on the topic of meaningful participation, but we know that it is through action that we will learn to do better. As an organisation we are dedicated to shifting the way we work to make it more equitable; to being self-reflective on what and how we can do better; and to trialling new ways of working so we can find more efficient solutions that put refugees in charge, both internally in our organisation and externally in the sector. We recognise that meaningful refugee participation will make that happen quicker and more effectively.

Off the back of our report we are working with a collection of refugees, other non-governmental organisations and the United Nations to build a Community of Practice and open a forum for ongoing dialogue that we hope will serve to address the barriers and untangle the complexities of some of these issues. We hope that together we will find a better way forward, one that puts refugees in the driving seat. Today, Tomorrow Vijana has an annual operating budget of $270,000 (unprecedented for a small RLO based in Uganda), and is now reaching over 18,648 refugees across the settlement. They are defining their futures, on their terms.

You can read our report here. We have also created a series of short videos for RLOs that highlight ways of overcoming the barriers with donors – watch them here.

Christina Thompson is the Communications Director at Cohere. They consulted a number of Cohere's partners for the development of this article.

Impact of refugees' participation in the labour market on decent work and social cohesion: examples and evidence from two ILO programmes in Jordan

Maha Kattaa and Nathalie Both

Introduction

Jordan has played a key role in the international response to the Syrian refugee crisis, despite the pressure this has placed on the country's limited resources. Jordan hosts some 1.3 million Syrian refugees, of whom 660,000 are registered with the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), making it the second largest per capita refugee-hosting country in the world in 2021. The large majority of Syrian refugees (79.5%) reside in urban areas with host communities. The country's commitment to helping mitigate the crisis was solidified by the introduction of the 2016 Jordan Compact Agreement, intended to promote inclusive growth by increasing the economic opportunities available to both Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan. The Compact facilitated the access of Syrian refugees to the labour market by reducing barriers to the legal employment of refugees in the kingdom – the first such agreement in the Arab States region to do so.

This article outlines how the International Labour Organization (ILO) has supported Syrian refugees and host communities to access decent employment[8] and how this has contributed to strengthening social cohesion between the two.

Syrian refugees' access to decent employment in Jordan: before and after the 2016 Compact

Up until the beginning of 2016, access to the labour market for non-Jordanians, including refugees, was highly restricted. According to the Jordanian labour law at the time, migrant workers could only obtain jobs if they had competence that was not available in Jordan or in occupations where the demand for labour was higher than the existing supply in the country. To be able to obtain such jobs, work permits had to be applied for by employers and the employees were tied to a single employer for the whole validity period of the permit. In addition, the process of obtaining work permits was relatively expensive as well as bureaucratic, for both the employer and the employee. Thus, prior to 2016, only about 3,000 work permits were issued annually to Syrians, and in practice, all Syrians working in Jordan prior to that time were engaged in informal employment generally associated with low wages, long working days, and poor working conditions.

8 Decent work refers to work that is 'productive and delivers a fair income, [ensures] security in the workplace and social protection for all, [provides] better prospects for personal development and social integration, [upholds] the freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and [guarantees] equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men'.

In 2016, the government of Jordan, in partnership with the international community, committed to improving the living conditions, prospects and resilience of both Syrian refugees and Jordanian host communities. Through these efforts, the Jordan Compact was born. The Compact is a commitment from the international community not only to support Jordan in hosting refugees, but also to support Jordanian citizens and the economy as a whole. As part of the Compact, the Jordanian government began facilitating Syrian labour-force participation in a formal and regularised manner by relaxing some of the requirements for the issuance of work permits, including:

- Agricultural cooperatives and the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions were given authority to issue non-employer specific (flexible) work permits in various sectors, including agriculture and construction. This meant that Syrian workers in those sectors were no longer tied to a single employer but free to work for any companies, and to travel freely in Jordan in search of job opportunities.
- Fees associated with the issuance of work permits for refugees have been waived since April 2016, as an explicit condition of the World Bank loan given to Jordan as part of the Compact.
- Exemptions from deportation or relocation of Syrians have been put in place considering the conflict in Syria.
- Concessional trade and finance were made available to Jordan by the international community, agreed on the condition that they formalise employment for 200,000 Syrian refugees.

While there remain many challenges to ensuring access to decent work opportunities in various sectors employing Syrian workers, work permits have provided a legal pathway for many to access and enjoy their rights. Since the signing of the Jordan Compact, more than 350,000 work permits have been issued to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

State of social cohesion between Syrian refugees and host communities in Jordan

While there is limited consensus about what is meant by the concept of social cohesion, what is less contested is that forced displacement affects social relations and can lead to social tensions. Amongst the various channels through which displacement can affect social cohesion, the perceived impact on the labour market and the ability of hosts to sustain their livelihoods is central. The influx of large numbers of displaced people can be perceived as increasing competition for jobs and placing a downward pressure on wages and working conditions. As this has important implications for the ability of hosts to meet their basic needs, this perception can result in resentment towards displaced populations and contribute to social tensions. Indeed, various research projects in Jordan identified the presence of tensions between host communities and Syrian refugees, largely driven by the belief that the refugee crisis deteriorated living conditions for Jordanians.

ILO programming in Jordan

In Jordan, the ILO contributes to the Jordan Response Plan and the Jordan Compact wherein its work focuses on three core priorities: promoting decent work through strengthened labour market

governance; enhancing economic growth through private-sector development; and promoting job creation and developing people's skills. Under the first priority, the ILO has advocated for Syrian refugees' right to work and rights at work, and supported government in the issuance of work permits to refugees, whilst strengthening decent work conditions in factories and in the agricultural sector and providing support to address instances of child labour. Under the second priority, the ILO has supported the Ministry of Labour to establish employment service centres which cater to both Syrian refugees and Jordanian nationals, providing them with support to find decent employment, and referring them to skills training opportunities. This is in addition to enterprise support for the participants in the previous three programmes, with a particular focus on the agriculture and post-harvest logistics sectors. Finally, under the third priority, the ILO implements various Employment Intensive Investment Programmes (EIIPs) that aim at direct job creation and improving the availability and quality of infrastructure. The ILO response and interventions are informed by several assessments and evaluations capturing the situation and voices of displaced populations.

Throughout the ILO's programming in the refugee-hosting countries – whether in Jordan or elsewhere – the ILO places a strong emphasis on ensuring that interventions do not exacerbate existing social tensions, but instead contribute to fostering social cohesion between displaced populations and host communities, and supporting the resilience of displaced populations, including through the promotion of integration where possible.

In Jordan, two specific interventions are presented that have aimed to achieve these twin objectives. Firstly, the ILO – together with development and humanitarian partners – has provided support to the government of Jordan in the issuance of work permits for refugees, in support of the government's commitment under the 2016 Compact to support refugee populations to access decent employment and contribute to the Jordanian economy. The ILO supported the deployment of mobile work permit stations to enable Syrian refugees to more easily renew their documentation and contribute to the establishment of employment centres in and around refugee camps to make employment services more easily accessible to refugees.

Secondly, the ILO has implemented EIIPs that aim at direct job creation while also contributing to improving the quality and availability of infrastructure as well as the employability of participants through the provision of skills training. From the outset, the programme is designed to promote social cohesion, by bringing together host communities and Syrian refugees, providing workers from the two communities with the opportunity to engage more closely and consistently. The impact of the programme on social cohesion has been closely monitored between phases, with indicators relating to the perception of residents in target governorates on the level of tensions between host communities and refugees, and on the willingness of participants to interact with other population groups, among others.

ILO's Employment Intensive Infrastructure Programme (EIIP) creates 200 decent jobs for Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugees to help restore livelihoods and support the clear-up operation in Beirut. Credit: ILO

Evidence of impacts

Access to work permits

A recent study produced by ILO and Fafo was designed to explore and advance the evidence base on the impact of work permit regulations on decent work outcomes for Syrian refugees in Jordan by analysing several data sets gathered by ILO and Fafo since 2014. The findings from the analyses show clear positive impacts of the work permit scheme in improving decent work for Syrian refugee workers in Jordan. Based on an analysis of a wide selection of decent work indicators, most of these were found to show that Syrians holding a valid work permit held better quality jobs than their counterparts without valid work permits. The analyses also showed that in many areas of decent work, Syrian workers had come closer to the standards of the Jordanian workers over time, indicating a steady assimilation of Syrians into the Jordanian labour market, partly caused by the introduction of the work permit scheme. However, decent work is still considerably more prevalent among Jordanians compared to Syrians in most areas, indicating that there is still much room for improvement.

Beyond the impacts on decent working conditions, the studies also identified largely positive outcomes of the work permits on integration and social cohesion. Firstly, the study found that holding work permits gave Syrian refugees a sense of safety, with some 70% of interviewed refugees with work permits highlighting that the permit made them feel safe in the streets, which contributes to their wellbeing in

general. Secondly, the scheme also contributed to Syrian refugees' better integration into Jordanian society and the status of Syrian refugees in the labour market, with greater numbers of Jordanians perceiving Syrian refugee workers to be reliable and hardworking following the implementation of the scheme. And the same positive trend was seen in terms of perceptions of the influence of Syrian refugees' presence on the wage levels in the market: 90% of Jordanians believed that Syrians were pushing down wage levels in 2014 compared to only 65% with the same belief in 2020. The level of trust between Jordanians and Syrian refugees has also increased significantly between 2014 and 2018, with 48% of Jordanians expressing trust in Syrian refugees in 2018 compared to 12% in 2014. These datasets reflect the greater level of social cohesion created between host communities and Syrian refugees in Jordan.

Employment Intensive Investment Programme

Between 2016 and 2022, the EIIP has generated 22,232 employment opportunities, with almost equal participation among host communities (48.2%) and Syrian refugees (51.8%). Evidence of the programme's impact on social cohesion has illustrated positive trends. Indeed, between the third and fourth phase of the programme implementation – during which the project expanded its geographical coverage, and included wider participation of (skilled) refugees and women – worker surveys were conducted to understand its contribution to social cohesion based on an index compiling answers in relation to trust, respect, cooperation and comfort between host communities and Syrian refugees. Responses on the contribution of the programme to social cohesion, while strong in the third phase, were higher in the fourth. Similarly, while 88.8% of surveyed participants identified that the programme had contributed to reducing tensions between the communities in the third phase, 95.8% agreed in the fourth. For example, evidence from qualitative data collection suggested that the EIIP had enabled participants to forge new relationships and friendships with other nationalities that extended outside of the work environment.

Conclusion

Participation of refugees in the labour market in fragile contexts can enhance the local economy and social cohesion. Integration in the labour market should be a longer-term strategic approach, rather than applying it to discrete activities and project interventions, to ensure the holistic contribution to local economy and social cohesion outcomes.

It is important to ensure that the situation analysis and the formulation and design of activities considers differences in the situation, needs, and voices of different target groups within refugees and host communities including women, youth, and people with disabilities. Addressing these differences with a rights-based approach will contribute positively to social justice, contact, and thus social cohesion. This allows for the identification of potential problems and solutions. For example, it is important to identify what kinds of infrastructure and skills-training programmes are most likely to be useful to the local communities and promote coexistence among and between them, as well as understand the fault lines that might trigger tensions during project implementation. Such measures will not only advance refugees' integration and empowerment but – by reducing grievances linked to unequal access to

resources and opportunities and enhancing contact – will also contribute positively to reducing conflicts and enable refugees to act as agents of peace. Throughout the planning, design and implementation of its interventions, the ILO is systematically informed by the findings of the different evaluations and assessments conducted throughout the different phases that highlight the situation, needs and aspirations of the different target groups.

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Organising towards a practice of decoloniality, refugee/IDP leadership, and power redistribution in humanitarian aid: experiences from inside the international humanitarian aid sector

Serwah Asante with contributions from current and former INGO employees

In 2020, as the world was decrying global injustice perpetrated towards Black and Brown bodies, the humanitarian aid sector was also undergoing a reckoning with its own deeply rooted colonial past, present and future. Personnel from organisations[9] across the sector exposed the insidious prevalence of white supremacy culture and coloniality.

At our international non-governmental organisation (INGO),[10] discussions concerning coloniality, power, marginalisation, injustice, and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) were underway in small pockets of the organisation prior to 2020. However, mainstreaming these conversations as a priority for leadership and staff members en masse did not gain traction until concerned and impacted personnel self-organised and ratcheted up external and internal pressure, building on the media and public attention surrounding the 2020 global movement for racial justice. Central to staff concerns were questions pertaining to how the INGO could reconcile with its colonial past, retool itself to address its colonial present, and reimagine a decolonial future that may unfold with or without such institutions.

In addressing the organisation's colonial present and forging a decolonial future, reflecting on how power is accessed, utilised and shared becomes critical. At our INGO – an organisation rooted in hierarchical structures of authority – examining the profiles and lived experiences of the chief decision-makers reveals the extent to which the institution's power brokers represent the people it is charged to serve.

9 Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF or Doctors Without Borders), Amnesty International, Save the Children, and the International Rescue Committee (IRC).

10 'Our INGO' is used as a moniker in this article to represent the organisation that article contributors worked in.

The beauty and perplexity of decoloniality are that the practice requires us to confront deep and layered belief systems that affect us all. The process asks us to examine ourselves, our relations to each other, and the systems we operate in to decentre Western supremacist ideologies and embrace a more expanded understanding of the world around us, within us and between us. Decoloniality is a continual, iterative, individual and communal process. We offer this reflection to share our experiences as current and former personnel within the sector, to add to the multiplicity of voices championing decolonial approaches across our industry – including the many organisations led by refugees and internally displaced people (IDPs) that put these theories into practice daily, and to continue to work towards building a more just world.

Decolonisation, decoloniality and DEI

To begin this analysis, it is helpful to have working definitions of decolonisation, decoloniality and DEI.

Decolonisation, within the United Nations (UN) context, is defined as a political process through which colonised nations gain(ed) statehood and independence. The UN currently lists 17 non-self-governing territories that are still fighting to gain their political independence, under the banner of decolonisation.

Decoloniality (decolonial processes) is a social theory born out of the Global South. Leading decoloniality scholar Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni defines this practice as a multi-directional and intersectional framework that decentres existing colonial legacies of a singular Western-focused knowledge base that is perpetuated as the universal truth. Decoloniality argues that although the administrative structures of colonialism were dismantled in many countries through the political process of decolonisation, the vestiges of colonialism still remain under the banner of coloniality.

Diversity, equity and inclusion is an organisational framing tool that helps ensure diverse, equitable and inclusive representation that better reflects the multidimensional world that we live in. DEI, on its own, does not require that practitioners challenge systems of coloniality. However, as more diverse voices are empowered within organisational settings, this expansion can lead to a broadened collective perspective that allows for explorations of decoloniality to take place.

The humanitarian aid sector as an agent of coloniality

The humanitarian aid industry, born out of the ashes of colonialism, boasts a long-standing, profitable, and mutually beneficial relationship with global domination and white saviourism. The UN was established in 1945 primarily by former colonial powers to promote peace and security in Western Europe and maintain the existing status quo of global dominance. This era also ushered in the birth of countless non-profit organisations based in the West with mandates across the globe. Central to the expansive reach of the Western non-profit industrial complex is the premise that proximity to global power and resources – most often derived from colonial exploitation – makes actors of these organisations best situated to serve as trustworthy and responsible stewards of funding resources and to achieve high-level results. The dominance of this practice ensures that organisations led by impacted

people and communities (such as refugee-/IDP-led organisations) are, at best, tokenised to legitimise Western INGOs as champions of localisation. This reality exposes extreme power imbalances that continue centuries-long practices of exploitation and infantilisation of marginalised communities in perpetual service to dominant culture.

The goal of most humanitarian aid organisations is not to challenge colonial legacies or current power imbalances. The industry is set up to reward continued expansion of well-connected, Western-operated organisations at the expense of localised ownership. Additionally, to finance endless growth, INGOs have well-documented histories of exploiting crises to harness funding which further secures their power as extensions of Western hegemonic might. The dichotomy here is that some of these organisations engage in work that alleviates pain and suffering for many people in immediate crises. However, without a full critique of the operational framework of this industry, we are doomed to continually cycle through phases of conflict, chaos and episodic relief – all under the banner of white saviourism.

The humanitarian aid industry is supported by a system of cronyism that imposes colonial order under the operational framework of white saviourism and exhaustive donor-accounting metrics that favour proximity to Western power. As such, leadership of high-profile charity organisations is overwhelmingly comprised of people who are enmeshed in, beholden to, and beneficiaries of the current systems of global domination – coloniality. This hierarchy of power maintains a racialised caste system that can be easily deduced by any cursory viewing of the chief decision-makers of any well-known non-governmental organisation. Beyond promoting a racialised hierarchy of power, many of these organisations also align themselves with Western private-sector financiers to ensure their economic survival. Corporatised INGOs often adopt an endless growth model of operations that is in direct opposition to transference of power to local, refugee-/IDP-led organisations. Additionally, leaders of these Western INGOs can take home inflated salaries comparable to the private sector but with the veneer of white saviourism that often allows their movements to go virtually unscrutinised and unchallenged.

Coloniality is further manifested in how some members of marginalised communities are socialised to see themselves and their position in relation to power. A subject that is rarely explored, but increasingly of importance in DEI and decoloniality work, is the rise of an empowered class of individuals with marginalised backgrounds who subscribe to coloniality as a core operating philosophy. As the practice of coloniality impacts all aspects of being, understandings of the world, projections of the future and comprehension of power, decoloniality asserts that we are all impacted by the grand narrative of coloniality. As such, many people – irrespective of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, refugee/IDP status, etc. – are deeply entrenched in the dominant-culture philosophy of coloniality. Ultimately, this means that simply having a person with marginalised identities in an elevated position is not sufficient to impact coloniality. It is critical that the individual is actively unpacking and confronting coloniality within themselves, their communities, their organisations, and the larger systems at play.

As people around the globe have called for racial justice and social equity, organisations have felt the pressure from the general public and personnel to address racism and coloniality in substantive ways. This pressure has led to an increase in DEI mandates, offices and initiatives that are often disconnected

from true power and set up to fail. DEI leaders are promoted with great fanfare and then quietly and systematically delegitimised to serve as puppet heads and scapegoats to mask performative engagement by organisational leaders. In such instances, DEI becomes a public relations function that allows organisations to shirk any true responsibility to address issues that perpetuate coloniality and inequity throughout companies, systems and society-at-large.

The toxic blend of coloniality, white saviourism, performative DEI, cronyism and financing that controls agenda-setting means that marginalised communities most impacted within the humanitarian aid sector, including refugees and IDPs, rarely hold any semblance of decision-making power. Coloniality becomes so embedded in the modus operandi that people equate white saviourism with public good and altruism. We do not investigate the insidious connections between financing and agenda-setting; aid organisations as extensions of Western imperialism; the history of global/regional conflict and the West's role as an active agent; and the ways in which people build lucrative careers in the sector with little investigation into whether they are best equipped to serve the needs of diverse marginalised communities.

Decoloniality efforts at our INGO

Mural honouring George Floyd pictured during the Black Lives Matter protests in Minneapolis, MN. Credit: Unsplash/munshots

In April of 2020, following the execution of Breonna Taylor and just prior to the murder of George Floyd, a small group of staff met to discuss coloniality and discrimination in the organisation and in the wider humanitarian aid sector. Following the commencement of the global outcry for racial justice and end to

police brutality in May 2020, personnel founded an employee-led group to provide a dedicated space to unpack coloniality and racism while organising for change within the organisation and beyond. At its peak, the employee resource group boasted 500+ people in its network. In October 2020, members issued a document of demands, highlighting over 50 actions that the organisation could take to become an entity dedicated to decoloniality and anti-racism. A key action proposed was the recruitment and promotion of intersectional refugee and IDP leaders to the highest ranks of leadership.

Top leadership responded to efforts to address coloniality and racism in the organisation with derision, retaliation, stonewalling, employing high-cost lawyers to conduct secretive reviews of staff allegations, and ultimately little change to its practices or leadership composition. After 2+ years of internal staff organising and promises to listen and respond to personnel concerns, diversity amongst top leadership looks virtually the same with no meaningful inclusion of intersectionally representative refugee/IDP leadership. In fact, coloniality has become more deeply entrenched. One emerging tactic to maintain the status quo and avoid accountability is that top leaders no longer include photos of themselves on the organisation's website.

As a result of the performative nature of DEI, anti-racism and decoloniality efforts at our organisation, many marginalised and impacted personnel, including current and former refugee and IDP clients, expressed deep fear of speaking out against colonialism. This serves as the underlying reason why contributing authors of this piece chose to remain anonymous. Retaliation is normalised for personnel raising concerns about abuse of power. Oftentimes, the internal complaints mechanisms deter personnel from reporting cases of abuse by making the process opaque and denying a basic survivor-centred commitment of transparency by failing to share findings with the individual who reported the abuse or with staff-at-large. As such, there is a deep lack of trust in and fear of leadership amongst personnel who experience abuses of power within the organisation.

Despite these challenges, personnel have organised to bring about internal and sector-wide changes. These actions range from speaking out publicly about the organisation's culture of white supremacy to connecting with like-minded individuals across the sector to strategise towards a decolonial future.

Imagining a new system of engagement to address coloniality and empower affected communities

To embrace a decolonial future, it is necessary to reimagine what the possibilities for our futures could be. Rather than passively absorb messages around a singular march towards colonially defined modernity, decoloniality provides us with a framework to lean into our radical imaginations and conjure alternate ways of projecting our future(s). Once we have this vision, we are charged to do the work to bring about lasting change. Within the context of the humanitarian aid industry, taking the first steps to build towards a decolonial future would require clear actions focused on transitioning power from INGOs to impacted communities, including to those organisations led by refugees and IDPs. Below, we offer some reflections on how this process could unfold.

- Appoint a head of organisation who is a member of the impacted communities that the organisation is mandated to serve and a strong advocate for the empowerment of marginalised communities and decoloniality.
- Set a minimum standard that at least 50% of top leadership executives and the board of advisors represent impacted communities.
- Champion a strategy to transfer power to local refugee-/IDP-led organisations and use the organisation's international platform, position and authority to advocate for decolonised practices, ultimately working such INGOs out of existence.
- Conduct an independent decolonial review of the organisation's history, present, possibilities for the future, programming (including evaluations), operations, pay scale, human resources, financing, fundraising, public relations, partnerships and culture.
- Develop a practice of leadership and middle management centring marginalised and most-impacted voices. This includes holding space for them to speak and wield power, listening to them, and prioritising their views in any decision-making process.
- Decentre INGOs as the key intermediary in humanitarian relief and, through a lens of decoloniality, transfer power to local/most impacted organisations, such as those led by IDPs and refugees.
- Continually unpack, address and investigate the organisation's relationship to and benefits from coloniality.
- Explore how to transition from an aid-focused orientation of operations to a reparative system of justice and community care.
- Work with local experts in places of operation to apply a decolonial assessment of programming and evaluatory practices.

These offerings are not prescriptive but instead reflect our desire to further contribute to building a decolonial future. Our experiences to date have shown that there is deep and sustained resistance to accountability, justice, and any disassociation from white supremacy culture and values. However, we are encouraged by the continued work of people across the sector who are striving to bring about lasting change. Decoloniality gives us a blueprint to unpack the coloniality within us and to work to decentre white supremacy in service of a broader, multi-layered, and more robust lens through which to understand and reshape our world.

We invite you to join us in these efforts and use your voice and platform to recalibrate our sector towards an orientation of care, justice, localised power, true representation and accountability. The articles in this edition explore one aspect of this recalibration of power in the humanitarian sector; refugee-/IDP-led organisations committed to unpacking coloniality and striving for more robust frameworks from which to operate have the potential to transform approaches to humanitarian responses in refugee contexts and beyond.

If you would like to learn more about decoloniality as a practice and efforts undertaken throughout the humanitarian aid sector, please see the suggested reading and video list below.

Suggested reading:

- *White saviorism in international development* by Themrise Khan, Kanakulya Dickson and Maïka Sondarjee (2023)
- *Time to decolonise aid* by Peace Direct (2021)
- *Decolonizing the humanitarian nonprofit sector: why governing boards are key* by Rose Worden and Patrick Saez (2021)
- 'Flipping the narrative: the roots of the refugee protection system are colonial and racist' by Sana Mustafa (2023)
- 'How to write about Africa' by Binyavanga Wainaina (2019)

Suggested videos:

- Critical Conversations – Walter Mignolo On "Decoloniality" (2021)
- Dr Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni Lecture on Decoloniality and the Cognitive Empire at the Hormuud Lecture (2019)

Serwah Asante (she/her) is a human soul trying to navigate this existence with as much grace, love, alignment, and healing as possible. She is also a consultant working with other marginalised voices to centre decoloniality, DEI, healing, and anti-racism in the programming, operations, and culture of international and multilateral organisations. To connect further, please feel free to reach out at info@deiandbeyond.com or at www.linkedin.com/in/serwah-asante/.