REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS KENYA COUNTRY REPORT

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LERRN

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About the study

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About the Refugee-Led Research Series

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

About the RLRH

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

About LERRN

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

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Acronyms

DRS	Department of Refugee Services
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GIV	Global Innovation Valley
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
INVER	Initiative for Nurturing Vulnerable & Empowerment for Resilience
KIBL	Kalobeyei Initiative for Better Life
KII	Key Informant Interview
KRIN	Kakuma Refugee-Led Initiatives Network
LERRN	Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (Carleton University)
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, and Associated Communities
LPSD	Learning Permaculture for Society Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
OSF	Open Society Foundations
RAI	Resilience Action International
RLO	Refugee-Led Organisation
RLRH	Refugee-Led Research Hub (University of Oxford)
RSC	Refugee Studies Centre (University of Oxford)
SIR	Solidarity Initiative for Refugees
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
YES	Youth Education and Sports

Executive Summary

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

Kenya
1. Kakuma Camp
2. Kalobeyei Settlement
3. Nairobi

Phase 1: Mapping RLOs

150 RLOs identified
45 stakeholder interviews

Phase 2: In-depth examination

15 interviews with RLO leaders
14 interviews with external skateholders
30 focus group discussions (FGDs) with RLO beneficiaries and community members
15 FGDs with RLOs´managers, staff and volunteers

The RLO landscape

- RLOs in Kenya are diverse in nature; they range from small groupings and associations within various communities to larger organisations that are registered as community-based organisations (CBOs) or non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Other groups also include formal and informal faith-based organisations and savings groups.
- Refugees in Kenya create RLOs to fill existing gaps left by aid organisations and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in service provision and delivery. In urban areas, RLOs are the first point of contact for new arrivals, and some provide safe houses for refugees who cannot afford to pay rent.
- RLOs provide services in education (adult education, English training, and digital training), livelihoods, hygiene and sanitation, and agriculture, particularly in the camp settings. RLOs in both urban and camp settings played an important role in the distribution of food and other necessary items during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- Most formal RLOs are led by educated Congolese nationals. This is because they tend to have wider networks, and other communities tend to rely on informal ethnic associations. Congolese-led RLOs do, however, often employ other nationalities and host community professionals as staff. In areas where refugees tend to be from one nationality, RLOs tend to be established by that nationality.
- Most RLOs are created by men, with few groupings led by women. This is due to structural and cultural barriers that most women face; women have fewer network connections, are often excluded from decision-making, and most have only informal education.

Perceived impact of RLOs

- In urban areas, RLOs are known by refugee communities within their area of operation. In areas where there are few refugees, they do not typically know about the existence of RLOs. In camp settings, RLOs are widely known, especially the elite and larger RLOs. Younger people tend to be more aware of the RLOs operating in their community.
- Government officials in the camps, such as the Department of Refugee Services (DRS), are aware of both registered and unregistered RLOs as they oversee the registration of CBOs. In urban areas, the local chief and police know about RLOs. The chief oversees access to registration, and the police sometimes consult RLOs if a refugee is accused of committing an offence.
- NGOs and UNHCR are aware of the existence of larger RLOs within both urban and camp settings.
- Member contributions facilitate the establishment of most RLOs. Subsequent activities generate interest and funding from NGOs and external donors, and RLOs may stop collecting membership contributions. Some RLOs source funds from online fundraising, diaspora aid, and contributions from activities such as livelihood projects or cultural activities.
- RLOs that have broader connections and networks are known as elite RLOs. In the camps and urban settings these elite RLOs are part of networks such as RELON-Kenya.
- Beneficiaries describe RLO service provision as fast and efficient. Some say they are treated with understanding and respect, and others add RLO services to meet their needs. However, women and older people feel excluded from services as most focus on young people. Other non-beneficiaries in the community feel RLOs established by a particular ethnic group may only target those of the same ethnicity.
- The refugee community considers service provision by RLOs as more easily accessible because, contrary to aid organisations and UNHCR, RLOs are formed within the community. RLOs permit beneficiaries to use their native language and provide assistance despite documentation challenges, unlike many NGOs and the UNHCR. Some feel RLOs more effectively target beneficiaries and create better paying jobs for refugees than NGOs and UNHCR.
- RLO leaders,beneficiaries, and some external stakeholders consider RLOs as highly impactful because of their proximity and ability to better understand the community. RLOs are the first point of contact by new arrivals in urban areas and are crucial sources of information sharing for refugees. This was particularly evident during COVID-19 when RLOs took centre stage in service provision.

Variations in impact

- RLO impact in Kenya is reliant on access to networks and the regulatory framework. RLO leaders with previous experience with UNHCR and other aid organisations are better able to access funds from NGOs, UNHCR, and the diaspora, and RLO leaders with connections to government officials are better able to access registration. RLOs that are registered are able to apply for external funding and sometimes work in partnership with NGOs,

- while unregistered RLOs face challenges when applying for funding and grants.

  RLOs in Kenya have limited meaningful partnerships with NGOs or UNHCR; however, some RLOs receive grants from NGOs to implement projects.

- Challenges that RLOs encounter include financial limitations, lack of registration, lack of capacity building for staff and RLO leaders, and replication of services by multiple RLOs.

Recommendations

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

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Introduction

Rationale and objectives

Emerging evidence suggests that refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in East Africa play a vital role in meeting community needs.[1] RLOs increasingly took centre stage during the COVID-19 pandemic, providing protection and assistance to refugee communities while other humanitarian organisations struggled to respond effectively.[2] There is some evidence on the landscape and activities of RLOs in Kenya.[3] However, no prior study has engaged community members and RLO beneficiaries to understand how they perceive the impact of RLOs on the refugee response and on their well-being.

This study seeks to fill these knowledge gaps in Kenya by responding to the following research questions:

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

Research methods

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

Phase 1 of data collection

Phase 1 of the study consisted of mapping RLOs in the country through a desk review, an online search, and 45 rapid phone-based interviews. Preliminary mapping was critical to avoid overlooking smaller RLOs that may not have considerable resources, but still contribute to the well-being of their communities.

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[1] See for instance: Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts, and Evan Easton-Calabria, *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020).
[2] Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria, and Kate Pincock. 'Localising public health: refugee-led organisations as first and last responders in COVID-19', *World Development* 139 (2021): 105311.
[3] See: Kate Pincock, Alexander Betts and Evan Easton-Calabria, *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria, and Kate Pincock. 'Localising public health: refugee-led organisations as first and last responders in COVID-19', *World Development* 139 (2021): 105311; Evan Easton-Calabria, Alexander Betts, and Kate Pincock. 'Refugee-led organisations: collective action for collective assistance', Rethinking Refuge, 17 September 2021; Evan Easton-Calabria and Robert Hakiza. 'In the interest of saving: refugee-led microfinance in Kampala, Uganda', *Development Policy Review* 39, no. 1 (2021): 22–38. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/dpr.12500

The team selected 15 RLOs (five in each location: Nairobi, Kakuma, and Kalobeyei) for in-depth examination. The selection of the RLOs was based on a mix of purposive and convenience sampling in both sites and on a set of criteria that reflected the diversity of RLOs. Special attention was given to diversity in the sample, and researchers set minimum criteria for RLOs based on: 1) the RLO setting (camp versus urban); 2) registration status; 3) nationality, religion, gender, social status, education level, or age of RLO leaders; 4) the level of external relations and influence of non-refugee actors (including co-led organisations between RLOs and host community members); 5) their resources and access to funding; and 6) their stated objectives (eg social protection, artistic, for-profit).

Phase 2 of data collection

The research team collected in-depth qualitative data on the 15 RLOs and the actors that benefit from them or are involved in refugee response. See Annex 1 for more details about the profiles of selected RLOs.

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

A refugee-led study

This study was led by a current refugee researcher based in Nakuru, Kenya. RLOs and beneficiaries reacted positively to being approached about this research project. RLOs were generally enthusiastic to know research was being conducted on their work, especially smaller-scale initiatives and women-led groups that typically felt excluded from discussions around refugee participation. They had many questions about the research and what benefits it could bring them. The research team took time to explain the scope and objectives of the study to mitigate expectations.

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

Nature and scope of RLOs in Kenya

There is no universally accepted definition of RLOs. In this report, we use the term RLO to describe any organisation, association, coalition, formal or informal network, faith-based group or initiative that is led by refugees or asylum seekers in urban, rural, camp, and settlement settings.

Definition of RLOs	
	It may include both registered and unregistered groups.
	Their function is to respond to the needs of refugees and related host communities, whether these are humanitarian, developmental, or cultural.
	While RLOs generally prioritise their national community or the refugees who live where they operate, RLOs also provide services to host community members in urban locations and settlements where they are more integrated with nationals.
	RLOs may provide direct services or focus on advocacy. They can aim at supporting their own members (self-help groups), their communities (special interest group or ethnic group), other refugees, and the host community they live with. They may have for-profit elements, but those are used (fully or partially) to fund non-for-profit activities.
	RLOs may include non-refugees in their boards and management teams, but the main decision-makers and founders have a displacement background.
	We exclude from this definition refugee leadership bodies set up by authorities and UNHCR as they were not set up independently, hence their decisions are bound by authorities and UNHCR. In Kenya, we excluded education committees and refugee community leadership structures that are implemented by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), such as village and zonal leaders in Nyarugusu refugee camp.
	We also exclude groups created as part of INGO programmes unless those groups have expanded their activities beyond the original INGO objectives.

RLO development in Kenya

At the regional level, we conceptualise RLOs in three main development stages, linked to their funding capacity:

- **Self-help stage**: Informal groups that aim at providing services to their members only. They are dependent on their members' contributions, which can be upon registration or via monthly or annual contributions ranging between KES 50 to KES 1,000. They may also engage in income-generating activities, where profits are distributed between RLO activities and members. These groups are not registered. Many RLOs led by women, such as Dwato Women Group in Nairobi, and small groups led by men across all locations are at the self-help stage.
- **Growth phase**: Community-based organisations (CBOs) are organisations that have registered and are able to provide services to both their members and their community (typically along national and ethnic lines). At this stage, RLOs are able to engage with diaspora members, individual sponsors and, in some cases, humanitarian donors. During the growth phase, RLOs rely on a hybrid of self-funding and funding from external stakeholders, although self-funding outweighs external funding as the latter is usually not sufficient and is irregular. RLOs are stabilising in this phase and are able to attract

funding from well-off community members, diaspora members, humanitarian donors, and individual donors. Individual sponsors may include researchers who engaged RLO leaders as research assistants, and international former aid workers or volunteers who developed personal connections with RLOs. In such cases, they either provide direct financial support or support with fundraising and network-building. RLOs at this phase have just registered or are trying to register. This applies to medium-scale RLOs in Kenya.

- **Expansion phase**: Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or larger CBOs provide services to refugees regardless of their ethnic affiliation and to the host community. They are able to compete with traditional organisations for funding. They are often referred to as 'elite' or 'celebrity' RLOs. In this phase, RLOs are in a good position to lobby and partner with traditional INGOs for humanitarian funding. External funding outweighs membership fees and diaspora support. A few elite RLOs have direct access to humanitarian donors (eg L'Afrikana in Nairobi and Resilience Action International [RAI] in Kakuma). RLOs in this phase engage in high-scale income-generating activities and can bid for contracts from private investors. Membership fees are not required at this stage and profits from income-generating activities by members are not shared

This report examines 1) how some RLOs have managed to grow into medium-sized groups, and expand into elite groups, and 2) what sets them apart from RLOs that remain at the self-help stage. We nonetheless acknowledge that self-help groups and smaller-scale RLOs can play a significant role in their members' lives.

We demonstrate that RLOs get stuck in the self-help stage largely as a result of external factors: if they are unable to access further funding (beyond membership fees) from donors or diaspora support, and/or if they are unable to register. We see that RLO leaders with more personal networks, who are generally educated men who previously worked as incentive workers with aid organisations, are more likely to access funding and expand their organisations.

Women-led RLOs are less likely to move on from the self-help stage due to structural barriers and self-censorship. It was a challenge to identify women-led RLOs across all locations until a visit to the location revealed informal, women-led refugee groups impacting the community that did not advertise themselves as RLOs.

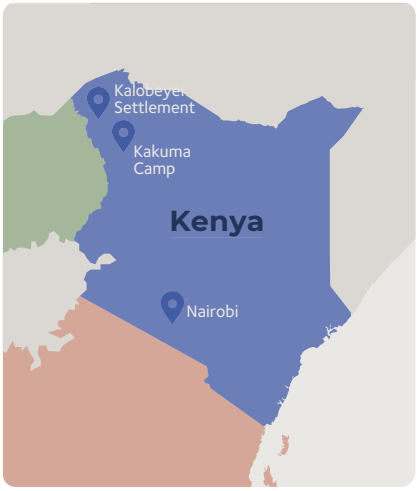
Diaspora funding remains a source of support for RLO activities. RLOs tend to receive diaspora support when their founding member/leader is resettled abroad and continues to provide support (eg RAI in Kakuma), or when they have the capacity to raise awareness of their activities online (eg the Initiative for Nurturing Vulnerable & Empowerment for Resilience in Kakuma, which sometimes uses GoFundMe to request funds from the diaspora and other supporters).

The RLO landscape

Kenya is home to many refugees in situations of protracted displacement.[4]

[4] According to UNHCR, the number of refugees and asylum seekers in Kenya is 550,817 as of 30 April 2022, making it the second largest refugee-hosting country in Africa. Protracted refugee displacement occurs when refugees remain in exile for more than five years without any solution offered to them. John Thon Majok. 'A generation in limbo: protracted refugee situations in Kenya must be addressed', *Africa Up Close*, 30 August 2019. https://africaupclose.wilsoncenter.org/a-generation-in-limbo-protracted-refugee-situations-in-kenya-must-be-addressed/

The refugees and asylum seekers residing in Kenya today are mainly from Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Eritrea, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, and Uganda. The majority of Kenya's refugees reside in its two desert refugee camps, namely Dadaab in north-eastern Kenya, and Kakuma and Kalobeyei in north Rift Valley; a large number of refugees also reside in Kenya's significant cities, most notably Nairobi. In all these areas, refugees frequently mobilise to create informal associations and later CBOs that serve as alternative means to provide social protection, which has been traditionally left to aid organisations and UNHCR.



In our mapping, we identified more than 150 RLOs in Kenya. RLOs in Kenya are diverse in nature and have emerged in greater numbers since the 2010s. Some RLOs operate in both urban and camp settings (eg DAFIKESO, which was created by refugees who received the DAFI scholarship and operates across Kenya).

Nairobi

Despite Kenya's encampment policy which prohibits refugees from leaving camps, urban areas have been a home for refugees for many years. UNHCR estimates 86,647 refugees and asylum seekers live in different parts of urban centres in Kenya as of the end of April 2022. Among these refugees, the majority live in Nairobi.

RLOs in Nairobi are diverse in nature and size. They range from large-scale RLOs, such as Kintsugi, Youth Voices Nairobi, and L'Afrikana, to smaller self-help groups led by women from a single national group, such as Dwato Women Group from Ethiopia and South Sudan Women Association in Nairobi. There are also RLOs that are formed to protect and assist minority groups such as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, and associated communities (LGBTQ+).

RLOs in Nairobi tend to be bound to low-income neighbourhoods where refugee communities are concentrated, such as Eastleigh, Kabiria, Kayole, Umoja, Ruiru, and Rongai, among others. Most RLOs started as self-help groups after the arrival of large influxes of refugees to urban areas in the 2010s and expanded by setting up membership structures.

RLOs in Nairobi mostly focus on livelihood, adult education, orientation for newly arrived urban refugees, and advocacy. They are often the first point of contact for new asylum seekers arriving in the city. Some RLOs provide a place for safe housing for their beneficiaries. For example, FLBQ provides safe housing for the most vulnerable LGBTQ+ refugees in Nairobi. Livelihood is also a key area of focus for urban RLOs as refugees living in urban areas are less likely to receive direct assistance from UNHCR and aid organisations. To support refugee livelihoods, several RLOs provide training on tailoring, soap-making, and artwork (eg L'Afrikana). Others provide business training and grants to beneficiaries who want to start small-scale businesses such as salons. Women-led informal RLOs in Nairobi tend to

focus on providing informal support to members while producing handmade products such as beadwork, weaving, and selling handmade items.

Youth-led RLOs are often engaged in advocacy to improve refugees' participation in decision-making fora and perceptions of refugees among the host community. Some RLOs provide services to solve problems that are unique to their community. For example, in Eastleigh, Tawakal provides psycho-social and sexual and gender-based violence support to the Somali community. Additionally, RLOs led by LGBTQ+ provide protection to members of the LGBTQ+ refugee community in Nairobi.

The COVID-19 pandemic was an accelerator for many RLOs in Nairobi to scale up their activities. RLOs played a key role in creating awareness in their communities and distributed food and other items to the most vulnerable in the community. This also increased their visibility and partners' interest in their work.

Many RLOs in Nairobi are registered under county governments as CBOs, but some operate informally, in particular women-led self-help groups or associations.

RLOs in Nairobi rely on volunteers, but some that are large-scale do have a staffing structure that provides paid incentives. For example, L'Afrikana has staff on a monthly payroll.

Some RLOs in Nairobi act as referral points for UNHCR and aid organisations and they also refer some of their beneficiaries to these aid organisations for further assistance. Various RLOs carry out mobilisation and distribution of items when required by aid organisations and UNHCR.

> *'Tawakal is the intermediate link between the Somali community and HIAS, UNHCR and other organisations like IRC, DRC. Most organisations engage us whenever they want to do any activity in Eastleigh. They always come first to Tawakal before entering Eastleigh'.*
> - Tawakal staff, Nairobi

Kakuma Refugee Camp

Kakuma Refugee Camp was set up in 1992 following the influx of South Sudanese. Kakuma is organised in four camps: Kakuma 1, Kakuma 2, Kakuma 3, and Kakuma 4.[5] RLOs in Kakuma are diverse in nature and size. Some are larger-scale RLOs that have acquired NGO status, such as RAI, others are small-scale organisations, such as Learning Permaculture for Society Development (LPSD) found in Kakuma 1. RLOs also include self-help groups that are mostly led by women, and religious groups such as Wisdom of Ba'bando Pastors. There are some large-scale RLOs in each camp, such as URISE in Kakuma 1, Resilience Action in Kakuma 2, and Solidarity Initiative for Refugees in Kakuma 3, that are known by refugees across the four camps. There are no large-scale RLOs in Kakuma 4 because it is a fairly new camp created in 2013–14 following an increase of arrivals of South Sudanese refugees.

Some RLOs are registered as CBOs and one as an NGO through the Department of Refugee Services (DRS), but the majority are not registered. Some unregistered elite and large-scale RLOs carry on with their service provision and have a record of accomplishment despite their status. For example, Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR) is the leading RLO in providing digital literacy despite their lack of registration.

[5]UNHCR. 'Kakuma Refugee Camp and Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement'. https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kakuma-refugee-camp

RLOs in Kakuma provide similar services to aid organisations, and their focus areas are mainly education, livelihood, farming, and youth activities such as sports and music. Education is a key service that RLOs provide through digital trainings, English language trainings, social and emotional learning for children, and sexual and reproductive health trainings. They also provide professional courses such as certificates, diplomas, and degrees. The most influential RLOs in Kakuma, such as RAI, URISE, and SIR focus on education (eg online certificates and diploma, digital training, permaculture). RLOs also engage in research and knowledge production, for example Youth Education and Sports (YES). Some engage in income-generating activities such as fishing, music, photo studios, 3D printings, and agriculture. Other RLOs provide services related to entertainment to the community with the aim of teaching the community about issues such gender-based violence through drama and community cohesion through sports. Some RLOs target specific or marginalised groups of people, for example the Humanitarian Relief Development Agency provides midwifery services to pregnant women, LGBTQ+-led initiatives, and those that support people with disabilities. Women-led RLOs in Kakuma tend to provide services in relation to handmade products such as crocheting and beadwork, soap-making, tailoring, catering, and farming.

RLOs in Kakuma do not typically have a membership structure and rely on volunteers.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, RLOs played a key role in creating awareness about the virus in their communities and distributed items such as masks and sanitisers.

> *'The young people from these RLOs were going to different blocks to educate us about Corona. Some RLOs like REHORI [Refugee and host resilience and Gender based Violence Initiative] taught us how to make liquid soap to use and sell.*
> – RLO beneficiary, Kakuma

Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement

Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement was created in 2016, just 3.5 kilometres from Kakuma, with the aim of promoting self-reliance and integration of services between refugees and host community members.[6] Kalobeyei is organised in Villages 1, 2, and 3. RLOs in Kalobeyei began forming in 2018. RLOs can be found in different villages; however, large-scale RLOs such as Kalobeyei Initiative for Better Life (KIBL) and Wasafi Group are known by refugees within different villages. Most RLOs in Kalobeyei operate informally without registration and few are registered as CBOs through DRS.

Most influential RLOs, such as KIBL and Wasafi Group, focus on hygiene and sanitation to promote health – a key need in the settlement.

Other RLOs focus on education and livelihood; some RLOs facilitate the provision of professional courses such as diplomas, degrees, and certificates as well as digital training skills, and professional development skills. There are also self-help groups such as the Kalobeyei Integrated Business Men and Women Association, which facilitates group savings and loans, and others that carry out farming activities and other income-generating activities such as soap-making. The women-led groups in Kalobeyei tend to focus on farming and handmade crafts such as beadwork and crocheting. Youth-led RLOs focus on advocacy and sports and wellness training.

During the COVID-19 outbreak, RLOs played a key role in raising awareness in their communities. Some RLOs like Global Innovation Valley (GIV) came up with the 'Smarter

[6] UNHCR. 'Kalobeyei Settlement'. https://www.unhcr.org/ke/kalobeyei-settlement

than Covid' project that raised awareness on COVID-19 in all villages and provided affordable masks and water cans.

There is limited co-leadership with the host community given the set-up of the settlement, specifically the distance between the refugee villages and host community villages.

Profile of RLO leaders

Nationality

Across all locations in Kenya, educated Congolese refugees tend to take the lead in creating RLOs. However, in areas where refugees tend to be from one nationality, the RLOs created tend to be from that nationality. For instance, in Eastleigh, Nairobi, RLOs are led by the Somali community, and in Ruiru, Nairobi, RLOs are led by the Anyuak community from Ethiopia. Other nationalities such as Sudanese, Burundians, Ugandans, and Ethiopians have also created smaller-scale RLOs. Large-scale RLOs created by Congolese tend to include other nationalities and some host community professionals as staff and other managerial positions.

Gender

Across all research sites, most RLOs are led by men. The women-led organisations tend to be self-help groups or unregistered organisations. During the mapping phase, the team was only able to identify two women-led groups in Nairobi and three in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. These groups are small-scale and struggle to gain resources to expand their activities. Women-led groups have often started as either beneficiary groups from aid organisations that continued working together to promote their products and expanded their activities or as church groups.

The lack of women RLO leaders can be explained by structural and cultural issues: women have less access to higher education, where leaders often meet; they also have competing priorities such as childcare and house management.

Some women leaders in Kakuma also reported cases of harassment when delivering services from authorities, aid workers and male RLO leaders, making it difficult for them to develop their activities. Furthermore, while women might be doing important work for the community, they do not always perceive their group's work as an initiative or feel that they are having an impact on the community.

However, some RLOs that were founded by men employ women in management positions. For example, Tawakal Youth in Nairobi is headed by a young woman and the programme manager for SIR in Kakuma is a woman.

Education

Elite and large-scale RLOs are generally led by young, educated men with bachelor's degrees. The leaders of some small-scale and medium-scale RLOs have qualifications such as higher education diplomas and secondary education certificates. Some have certificates acquired from technical and vocational training. Out of all women-led initiatives, one leader had a bachelor's degree while others only had primary education certificates. More successful RLOs are led by more educated leaders: this can be explained by the fact that educated refugees are more likely to have access to networks and are seen as more

legitimate to implement their work.

Age

Most RLO leaders in Kenya are young male refugees aged between 18 to 40 years. Younger refugees have taken the lead in creating RLOs because they tend to have had more access to education compared to older generations and want to address challenges they face, such as unemployment and access to education. However, there are a few RLOs that are created by middle-aged (45–50) men. Women-led groups are mostly led by middle-aged women who are looking for opportunities to support their families.

Motivation to start RLOs

Most RLO leaders in Kenya explain that they started their groups to fill existing gaps in the community that humanitarian organisations and UNHCR had not addressed. RLOs are also launched by young people to create their own opportunities for self-development. They have skills and are unemployed so creating an RLO gives them status and potentially funding. RLOs are also created to advocate on behalf of the community.

> *'We formed FLBQR to help us to solve challenges that most of us, especially as women. To illustrate this, I will go back to 2014 or 2015, when UNHCR, through HIAS, used to assist LGBT+ refugees with monthly financial support. In 2017, UNHCR stopped that financial support, and LGBT+ refugees started having many problems, including shelter and food. Women were the most affected among others. Challenges brought us together, and we formed this organisation so that it would help us to source for funds and solve our problems.'*
> - RLO staff, Nairobi
>
> *'RLOs are founded by refugees because of the pressures of life they go through daily. Some people think that refugees are illiterate. That is not true. There are refugees with professional skills and experience gained back home in our countries. After struggling and hitting the wall, we decide to take charge of our lives. We realised that if not united, our voices will not be heard. But if we can come together and have one voice, and look for funds, we can survive by creating opportunities for ourselves.'*
> - RLO leader, Nairobi
>
> *'I was called by a friend who introduced me to his vision. I saw it important to put our hands together to support our community by advocating for the voiceless in our community' (RLO leader, Kalobeyei). 'I was motivated to volunteer because I realised that we never have our voice out there as Nubians; we wanted to be that voice.'*
> - RLO staff, Kakuma

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

Involvement of the host community

RLOs are more likely to provide services to host community members in Nairobi. Involving host communities allows RLOs to maintain good relationships with the local community as they share infrastructure and amenities. RLOs in Kakuma and Kalobeyei aspire to include host community members but face challenges when doing so because there is little integration. In Kakuma, refugees are isolated from community members – only community members who know RLO leaders personally might come for activities. The situation is similar in Kalobeyei, despite being an integrated settlement – refugees are in one village, while host community members are in another village, meaning that there is little integration. As RLOs have limited funding, there is no incentive for host community members to come and volunteer, especially as they have to pay for transportation across long distances.

Some elite RLOs involve host community professionals at the managerial level. For example, RAI has two Kenyan employees. The team did not identify any RLOs that were set up organically by the host community or RLOs where the host community plays a role in decision-making, although management tends to include one or two host community members who are hired to play the role of enablers. In camp settings, those community members do not belong to the area but are professionals from urban centres hired for their networks and skills.

	Setting	Beneficiaries	Co-managers	Enablers	Inhibitors
Nairobi		✓	✓	✓	–
Kakuma		–	–	–	–
Kalobeyei		–	–	–	–

Partnerships

In Kenya, RLOs are able to operate publicly; they engage with aid organisations and UNHCR in urban and camp settings. However, these engagements and partnerships tend to be project-based and short-term. RLOs that receive funds are typically the ones able to seek further funding, which has created a group of elite RLOs with greater access to opportunities. Partnerships are important as they not only expose RLOs but also enhance their legitimacy to the donor community and sometimes to the community members. Partnerships in Kenya include:

- **Mobilisation and access to the refugee community:** Many aid organisations and UNHCR engage RLOs as a way to access communities. The stakeholders interviewed described the main contribution of RLOs as an access point to the community. '*They contribute a lot to the work of the humanitarian organisations. Because sometimes these other aid organisations come through them so that they can support the community, they are a link between aid sectors and the community'* (stakeholder, Kakuma).
- **Information sharing and (two-way) referrals:** Some RLO leaders in Kenya have established linkages with aid organisations that allow them to refer community members to services. For example, RLO leaders that work as incentive staff in aid organisations can refer their beneficiaries to these organisations for further assistance. Some stakeholders noted that RLOs are critical for information sharing. *'RLOs are a place where beneficiaries*

can be able to pass information, and they are also able to cast down information from the aid organisations to the communities. I think they are best in that place when you need to send a message' (stakeholder, Nairobi).

- **Complementary work of aid organisations:** Stakeholders noted that RLOs give room for continuity, especially if aid organisations cease implementing programmes. They also complement the work of aid organisations by adding more players to the humanitarian and development sector. Additionally, more players means competition with aid organisations. *'I can reiterate back to during COVID when organisations were working from home, RLOs were out there maybe distributing food, sanitary equipment and even some small finances on behalf of organisations which are not allowed by their headquarters to go out and engage'* (stakeholder, Nairobi).
- **Implementation:** In Kenya, larger-scale RLOs such as RAI in Kakuma implement projects on behalf of INGOs on a short-term basis. In those instances, RLOs act as intermediaries between the community and aid organisations. RLOs often report that those partnerships are not sustainable. Typically, larger, more structured, RLOs with strong networks act as implementers on projects set up by aid organisations.
- **In-kind contributions:** A lot of aid organisations interviewed in Kenya said in-kind contributions are more preferable than direct funding because of issues linked to accountability across RLOs of all types and sizes. For instance, aid organisations provide items such as cleaning materials to organisations that provide hygiene and sanitation services at Kakuma and Kalobeyei; others provide items such as laptops and furniture to different RLOs across all locations.
- **Capacity development:** Enhancing the capacity of RLOs is the objective of many aid organisations. In Kenya, Cohere takes the lead in partnering with different RLOs both in urban and camp settings to enhance their capacity on project implementation and delivery. Additionally, Cohere has created a platform (Re-Frame) which displays the work of RLOs and advertises funding and project opportunities. Other aid organisations (eg Refuge Point) provide training and grants to some RLOs through their self-reliance programmes.

Despite the above efforts, meaningful engagement remains sparse. While some aid organisations play an active role in transferring funding opportunities for RLOs (eg Cohere, DAFI), the funding models in the humanitarian sector, and larger INGOs and UNHCR, are slow to change. RLOs are often involved in projects that are already set-up by INGOs as a way to promote localisation, but there is no associated transfer of power or resources that the RLOs could use as core funding for sustainability. Many organisations plan to continue engaging with RLOs in future programmes, but they do not have strategies to engage women-led RLOs or groups led by marginalised groups.

Dynamics between RLOs

RLOs in Kenya tend to coordinate if they have the same formal level or when the leaders are in the same personal and professional networks. The leaders of various large-scale RLOs may have been granted similar scholarships, worked or volunteered together, or are part of the same steering committees and conferences. This pre-existing kinship plays a key role in supporting coordination. In Nairobi, large-scale RLOs work collaboratively on some projects such as the annual African Refugee Peace Marathon Day. In Kakuma and Kalobeyei,

RLOs form WhatsApp groups to exchange information and opportunities.

Two national and formal RLO networks have been set up in Kenya to coordinate the activity of RLOs, share opportunities, help with registration, advocate on behalf of RLOs, and gain legitimacy in the refugee response. RELON-Kenya was established in 2021, building on RELON-Uganda. Kadana was formed in 2019 with support from the Lutheran World Federation. There is also a network in Kakuma – the Kakuma Refugee-Led Initiatives Network (KRIN) – set up in 2020 that aims to coordinate RLOs in Kakuma and Kalobeyei, but they are not currently active.

These emerging networks face challenges related to outreach and trust-building with RLOs. RELON networks face these challenges given their limited resources, especially with RLOs that are not based in urban centres, where networks have their offices. RLOs pursue membership in those networks to get access to opportunities but are likely to cease engagement if they do not see benefits or if they feel that advocacy does not reflect their specific needs, which may alienate camp-based RLOs or RLOs led by marginalised groups. In an environment of scarcity, RELON networks are sometimes perceived as gatekeepers to resources. This puts networks in a challenging position as they have limited resources to operate, which impedes their ability to redistribute. RLO leaders in Kakuma and Kalobeyei expressed their limited knowledge of the networks. Elite, large-scale RLOs in Nairobi and some large-scale RLOs in Kakuma mentioned they belonged to RELON but not all were actively involved.

Women-led groups and LGBTQ+-led RLOs have limited knowledge of RLO networks. There is no coordination between women-led initiatives. However, the LGBTQ+-led RLOs tend to coordinate more and sometimes work together on projects and organise joint events. Additionally, they collaborate more with the host community LGBTQ+ CBOs to garner assistance and improve working relationships.

Image 2: Training session led by the Global Village Initiative, Kalobeyi, Kenya. © Raphael Bradenbrink

Impact of RLOs on communities

Knowledge of RLOs among community members

Refugee communities in Kenya tend to have more knowledge about RLOs that operate within their own village, neighbourhood, or zone. Some RLOs are more well-known than others due to the influence they have in the community. The degree of influence is linked to the leader of the RLO, the sector in which they intervene, their affiliation to humanitarian organisations, and their ability to offer continuous services.

	Setting	High	Mixed	Low
Nairobi		-	✓	-
Kakuma		✓	-	-
Kalobeyei		✓	-	-

Nairobi: RLOs are often started in areas where refugee communities live in clusters, such as the Kabiria/Kawangware area and the Kamukunji/Eastleigh area. Refugee communities in these areas can often talk about the RLOs that operate within their communities and describe the services they offer. However, in areas where refugees are dispersed, community members have limited knowledge of RLOs. Generally, refugee communities that have not directly benefited from services offered by RLOs are significantly less familiar with the work of RLOs. In Nairobi, Congolese, Burundian, and Somali participants knew more about RLOs than Sudanese and South Sudanese participants. This is likely because fewer RLOs have been created by Sudanese and South Sudanese community members or in the areas where these communities reside.

Kakuma and Kalobeyei: Refugee community members in both areas can describe the work of large-scale RLOs that operate in their zone or village, and the services they offer. Some large-scale RLOs are known across both Kakuma and Kalobeyei (eg RAI and SIR). Refugee communities are also familiar with RLOs that target them directly. For example, young people in Kakuma and Kalobeyei tend to be familiar with RLOs that provide direct support to youth, such as free internet access and education training. Likewise, women tend to be familiar with women-led groups. Small-scale RLOs are only known within their areas of operation. For example, the Initiative for Nurturing Vulnerable & Empowerment for Resilience (INVER) is only known by refugees who reside in Kakuma 3. Women-led groups and smaller RLOs that have no offices are not generally known within the wider community;but by the members of the community they directly serve. In areas where there are fewer RLO activities, such as Kakuma 4, community members tend to have limited knowledge of RLOs.

Knowledge of RLOs among aid organisations, UNHCR and government institutions

Aid organisations and UNHCR are generally familiar with medium and large-scale RLOs that are based in Nairobi. They work with some of these RLOs to target and mobilise various refugee communities. Some RLOs refer beneficiaries to aid organisations for further assistance. In general, aid organisations are not familiar with women-led organisations and struggle to engage them. One organisation mentioned that they had not received a

single grant application from a woman-led RLO in Kenya.

In Nairobi, government representatives and the police tend to know about RLOs that have offices in their areas of jurisdiction. For instance, the chief of police in Ruiru mentioned he knows RLOs that operate there. Some RLOs and groups consult the chief officers for assistance and guidance with registration.

Aid organisations and UNHCR in Kakuma and Kalobeyei are generally familiar with RLOs in their areas and in certain communities, particularly the RLOs they have worked with. Some have involved RLOs in their activities and others have supported RLOs with small grants and equipment (eg Peace Winds Japan aided the Wasafi Group with cleaning equipment and materials). When interviewing UNHCR, staff were not able to identify RLOs beyond the sub-contractors that were executing programmes on behalf of implementing partners.

Government representatives such as DRS are aware of the existence of RLOs since they are in charge of RLO registration in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. Some RLOs involve DRS in their activities. One DRS officer mentioned they provided support to some RLOs in Kakuma for peace-building training and conflict resolution issues.

Experiences of RLO beneficiaries

Refugee respondents described their experiences differently. Members, staff, and beneficiaries of RLOs described the impact of RLOs as positive because they are closer to the community and can understand their needs better. Beneficiaries specifically spoke about how the services of RLOs had impacted their well-being and self-reliance. Non-beneficiaries talked about services that other community members such as their relatives or friends received. Women and older people often said they felt excluded from services as most RLO services focus on young people. Women said they know from their experience that they can't benefit because they are not targeted but that their children benefit from services that target young people. All groups noted that the most significant impact of RLOs was felt during COVID-19 pandemic, as RLOs provided key services such as distribution of food, masks, and sanitisers; some even provided safe houses for those who were not able to pay rents in urban areas.

Across different RLOs, interviewed beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries compared the services of RLOs and the humanitarian sector as follows:

- Beneficiaries are treated in a more dignified manner and with more respect by RLOs. *'When you access RLO services, they welcome you and listen attentively to your issues, without being judgemental or asking a lot of questions. They do not chase you away like UNHCR and other national or international organisations'* (beneficiary, Nairobi).
- RLO services are more adapted to their needs and detail-oriented because they know the community better. *'RLOs understand your situation and difficulties and make it easy to get services. Other organisations will keep you coming and going back without any understanding or assistance'* (beneficiary, Kalobeyei). However some non-beneficiaries felt their services might be of lower quality because RLOs depend on volunteers compared to other organisations.

- RLOs are fairer when delivering services within their own groups than aid organisations. *'RLOs don't discriminate against someone because he is a South Sudanese or Somali because they are refugees like us. They understand us as refugees'* (beneficiary, Kalobeyei).
- RLOs are more accessible and less bureaucratic; there is less waiting time and paperwork to receive their services. Interactions are more direct because of shared experiences of difficulty in accessing aid. *'For me, it is difficult to get help from UNHCR or other organisations as it is a long process. First of all, a refugee has to book an appointment online. After doing the online booking appointment process, a refugee has to wait for the confirmation message. This message takes days to come and sometimes it does not come. A refugee cannot access UNHCR or other aid organisation premises without that appointment. It is very different from Tawakal because a refugee does not need an appointment'* (beneficiary, Nairobi).
- RLOs are more accountable to communities because beneficiaries feel able to give them direct feedback on activities. *'It is very difficult for me here to leave this block 6 and start looking for feedback from aid organisations in town, but Mama Sakina is with us here in the community. When I have a problem and I need answers, I run to her and she will listen to me as well as respond immediately'* (beneficiary, Kakuma).
- Communication with RLOs is easier due to cultural understanding and shared language. *'We speak the same language, we have the same culture and historical backgrounds, so I am able to communicate with them easily'* (beneficiary, Nairobi).
- RLOs are considered as more open to serving refugees who are not registered or to provide support that could be considered illegal by aid organisations. *'You see here in [RLO] if I come and I have documentation that I am registered in Kakuma, I get assistance, but when I go to other organisations, they tell me to go and get help from Kakuma'* (beneficiary, Nairobi)
- RLOs create opportunities for volunteers or staff that are better paid than aid organisations, as they do not follow incentive work requirements. *'When you consider the payment with these organisations led by refugees and other aid organisations, refugee-led organisations pay at least higher'* (beneficiary, Kakuma).

The majority of non-beneficiaries said they knew of someone who has received services from an RLO and had a good experience. However, community members who had not received services were less positive about their experiences with RLOs. Some did not want to access RLO services as they expected RLOs would only provide services to members of their national or ethnic group; or because they had been rejected from service provision before.

As a result, those who had not been selected for service delivery spoke more negatively about RLOs and the fairness of their service provision.

> *'You see for instance there were scholarships to study but only few people were successful,. There was also a time they distributed computers and we did not receive them'.*
> - Non-beneficiary, Kakuma

Description of impacts

Beneficiaries

Beneficiaries gave specific examples of how services had impacted their well-being and self-reliance. This applied to both self-help groups led by women and LGBTQ+ RLOs.

- Beneficiaries of RLOs talked about how they gained entrepreneurship skills, start-up capital, job matching services, and employment assistance to support their self-reliance: *'I have benefited a lot from RAI. I was able to attend tailoring training and gained skills, and at the end of the training, I was given a machine which is helping me to make money through tailoring'* (beneficiary, Kakuma).

- Medium-sized and elite, large-scale RLOs support refugees to access services that are not available elsewhere; they fill gaps left by humanitarian organisations and authorities. RLOs also help beneficiaries with referrals to aid organisations for further assistance. *'RLOs here in Kakuma offer English language trainings for adults and mothers that is not provided by other organisations. English learning for us is important because it allows everybody in the community to be able to communicate with the surrounding [community] as Kakuma is a multinational place where people are of different backgrounds and countries who speak different languages'* (beneficiary, Kakuma).

- RLOs have been at the forefront of aid provision to refugee communities during the COVID-19 outbreak due to their ability to access the communities compared to aid organisations.[7] They distributed soap, masks, water, and information about the virus. *'During the COVID-19's lockdown, Kintsugi people distributed food like rice, maize flour, and hygiene items, including soaps, sanitisers and masks to vulnerable refugees here in Nairobi'* (refugee community member, Nairobi).

Non-beneficiaries

Community members who had not benefited from RLO services described the impact of RLOs as neutral; a small minority said that RLO might have a negative impact.

Potential beneficiaries who could not access RLO services due to a shortage of resources described the impact of RLOs as neutral since they did not solve any of their problems. This was especially expressed by women who did not benefit directly from RLOs that target youth. Others claimed that the resources available to RLOs were not used for their original purpose, thus having no impact in the community.

> *'First of all, these RLOs are here to help refugees but the opportunities are still very few. So people in the community have no chance to benefit'*
> Non-beneficiary, Kalobeyei
>
> *'There is selfishness. People steal the funds that are allocated to the beneficiaries. Once the funds come, one person takes everything and disappears. And it brings no change to the community'*
> - Refugee community member, Kakuma

[7] During the COVID-19 pandemic, RLOs have frequently found themselves as default providers of assistance and mutual aid, but usually without additional or effective support from international organisations and NGOs.
See Alexander Betts, Evan Easton-Calabria, and Kate Pincock. 'Localising public health: refugee-led organisations as first and last responders in COVID-19', *World Development* 139 (2021): 105311.

Variations in response and impact

Networks

Networks are key in determining the success of RLOs because they allow leaders to access funds and to create collaborations between RLOs, humanitarian organisations, and the UNHCR. Personal relations, gender, nationality, and education influence RLO leaders' ability to access networks, which in turn increases their ability to raise funds, set up partnerships, and provide regular services to a greater range of beneficiaries. In Kenya, English-speaking educated Congolese men appear more likely to have opportunities to build those linkages.

RLO leaders that are either current or former incentive workers of humanitarian organisations or UNHCR have advantages in setting up partnerships and raising their profiles. This is because their involvement allows leaders to attend and/or participate in meetings and conferences, where they can showcase their work, enhance knowledge, and expand their networks and opportunities. Additionally, some RLO leaders that are actively working with these aid organisations can access top management of NGOs, present their projects, and lobby for assistance.

Some RLO leaders are resettled refugees; others maintain connections with resettled diaspora members. This allows them to access diaspora networks that can mobilise funds to support RLO activities. In some cases, RLOs have connections with religious organisations – some of which are led by diaspora members – such as churches that support their activities.

Some RLO leaders in Kenya have good connections with local authorities, such as the chief in the cases of urban-based RLOs, and the Department of Refugee Services (DRS) in the case of camp-based RLOs. These close connections help them obtain information on access to permits, navigate registration processes, and receive other forms of support such as equipment. Camp-based RLOs can also obtain information on how to apply for land allocation to establish their offices.

Some RLOs in Kenya also establish networks with host community members. This is often via partnership with local CBOs. In Nairobi, for example, some LGBTQ+ RLOs partner with local CBOs when implementing activities, which further expands their networks. Some RLO leaders are invited to local CBO meetings in urban and camp settings, which creates space for potential collaboration. Large-scale RLOs have successfully managed to include professional nationals to help with professionalisation of activities, registration, and access to a broad range of networks.

Regulatory framework

The Kenyan Societies Act of 1968, which regulates community organisations, does not mention refugees' right to create associations. RLOs are nevertheless able to register as CBOs and NGOs. There is an informal rule that RLOs are able to register only if they have 'a large number of Kenyan nationals within the board of directors and general membership and to have activities pertaining to the local community.'[8] However, some RLOs in Nairobi successfully register with no host community members on their boards.

[8] Mohamed Duale. 'To be a refugee, it's like to be without your arms, legs: a narrative inquiry into refugee participation in Kakuma Refugee Camp and Nairobi, Kenya', *Local Engagement Refugee Research Network Paper* 7 (May 2020).

Some RLOs are able register with ease due to their close relations with various government officers. In urban areas, some RLOs include nationals on their board of directors to ease their registration process as CBOs; women-led initiatives may register as groups via the local chief officers. In Kakuma and Kalobeyei, RLOs must first be vetted through an NGO (typically NRC [Norwegian Refugee Council] or Swiss Contact) before getting support from the DRS office and then the county government. In Kalobeyei, most RLOs are unable to register because the DRS office is in Kakuma.

Government officials support the registration of RLOs. DRS reported that they were trying to consolidate the registration process to make it more systematic through the implementation of the Refugee Act of 2021; they also plan to allow refugees to register in Kakuma instead of making them go to Lodwar.

RLOs that are not registered are able to operate without safety challenges or harassment from local and refugee authorities. However, lack of registration impedes their ability to increase their impact.

> *'For a donor to trust you, you need their trust, and that trust is built through the certification that you have. This has been a challenge for us to execute various projects that we need to run, and registration has been a constraint to us. I remember one project that we were working on regarding social cohesion. We wrote a proposal, and we won it but when it came for them to give us the grant, we were asked to bring our certificate and bank account. We never had that and that's how we lost out. You cannot have a bank account when you don't have a certificate.'*
> – RLO leader, Kakuma

In camp locations, some RLOs (both registered and unregistered) are allocated land from DRS for their offices and activities, which is not the case in Nairobi. Their ability to get premises is dependent on their relations with authorities, their visibility, and perceived legitimacy.

Image 3 Activities of the Kalobeyi Initiative for a Better Life, Kalobeyi, Kenya.
© Raphael Bradenbrink

Conclusion

The key challenges identified by RLO leaders and members include:

- **Access to funds:** There was a consensus that access to funds remains a major challenge for RLOs. Limited access to diversified sustainable sources of funding – whether it comes from the aid sector, diaspora, income-generating activities, or individual sponsors – prevents RLOs from operating, scaling up their activities, and providing quality services. *'We do not have access to a lot of grants or funding. We have very good strategies or good plans or areas of intervention that we want to work in, but without funds, we are not able to achieve much'* (RLO leader, Kalobeyi).

- **Lack of meaningful partnerships:** RLO leaders expressed challenges in forming meaningful partnerships. They reported light-touch, project-based partnerships with aid organisations whereby they would get invited to ceremonial days, support access to communities, and receive in-kind support for their projects. *'We are not engaged meaningfully regarding partnership, we only act as implementers and our reports are used by these aid organisations'* (RLO leader, Kakuma).

- **Lack of capacity:** Capacity development was identified as a significant need by RLOs to meet the requirements of a credible actor in the humanitarian set-up. Identified gaps include proposal development, financial management, and operations. Female-led RLOs reported more capacity gaps compared to male-led RLOs.

- **Lack of proper documentation and legal registration:** In Kenya there are no unified, straightforward ways to register. Most unregistered RLOs intend to register in order to unlock access to funding and opportunities that come with legal status. *'I'm looking at registration and it is one of the biggest challenges because there's a criterion on the registration. And for us to apply for certain grants we need proof of registration, especially for small-scale RLOs. If you don't have it, then you'll be just doing things in the community without the recognition of the local government, not even UNHCR'* (RLO leader, Kalobeyi).

Generally, RLOs intend to address the above-mentioned challenges through developing further networks. Elite RLOs plan to expand their networks even further to ensure sustainability of partnerships. Elite organisations are keen to extend their services to more locations within Kenya and East Africa at large. For example, SIR's leader spoke about expanding operations beyond Kenya to Uganda and the DRC. Smaller RLOs seek to increase their visibility in order to access networks and build their credibility to attract potential donors and partnerships.

Recommendations

To donors

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

To governments and authorities

- **Simplify and communicate on the registration process.** RLOs are able to register as CBOs and NGOs, but several barriers remain in terms of information and access. Governments should make access to registration systematic and straightforward and communicate on the steps needed to register.
- **In settlement settings, allocate land fairly to RLOs to set up their activities.** In Kakuma and Kalobeyei, camp authorities have granted access to land for some RLOs to set up their offices or to implement their activities. Authorities should continue providing land to RLOs as it is critical to their sustainability. Authorities should also develop clear criteria for what activities and under which conditions RLOs can access land.
- **Promote the work of both smaller and larger RLOs in consultations.** There is a risk that the same elite groups will be engaged while others, such as minorities or women, are excluded from nascentrefugee participation efforts. Authorities should systematically consult with a range of RLOs that reflect the RLO landscape in their areas of jurisdiction.

To UNHCR

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

To aid organisations

- **Involve RLOs in decision-making through equal-partner consortia.** RLOs are often involved as implementers only, which does not give them the power to make decisions or to gain valuable experience in decision-making. Aid organisations should set up equal-partnership consortia that engage RLOs meaningfully from the project development phase onwards as co-owners of the project.
- **Embed capacity development with funded projects.** Capacity development is a key need for many RLO leaders in terms of project development, implementation and proposal writing. However, current models of capacity development – which mostly consist of short-term training sessions – are unlikely to yield long-term results or gains for RLOs. Capacity-building activities that are embedded with project delivery are more likely to yield long-term results. Aid organisations should include capacity development as a core activity in the design of consortia.
- **Support the operationalisation of a remote one-stop service centre for RLOs.** RLOs have limited access to support systems unless they have a personal relationship with professional aid workers. This deepens inequalities between RLOs and penalises women-led groups which remain at the self-help stage. Aid organisations should gather resources to set up a team of mentors that all RLOs, whether registered or not, can access in-person or remotely. These mentors can help them articulate and develop their projects and ensure their activities align with requirements.
- **Be long-term allies.** RLOs have significant value-added qualities to assist in the refugee response, but are hindered by structural weaknesses due to the displacement status of their leaders. Aid organisations should manage their expectations of what RLOs can achieve and engage in long-term support and partnerships. They should also promote the ideas of refugees, give credit and recognition and make space for RLOs to participate in decision-making at the policy and project levels.
- **Support leadership activities in locations with fewer RLOs.** There are fewer RLOs active in more marginalised areas (eg Nakuru, Mombasa). Aid organisations should support emerging leaders by facilitating community conversations and supporting the identification of priorities and existing resources.

To RLOs

- **Set up RLO-to-RLO partnerships on projects.** Larger-scale RLOs can play a critical role in raising the profile and increasing the capacity of marginalised RLOs. RLOs with better access to networks should consider including smaller RLOs in the delivery of services and set up equal partnerships with them in order to unlock access to partners and resources.
- **Ensure that networks are inclusive.** RELON Kenya and other networks were created with the objective of joint advocacy for RLOs in the country. The networks should take transparent steps to include and promote RLOs in camps, RLOs in marginalised locations, women-led initiatives, minority nationalities, and special interest groups.

- **Take steps to ensure consistency in community accountability.** While RLOs tend to be seen as more accountable to refugees themselves, there are concerns that they might not stay accountable to the community as they access more resources. RLOs should set up systems for record-keeping and record-sharing at the community level (eg use of social media, public consultations, and events).
- **Extend information about services to refugees living beyond concentrated areas.** Refugees living in less refugee-populated areas have limited information about RLOs and the services they offer. RLOs should use avenues like social media and community leaders to inform refugees of available support.

Image 4: Office of the Kalobeyi Initiative for a Better Life, Kalobeyi, Kenya.
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Annex 1: Profiles of selected RLOs in Kenya

In Nairobi

1. **Dwato Women Group** is a women-led self-help group that operates in Ruiru. It consists of women from the Anyuak community in Ethiopia. It started in 2014 and was registered in 2018. The women in this group mainly undertake income-generating activities such as crocheting, and selling other handmade products. They are sometimes assisted by loans from RefuSHE organisation. The loans and monthly contribution by members are the main source of income.

2. **Foundation For Lesbian Bisexual Queer refugees (FLBQR)** is an LGBTQ+-led RLO based in Nairobi. Their main source of funding is through external donors and partnership with local and international aid organisations. Their main work is elevating and advocating for the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ refugees living in Kenya. They also offer vocational and business skills training. The FLBQR office acts as a referral and communication point for beneficiaries. The office also acts as a safe house for the most vulnerable individuals in the community.

3. **Kintsugi** is a large-scale RLO registered as a CBO in Nairobi. It was founded in 2016 by Congolese nationals and it is based in Kasarani. It has Burundian and Kenyan professionals among its board. It serves communities that live in the Kasarani, Kayole, Kawangware, and Ngong areas of Nairobi. Kintsugi funding sources include contributions by members and friends from the diaspora, aid organisations in-kind support, and partnership with aid organisations. Their services include referrals and access to information, business skills training, ICT training, and language training. They also train beneficiaries on skills such as barbering and sandal-making. Kintsugi's office space was used as safe housing during COVID-19, hosting families that had no homes. Kintsugi initiated the African Marathon Peace Day in Nairobi and took the lead in implementing this sporting activity in collaboration with other RLOs. Kintsugi is a member of RELON-Kenya.

4. **L'Afrikana** is a large-scale RLO based in Nairobi. It was founded in 2013 and registered as a CBO in 2017. It is located in the Kabiria/Kawangware area of Nairobi. It was created by a Congolese refugee but has current staff from other nationalities, including from South Sudan and Burundi. They have also hired professionals from the host community. Their sources of funding include income-generating activities, partnerships with aid organisations, and member contributions. Their main activities are centred around education and livelihood, and they provide vocational training such as tailoring and artwork courses. They also carry out income-generating activities by selling handmade products from tailoring and artwork. The beneficiaries of L'Afrikana are both refugees and host community members from the same area. L'Afrikana is a member of RELON-Kenya.

5. **Tawakal Youth** is a subsidiary branch of Tawakal, which was founded by two Somali doctors in 2010. Tawakal Youth was registered as a CBO in 2015 and is youth-led; it is currently led by a young woman. It serves refugees and unprivileged host community members living in the Kamukunji/Eastleigh area of Nairobi. These areas have refugees from Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. Tawakal's main source of funding

is via income generating activities (eg youth cultural dances), contributions from the Eastleigh business community, partnerships with aid organisations, and in-kind contributions from UNHCR and other aid organisations. The main activities of Tawakal Youth are psycho-social support and women and youth empowerment through various trainings. It also teaches Somali cultural dances to the youth, who can be contracted to perform in various concerts, and acts as a referral point for refugees in the area. During Ramadan each year, Tawakal Youth engages in food distribution.

In Kakuma Refugee Camp

1. **Initiative for Nurturing Vulnerable & Empowerment for Resilience (INVER)** is a small-scale RLO located in Kakuma 3. It was founded in 2018 by a group of young refugees from different nationalities. The RLO is not registered but has gone through vetting by the NRC. INVER seeks to promote the resilience and psycho-social well-being of refugees through programmes focusing on enterprise development, adult literacy, sexual and reproductive health, sports, and social cohesion. The main sources of funding include online fundraising via the 'Go fund me' platform, monthly contribution by members, and partnerships with aid organisations.

2. **Learning Permaculture for Societal Development (LPSD)** is the only RLO led by women in Kakuma. It is located in Kakuma 1 and was founded in 2018 by a Congolese woman. It has not officially registered as a CBO. The main source of funding is through income generating agricultural activities. The service provided by LPSD is permaculture farming education to women in Kakuma and Kalobeyei. However, they have expanded to include music/studio development for young people. It has members from different communities and host community professionals.

3. **Refugees & Hosts Resilience Initiative (REHORI)** was founded in 2012 in Kakuma 1 with the aim of empowering refugees as well as host communities through integrated development activities. REHORI is considered a medium-scale RLO and is not officially registered. Their main source of funding is member contributions, but they have also received grants from aid organisations and engage in income generating activities. REHOR provides services on permaculture education, tutoring, drama and filming for young people, peace and conflict resolution education, and tailoring training.

4. **Resilience Action International (RAI)** is the only RLO in Kenya registered as an NGO. It is located in Kakuma 2. RAI was founded in 2014 by a refugee from the DRC who is now resettled to a third country; it was registered as an NGO in 2016. RAI employs staff from different nationalities and host community professionals. RAI's main sources of funding are private foundations, as well as grants and partnerships from aid organisations. RAI also receives private donations from local and diaspora individual sponsors. It runs programmes on education for livelihood such as English language courses, vocational training, and entrepreneurship development. It also runs a programme on sexual and reproductive health that is peer-led as well as reproductive health literacy training for adolescents. RAI undertakes income-generating activities such as provision of electricity in the camp.

5. **Solidarity Initiative for Refugees (SIR)** is a large-scale youth-led organisation established in 2016. It is not officially registered. SIR is located in Kakuma 3 and serves refugees from all Kakuma locations. The main source of funding is through partnerships with aid organisations, and grants from UNHCR, and other aid organisations. SIR's goal is to use technology to equip refugees with skills and tools to create a better future for themselves. The organisation empowers youth in Kakuma through education access and livelihood training using digital learning methods. SIR has staff from different nationalities and currently has a woman as their programme manager.

In Kalobeyei Refugee Settlement

1. **African Youth Talent Innovation (AYTI)** was founded in 2019 by young refugees who sought to fill service-provision gaps in the community. It is based in village 3. The main source of funding for ATYI is member contributions. Its services include language courses (English, French and Arabic), life-skills training for youth, public health training, and tailoring training. AYTI hopes to register soon.
2. **Global Innovation Valley (GIV)** was founded in 2019 with the purpose of empowering young refugees and marginalised youth from the host communities through social entrepreneurship. GIV has not obtained official registration as CBO. GIV's main source of funding is through partnerships with aid organisations, and in-kind support from aid organisations. GIV conducts activities related to personal and professional development as well as digital skills. At the peak of COVID-19, GIV came up with the 'Smarter than Covid' project that raised awareness of the virus in Kalobeyei.
3. **Kalobeyei Initiative for Better Life (KIBL)** was founded in 2018 by a group of young refugees in Kalobeyei. KIBL was registered as a CBO in 2020 and has a rotational leadership structure – a new leader is elected by members every two years. It has staff from different nationalities. Their main source of funding is via external donors, and partnerships with local aid organisations. KIBL conducts activities related to vocational and professional training supported by the Amala Foundation. It also provides training on livelihood promotion such as mobile app development and other digital training.
4. **Peace Forever** is a South Sudanese women-led group located in village 1. It was founded in 2021 and is not yet registered. Its main objective is training women in livelihood activities such as soap production and other handmade products. It also conducts life-skills training for young children in their community. Peace Forever sometimes receives small-scale donations from a church.
5. **Wasafi Group** was established by a group of young refugees in 2018. It is located in village 3 and is still under the process of registration. Wasafi's main source of funding is through member contributions; they also receive in-kind support from aid organisations. Its focus is on cleaning and hygiene and sanitation awareness in the villages. It relies on volunteers to conduct its activities.

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