Refugee-Led Organization (RLO) Involvement in Local Decision Making: Challenges and Opportunities

RLO-Led Self-Reliance Learning Exchange Series

May 2024 | Kampala, Uganda

REFUGEE SELF-RELIANCE INITIATIVE

REFUGE POINT

REFUGEE - LED ORGANIZATION NETWORK OF UGANDA RELON UGANDA

ROOM SEAT

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. There are a growing number of approaches for refugee engagement emerging in urban spaces, including in Kampala through the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)'s collaboration with IRC's Re:BUiLD program, which can serve as blueprints for local policy engagement in other parts of Uganda and other contexts.

2. The private sector plays a critical role in supporting refugees in Uganda, including through: new approaches supported by Asili Agriculture in Kiryandongo settlement and other locations; a Refugee Investment Facility supported by the Danish Refugee Council; Amahoro Coalition's work to leverage private sector business models to create meaningful impact for refugee populations; and innovative financing solutions for refugee entrepreneurs supported by Relevant Ventures, GmbH.

3. There is still a nascent level of understanding amongst RLOs of the Government of Uganda's policy formulation processes, refugee participation opportunities, and existing registration and administrative policies. To address the challenges that they face in being recognized as national organizations and therefore equally included under the law, RLOs need a formal process for information sharing and dissemination of local policies, as well as clarification on registration requirements — including those under the NGO Act of 2016 and the Refugee Act of 2006.

4. There is untapped potential for greater collaboration and coordination between RELON Uganda members and existing local networks, including at the settlement level.

5. While there is great interest in learning from and exchanging with other RLOs in the region — including through sharing information from similar convenings — opportunities to do so are limited. There is a need for humanitarian and development partners, including the private sector and governments, to create an inclusive environment for refugees so they can meaningfully take part in decision-making spaces.

Introduction

The Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI), RefugePoint, Refugee Led Organisation Network of Uganda (RELON Uganda), and Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT) jointly convened a two-day learning event in Kampala, Uganda on May 7-8, 2024, gathering over 50 refugee leaders and representatives of NGOs, UN agencies, the Government of Uganda (GoU), the private sector, academic institutions, and donors.

The convening facilitated knowledge exchange around the role of refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and RLO networks in local decision-making and policy engagement, with a focus on how local policies can contribute to self-reliance outcomes. The agenda and objectives for the meeting were developed through a co-design process with RLOs based across Uganda.

Convening Background

As a global convener on self-reliance topics, the RSRI and various partners are facilitating an ongoing series of country-level RLO learning exchanges to promote the expanded engagement of RLOs in dialogues around self-reliance. Exchanges aim to:

- Ground-truth self-reliance approaches with the perspectives and experiences of refugee-led organizations; and

- Produce recommendations that will result in higher-quality research, programming, and policy engagement through the exchange of perspectives and learning from various contexts.

Despite the acknowledged value of their contextual insights and roles as responders and service providers within their communities, the input of RLOs is often missing from discussions related to policy decision-making, resource allocation and prioritization, and programming. Moreover, when RLO inputs are solicited, it is often done in a cursory, top-down way that does not allow for refugee leaders to prioritize issues that matter to them and fully understand windows for influence. Often, consultations with RLOs also lack a feedback and accountability loop.

To fill this gap, the learning exchange series was created to build a shared understanding of various topics related to self-reliance and to equip participants with the knowledge, tools, and access needed to take their shared learning forward to influence national, regional, and global discussions on refugee self-reliance.

The exchanges are co-designed and co-facilitated with RLO participants. Rather than being conferences or workshops where there are 'experts' lecturing 'learners,' the exchanges aim to create a reciprocal, active, adaptive, and participatory space for the exchange of information around a commonly defined learning agenda on self-reliance, with specific topics varying from location to location depending on the interests of participating organizations.

This convening, the second in the series, was co-hosted by the RSRI, RefugePoint, RELON Uganda, and R-SEAT. The agenda was collaboratively designed with Uganda-based RLO leaders, and the workshop was co-designed over a four-month period with input provided through four online planning meetings. In addition to the planning meetings, a survey was also sent out to a broader group of RELON Uganda members to solicit input into topics and approaches.

Key themes considered by the group during the co-design process included:

- The explicit and implicit goals of participating organizations;

- Tradeoffs between process/relationship-building goals and outcome goals;

- Approaches to broadening participation and ownership, and identification of multiple 'entry points' for engagement and leadership for different stakeholders in the convening;

- Opportunities for creativity; and

- Potential derailers and mitigation strategies.

In addition to the planning meetings, a survey was also sent out to a broader group of RELON Uganda members to solicit input into topics and approaches.

A number of priorities emerged during these discussions, including:

- Private sector approaches and innovative financing;

- Climate and self-reliance;

- Localization and local engagement, including on laws and policies;

- Defining milestones and indicators for self-reliance in the Uganda context;

- Gender mainstreaming the role of women's empowerment in self-reliance;

- Digital inclusion;

- Social cohesion;

- Land rights, land acquisition, and food security considerations; and

- Mental health and self-reliance.

Following several rounds of discussion, the group decided to focus on local engagement: policy engagement with government officials and private sector engagement at the local level.

In addition to refining a technical focus area for the convening, the RLO leaders also jointly outlined design priorities for the convening, including:

- The desire to organize conversation opportunities between RLOs and other stakeholders – including knowledge exchange and learning – but to limit presentations that did not have opportunities for interactive discussion and had more of an academic feel.

- The importance of bringing space for informal networking into the convening.

- A focus on thinking through a defined process for continuing the work and carrying outcomes forward.

- Prioritization of diverse participants and ensuring that the convening felt open to all.

- The importance of opportunities for visibility of RLO programming and the involvement of donors in the convening.

Convening Overview

Objectives

The objectives of the convening were to:

- Articulate a common set of policy and advocacy priorities for RLOs and RLO networks in Uganda related to local decision-making and local policy engagement;
- Map current and potential avenues for locally-led RLO engagement with government officials and private sector actors;
- Identify the ways in which local policies can contribute to self-reliance outcomes for refugee populations in Uganda; and
- Build connections between refugee leaders and the broader ecosystem of local decision-makers.

Participants

The event brought together over 50 participants, including RLO leaders from across Uganda and representatives from other stakeholders. These included NGOs, UN agencies, philanthropic institutions and donor agencies, research institutions, embassies, the private sector, and the Government of Uganda (GoU).

Convening Roadmap

The two-day event centered on the perspectives of refugee leaders and facilitated connections and dialogue with key partners and stakeholders from the supporting ecosystem.

DAY 1

The first day of the convening brought together approximately 20 leaders of RLOs based across Uganda and focused on an exchange of experiences with other RLOs in the region, collaborative mapping of the local policy ecosystem in Uganda, prioritization of policy engagement opportunities for RLOs at the local level, and development of recommendations.

Participants reflected on the contextual differences and outcomes from the first RLO Learning Exchange, which took place in Nairobi in 2023, during which participants focused on defining economic inclusion and social protection priorities for the Kenyan context and jointly developed recommendations to inform 2023 Global Refugee Forum pledge initiatives. Leaders then mapped the current state of local policy engagement by RLOs to cultivate a common understanding of potential opportunities. Building from this, participants discussed priorities and co-developed a set of recommendations related to local engagement of RLOs.

What is self-reliance?

self-re·li·ance / noun
The social and economic ability of an individual, a household, or a community to meet its needs in a sustainable manner

Participants were asked to consider this definition of self-reliance and think of words they associate with the term.

DAY 2

The second day of the convening facilitated an exchange between refugee leaders and key agencies supporting their work in Uganda.

To start the day, refugee leaders presented the recommendations they developed on the first day for feedback from new participants representing a variety of stakeholders.

Feedback from the agencies to RLO leaders highlighted the need to collectively think through processes for RLO input into evaluation/feedback of existing policies impacting refugee populations and any relevant supporting structures. Participants also shared ideas for more broadly connecting RLOs to existing platforms for coordination and engagement, including the REF and upcoming Government of Uganda-led consultations on localization policies.

To support this work, RLO participants highlighted the need for a commonly developed work plan alongside opportunities to build RLO knowledge on various policy tracks and a platform for information sharing – including best practices, challenges, etc. – between districts and centrally. It was suggested that RELON Uganda could deepen engagement in this space as a central coordination body. Participants commented that private sector awareness of refugee issues continues to be ad hoc and limited, presenting an additional opportunity to identify common points of interest and coordination.

To close out the day, two focus sessions were held highlighting case studies from the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)'s work with the IRC and a variety of private sector stakeholders working with RLOs and refugees in Uganda. Following the focus sessions, participants re-convened to reflect on what they had learned and discuss commitments for action and next steps.

Recommendations & Learning From Focus Sessions

The convening was designed to catalyze conversation, promote the sharing of perspectives and experiences, and build connections between participants. Over the two days, discussions generated actionable insights, learning, and recommendations.

Recommendations

1. By May 2025, develop a process for the deliberate involvement and participation of RLOs in policy formulation and review processes within Local Government Departments, e.g. District NGO Monitoring Committees, District Community Development Offices, etc.

   As part of this process, create a mechanism to provide information to RLOs and RLO networks at the district level about the processes for local policy development, what is being considered during upcoming policy formulation processes, and timelines for review. This update process should align with the policy formulation calendar that is already in place for the Local Government Departments.

2. Within the coming year, RELON leadership will work with RELON members to develop a proposal for a process through which it will:

   - Decentralize some of its powers and link up/collaborate more with locally established networks in the settlements; and

   - Create an RLO-to-RLO engagement forum with the goal of joint advocacy and regular sharing of approaches and updates to the Uganda-based RLO community on policy development processes.

3. During the coming year, develop a process through which UNHCR and OPM will work with RLOs to convene regional awareness sessions on existing policies and the implementation of policies that are included in the 2006 Refugee Act and NGO Act of 2016, empowering RLOs to engage in policy reform conversations in an informed manner.

FOCUS SESSION #1

Municipal Level Engagement of RLOs

Daniel Kaseregenyi
Deputy Director, Gender, Welfare & Community Services (DDGCS), Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)

Tina Nasasira Kalitani
Advocacy Manager, IRC Re:BUILD

Moses Odokonyero
Senior Program Manager, IRC Re:BUILD

Jerry Lukendo Mbokani
Chief Executive Director and Team Leader, RELON Uganda

This panel focused on learning from the Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA)'s engagement with the IRC to expand and deepen opportunities for municipal-level engagement of refugee populations in Kampala.

KCCA shared how it ensures its policies are inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of Kampala residents, as well as how it gathers feedback from residents and various stakeholders to inform its policy-making processes. Panelists also highlighted how external organizations and stakeholders can best support KCCA's efforts in promoting inclusive and effective local policy engagement.

IRC highlighted key challenges that the urban refugee population in Kampala faces, including difficulty accessing essential services like healthcare and education, decent housing, and social and professional networks. Panelists shared best practices, examples of ongoing work in this space, and strategic recommendations for enhancing the support system for refugees in Kampala, including those featured in IRC's recent policy brief, "How Donors Can Better Support Urban Refugees in Kampala and Nairobi."

FOCUS SESSION #2

RLO Engagement With the Private Sector

Julius Muriuki
Programs and Research Associate, The Amahoro Coalition

Maike Striffler
Co-Founder & Partner, Relevant Ventures GmbH

Sybille Anny
Founder and Director, Her Dreams Count

Emmanuel Onyango
Corporate Affairs Manager, Asili Agriculture

Julie Motzfeldt
Global Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) Specialist, The Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

This panel focused on a number of emerging approaches for RLO and refugee engagement with private sector actors, particularly in local contexts:

- Asili Agriculture, which is the biggest maize and soybean producer in the East African region, supports refugees in the Kiryandogo settlement, working with smallholder farmers as both customers and suppliers. Notably, the Kiryandogo cluster is one of Asili's highest-performing clusters, with a significant portion of their purchases from refugee farmers supplying the World Food Programme with grain. As a result, Asili sees a lot of potential for expansion of its partnership with refugee farmers into other parts of the country and region.

- The Refugee Investment Facility is an initiative supported by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC). It supports private sector partners with an overarching goal of

localization and sustainability, which reflects the DRC's focus on self-reliance. Through the facility, the DRC provides loans to private sector partners at an interest rate based on performance against jointly developed KPIs. The facility identifies partners based on their ability to provide positive services for refugee clients.

- The Amahoro Coalition works to leverage private-sector business models to create a meaningful impact for refugee populations. They do this by sensitizing private sector partners on refugee issues and by providing support for firms in hiring practices and internship placements. Notably, this is done via a client service focus rather than a Corporate Social Responsibility focus. Amahoro also liaises with RLOs on topics related to private sector engagement, including policy barriers like business registration and work permits, and supports refugees in talent mapping and skills assessments.

- Relevant Ventures is a Uganda-based firm that invests in social businesses, including those that are refugee-led. However, many of the refugee-led businesses it sees can't get past the "livelihoods" stage and are not "investment-ready." Relevant Ventures offers early-stage entrepreneurs flexible capital and business services to get them ready for larger investments and scaling opportunities. Businesses are selected via a peer-to-peer selection process and, once on board, pay back 5% of additional monthly revenues to Relevant Ventures in exchange for the investment capital. Relevant Ventures has prototyped this with eight businesses, two of which are refugee-led.

- Her Dreams Count is a Uganda-based organization focused on providing refugee girls with the digital skills and knowledge they need to enhance their creativity and innovativeness. Learning to code gives young women vulnerable to early marriage alternative pathways to stability, employment, and self-reliance. Some of the challenges that Her Dreams Count faces include meeting the high demand for its services with few available resources and changing the mindsets of the refugees, host communities, and organizations it works with.

Panelists touched on the challenges that a continued lack of awareness presents for the scalability of the above approaches, as well as ways in which refugee businesses can become more "investable" and private sector actors can more effectively engage refugees as clients. Key discussion points included the importance of "knowing your client" and community and the ways in which RLOS can support this process. Panelists also highlighted the need to identify and address existing administrative and policy barriers that limit refugees' access to financing and business registration.

Commitments to Action and Next Steps

Group Reflections

Overall, participants voiced their desire for a stronger RELON Uganda presence outside of Kampala and expansion of opportunities for connections between regional networks, including peer-to-peer exchanges between elected officials in the REF and RLOs. RLOs also expressed a desire to learn more about existing coordination structures both at the central and district levels.

Participants suggested a number of next steps to advance recommendations coming out of the workshop, including:

- Establishing a committee convened by RELON Uganda to refine and follow up on the recommendations. This includes developing an engagement strategy, timeline, and success metrics.

- Conducting stakeholder mapping through the committee with a focus on identifying existing structures for RLO engagement and decision-making on policy-related issues.

- Sharing information across the RELON Uganda network related to central coordination structures and upcoming meetings, including at the district level, where RLO representatives can engage. UNHCR offered to assist in information sharing related to this action step.

Next Steps

The RSRI and RefugePoint will share this workshop report with all participants, including copies of presentations and resources.

R-SEAT is committed to co-organizing an advocacy and leadership workshop with RLOs to support and strengthen their roles in policy engagement.

RELON Uganda will carry forward the recommendations on decentralizing its structure and continue convening and developing policy engagement work plans.

Annexes

Annex 1: Convening Agenda

Annex 2: List of Participating Organizations

Annex 3: Presentation Slides and Materials

Annex 4: Convening Evaluation Results

Acknowledgments

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This report was prepared by Kari Diener and Shelby Quackenbush and reviewed by Simon Marot Touloung Chadop, Robert Hakiza, Jean Marie Ishimwe, Jerry Lukendo Mbokani, Ned Meerdink, Simar Singh, and Mary Wangui.

For more information on this report and future convenings, please get in touch with us:

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