REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS ETHIOPIA COUNTRY REPORT

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LERRN

Refugee-Led Research Series
Research Report no. 4

About the study

This study was supported by the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) at Carleton University, and the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) at the University of Oxford. The report was prepared by Abis Getachew, with support from Pauline Vidal (Research Facilitator, RLRH). It was published in November 2022.

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.

Funders

The study is supported, in part, by the Open Society Foundations (OSF), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Robert Bosch Stiftung, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Prize, and the IKEA Foundation.

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Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the contributions of the research assistants in Ethiopia: Lidya Tewelde, Buay Tut, and Munira Ali. I thank Pauline Vidal, Dr. James Milner, and Dr. Alexander Betts for their support throughout the process.

I am grateful for having had the opportunity to collaborate with the other lead researchers in East Africa: Andhira Yousif Kara, Uwezo Ramazani, and Mary Gitahi. I also thank current and past colleagues at the RLRH who helped me at different steps of the research process. Special thanks go to Foni Joyce Vuni, Mohamed Hassan, Buhendwa Iragi, Salama Mariam, Grace Isimbi, and Andonis Marden. Administrative support from Stephanie Pineau and Nadiya Ismaeva at LERRN was essential to the success of the study.

Freddie Carver, Jason Bell, and Yotam Gidron provided invaluable guidance throughout the research process. Discussions with Kiya Gezahegn, Tirsit Sahledengel, and Dessalegn Dinku were critical in shaping the study design and findings.

I am also thankful for the collaboration and contributions of the team conducting the study on refugee-led initiatives in the Middle East, in particular Dr. Oroub Elabed, Watfa Najdi, Mustafa Hoshmand, and Osama Okour.

I wish to extend my thanks to the Refugees and Returnees Services and the UNHCR in Ethiopia for making this study possible, in particular Ashenafi Demeke, Abdikadir Jama, Mohammed Hassen, and Chalachew Gemechu.

Most of all, I am grateful to leaders, members, and volunteers of RLOs in all locations who spent time with us during the study and shared their aspiration to support their community members. I also thank community members and informants who participated in interviews.

The report can be referenced as follows: Getachew, A. (2022). 'Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa: Community Perceptions in Ethiopia.' Refugee-Led Research Series, Research Report (4), November 2022.

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Acronyms

CBO	Community-based organisation
ERUGSA	Eritrean Refugee University Graduates and Students Association
FGD	Focus group discussion
INGO	International non-governmental organisation
KII	Key informant interview
LERRN	Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (Carleton University)
LNPGC	Lou Nuer Peace Graduate Committee
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
OSF	Open Society Foundations
RADO	Rural Aid and Development Organization
RCC	Refugee Central Committee
RLO	Refugee-Led Organisation
RLRH	Refugee-Led Research Hub (University of Oxford)
RRS	Refugee and Returnee Service
RSC	Refugee Studies Centre (University of Oxford)
RUDA	Reang Unity Development Association
RYNA	Refugee Led Youth Network Association
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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. Because there was no available information about RLOs and the forms that they take in Ethiopia prior to this study, the results fill an important knowledge gap by exploring the nature, scope, and practices of RLOs in Ethiopia, the perceptions that communities and stakeholders have of RLOs and their impact, and the factors that condition RLOs' responses and impact. This study was led by a person with a displacement background from the start to finish.

The RLO landscape

- RLOs in Ethiopia vary in terms of size, nature, leadership, and legal status. In Addis Ababa, RLOs are not registered, mostly target youth, and are dependent on their members' monthly contributions and support from the diaspora community. RLOs in Addis Ababa are largely community-based and faith-based, while most RLOs in Nguenyyiel are clan-based. In Melkadida, some RLOs are engaged in profit-oriented activities while providing humanitarian and livelihood services to their community. Other groups are organised into savings and loan groups that provide support to their members.
- In Addis Ababa, RLOs are mostly engaged in livelihood support, awareness raising, and emergency response. In Nguenyyiel, RLOs are mainly engaged in conflict resolution and awareness raising. In Melkadida, RLOs tend to focus on awareness raising and livelihood support in the form of savings and loan associations.
- Networking is crucial for effective RLO responses to humanitarian action, and RLOs with a good diasporic network respond well to the community. Internet access, which is more available in urban areas, is critical in facilitating networking. Hence, RLOs in Addis Ababa are more effective in reaching their communities than those operating in camp settings.
- RLOs that involve host communities are very limited in number. Out of the 15 RLOs researched in Ethiopia, only two of them are co-led. Co-led RLOs form due to mutual interests and experiences, which enables integration otherwise not seen in other communities. For example, one Addis Ababa-based RLO is co-led with Yemenis, whose

refugees share similar experiences with Ethiopian returnees who fled the war in Yemen.

- The main motivation for RLOs is to fill gaps in the communities. In Nguenyyiel, due to the high frequency of conflicts between clans, RLOs seek to create peaceful co-existence. In Addis Ababa, RLOs seek to support community members during cases of emergency and more generally to create a means for living.
- Some aid agencies provide in-kind contributions to RLOs in camp settings. For example, in Nguenyyiel, Oxfam supports RLOs to register and develop their internal structures. In Melkadida, there is support from the International Medical Corps and the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).
- Unlike RLOs in the camps, RLOs in Addis Ababa do not receive any support from aid organisations. They instead receive most of their support from the diaspora. RLOs that do not receive support from the diaspora or aid organisations struggle to provide continuous services.
- There are no networks of RLOs in Ethiopia. There is also no coordination between the RLOs in Ethiopia.

Perceived impact of RLOs

- Refugee communities do not know much about RLOs, especially in Melkadida and Addis Ababa. In Melkadida, community members are not aware of the activities of RLOs in their communities, with the exception of savings and loan associations. However, in Nguenyyiel, RLOs are well known by community members as they are established based on existing clans.
- Government agencies are more knowledgeable about the Refugee Central Committees (RCCs) than other RLOs. RCCs are established mainly by the involvement of UNHCR and the Ethiopian government's Refugees and Returnees Service (RRS). RCCs in the camps are responsible for the registration of RLOs. However, RCCs in Addis Ababa do not have such administrative power except for mobilising community members. RCCs are not considered RLOs in this study because they lack independence and transparency in the election of their leaders, and because they have external influences in their activities and scope.
- RLOs in Addis Ababa meet the needs of their communities more effectively than aid organisations. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) may provide services such as education, but RLOs provide services such as food and transport, which are deemed a higher priority by many beneficiaries. RLOs in Melkadida provide close support to the community especially in training, advocacy, and awareness creation. In Nguenyyiel, RLOs focus on emergency support and peaceful co-existence.
- RLOs are perceived by both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries as creating a positive impact on the community. RLO activities include rescuing vulnerable members of the refugee community during conflict; responding to the emergency needs of their community members; creating awareness on COVID-19; girls' education and youth empowerment; and facilitating peaceful co-existence between different South Sudanese sub-clans in Nguenyyiel refugee camp. However, external stakeholders are sceptical of the activities of the RLOs.

- For community members, a successful RLO is one that regularly provides support, serves the community with impartiality, is proactive in looking for networks, and is independent from aid. However, most community members from Melkadida note that successful RLOs tend to secure support from NGOs.

Variations in impact

- RLOs face financial and registration-related difficulties that reduce their ability to play a more significant role. Some RLOs plan to register abroad and thus become an international organisation; others intend to obtain registration via local faith-based organisations.
- The main obstacle in RLO registration is the mismatch between the Refugee Proclamation 1110/2019 and the Civic Society Proclamation. According to the Refugee Proclamation, refugees are permitted to associate and organise, but the Civic Society Proclamation designates that organisations register either as local or international organisations.
- External stakeholders have partnership plans with the RLOs. These include capacity-building programmes in Nguenyyiel and increasing the financial capacity of RLOs in Melkadida. However, aid organisations do not have clear partnership plans with RLOs based in Addis Ababa. This is because many RLOs in the capital are not registered and aid organisations do not want to work with unregistered RLOs.

Recommendations

- The government should allow RLOs to register as CBOs or NGOs. RLOs need support on registration, financial support, and capacity development. Registration would allow RLOs to create direct connections with the RRS and aid organisations, and to fundraise.

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]

A preliminary literature review revealed that there was no available information about RLOs and the forms that they take in Ethiopia, although Oxfam published a report on refugee-led initiatives in Gambella in December 2021.[3] This report includes insights from the Oxfam report.

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

1. **Nature of the response:** What are the nature, scope, and practices of RLO activities in Ethiopia?
2. **Perceived impact of the response:** How is the impact of RLO 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 the common factors that determine the response and impact of RLOs? What factors explain the variation in response and impact of RLOs in Ethiopia?

Research methods

To understand the nature and changes brought about by RLOs in Ethiopia, the study relies on the perceptions of their 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 25 rapid phone-based interviews.

The lack of public information and the difficulties in obtaining information about RLOs in Ethiopia can be explained by their hidden nature, particularly in urban centres. RLOs often support their own members and rarely advertise their work for fear of harassment and

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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] Oxfam. 'More local is possible: recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response', Briefing Paper, 1 December 2021.
https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/more-local-is-possible-recommendations-for-enhancing-local-humanitarian-leaders-621311/

The lack of public information and the difficulties in getting information about RLOs in Ethiopia can be explained by the hidden nature of RLOs, particularly in urban centres. RLOs often support their own members and rarely advertise their work for fear of harassment and arrest. As a result, the team adopted a more exploratory approach when selecting the 15 RLOs for this in-depth study, based on a preliminary framework:

- The team excluded refugee leadership bodies set up by authorities and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). This is because they were not set up independently and are not meant to take independent decisions but rather support the implementation of Refugee and Returnee Services (RRS) and UNHCR programmes. In Ethiopia, this applies to the Refugee Central Committees (RCCs) that are consulted for decisions by RRS and UNHCR (although some sources question whether this engagement is meaningful) and play a role in maintaining law and order in camps and urban centres.[5]
- The team included groups created as part of international non-governmental organisation (INGO) programmes to examine whether those groups have expanded their activities beyond the original INGO objectives and managed to sustain activities.
- In Melkadida, the team included cooperative groups on for-profit activities to examine to what extent they used income generation to support community members. The team found that some groups provide some assistance to the community through free training (eg Hilal Furniture Manufacturing) while some groups strictly aim to make profit.
- The team focused on RLOs that are currently active and implementing projects regularly; they also prioritised RLOs that serve the community beyond their own members, where such RLOs exist. Most of those RLOs can be found in Addis Ababa. Only four groups fell under the medium-sized category, and one can be considered elite. All are in Addis Ababa. Out of the 61 RLOs identified in Ethiopia (14 in Addis Ababa, 10 in Melkadida, and 37 in Nguenyyiel), 56 were groups in the self-help phase. In this phase, informal groups aim at providing services to their members only; they are not registered. RLOs in Ethiopia are mostly dependent on members' financial contributions, which can be upon registration, ad-hoc (through contribution boxes), monthly, or annually. A few outliers manage to move on to the growth phase in Addis Ababa due to connections with churches and the diaspora.

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.
- 13 KIIs with external stakeholders, including state representatives, local authorities, other humanitarian and development service providers, academics, experts, and

[4] According to the UNHCR, a RCC is a resident coordination and leadership body that is consulted on multi-sectoral issues pertaining to camp matters. It is composed of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary, Shelter Representative, Disabled Representative, and Zonal Leaders. Camp residents elect committee members. UNHCR. 'Melkadida camp snapshot' (2013).

[5] Oxfam. 'More local is possible: recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response', Briefing Paper, 1 December 2021. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/more-local-is-possible-recommendations-for-enhancing-local-humanitarian-leaders-621311/

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 former refugee researcher who returned to Addis Ababa. RLOs and beneficiaries reacted positively to being approached about this research project and often stated that this was the first time they had been interviewed for the work they lead. The research team took time to explain the scope and objectives of the study and to mitigate expectations

Nature and scope of RLOs in Ethiopia

In this report, we use the term RLO to describe any organisations, associations, coalitions, formal or informal networks, faith-based groups, and initiatives 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 the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as they were not set up independently, hence their decisions are bound by authorities and UNHCR. In Ethiopia, we excluded RCCs.[6]
	We also exclude groups created as part of international non-governmental organisations (INGO) programmes unless those groups have expanded their activities beyond the original INGO objectives.

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

- **Self-help phase**: Informal groups that aim at providing services to their members only. Groups in this phase are not registered.
- **Growth phase**: Community-based groups that are able to provide services to both their members and their community (typically along ethnic lines). At this stage, RLOs are able to engage with diaspora members and individual sponsors.
- **Expansion phase**: Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or larger community-based organisations (CBOs) that provide services to refugees regardless of their ethnic affiliation and to the host community. They are often referred to as 'elite' or 'celebrity' RLOs. Humanitarian funding outweighs membership fees and diaspora support. They are able to receive funding from philanthropic donors.

[6] RCCs are consulted for decisions by RRS and UNHCR (although some sources question whether this engagement is meaningful) and play a role in maintaining law and order in camps and urban centres. See: Oxfam. 'More local is possible: recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response', Briefing Paper, 1 December 2021.
https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/more-local-is-possible-recommendations-for-enhancing-local-humanitarian-leaders-621311/

The vast majority of RLOs in Ethiopia remain in the self-help phase; a few outliers have transitioned to the growth phase in Addis Ababa due to their connections with the diaspora and with churches. RLOs in Ethiopia are mostly dependent on members' financial contributions, which can be upon registration, ad-hoc (though contribution boxes), monthly, or annually.

The RLO landscape

Addis Ababa

RLOs in Addis Ababa are set up along ethnic lines (eg Eritrean, Yemeni, Somali, South Sudanese). The team focused on RLOs that aim to extend support beyond their members to the wider community, which applied to Eritrean and Yemeni groups.

> *'It is because the people were suffering which caused all this association thing...and during the COVID-19 days, a lot of people were very much suffering.'*
> - RLO leader, Addis Ababa

Eritrean RLOs started as informal community structures that subsequently developed more formalised structures. They scaled up operations as a reaction to the 2020 Tigray War, which led to an influx of Eritreans to Addis Ababa following attacks on the Tigrayan refugee camps of Hitsats and Shimelba. Approximately 20,000 Eritrean refugees were displaced following the destruction of these camps; some moved to other parts of Tigray and others to Addis Ababa.[7] Challenges related to COVID-19, the loss of income for refugees, and difficulties in accessing aid also motivated RLOs to support either to their members or to the wider community. Additional support offered by RLOs is diverse: some provide business support (eg help to buy a coffee-making machine), while others act as intermediaries between the diaspora and urban refugees by sharing stories of individual refugees on social media. For instance, one RLO records and uploads videos of individuals who need support to their YouTube channel and includes the individuals' bank information so they can receive direct assistance.[8]

Most groups rely on membership fees. Some groups receive support from the diaspora and from international and Ethiopian faith-based organisations and churches. No group was able to register, making it difficult for them to operate safely. Urban groups rarely interact with INGOs and actively avoid local authorities. Local authorities prefer to interact with refugee communities through the formal RCCs.

Melkadida Refugee Camp

Melkadida is the third most populous camp among the camps in Dollo Ado[9] and is home to

[7] Sarah Miller. 'Nowhere to run: Eritrean refugees in Tigray', Refugees International Brief, March 2022. https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports/2022/3/1/nowhere-to-run-eritrean-refugees-in-tigray
[8] Mahber Metehegegaz Youtube channel. https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5nQykWMjskZJ891mQfz_Ow/videos
[9] UNHCR Operational Data Portal. 'Refugees from Somalia'. https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/horn/location/161

refugee-led cooperatives that focus on agriculture, renewable energy, environmental conservation, and the livestock value chain supported by the IKEA Foundation. There are numerous cooperatives that are run both by the refugees and the host communities, which are supported by UNHCR, RRS, and the IKEA Foundation.[10] These cooperatives are profit-making and members share the dividends among themselves. These cooperatives are involved in different sectors including agriculture, livestock, energy and the environment.

However, upon further examination, it became apparent that those groups only aimed at profit and did not fall under the RLO definition. The focus on cooperatives left little space for self-help groups to emerge. Outliers in Melkadida include a furniture shop that provides free training to young refugees to learn the trade; and a mini grid cooperative that has been involved in profit-making activities and provides free electricity to community members who otherwise cannot afford it.[11]

There are also numerous Ayutos in Melkadida. Ayutos are informal refugee-led microfinance structures whereby members meet to place small amounts of money into group savings and take out and repay micro-loans. This way of addressing financial needs is very popular in the Somali community. Among several Ayutos in Melkadida, the team only selected women-led RLOs for examination.

Groups are able to register with the local RRS office and operate safely.

Nguenyyiel Refugee Camp

RLOs in Nguenyyiel, in the Gambella region, are established in groups that reflect pre-existing South Sudanese clan and sub-clan-based structures. These groups focus on peaceful co-existence among sub-clans and play a self-help role (eg support for a sick member, support for funeral costs, organisation of events for graduation of members). These groups are registered with camp authorities.

Oxfam has played a significant role in supporting the development of these groups, from traditional cultural network groups to a group of formalised CBOs that meet regularly and are working on strengthening their institutional structure and registering. Oxfam-supported RLOs include the Refugee Led Youth Network Association (RYNA) and Lou Nuer Peace Graduate Committee (LNPGC). Oxfam supports the development of their organisational structure, particularly their internal regulations, and their planned activities. Oxfam also provides support for their registration at a national level so that aid organisations and donors can more directly engage with them.

Churches also provide varying types of support, including engaging with their communities in creating awareness on the issues of peaceful co-existence. The refugee-led Presbyterian Church is an outlier in that it also welcomes orphans to stay in the church.

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[10] Alexander Betts, Andonis Marden, Raphael Bradenbrink, and Jonas Kaufmann. 'Building refugee economies: an evaluation of the IKEA Foundation's programmes in Dollo Ado', Refugee Studies Centre Report, University of Oxford, 12 May 2020. https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/building-refugee-economies-an-evaluation-of-the-ikea-foundations-programmes-in-dollo-ado

[11] Giulia Naboni and Elisabeth Haslund. 'Solar cooperatives give refugees and locals in Ethiopia clean energy and livelihoods', 3 June 2021. https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/2021/6/60b8c9874/solar-cooperatives-give-refugees-locals-ethiopia-clean-energy-livelihoods.html

Profile of RLO leaders

Nationality

Almost all the RLOs in Ethiopia are built along ethnic or national lines. In single-nationality camps, such as Melkadida and Nguenyyiel, RLO leaders' nationalities reflect the camp demographics. In urban settings like Addis Ababa, most of the RLO leaders come from the Eritrean community, which is the majority refugee community. Among the total 71,461 refugees in Ethiopia, close to 65,000 are Eritreans.[12]

Gender

The team made a conscious effort to identify women-led RLOs in all three locations. The team identified several women-led self-help groups that do not plan to expand their activities beyond in-group savings and loans (eg Tofiek Ayuto).

> *They say that I am outcast, and I am a woman, and I should not do this as Islam woman – I have to be at my house and serve my husband'.*
> – RLO woman leader, Addis Ababa

The main outlier is Nege Yeshalal, an RLO led by a Yemeni woman in Addis Ababa that aims to support Yemeni refugees and Ethiopian returnees from Yemen. She faces significant challenges. She explained she was told to stay at home by the Yemeni Embassy when raising the question of RLOs. As she has five children and runs a business, she has limited time to scale up her organisation. This reflects the structural and cultural issues that women refugees face: women have less access to higher education, where leaders often meet; they have competing priorities, such as childcare and house management; and they face barriers when seeking leadership positions and might not be seen as legitimate leaders for issues that are not women-specific.

Education

Most RLO leaders do not have higher education qualifications. Out of the 15 RLOs identified in Ethiopia, only three of them have leaders with a bachelor's degree. This can be explained by challenges in accessing higher education for refugees in Ethiopia.[13]

Age

Most RLO leaders were between 25 and 45 years old. Faith-based organisations have older leaders, while Oxfam-supported RLO leaders from Nguenyyiel tend to be younger and recent university graduates.

Inclusion of the host community

The team identified two RLOs that engage the host community in Addis Ababa. There is no inclusion of the host community in the camps under review, which can be explained by limited integration between refugees and host communities that derive from encampment practices, and the small-scale, camp-focused nature of ongoing activities.

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[12] UNHCR Operational Data Portal. 'Total refugees and asylum seekers'. https://data.unhcr.org/en/country/eth

[13] Wondwosen Tamrat and Samuel Dermas Habtemariam. 'The quest for refugee higher education in Ethiopia: the case of self-financing Eritreans', *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning* 21, no. 2 (2019): 120–40. https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/29682/Habtemariam_2019_Refugee_Education.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=n

Nege Yeshalal, which includes both Yemeni refugees and Ethiopian returnees from Yemen, is one such RLO that engages host communities. The leader explains that they included Ethiopian returnees for two reasons: 1) these two groups face shared challenges; and 2) including Ethiopian beneficiaries reduces suspicion on their activities.

> *'There are two reasons for this. One: they need to support themselves as they are returnees. Also if we were alone, we could have had a more severe problem, at least when the police guys see that there are Ethiopians they will be calm. Otherwise, it is like there is Arab-phobia with the police. Everything an Arab does involves terrorism'.*
>
> – RLO leader

Shared history can also explain the inclusion of host community members in RLOs. In Addis Ababa, one RLO accepts members who come from the same neighbourhood in Asmara, whether they are Ethiopians who moved to Addis Ababa before Eritrean independence or more recent Eritrean refugees. The management team is mostly Eritrean, and Ethiopians are members or beneficiaries.

The 2019 Refugee Proclamation, which promotes local integration, may open the door for more co-led initiatives between the host community and refugees,[14] but this may first require meaningful social and economic integration to develop organically.

Partnerships with the aid sector

Partnerships between RLOs and other actors in Ethiopia are limited by the restrictive legal environment. While most international aid organisations are keen to work with refugee-led organisations and initiatives, their plans are dependent on the application of the 2019 Proclamation.

Aid organisations nevertheless provide some light-touch support in camp settings, given that RLOs are able to register with RRS. They are more likely to support RLOs that evolved from beneficiary groups that aid organisations had originally set up. For example, in Melkadida, the Rural Aid and Development Organization (RADO) provides wheelchairs to the Melkadida Disability Association. Such in-kind assistance is not regular and has slowed down since the COVID-19 outbreak. Hilal Furniture was supported for their for-profit activities (material and training) but has not received support for their non-profit training activities for local youth.

Some RLOs have established linkages with INGOs and may refer community members to INGO services in times of need. In some cases, INGOs refer refugees to RLOs. For instance, in Nguenyyiel, UNHCR refers orphans to the orphanage run by the refugee-led Presbyterian Church.

Oxfam has taken the lead in Gambella in supporting groups in setting up their structures. Support includes the development of rules and plans, registration, and in-kind support (eg meeting hall, chairs and water for the meeting participants).

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[15] Mehari Taddele Maru. 'In depth: unpacking Ethiopia's revised refugee law', Africa Portal Feature, 13 February 2019. https://www.africaportal.org/features/depth-unpacking-ethiopias-revised-refugee-law/

RLO networks and coordination

There are no formal national RLO networks in Ethiopia. In Addis Ababa, RLO leaders explained that the restrictive legal environment limits their incentives to reach out to other RLOs as it would expose them to more police harassment.

In Nguenyyiel, aid organisations support RLOs in setting up coordination mechanisms. For example, Oxfam is supporting RYNA in bringing all clan and sub-clan-based RLOs under one umbrella. RYNA was set up four months before data collection, so there is little information about its relevance and sustainability.

Impact of RLOs on communities

Knowledge of RLOs among community members

Community members know more about RLOs in camp settings than in Addis Ababa, where RLOs tend to operate more secretly due to the restrictive legal environment.

> *'There are not many refugee-led associations and you do not find them easily. Because they are informal and they do not have recognition from authorities, they cannot move, develop networks freely, and go all the way to execute their activities'*
>
> - Community member, Addis Ababa

In some cases, Addis Ababa-based RLOs seem to be more known among diaspora members, which is reflected in the number of likes and subscribers they have on their Facebook and YouTube pages (eg Mahber Metehegegaz has a total of 82,500 views on their YouTube page).

Many self-help groups across research sites do not have plans to expand their activities beyond their own members; they do not seek visibility, thereby limiting community members' ability to see – and talk about – their impact if they are not group members.

	Setting	High	Mixed	Low
Addis Ababa		-	-	✓
Nguenyyiel		✓	-	-
Melkadida		-	-	✓

The situation within the camps is variable. In Nguenyyiel, RLOs are based on clan and sub-clan Nuer structure, hence the community can easily identify and understand them. In Melkadida, few community members know about groups that seek to benefit the wider community. When asked about RLOs, community members often talked about profit-making cooperatives and businesses.. When talking about RLOs that have both profit-making and humanitarian goals, such as Hilal and the solar cooperatives that provide free electricity services, community members were only able to talk about the business aspects of their activities, unless they had received direct support from those groups.

Knowledge of RLOs among community members

Knowledge of the RLOs in Ethiopia by the government and other aid organisations is dependent on the RLOs' operational location.

In Addis Ababa, aid organisations and government agencies have little to no knowledge of RLOs and only refer to the RCCs when asked about refugee-led initiatives. There are RCCs for each nationality group, including Eritrea, Somalia, Syria, Yemen, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan and Sudan.

> *'Yes, there are organisations that are led by refugees like the RCCs. Whenever we want to communicate with the refugee communities, we deal with them. For example, if there is a missing data or document that we have to fulfil, we have to communicate with these organisations. We are currently also engaging with them in different ways"*
>
> - RRS, Addis Ababa

The lack of knowledge on RLOs in Addis Ababa can be explained by the fact that RLOs are not registered in urban settings, and the fact that they prefer to stay hidden. In Melkadida and Nguenyyiel, RLOs are well known by UNHCR and state agencies and are registered, which enables them to operate openly.

Descriptions of experiences and impact

As the nature of RLOs differs in (and within) each location, how community members described RLO impact was similarly varied. In Addis Ababa, community members who were aware of RLOs mostly described the impact of self-help groups and medium-sized groups with diaspora support. In Nguenyyiel, community members mostly focused on the importance of RLOs in promoting peaceful cohabitation between clans and the host community and in reducing crime and violence. In Melkadida, community members mostly described the impact of cooperatives on livelihoods rather than the additional services some of those provide. Beneficiaries gave specific examples of how services had impacted their well-being and self-reliance. This applied to both self-help groups and groups that provided services to members of the wider community. Members of self-help groups talked about the importance of the direct support they received from other members (*'RLOs are very important because they are the ones who are around you and would run for your sake if something happens'* – RLO member, Addis Ababa), whereas beneficiaries of medium-scale RLOs compared RLO services to those provided by aid organisations and UNHCR (*'they have a platform to gather the community and support the community in everyday problems that the UNHCR cannot even solve'* – RLO beneficiary, Addis Ababa):

- Self-help group members and beneficiaries explained how receiving micro-loans helped them engage in business and receive a necessary income, and how they received direct support in cases of emergency (eg funeral, hospital visit, provision of a wheelchair). *'UNHCR was good but now the services they are giving us are less than previous years… Our group is our other hand we are getting support to rely on'* (self-help group member, Melkadida).
- Other beneficiaries talked about how the service they received filled a gap that humanitarian organisations had not met in both urban and camp settings, particularly in terms of skills, employability, and in-kind support. Beneficiaries highlighted the tangible aspects of the support they received and the direct impact on their well-being. This was particularly the case for beneficiaries in situations of irregularity or marginalisation that excluded them from services or when the RLO provided a service that might not be legal. For instance, beneficiaries discussed a group that came to rescue them from Tigrayan camps at the beginning of the war and took them to Addis Ababa. Others talked about the support they received in terms of training courses, housing, rent, and medical services: *'My surgery was successful, and they were beside me in the whole process. It was not in my mind to perform surgery. So, I just do not have any words to express my gratitude for the things this association does. And as you can see me now, I am better'* (beneficiary, Mahber Metehegegaz, Addis Ababa).
- Beneficiaries often talked about the importance of awareness raising and conflict resolution activities carried out by RLOs in camp settings: *'I have benefitted personally from these associations because I'm being told how to live peacefully with my family, neighbours, and people from other communities'* (beneficiary, RYNA, Nguenyyiel).

- Beneficiaries noted the critical services offered by RLOs during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as providing masks, water, soap, and information about the virus.
- Beneficiaries also talked about the importance of cultural preservation activities led by RLOs. For instance, the Berlula Music Band was often identified as an important group for community members in Melkadida: *'Berlula band led by refugees focuses on art, music and drama. They keep traditional dances and music for the community'* (community member, Melkadida).

When talking about the impact of RLOs on the community, it is important to distinguish between the priorities set by aid organisations and priorities set by refugees. In Nguenyyiel, for example, there was a disagreement between Oxfam and an RLO on the relevance of using funds to organise a graduation party for recent graduates. Refugee respondents saw the graduation party as an important community event that could potentially incentivise youth, especially girls, to pursue further education. However, for Oxfam representatives, such initiatives are not a priority for community needs. This shows that community priorities may differ from external priorities.

Non-beneficiaries who were aware of RLO services were generally understanding of their purpose and of their resource limitations. In Addis Ababa, refugees noted their appreciation for RLOs in providing transportation money to receive training from an aid organisation. Refugees were also generally understanding towards membership-based RLOs that only provided services to their members, unless these RLOs had received humanitarian funding that refugees felt should be distributed beyond the membership group. Unlike other settings, there was little suspicion towards RLOs, which may be explained by their lack of resources and visibility.

Variations in response and impact

Regulatory Framework

The regulatory framework is the main challenge faced by RLOs in implementing projects safely and accessing funding and partnership opportunities.

Article 27 of the revised refugee proclamation of Ethiopia (Refugees Proclamation No.1110/2019) allows refugees to create associations, stating that 'recognized refugees and asylum-seekers have the right to association, as regards non-political and non-profit making associations and trade unions in the same circumstances as the most favorable treatment accorded to foreign nationals pursuant to relevant laws.'

However, since the Refugees Proclamation was issued, there are no regulations and directives for RLOs to register and operate on the ground. Moreover, the Civil Societies Organisations Proclamation No. 1113/2019 contradicts the Refugee Proclamation 1110/2019 as it mentions that an organisation can either be international or local, and that foreigners should submit passports, which refugees rarely have access to.

In the camps, RLOs are able to register with the camp administration, which enables them to operate within the camp boundaries. However, they often lack documentation to prove registration and are thus unable to register with the government, limiting their access to aid organisations to request funding and support.

In Addis Ababa, RLO members risk physical harm when implementing activities. One RLO leader was imprisoned for two months after filming an interview with a homeless refugee from their community to share on social media. 'We always face harassment from the police, especially the district police' (RLO leader, Addis Ababa).

Some organisations are looking for alternative ways to register and implement activities despite the strict regulatory context. One group in Addis Ababa is planning to register in Europe and return to Ethiopia as an INGO; another group in Addis Ababa used the licence from an allied registered faith-based organisation.

Networks

The most significant factor in determining the success of an RLO is the leader's ability to access the diaspora and faith-based networks for support. Personal relations, location, gender, nationality, and education all influence a leader's ability to access networks, which in turn unlocks their ability to raise funds, set up partnerships, and provide regular services to a greater range of beneficiaries. Eritrean urban-based men are more likely to have opportunities to build such networks.

Diaspora network: Urban RLOs attribute their ability to fundraise from the diaspora to their access to the internet, the visibility of their activities via social media, and their personal relations with refugees who left for Europe or have been resettled in North America. In some cases, they receive funds to operate (ERUGSA, Act of Good Samaritan), or allow people in need to receive funds through their online presence (Mahber Metehegegaz). None of the camp-based RLOs have support from the diaspora.

Faith-based networks: Churches and faith-based organisations in Addis Ababa play a key role in allowing some RLOs to operate and bypass wider access challenges. For example, Act of Good Samaritan has a partnership with Mercy Gate International, a religious humanitarian organisation registered as an NGO in Ethiopia. While Mercy Gate does not provide funding to Act of Good Samaritan, they have provided letters to access camps and an office space. Act of Good Samaritan also uses the licence of its sister organisation when needed. The religion of RLO leaders is often relevant when obtaining support from churches (locally or abroad) and mosques.

Conclusion and recommendations

Significant challenges remain in Ethiopia to unlock RLOs' potential to support their community members. This section provides recommendations based on RLO priorities outlined during fieldwork: 1) Ability and support to register; 2) Access to funding opportunities; 3) Capacity building for RLO leaders and staff; 4) Access to infrastructure

To donors

- **Advocate for policy change at the government level.** The restrictive regulatory framework can hinder the realisation of RLO 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, and on refugee documentation and access to infrastructure (eg banking).
- **Fund unregistered self-help groups.** Many RLOs in Ethiopia 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 RLOs requires supporting those groups to help them expand their reach and activities in early stages of development. Donors should adapt funding requirements to the specific needs of RLOs.
- **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 in aid organisations.
- **Create space for RLOs to influence the humanitarian sector.** RLOs in Ethiopia are not involved in humanitarian fora. Donors should involve RLOs in donor meetings and humanitarian coordination meetings. For the sake of inclusivity, donors should fund costs associated with participating in those coordination meetings and implement translation mechanisms.

To governments and authorities

- **Develop directives for RLOs to register and operate.** In Ethiopia, the government should implement provisions from the Refugees Proclamation of 2019 that allows refugees to create associations. The lack of directives prevents RLOs from implementing activities safely and seeking funds. The government should set up a policy and guidelines for registration that are in line with the reality of RLOs.[16]

[16]. This reflects recommendations from Oxfam (2021): 'While the legal position in relation to refugee-led organizations should be increasingly enabling, it remains unclear how far aid agencies working with refugees are willing to go without further clarification. RRS should clarify the implications of the new law so that refugees can take advantage of any new opportunity to formally register organizations.' Oxfam. 'More local is possible: recommendations for enhancing local humanitarian leadership and refugee participation in the Gambella refugee response'. Briefing Paper 2021, 1 December 2021. https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/more-local-is-possible-recommendations-for-enhancing-local-humanitarian-leaders-621311/

To UNHCR

- **Advocate for policy change at the government level.** UNHCR can partner with donors to advocate for changes on RLO registration, recognition of existing initiatives, and on 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.
- **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 a country advisory board to promote the implementation of these policies and to adapt them to Ethiopia specificities. Once those are approved, UNHCR should ensure that policies are known by UNHCR staff at the national and field level.

To aid Organisations

- **Involve RLOs in decision-making through equal-partner consortia.** Humanitarian 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. 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.
- **Be long-term allies.** RLOs have significant value-added qualities to assist in the refugee response, but they are hindered by structural weaknesses due to the displacement status of their leaders. Aid organisations should manage 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.

To RLOs

- **Set up a network of RLOs.** Networks can help RLOs access opportunities, share ideas,distribute funding, and provide a platform for the RLOs to network with one another and with other key potential partners/stakeholders at the national, regional, and global level. The RLO network should take transparent steps to include a range of marginalised groups in their structures (women and minority nationalities).
- **Take steps to ensure 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).

Annex 1: Profiles of selected RLOs in Ethiopia

In Addis Ababa

1. **Act of the Good Samaritan** is a faith-based Eritrean RLO established in 2018. It was established by Eritrean refugees who were involved in missionary activities in Mekelle, northern Ethiopia. They were originally motivated to start the RLO to help refugees who move from camps to cities to get medical treatment. Their activities vary, including protecting the refugee community, supporting refugee livelihood, and providing awareness raising. Their main source of funding is from the diaspora.
2. **Ebay Gejeret Association** is a self-help group consisting of both Ethiopians and Eritrean refugees that focuses on funeral insurance. It was established in 2019 immediately following the peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Ebay Gejeret is a neighbourhood in Asmara and members are comprised of individuals who grew up and lived in the area. Members meet every month and contribute a uniform amount of money, which goes to the members who lost their family members. Their main source of funding is member contributions.
3. **Eritrean Refugee University Graduates and Students Association (ERUGSA)** was established in 2015 by Eritrean refugees who are students and graduates. It was established to create awareness on irregular migration to Europe. Activities have also included awareness raising on COVID-19. Their main sources of funding are diaspora funding and partnerships.
4. **Mahber Metehegegaz Eritraweian** (Eritrean Self-Help Association) is a community-based RLO established in 2019 by a group of Eritrean refugees residing around Gofa Mebrat Hail. They focus on the emergency medical needs of communities, employment creation, and the provision of moral support to community members. They raise money for individuals from the community and act as an intermediary between the diaspora and vulnerable members of the community.
5. **Nege Yishalal** (Tomorrow Will Be Better) is a Yemeni RLO established in 2017 and led by a Yemeni woman in Addis Ababa. It is a CBO and also involves host community members who are returnees from Yemen. In addition to livelihood and humanitarian activities, it focuses on women's empowerment. Their main source of funding is member contributions.

In Nguenyyiel Refugee Camp

1. **Luo Nuer Peace Graduate Committee (LNPGC)** is a young RLO established in 2021 to serve the Luo Nuer sub-clan in the camp. It seeks to create unity among the Luo Nuer community and to facilitate peaceful co-existence between the refugee and the host community and also between the refugee community members. Their main source of funding is member contributions. It is supported by Oxfam with in-kind contributions.

2. **Luo Nuer Women Association** is a women-led RLO primarily working on violence against women and gang violence among the Luo Nuer community. It was established in 2016 and inspired by women's associations in the host community. Their main source of funding is member contributions.
3. **Reang Unity Development Association (RUDA)** was established in 2016 and focuses on conflict resolution and prevention within the Reang community living in the camp. Their main source of funding is member contributions.
4. **Refugee Youth Network Association (RYNA)** was established in 2021 and aims to create a conflict free community. It strives to create unity among kinship-based RLOs and seeks to create a network that includes other RLOs, such as RUDA, LNPGC, and others, to form a stronger association. Their main source of funding is member contributions. It is supported by Oxfam with in-kind contributions.
5. **St Mat Presbyterian Church** is a refugee-led church. In addition to its religious activities, the church welcomes and raises orphans in the community irrespective of which faith they are following. The church was established in 2017 and has been involved in humanitarian activity ever since. Their main source of funding is member contributions.

In Melkadida Refugee Camp

1. **Berlula Music Band** was established in 2010 and aims to raise awareness on topics such as girls' education, early marriage, HIV/AIDS, malaria, and COVID-19 through music and drama. It also makes profits which are shared among members. They receive in-kind contributions from aid organisations and UNHCR.
2. **Hilal Furniture Manufacturing** is a profit-making furniture manufacturing cooperative. It was established in 2012 and provides free woodwork training to the refugee youth.
3. **Melkadida Association of People Living with Disability** was established in 2015 by community members with disabilities with support from RADO. They act as an intermediary with INGOs (advocacy and mobilisation) and have no stable source of funding.
4. **Melkadida Sharia Court** is a refugee-led court involved in marriage related issues. It was established in 2016 and focuses on giving advice to the youth and providing counselling services. The Court receives contributions from community members, and its building was constructed by UNHCR.
5. **Tofik Ayuto** is a self-help savings and loan association for women. It was established in 2019 after food rations declined in the camp.

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Designed by: Habesha Media
Published by: Refugee Studies Centre, November 2022
Citation: Getachew, A. (2022). 'Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa: Community Perceptions in Ethiopia.' Refugee-Led Research Series, Research Report (4), November 2022.