THE POLITICS AND PROCESSES OF REFUGEE LEADERSHIP

A Comparative Analysis of Factors Conditioning Refugee Leadership in The Global South

East Africa Research Report

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

"Meaningful refugee participation" has become an issue of growing visibility on the policy agenda of the global refugee regime in recent years. This visibility is arguably a result of the inadequacies of refugee responses, increasing scholarly research on meaningful refugee participation, and a growing recognition of the importance of refugee participation in the governance of the refugee regime itself. Despite this emphasis on participation, less prominent in research and policy discussions is the question of refugee leadership, in particular how individual refugees or networks of refugees are able to demonstrate agency to influence policy and practice that affects the lives of refugees, especially in the context of restrictive political environments. The study explored four broad research questions:

1 **What is refugee leadership and how is it understood within displaced communities?**

**2** **In what ways is refugee leadership expressed?**

3 **What variation exists in refugee expressions of leadership within and between countries?**

4 **What factors explain this variation, including factors related to human agency and intersectional perspectives of gender, power and identity?**

The study employed a multiple-case study design to explore the lived experiences of refugee leaders as well as the political opportunity structures through which leadership is exercised.
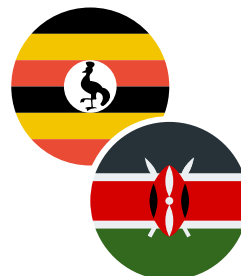
It was carried out in two countries: Uganda (Nakivale and Kampala) and Kenya (Kakuma and Nairobi), to understand and appreciate the different perspectives informing refugee leadership in both rural settlements or camps and urban areas.

This study investigated refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda through focus groups and interviews involving 91 participants. To understand the politics and process of refugee leadership in East Arica, the study draws on the concepts of political opportunity structures, agency, and intersectionality.

The findings of the study show that while meaningful refugee participation has gained attention in the policy arena, there remains a tension between inclusion and influence. Meaningful participation for refugee leaders in formal structures is largely framed in procedural terms, that is, who attends meetings and who sits on the committees, rather than in terms of actual decision making and corresponding accountability to refugee communities.

Moreover, the co-existence of institutional/formal and community-based/informal leadership structures raises questions about legitimacy and about who is qualified to represent the refugee communities in decision making processes. Using the lens of intersectionality, the study also brings to the fore the unequal ways in which refugee leadership is exercised in the context of varying forms of political opportunity structures. Gender, age, ethnicity, language, legal status, and urban/rural location intersect to shape who is recognized as a "legitimate" leader.

Moreover, the study reveals how certain identities such as gender and language proficiency are privileged in who becomes a refugee leader in a given location.

Furthermore, variations in political opportunity structures influence how refugee leadership is exercised in both Uganda and Kenya. Uganda's legal and regulatory environment creates some institutional openings for meaningful refugee participation in decision making processes. In contrast, Kenya's securitised refugee policy restricts formal participation, even though it offers a ray of hope under the recently launched SHIRIKA plan. With an increased call for refugee involvement in all matters concerning them, the government of Kenya, through the SHIRIKA plan is exploring ways of increased involvement of refugees in decision making processes, including a recognition of refugees in urban areas.

Nevertheless, the strict enforcement of the encampment policy and the perceived legitimacy of block leaders as refugee representatives remain hurdles in attaining the desired goal of meaningful refugee participation. The study concludes that to achieve meaningful refugee participation in East Africa, there is a need to move beyond tokenistic representation of refugees to a recognition of diverse forms of leadership, in particular by valuing Refugee-Led Organizations as a legitimate refugee voice in decision making processes.

LIST OF ACRONYMS

DRS	Directorate of Refugee Services
GBV	Gender Based Violence
OPM	Office of the Prime Minister
RELON	Refugee Led Organizations Network
RLOs	Refugee-Led Organizations
RLP	Refugee Law Project
RLRH	Refugee Led Research Hub
R-SEAT	Refugees Seeking Equal Access to the Table
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

1. INTRODUCTION

"Meaningful refugee participation" has become an issue of growing visibility on the policy agenda of the global refugee regime in recent years. This visibility is arguably the result of the inadequacies of refugee responses and the growing recognition, as articulated in Paragraph 34 of the Global Compact on Refugees that

> "
> responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.
> "

– Paragraph 34, Global Compact on Refugees

This visibility is also the result of research in recent years that has focused on the significance of refugee-led responses in local and national contexts,[1] along with a more recent recognition of the growing importance of refugee participation in the governance of the refugee regime itself[2]. Less prominent in research and policy discussions is the question of refugee leadership: if and how individual refugees or networks of refugees are able to demonstrate agency to influence policy and practice that affects the lives of refugees. This lack of knowledge about refugee leadership is especially significant in the context of the global South,[3] which hosts the vast majority of the world's refugees and where refugees navigate a complex terrain of diverse, yet frequently restrictive, political environments, from refugee camps to urban contexts.[4]

Where questions of refugee leadership are addressed in the literature, it is frequently in the context of refugee protests and other forms of political action.[5]

91
participants

This study investigated refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda through focus groups and interviews involving 91 participants.

While organizing protests is one form of agency, more recent examples from refugee communities across the global South suggest that refugee leadership can and does take many different forms. Through its work with refugee leaders in various regions, the refugee-led initiative R-SEAT has engaged with refugees who are demonstrating leadership by engaging with domestic policy processes, working within institutional structures to influence change, mobilizing communities in self-help initiatives, using social and traditional media to change public perceptions about refugees, and producing innovative research on refugee issues from the perspective of those with lived experience of displacement. Key among these actors are Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs), which are increasingly becoming a prominent feature among the refugee communities in East Africa, often emerging as formalized leadership structures within refugee communities.

RLOs include any organizations, associations, coalitions, formal or informal networks, faith-based groups, and initiatives led by refugees or asylum seekers in urban, rural, camp, and settlement settings.[6] RLOs emerge out of individuals or a group of individuals who come together to find a solution to issues they see or face in their communities as registered or unregistered organizations or associations. RLOs are now found in both rural settlements and camps, as well as in urban areas of hosting countries

The exercise of refugee leadership is shaped by a complex interplay of political opportunity structures, individual and collective agency, and multiple identities.

The dominant forms of leadership in East Africa are the traditional leadership structures, which emphasize communal values, elder authority and kinship ties.

During displacement, these forms of leadership are adapted to address the complex challenges faced by refugees in countries of asylum. Unlike Western leadership paradigms, which are grounded in individualism and hierarchical control, East African conceptions of leadership emphasize rationality, communal responsibility, and collective decision-making.[7] Leadership is shaped by the interaction of cultural identity, gender, nationality, ethnicity, and refugee status. These intersecting identities influence who can lead, how leadership is recognized, and whose perspectives are valued in community, national policy spaces. These identities do not function independently but rather interact to produce differentiated experiences of agency and meaningful participation.

2. METHODOLOGY

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The East African case study explored four broad research questions: 1) what is refugee leadership and how is it understood within displaced communities? 2) in what ways is refugee leadership expressed? 3) what variation exists in refugee expressions of leadership within and between countries? and 4) what factors explain this variation, including factors related to human agency and intersectional perspectives of gender, power and identity?
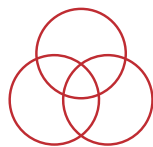
To understand the politics and process of refugee leadership in East Arica, the study draws on the concepts of
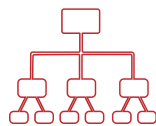
political opportunity structures,

agency,   **and intersectionality.**

Specifically, attention is paid to how political opportunity structures, made up of both formal and informal institutional, political and environmental factors facilitate or constrain refugee leaders' collective action.[8] Agency theory on the other hand negates the idea that refugees are passive recipients of aid, stressing instead their capacity to act purposefully and creatively within constraints. [9]

Agency pays attention to how refugees find room to maneuver around institutional obstacles and negotiate local power dynamics and legality to obtain visibility and influence. [10] Taking into account the fact that refugee communities in East Africa stride overlapping identities of gender, nationality, legal status, and disability, it was essential to unpack how these identities shape access to leadership opportunities. Intersectionality is a concept that explains how people's multiple identities intersect to shape their lived experiences.[11] Intersectionality brings to the fore how structures of exclusion and inclusion operate within refugee communities producing different outcomes in leadership and sustainability of such leadership.[12]

The study was carried out in two sites, Uganda and Kenya, to understand and appreciate the different perspectives informing refugee leadership. The two sites were purposely selected because they each host large refugee populations, have a long history of hosting refugees since the colonial times, and have seen the exponential growth of Refugee-Led Organizations with differing trajectories of establishment. Both Kenya and Uganda share many similarities, as well as some remarkable differences, making them interesting case studies. Both countries share a common colonial history under British rule. After independence, they took different governance trajectories, with Kenya becoming more politically stable under a one-party rule as Uganda went through a series of coups, counter coups, and wars of liberation.

Not only do both countries share adjacent borders, but they are also in the center of volatile regions, that is the Greater Horn and Great Lakes regions of Africa, making them major refugee hosting countries.

2.1 KENYA CASE STUDY: KAKUMA AND NAIROBI

Kenya has a long history of hosting refugees from the greater Horn of Africa as well as the Great Lakes region. Kenya shares borders with to the north with South Sudan and Ethiopia, to the east by Somalia, to the south by Tanzania, and to the west by Uganda. Kenya's relative political stability in a region widely characterized by protracted conflicts has made the country a host for refugees for decades.[13] Kenya also serves as a key transit route for refugees from the region fleeing onward to safer destinations, especially to the global North.[14] By April 2025, Kenya was host to 849,625 refugees and asylum seekers.[15] By nationality, the majority of the refugees are from Somalia (483,129), South Sudan (198,774), and the Democratic Republic of Congo (64,611).[16]

Figure 1. Refugees in Kenya by Nationality, April 2025 [17]
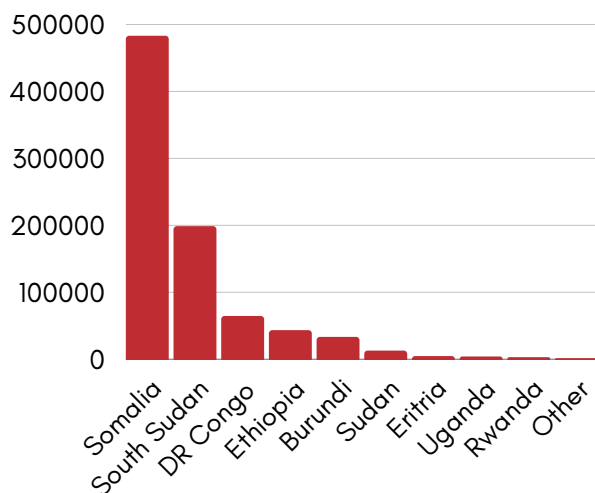
Source: UNHCR, "Kenya statistics package – 30 April 2025,"

In Kenya, field work was carried out in Kakuma Refugee Camp, as well as Nairobi, the capital city. The majority of the refugees in Kenya live in camps: the Dadaab refugee camps near the Somali border (431,216 refugees) and the Kakuma Refugee Camp near the South Sudan border (224,082 refugees).[18] The newer Kalobeyi refugee settlement hosts 79,035 refugees.[19] In addition, 112,988 refugees live in urban cities like Nairobi and Eldoret.[20] Kakuma Refugee Camp was formally established in 1992 to accommodate people fleeing the conflict in Sudan that lasted from 1985–2005.[21] Kakuma is now a culturally and economically significant location for refugees from South Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is managed by the Directorate of Refugee Services, under the Kenyan Government and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Nairobi, the capital city for Kenya, is also home to a one of the largest refugee populations in the region. Nairobi was purposively selected for the study because of the high concentration of refugees with diverse nationalities, including Somalis, Congolese, Rwandans, Ugandans, and South Sudanese. In addition, Nairobi is also host to many Refugee-Led Organizations, making it a rich area to study leadership dynamics, grassroots organization, and civic engagement for urban refugees in East Africa. Nairobi offers an opportunity to understand how refugees take on leadership roles in urban contexts, their interaction with state and non-state actors, as well as the political opportunity structures that influence meaningful refugee participation in decision making processes.

Moreover, Nairobi is the administrative and policy making center for Kenya and home to the headquarters of several international and regional organizations supporting refugee integration. Consequently, Nairobi provided an excellent location to observe and understand how refugee leadership interacts with governance structures and the resultant influence on decision making processes.

2.2 UGANDA CASE STUDY: NAKIVALE AND KAMPALA

Uganda shares borders with South Sudan to the north, Kenya to the east, Tanzania and Rwanda to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. Politically, Uganda operates as a multi-party democracy. Its administration follows a decentralised system of government. Governance is dominated by the ruling National Resistance Movement (NRM) and President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986. Uganda has a long history of hosting refugees mainly from the Great Lakes region and the greater Horn of Africa regions characterized by protracted conflicts. Refugees arrive in Uganda mainly as individuals fleeing persecution or in large numbers as groups fleeing generalised violence from their countries of origin. Uganda maintains an open-door policy to all asylum seekers irrespective of their nationality or ethnic affiliation and provides prima facie asylum for refugees of certain nationalities. Internal displacement is a result of armed conflicts, climate change, and development projects, such as the case of Uganda's oil pipeline. As of July 2025, the country is host to over 1.9 million refugees (see Figure 2), mainly from South Sudan (52.6%) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (32.7%).[22]

Figure 2. Refugee population in Uganda by Nationality, July 2025
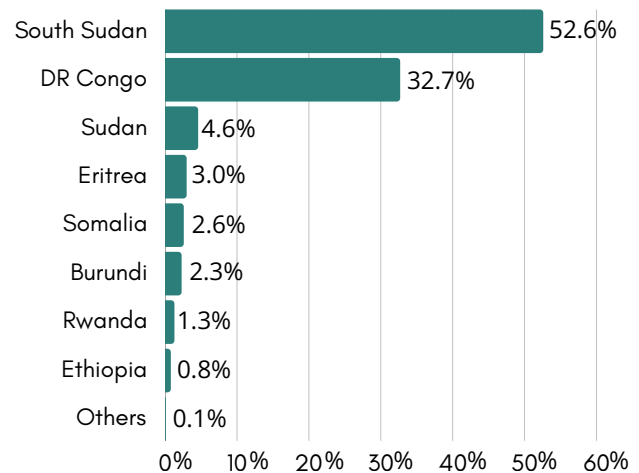
Source: UNHCR, "Uganda – Refugee Statistics July 2025,"

The conventional approach to hosting refuges in Uganda is to place them in rural settlements. There are 13 settlements found in 11 Local Government Districts: Nakivale, Oruchinga, Kyaka II, Rwamwanja, Kyangwali, Kiryandongo, Adjumani, Palorinya, Palabek, Lobule, Rhino Camp, Bidi, and Imvepi. Within the rural settlements, refugees have a right to a plot of land to grow their own food and build their house, as well as freedom of movement within the country with minimal controls. Moreover, refugee settlements are integrated within local communities whereby refugees share various social services and take part in decision making processes at a district and national level. Nevertheless, there is a growing number of self-settled refugees who live outside the humanitarian assistance framework, especially in the capital city Kampala and secondary cities like Mbarara, Arua Gulu and Mbale.[23] Nakivale Refugee Settlement is one the oldest refugee settlements in Uganda and has the largest population, with 268,373 refugees.[24] It is about 200 kilometers from Kampala, the capital city.

The camp is geographically divided into three administrative zones that is base camp, Juru and Rubondo. The refugee population is heterogeneous with different nationalities, languages, and age groups.

Kampala, like Nairobi, is host to urban refugees, mainly self-settled and living in slums or informal settlements around the city. Urban refugees have no formal leadership structures like the ones found in the rural settlements. As a result, refugee leadership in Kampala is largely expressed through formal and informal RLOs that offer service, advocate for refugee rights, and engage in skills training to foster self-reliance. [25] Urban refugees are not officially recognized in the same way as those in settlements, leaving them with limited decision-making power, authority in conflict resolution, and resource mobilization for their communities. Kampala is also home to a large and ever-growing number of RLOs. The activities of the RLOs are facilitated by the presence of headquarters of international and regional organizations, which are instrumental in providing a space for the expression of voices and for advocacy networks.

2.3 DATA COLLECTION SAMPLES

The study was co-designed with people with a lived experience of displacement, either as refugees or Internally Displaced Persons, and who hold a leadership position. Two team members, Pascal Zigashane and Andrew Sajja (Kakuma and Nakivale) were selected given their positions as leaders, as well as their experiences of displacement. The researcher positionality is further explained below. The study reached a total of 91 participants through Key Informant interviews and Focus Group Discussions (see table 1).

Figure 2. Refugee population in Uganda by Nationality, July 2025

Method	Kampala	Nakivale	Nairobi	Kakuma
Key informant interviews	7	7	7	8
Male FG	10	9	10	6
Female FG	6	5	10	6
Total participants	23	21	27	20

*FG – Focus Groups

2.3.1 FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Data was collected through 16 focus group discussions with 27 refugee women and 35 refugee men.

The focus group participants were selected on the basis of involvement in refugee leadership, nationality, and gender (both women and men). Selection of participants in the camps and settlements was carried out with the help of community leaders already living in the rural settlements/camps. In Nairobi, selection was carried out through a collaboration with R-SEAT and the Refugee Led Research Hub. In Kampala, selection was carried out with the support of refugee leaders and RLOs Network of Uganda (RELON-U).

Careful attention was taken to seek out leaders of different nationalities, that is Somalis, Congolese, and South Sudanese, as well as by gender, both women and men. Focus group discussions were conducted in English with limited translation where it was required. In some focus groups in Kampala, it was interesting to hold the discussions in Luganda, a language well understood by refugees, also showing the level of integration into the host community.

Focus group discussions also provided space to appreciate the political, legal and social environments refugee leaders navigate on a daily basis. The discussions brought into sharp focus the different opinions of refugee leaders on how they relate to the legal and regulatory frameworks in countries of asylum. In Nairobi for instance, it was interesting to observe how a call for registration and regulation of all Refugee-Led Organizations sparked a sharp debate. On the one hand, proponents argued that regulation was necessary since a good number of RLOs were mainly 'briefcase organizations' that do not serve the interests of their communities. Briefcase organizations here refer to organizations that exist primarily on paper, often with minimal or no actual operations. These entities are typically established to fulfil individual/founder's goals and objectives and exploit donor funding without delivering meaningful services to the communities they claim to serve. The opponents, on the other hand, saw registration as an infringement on their right to associate and saw the requirement as a move to curtail their activities within the city. Generally, proponents of regulation were wary of RLOs that served individual and not community interests.

Founding or identifying as an RLO is one way through which individuals access a source of livelihood or means of survival, or for others something to do. The goal of the individual is about being visible and vocal, through which their validity is assessed and measured even when they had no communities for which to represent and fight. When meetings are called for the RLOs, the same individuals and faces show up claiming to represent communities. The main fear for refugee leaders is that such organizations crowd out 'genuine' organizations that advocate for community interests, creating competition for scarce resources. Registration for the proponents would facilitate standardized procedures for running a Refugee-Led Organizations as well as a structure of accountability and proper management of resources. In so doing, registration would safeguard the legitimacy of RLOs.

The focus groups also brought to the fore the power structures and invisible barriers refugee leaders must navigate to realize their goals and objectives. For instance, through the discussions it was possible to uncover the opportunities refugees have to influence decision making processes to the benefit of refugee communities. For instance, the discussions revealed how RELON Kampala, by exploiting relationships with local leaders and Non-Governmental Organizations, has improved the integration of refugees into the urban economy. Refugee leaders shared their experiences and provided valuable insights into the negotiations between them and various stakeholders. They brought to the forefront the intricacies of who is recognized as a leader, whose voices are heard, and forms of inclusion and exclusion, especially for women, cutting across both urban and rural spaces.

Focus groups explored how leadership is understood within refugee communities and expressed in both rural and urban locations of Kenya and Uganda. Focus groups also provided a platform to probe consensus and divergence in community views on leadership and meaningful refugee participation.

2.3.2 KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key informant interviews were conducted with 29 purposively selected individuals and organizations.

Care was taken to select individuals directly involved in the refugee response: refugees leaders and organizations promoting meaningful participation of refugees. Key informant interviews were preceded by Actor Mapping in both Uganda and Kenya. The goal here was to identify key stakeholders in refugee management and decision-making spaces. The mapping exercise was carried out in the rural Kakuma and Nakivale, as well as in the cities, Kampala and Nairobi. The mapping exercise depended on the OPM and UNHCR databases of organizations and people with whom they work in both countries, as well as persons and organizations identified by the research assistants as critical to the study. Working with the research assistants who live and work within the research sites made it possible to quickly possible to identify key organizations and individuals relevant to the goals and objectives of the study.

Actor mapping was also informed by the extensive study[26] conducted by the Local Engagement Refugee Response Network (LERRN) and the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) of Refugee-Led Organizations in East Africa, including Uganda and Kenya.

The reports brought to the fore the importance of Refugee-Led Organizations and how these played a critical role in refugee leadership structures in both countries. It was ascertained for instance that Refugee-Led Organizations are spaces where refugee leadership is best recognized. RLOs are considered accessible both in terms of distance and language, less bureaucratic, and mainly informal. RLOs are also critical areas in not only in unifying refugees, but also as advocates for improved service delivery and respect for the rights of refugees and displaced persons. This study built on these findings to explore the meaning of individual refugee leadership; the forms it can take; the impact it can have on the ability of wider groups of refugees to access protection, assistance and solutions; and the factors that condition the ability of refugees to play such leadership roles. The mapping exercise brought to the fore the need to examine both formal and informal forms of refugee leadership, including clan leaders and opinion leaders among the refugee communities.

Key informants were selected purposively and included leaders of Refugee-Led Organizations, UNHCR, the Donor Community, the local government where refugees reside in rural settlements, urban councils in capital cities, NGOs, and Civil Society Organizations. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews held with refugee leaders in both rural and urban settings. Refugee leaders were engaged in formal interviews using an interview guide. The team developed a list of open-ended questions that directly correspond to the research questions and issues to be covered during the conversation.

This approach created an opportunity to follow other relevant lines of inquiry in line with the study objectives even if these are missing from the general interview guide. Key informants provided valuable insights into the roles and experiences of refugee leaders and brought to the fore how refugee leaders circumvent restrictive policies to speak out on the needs of refugees in both rural and urban areas.

2.3.3 PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Participant observation either as active participants or observers allowed for a more in-depth understanding of leadership patterns and behaviour in different settings. From the outset, the team attended several meetings and workshops where refugee leaders interfaced with their own communities, with policy makers, with donors, and with academics. Such encounters allowed for a more in-depth understanding of leadership patterns, and what issues are presented to which audience. Such meetings provided crucial insights into power relations and how refugee leaders pushed a particular agenda in the presence of policy makers and donors.

2.4 ETHICAL ISSUES IN RESEARCH

Conducting research in the field of forced migration in East Africa is imbued with several risks and ethical concerns as a result of unequal power relations, security concerns, extreme poverty, violence, and politicized research contexts.

Furthermore, there are several gatekeepers to the research process that the team had to navigate. These included the government officials responsible for granting permission to access the rural settlements and camps, International Organizations and donors that are seldom welcoming to research teams, and security personnel. There was also a risk of incidents that may endanger the team. While brainstorming on the risks, it was agreed that we must obtain the necessary authorizations to enter the refugee settlements from the Directorates of Refugees in both Kenya and Uganda. For Uganda, the research lead has already built rapport with the Commissioner for Refugees and that provides accessibility to the camps. The risk is also to be mitigated through our team members living and working in the refugee communities. The team has also sought to build networks with several stakeholders to receive invitations to relevant events, as well as join critical networks of academics and practitioners in both countries for sharing information. Security concerns and accessibility were taken into consideration while selecting study sites. For instance, in the choice of camps in Kenya, it was decided to avoid Dadaab Refugee Camp for security reasons and to choose Kakuma Refugee Camp.

2.5 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

Researcher positionality was considered a critical aspect of the study since social identities such as ethnicity, gender and class influence participant perceptions, data collection and interpretation.

From the proposal design, the project took into account these nuances by placing an emphasis on working with researchers with a lived experience of displacement. Their presence ensured that the research process was not only academically rigorous but also grounded in the realities of refugee life.

In addition to refugees, the team also involved a Ugandan who had an experience of internal displacement on account of the Lord's Resistance Army in Northern Uganda and founded a Community Based Organization to support refugees in Nakivale refugee settlement. The team worked with researchers with a lived experience of displacement in developing the research methodology, conducting research, and analyzing the data. In the project design phase, their insights helped frame the research questions in ways that moved beyond institutional understandings of leadership toward more nuanced accounts of legitimacy, contestation, and everyday political practices within refugee communities. They raised pertinent questions relating to how leadership, legitimacy, and representation are discussed within refugee communities. They also pointed out the importance of leadership in grassroots organisations, especially the informal leadership structures dominated by women, youth and individuals. Furthermore, their perspectives guided the design of tools for data collection tools that reflected the complex power relations refugees navigate. Lived experience also helped anticipate risks of surveillance, reprisal, or stigma that might arise when discussing politically sensitive issues, especially in the context of urban refugees in both Kampala and Nairobi.

During implementation, the presence of displaced researchers facilitated trust and access in settings where external researchers may otherwise have encountered significant barriers.

Shared experiences of displacement enabled the generation of more honest and nuanced accounts, particularly in relation to contentious leadership dynamics. Their linguistic and cultural fluency allowed them to capture subtleties in refugees' narratives that might otherwise have been lost in translation or filtered through institutional jargon. Furthermore, their presence helped to navigate complex community dynamics, including ethnic, gendered, and generational divisions, ensuring that a broader spectrum of refugee voices was included. In all, the involvement of researchers with displacement experience not only improved the empirical and ethical quality of the study, but also contributed to broader debates on epistemic justice by positioning refugees as co-producers of knowledge rather than as passive objects of inquiry.

3. UGANDA

3. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN UGANDA

Refugee leadership is exercised in the context of a complex set of political opportunity structures shaped by legal and regulatory frameworks, institutional arrangements, and urban and rural contexts. Uganda's legal framework creates opportunities for refugees under the open-door policies. In particular, the Refugee Act of 2006 and Regulations of 2010 allow refugees to vote and be elected at the village levels within the settlements, per Section 46(3) of the Local Government Act and the constitution. Refugees also have rights to work, to move freely, to access Ugandan basic social services, and to have a piece of land for each refugee family for their own exclusive (agricultural) use. Overall, under Uganda's Refugee Act refugees enjoy several rights, such as the rights to own and dispose of movable property and to lease or sublease immoveable property; to engage in agriculture, industry, and business; to practice one's profession; to access formal and informal employment opportunities; to economic, social, and cultural benefits, including elementary education; to benefit from protection of intellectual property rights (e.g., copyright protection for musicians and artists); and to receive a United Nations Convention travel document for the purpose of travel outside of Uganda. Refugees can also form associations and participate in community affairs, thereby providing a legal basis for community-based leadership structures in the settlements.

Since 1998, Uganda has focused on a policy of refugee self-reliance, which provides an enabling environment for refugees to depend on their own resources and capabilities to recreate their livelihoods with minimal external assistance. Betts and colleagues[27] have observed that refugees in settlements have used their economic inclusion to be innovative and enterprising, thereby contributing to the country's economy.

Despite this generosity, the legal and policy framework does not offer refugees an opportunity to become citizens.

Even where refugees stay in a protracted situation for decades, there is no transition offered for them to become citizens of Uganda, a fate shared by their children and even their grandchildren.

Refugees participate in decision making processes through several initiatives such as the Refugee Engagement Forum, District Engagement Forum, Settlement Transformative Agenda (STA), Refugee Host Population Empowerment (ReHoPE) strategy and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) secretariat co-chaired by the Minister of Disaster preparedness and Refugees and the Minister of Local Government.

Refugees are represented alongside other key stakeholders such as the government ministries, UN agencies, NGOs, and donors. Refugees are integrated into the national policy framework through the 'Settlement Transformative Agenda'.

The goal here is to include refugees into national service delivery and decision-making processes as a path to refugee self-reliance.

Refugees are also included in Uganda's National Development Plans (NDP III and IV) with the aim of mainstreaming their needs into national development planning and ensuring that they benefit from the same services and opportunities as the host population.[28] The inclusion of refugees into the national development plans also creates an entry point for line ministries and development actors into Uganda's Refugee Response.[29] Inclusion of refugees in national development plans has also provided, to a extent, space for the advocacy of Refugee-Led Organizations, thereby creating room for refugee voices in national policy making processes.

Refugee settlement administration mirrors Uganda's decentralized system of governance (see Figure 3). The government administers refugee settlements through the Camp Commandant and deputy who report to the regional refugee desk office, which reports to the Refugee Desk under the Ministry of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees in the Office of the Prime Minister.

Figure 3. Formal leadership structures for government and Refugee Welfare Committees in Uganda

Office of the Prime Minister	Refugee Engagement Forum/CRRF
Ministry of Disaster Preparedness and Refugees	District Engagement Forum
Directorate of Refugees	Refugee Welfare Committee III
Refugee Desk Office	Refugee Welfare Committee II
Camp Commandant and Deputy	Refugee Welfare Committee I

There are two identifiable forms of refugee leadership in Uganda, that is, the formal and informal. Formal refugee leadership structures (see Figure 3) constitute the Refugee Welfare Committees. RWCs were created by the Uganda government in the early 2000s to support the administration of refugee settlements akin to the Local Council structures under the decentralized system of governance. The RWCs consists of varying levels of representation from Refugee Welfare Council 1, representing households at the village level, RCW 2 representing at a zonal level, and RCW 3 representing the entire camp.[30] RWCs are legally recognized institutions anchored in the Refugee Act of 2006 under the broad interpretation of Article 48, which provides for

> **the procedure for the conduct of voluntary organizations dealing with the Office on matters concerning the activities and welfare of refugees; and the procedure for the meetings and conduct of other organizations or bodies involved in refugee activities.**[31]

– Refugee Act of 2006, Article 48

Refugee Welfare Committees are elected by refugees for refugee governance of the settlements. RWC elections are organized by the Office of the Prime Minister, Refugee Desk. Persons elected are recognized by the latter as legitimate refugee representatives who can work directly with government. RWCs act as liaisons between the government representatives within the camps and refugees, and between humanitarian agencies and the refugees. RWCs take part in the daily management of refugee settlement, including dispute resolution among refugees and between refugees and host populations. RWCs also play an important role in advocating for improved service delivery and the political participation of refugees. RWCs participate in decision making process at the district and national levels. They also form part of regular coordination meetings that bring together the government, humanitarian agencies, NGOs and Civil Society Organisations. At the RWC III level, they fulfil a function of representing refugee needs to the authorities (such as OPM and UNHCR), as well as providing feedback to the refugees of the decisions taken about refugees.

Whereas refugees can elect their leaders within the settlement, they are completely barred from any political activities within Uganda, whether at local or national levels, or against any country, including the country of origin, according to Article 35 Section d of the 2006 Refugee Act.

RWC elections take place every two years with 30% representation reserved for women. Generally, RWCs are made up of a committee of 12 members to include a Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, General Secretary, Secretary for Finance, Secretary for Security, Secretary for Women Affairs, Secretary for Youth and Sports, Secretary for Environment and Production, Secretary for Education, Secretary for Health, Secretary for Disability and Persons with Specific Needs, Counselor (RWC/LC), and two Opinion Leaders/Advisors. [32] Candidates must fulfil set criteria, that is, proper registration and documentation with the Office of the Prime Minister. In addition, they are allowed a campaign period before the final vote, which is often either by secret ballot or by queue behind a preferred candidate. RWC1 and RWC II directly draw their legitimacy from the refugees in the villages and zones, while RWC III chairs are elected by an electoral college comprised of elected RWC I and II leaders. During fieldwork, it was interesting to learn that in the last RWC campaigns in 2022, campaigns took on Uganda national party line and colors, that is Yellow for the National Resistance Movement, Green for the Democratic Party, Blue for the Forum for Democratic Change and Red for the National Unity platform, something unheard of before in refugee communities. Moreover, during the national elections, it is also common to find refugee leaders supporting a host community candidate, even though they do not participate in the formal voting.

National politics influence voting patterns in as much as refugees also expect to accrue support from the corresponding Local Councils in hosting areas to support their campaigns in the settlement but also for service delivery.

One of the barriers to meaningful refugee participation is cited as limited financial resources for the RWCs to adequately fulfil their mandate.

Although RWCs are elected by refugees, their service is voluntary. Unlike the Local Councils who receive UGX 10,000 monthly, RWCs receive no remuneration for their activities. Only the RWC III receives an in-kind contribution from the Office of the Prime Minister in the form of office space, a computer, stationery, and a motorcycle. It was established that RWC 1 and RWC II largely depend on charging a fee for official introductory letters and recommendations or benefits from land negotiations between refugees and hosts. One result of these practices is accusations of corruption and mistrust between refugees and the RWCs whom they consider to misrepresent them. In a study carried out about the RWCs in selected districts of Uganda, it was found that while RWCs are required to monitor the implementation of projects and provision of services to refugees by both government and humanitarian agencies, they often did not have adequate information or resources such as airtime, stationery, and transportation to conduct their duties.[33]

In addition, they depend on humanitarian agencies for expenses such as airtime for communication, stationery, and transport to attend crucial meetings. Consequently, inadequate resources limit the extent to which RWCs participate in decision-making processes within the settlements.

Refugees accuse RWCs for being an extension of the Office of the Prime Minster (OPM) in the settlements and not speaking up about refugee concerns nor fostering much needed change within the settlements. The OPM, specifically the Refugee Desk, provides strong centralized leadership coordinating refugee management, as well as controlling decision making at all levels from the local governments to the national level. As such, the main goals of the OPM interactions with refugee leaders are efficient settlement administration and maintenance of Law and order among the refugees, as well as between refugees and host populations. Local governments, through the decentralised system of governance, have been integrated into the refugee management system alongside the Office of the Prime Minister. While this inclusion aims at ensuring adoption of refugee friendly policies at the local levels, competition over resources, especially land and social services, continue to create tensions between refugees and hosts.

Informal leadership first emerges at the transit centres where refugees are first received. Refugees at transit centres undergo screening before being transferred to refugee settlements. These centres, which are strategically located near border entry points, facilitate the immediate needs of incoming refugees. Given that refugees may spend

from a few days to several months in a transit centre before being transferred to designated settlements, these centres are the first place where refugee leadership emerges, albeit at an informal level.

While Uganda's legal and policy framework is largely regarded as progressive and humane in comparison to many countries within the region,[34] it is not as supportive to refugee leadership as presumed. Despite the formal structures such as RWCs, refugee leadership is generally constrained in both rural settlements and urban areas. While the RWCs in rural settlements give a semblance of participation of refugees in decision making processes, in practice their roles are largely symbolic and advisory, leaving them with limited decision-making power. The role of RWCs is largely limited to conflict resolution, management of refugees within the settlement, and liaison with OPM and humanitarian actors. Decision making power remains with the Office of the Prime Minister. In addition, RWC leadership is short-term since they serve for only two years before another cohort is elected. The frequent change in RWC membership undermines leadership development, making long-term community planning rather difficult.

4. KENYA

4. POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES IN KENYA

Politically, Kenya follows a presidential system of governance. Its administration system is locally devolved. According to Berkley,[35] Kenya in 2013 replaced its previously highly centralized political structure with a more democratically accountable structure, where regional governments influence the political calculus of local elites, creating space for more diverse policy options in these contexts including refugees. Inclusion of refugees in the calculus of local government management is expected to create space within local political opportunity structures for the development of refugee leaders.

Kenya maintains a policy of control and containment of refugees in camps.

A refugee camp is designed to be a temporary settlement established to provide immediate shelter, protection and basic services.

Refugees are not integrated into the national economy and heavily rely on humanitarian assistance for survival.[36] Despite the encampment policy, there is a sizeable number of urban refugees in cities such as Nairobi, Eldoret, Nakuru and Mombasa who defy the encampment policy for several reasons such as insecurity in the camps, health and livelihood challenges.[37]

In total, 112,988 refugees are recognized as living in urban areas.[38]

> **(3) Every person who has applied for recognition of his status as a refugee and every member of his family shall remain in the designated refugee camp until the processing of their status is concluded. No refugee or asylum seeker is allowed to leave the designated refugee camp without the permission of the Refugee Camp Officer.**[39]

– Securities Law Amendment Act (2014)

Restrictions on freedom of movement are also in part linked to security concerns because of a series of terrorist attacks, which prompted the Kenyan Government in 2012 to tighten its encampment policy requiring all refugees and asylum seekers, including those residing in urban areas, to relocate to designated camps.[40] Obtaining movement permits is difficult because of restrictions on freedom of movement and delays in getting a movement permit approved. Refugee camps greatly constrain refugee integration into Kenya. Economic integration of refugees is further constrained by difficulties in obtaining work permits and business registrations. Refugees largely depend on food aid for basic survival.

Refugee management in Kenya is governed by several national laws and international obligations, including the 1951 Geneva Convention, the Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa and the New York Declaration of 2016. The primary refugee legal framework is the Refugees Act, 2021 which brings into line the country's policies with its international obligations, such as the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol, and the OAU Convention of 1969. The Refugee Act of 2021 replaced the Refugee Act of 2006 with the goal of providing a more robust framework that would safeguard the rights of refugees in line with the Constitution of Kenya.[41] The Refugee Act also provides for administrative arrangements governing refugees such as the Directorate of Refugees, responsible for refugee registration, status determination, protection, and the management of refugee camps. Although the Act upholds the rights of refugees, including access to education, healthcare, work, justice, freedom of movement, and choice of place of residence, the practice differs greatly.

Moreover, the legal framework restricts refugee political participation, limits self-organization, and creates controlled humanitarian governance structures which sideline meaningful refugee participation.

Refugees are disqualified from political participation including holding public office. The limitation also extends to political associations and political activities with fears that refugee political participation could exacerbate social tensions or threaten national security or public order.[42]

In addition, section 4 (d) of the Refugee Act of 2021 states that the government would not recognize refugees deemed to threaten national security. At the same time, section 29 (2) of the Act also authorized the denial of entry to a refugee or asylum seeker for security reasons.[43]

> **Unfortunately, the Refugee Act of 2021 approaches refugees as beneficiaries of humanitarian aid and not political actors who can take part in decision making processes.**

Refugees lack political rights. They cannot vote or formally participate in national or local governance, which greatly limits formal political engagement and the refugee voice, particularly in matters of governance, camp administration, and public policy.[44] Whereas Kenya's 2010 constitution enshrines the right to public participation, including for refugees, implementation of this provision has been inconsistent. For instance, in 2020, Kenya's Constitutional Court invalidated the Refugee Community Leader Election Guidelines.[45] The petition rose out of refugee concerns about the Refugee Community Leader Election Guidelines issued by the Refugee Affairs Secretariat (RAS) of Kenya, which require leaders of refugee groups in Kenya to be elected solely based on their areas of residence as opposed to the previous practice whereby refugee communities elected leaders based on their ethnicity or nationality.[46] The ruling was that the State Department failed to hold any public forum to gauge the concerns and obtain the input of the refugee community prior to the formulation of the Guidelines.[47]

The positive outcome of this decision was the widespread inclusion of refugee voices in the Refugee Act 2021, which included specific proposals made by refugees in relation to shared use of resources among refugees and the host community. Unlike the 2006 Refugee Act, the 2021 Refugee Act granted refugees the right to work, engage in business and access civil documentation, thereby facilitating access to rights and services, and inclusion in development plans.[48]

Refugee camp management is made up of both formal and informal structures. Formal structures are represented by the Department for Refugee Services (DRS). The department is directly under the Ministry of Interior and is responsible for camp management, security of refugees, legal frameworks, and policy implementation. At the camp level, the DRS is represented by Camp Commandants who oversee camp administration and security and enforce national laws. The Camp Commandant registers new arrivals, grants or denies permission to refugee movement through issuance of movement permits, and oversees refugee compliance to Kenyan laws, especially those governing refugees. Besides overseeing law and order within the camp in collaboration with the police and other security agencies, the Camp Commandant coordinates activities of humanitarian agencies and NGOs, and oversees activities of RLOs. Camp Commandants work closely with refugee leaders as well as other stakeholders, including UNHCR.

In both Kenya and Uganda, formal refugee leadership is hierarchical with the lower levels of the hierarchy involved in settling disputes and sharing information between the refugees and the humanitarian agencies.

Both Dadaab and Kakuma camps have elected Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs), officially recognized structures representing refugee voices. Refugee leadership within the camp governance structure is composed of block, zone and camp leaders as elected refugee representatives selected on the basis of nationality, gender, and age group. In Kakuma, Refugee Welfare Councils are a multi-tiered system made up of block leaders who report to zone leaders who in turn report to the RWC Executive Committee. The Kakuma Constitution, adopted in November 2011, lays the foundation of refugee leadership structures in the camp. While the UNHCR mentions the Kakuma constitution is followed by the main stakeholders, the refugee leaders to whom we spoke are unaware of such a document. The formal structure is supported by humanitarian agencies as well as the Government of Kenya through the Refugee Directorate.[49] The Directorate of Refugee Services, the UNHCR and implementing partners oversee the elections. Elections are carried out for block leaders, which is equivalent to a village, while zonal leaders represent a group of blocks. The election process involves spreading awareness in the community about the upcoming elections, spelling out the eligibility criteria for block and zonal leaders, and specifying who can participate in the voting process, often an individual above 18 years. The communities are called upon to nominate candidates, who are later vetted by the UNHCR, the Directorate of Refugees and humanitarian actors. Nomination of candidates often considers ethnicity and nationality in ways that reflect the demographic profile of the blocks and the zones. Voting is conducted in-person by secret ballot or by show of hands for smaller communities.

Like in Uganda, RWCs serve as intermediaries between refugees, the government of Kenya (DRS) and humanitarian agencies. They also take on responsibilities of conflict resolution within their communities, advocacy, and community mobilization. The main function of the block and zonal leaders is to facilitate the DRS engagement with the community for easier management of the camp. Block and Zonal leaders also attend the Peace Committees, which bring together the DRS, the humanitarian actors, the host population, and refugee leaders with the aim of promoting peaceful co-existence between refugees and hosts.

RWC v RLO

RWCs draw their legitimacy from the fact that they are elected by refugees through an electoral process. The government recognizes elected refugee leaders as true representatives of refugees, as opposed to leaders from RLOs, who are mainly perceived as refugee advocates.

In the Government of Kenya plans, when refugees are included in programs and policy making processes, attention is paid to the elected refugee leaders. It is the elected leaders who are most likely to be invited to formal meetings where decisions that affect refugee communities are made.

Refugee governance in Kenya is undergoing a significant shift, moving from traditional encampment models to a greater emphasis on socioeconomic integration and self-reliance.

This transition is marked by the launch of the Shirika Plan, which shifts from a humanitarian-driven response to a government-led, development-oriented approach. Officially launched in March 2024, the plan aims at promoting the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees by transforming camps into integrated settlements to alleviate pressure on hosting communities and to promote refugee self-reliance. The Shirika plan's alignment with international frameworks and its emphasis on socioeconomic inclusion of refugees is seen as one way of attracting significant international support for refugees, thereby enhancing Kenya's geopolitical standing and access to development resources. However, the Shirika plan faces a challenge of meaningful consultation with refugees, with an outstanding question of who legitimately represents refugee voices. Moreover, the plan faces a challenge of financing, especially in the face of declining resources from global donors and partners. Despite these far-reaching questions, the Shirika plan, once implemented is likely to enhance opportunities for meaningful refugee participation in decision making processes. For instance, during the drafting and launching processes, space was created for refugee leaders and RLOs' participation in decision making processes both in the camps and cities. The shift to more integrated settlements has also spurred informal and community-based leadership mainly in the form of RLOs. RLOs are increasingly becoming a prominent feature among the refugee communities in East Africa, often emerging as formalized leadership structures within refugee communities.

5. RESULTS

5.1 REFUGEE PERSPECTIVES ON MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

The active involvement of refugees in the design and implementation of policies and programs has long been considered a hallmark of effective refugee leadership within the region. Refugees' ability to take part in decisions about their lives in a meaningful way is considered as one way of ensuring that they control their lives and reduce dependency. According to a refugee leader in Nakivale refugee settlement,

> **Meaningful refugee participation means to me when refugees are given full right to voice out their challenges to say what is facing refugees.**[50]

– Interview Refugee Leader, Nakivale, June 2024

Refugee leaders mainly envisage meaningful participation in relation to taking part in decision making processes concerning their lives, leaving out participation in economic activities.[51] Meaningful refugee participation is also associated with the recognition of refugees as agents rather than passive recipients of aid.[52] Refugee leaders because of their knowledge of their communities, firsthand experience of the struggles and needs within their communities, and keen awareness of cultural norms and values believe that they are best placed to represent refugees.

Interventions without their input in the design process are often regarded as inappropriate to address their concerns. For instance, humanitarian aid emphasis on care and maintenance approaches leaves out the refugees' need for proper documentation as an empowerment tool for refugees to take control of their lives. The refugee leader's role therefore is seen as one of engaging with the various stakeholders to advocate for and speak up about refugee concerns and needs in ways that bring about lasting solutions. One leader emphasized that,

> Meaningful participation for me is to see things happening in the community, maybe because of effort that you put in or seeing engagement happening between, the host community, local authorities, local administration and refugee communities. Whereby refugees are able to converse, communicate and discuss matters with governments and humanitarian organizations. We can sit down and come up with solutions together without someone sitting somewhere and just deciding something for you. That is meaningful engagement and I like to see more of that. [53]

– Interview Refugee Leader, Nairobi, Kenya June 2024.

There remains the question of the extent to which refugee leaders, especially from among the RLOs, speak on behalf of refugee communities rather than pushing their own agenda with stakeholders.

Furthermore, meaningful participation is conceived of as having refugees at the negotiating table, not just as observers but as active participants contributing to discussions about their lives and the communities they represent. Sitting at the table without contributing meaningfully to the discussions is largely detested among refugee leaders. Refugee leaders consider useless meetings and engagements to which they are invited but not given space to articulate their communities' needs and concerns. As one refugee leader in Nakivale stated,

Filling the number at the table and a registration sheet that shows that refugees were present at the meeting but without our voices being hard cannot be considered meaningful participation. Why be invited for a meeting yet I cannot speak about the concerns of the community I represent?[54]

– Interview refugee leader, Nakivale refugee settlement, July 2024.

For refugees, meaningful participation consists of equitable relationships and respect between refugees and various stakeholders. Refugee leaders opined that there cannot be meaningful participation in situations where the relationship is lopsided in favor of the more powerful actors such as governments and humanitarian agencies.

Governments and humanitarian actors tend to look down upon refugee leaders, sometimes not taking their views as seriously. A refugee leader in Kakuma opined that,

If the stakeholders need to do something they call refugees but if refugees need them, they do nothing. If the government or agencies need something or if they are planning something it is easy for them to do. But now, when the refugees have something to tell them, it is not easy for them. First of all, in terms of access it is not easy. If you even reach them they are like a deaf ear until when they reach you. Meaningful participation means that you don't assume you need to know things about me. Knowing me is giving me an opportunity to express myself to speak about what I want you to know. It is not you who is going to speak about me, you know they always say that if someone speaks about you, there is a shortage of information. I tell you and you have to tell someone else some information will get lost, but when I am speaking directly to the decision maker, there is no information being lost. So, don't speak for us or speak about us, but let's speak about yourself because we know what we need and we know what can help us and you also listen to us when we want to speak.

– Interview refugee leader, Kakuma

For refugee communities, participation is not just voicing concerns but to also have those concerns addressed appropriately. Refugee communities and leaders are weary of attending meetings where they are only conduits of information.

Communities also get weary of presenting the same issue to their leaders and they do not see any results: "But what we see here is people who attend meetings do not speak out about our concerns. Instead they return informing us about what the OPM and the UNHCR want to do in our communities."[55] Frustrations over representation partly draw from raising specific community issues that are never resolved. For instance, in Nakivale, the longstanding issue of pastoralists grazing their animals in the refugee gardens remains unresolved and continues to strain relations between refugees and host populations.

> Since the 1990's refugees in Nakivale have complained about the host population grazing their animals in the refugee's gardens. To date we have hardly seen any tangible solution to this longstanding problem. Instead, the OPM and UNHCR ask us to promote peaceful co-existence with the hosts and social cohesion![56]

– Interview, Refugee Welfare Committee Leader, Nakivale, July 2024.

On meaningful participation, the RWCs insist that it is the refugees that know best what they want.

> I would suggest that if at all that those chances are there, we should let them be on the forefront. Because there are people who know very well the communities they are living in. Not people sitting there in the office and say you know what? [They] need this.[57]

– Interview, Refugee Welfare Committee II member, Nakivale, June 2024.

One of the barriers to meaningful participation is the label of 'refugee'. The label conjures up images of helplessness, vulnerability and lack of capacity. Refugees are widely perceived as recipients of aid and not as persons that can do anything for themselves. The perception brings about various forms of discrimination and marginalization from decision making processes. On the contrary, refugees have capacity, skills and abilities.

> **I would say that the refugees that you see in the communities that we are living in, they have capacity of doing any other thing like any other person, like hosting members. First of all, they are knowledgeable, they have skills, they have knowledge. The only shame that I can say people see on them is just called refugees, but they have capacity like any other person.**[58]

– Interview, Refugee Welfare Committee II member, Nakivale, June 2024.

Tokenism in refugee leadership, particularly by international and humanitarian organizations, refers to the practice of superficially including refugees in leadership roles or decision-making processes without genuinely empowering them or giving them substantial influence. In such cases, refugees may be given nominal positions or invited to participate in discussions, but their input is not truly valued or acted upon. This situation often results in the appearance of inclusivity and representation without the actual transfer of power, authority, or meaningful agency to refugee leaders.

Power imbalances between host governments, international humanitarian actors and refugees often result in tokenistic or superficial refugee participation. Quite often, humanitarian agencies make protection and aid distribution strategies without the involvement of refugees in a meaningful way.[59] Limited refugee involvement in program design leads to ineffective solutions that do not address refugees' actual needs.[60] Refugees are denied a right to influence polices that affect them.[61]

Tokenism may arise when participation fails to deliver change and it may alienate participants. A participation process that aims but fails to deliver co-production could be seen as tokenistic in the end. Although participation can help providers understand the lived experience of refugees, its aim is to influence decisions that lead to positive change and improvements.

" Meaningful refugee participation will be participating in a space where there is no patronage, first of all, and it's not tokenistic. You are not just being brought to say, we have two refugees on the table. It's seeing that what you have said on that table has been taken into consideration, and it has been implemented, or just the general feeling that you're being taken seriously.[62] "

– Male refugee leader, Nairobi, June 2024.

Refugees are often included in leadership roles and decision-making bodies primarily to fulfil diversity or representation quotas rather than genuinely engage their perspective or expertise.

Though they are given platforms to speak or participate, their contributions are not seriously considered in the decision-making process and their roles are often peripheral rather than central.

" **Often when a refugee speaks, it is reported as a general comment or summarized without recognizing the refugees present. Personally, I need to be allowed to make decisions on that table and I also need to be given a chance to explain myself clearly and not just brushed off.**[63] "

– Female refugee leader during FGD, Nairobi 2024.

Refugee leaders may be appointed or invited to participate without the necessary resources, training, or support to succeed in their roles, which can also lead to a lack of meaningful participation. Though some are included in organizational structures as a way to present an image of inclusivity and responsiveness to donor or public pressure, some refugee leaders do not feel that this is a sincere effort to incorporate their leadership. The actual power dynamics remain unchanged, with international or humanitarian organizations retaining control over decisions, while refugee leaders are sidelined or used to legitimize pre-determined outcomes.

In practice, refugees may be consulted on policies or programs, but their feedback is not integrated into the field decisions or plans, rendering their participation tokenistic. Furthermore, a refugee leader may be given a title or a position on a board, but without any real decision-making power or authority, making their role more symbolic than functional.

They may also be placed in roles without adequate capacity-building efforts, leading to their marginalization in discussions dominated by more resourced and trained national and international staff.

"

I was very skeptical about my contribution to the organization, because I felt like I was just part of the number and not being on the actual table, there's a difference between being on the table and leading conversations that are going to be impactful to you as a person and to your community and to you as a refugee.[64]

"

– Female refugee leader working in an INGO Kenya, June 2024

Once refugee leaders recognize that their inclusion is tokenistic, it can erode trust in the organizations involved and diminish the perceived legitimacy of the leadership structures. Tokenism often stifles the development of genuine refugee leadership by preventing refugee leaders from exercising real agency or contributing meaningfully to decisions that affect their communities. Meaningful participation requires more than presence; it demands influence, autonomy, and sustained engagement.[65] Although platforms like Uganda's Refugee Engagement Forum and Nairobi's Urban Refugee Protection Network offer promising models, they remain fragile and frequently dependent on donor support.[66]

5.2 ROLES OF REFUGEE LEADERS

5.2.1 COMMUNITY MANAGERS

RWCs hold the responsibility for managing community affairs on a daily basis.

According to the RWC II chairperson in Nakivale, one of the roles of the RWCs is to address community concerns.

"

When someone has a problem of maybe of lacking food, as a leader, you know, where to refer that person to. Then also these small issues of wrangles between the people, like the chairperson. You sit down and, you harmonize. I also work with my committee. That is, the people that are helping me to serve the village and also with other stakeholders like organization and also the OPM. For instance, where there are security concerns, I run to the police, if am told of the case that is beyond me I forward to the RWC III who may also forward to the OPM if they cannot solve it.[67]

"

– Interview, RWC II chairperson, Nakivale, June 2024.

When the RWC I cannot solve a problem, it is referred to the RWC II and or RWC III for handling. If it is beyond the capacity of the RWCIII to handle, then the OPM Camp Commandant is involved. Common problems refugee leaders address are conflicts such as over land between refugees and the host population, or over water management systems where RWCs are also in charge of the water points within the settlement in conjunction with the UNHCR among others.

5.2.2 ADVOCATES

Advocacy is one of the key roles played by refugee leaders. Refugee leaders bring community needs to the attention of major stakeholders and seek to find solutions. The role of refugee leaders as advocates is more pronounced among the RLOs and individual leaders as compared to formal structures of the RWCs and block leaders.

Advocacy is one way of giving a voice to the voiceless, articulating community needs and issues with the organizations or persons expected to effectively respond or cause a much-needed change. According to a female RLO leader in Kakuma,

> **I think one of the roles of a leader is to advocate on behalf of the voiceless, like speak on behalf of those who didn't get the chance to speak for themselves, and other leaders.**
>
> – Female RLO leader, Kakuma

Furthermore, refugee leaders also see themselves as advocates who also take action to address community concerns. For such leaders as they call out for interventions, they also find ways of meeting the community needs. According to a refugee leader in Kakuma,

> Our role is to ensure we are advocating for our community to be in peace and intervene wherever there is a conflict as a leader.
>
> Our role is to take the initiative to respond to the gaps, tackle the issues facing the refugees and take action immediately. We also have the initiative to lead youth and members of the organization to achieve their goal and make an impact in the community.
>
> – Refugee leader, Kakuma

Refugee leaders see themselves not only as advocates but also as mediators and first responders taking responsibility for all the problems that may occur in the community and solving them.

In this view, the leader is the voice and the eyes of our community, a leader doesn't speak as I do but we do. Advocacy takes on different forms and intensity depending on the context and issues. In Kakuma for instance, refugee leaders are concerned with the inadequate measures for food distributions, poor health care, increased risk of early pregnancies, and education. The most pressing issue is the lack of food because of inadequate food distribution. A participant revealed that,

> We are being given cash assistance so, they have divided us into 2 groups. There are those who get bamba chapa, so they do get this through a safaricom line, so also another group gets through bamba chakula through the ATM cards. Unfortunately, there has been a reduction in funds given for food through these mediums. It has caused anxiety with some refugees committing suicide and others forced into transactional sex with its dangers of early pregnancies.
>
> – Participant

Refugee leaders advocate and call on the World Food Program to review the food distribution and avert the adverse effects. This problem is exacerbated by the limited livelihood options because of the strict encampment policy, limited freedom of movement, and limitations on access to employment opportunities, leaving the refugees with hardly any options. With limited or no satisfactory response from the UNHCR and the WFP, communities are mobilized for protests against the status quo.

In Nakivale refugee settlement, the points of advocacy are mainly around land, such as new arrivals who do not receive land allocations, and land disputes involving refugees and host populations. Other advocacy points include issues surrounding documentation, especially access to Identity Documents and Conventional Travel Documents, as well as advocacy against Gender Based Violence within the settlement. Advocacy here is mainly carried out by the RLOs. RLOs are more vocal advocates for refugee rights and the inclusion of refugees in service delivery than the RWCs. Organizations such as the Refugee Led Network in Uganda (RELON-U) lobby for legal rights of refugees, better services, and political recognition of refugee communities. One of their notable successes has been lobbying the Kampala Capital City Authority to recognize refugee entrepreneurs, include them in city planning, and put an end to regular harassment from law enforcement personnel in the city. In Kenya, refugee advocacy is widely welcomed as one way of changing restrictive government policies. RLOs emerge not only as advocates of refugee rights but also as providers of critical services for refugees in settlements and urban areas. Most Refugee-Led Organizations in Nakivale are informal and small in size compared to Kampala, where most RLOs are registered and have formalized their activities as Community Based Organizations.

Another political opportunity structure is provided by regular engagement of refugee leaders and various stakeholders in meetings and dialogues aimed at enhancing refugee participation.

For instance, in 2021 and 2022, the International Rescue Committee with the support of various partners, including the Judiciary, Office of the Prime Minister Department of Refugees, and the UNHCR organized an organized an open dialogue with the Court Open Day for Urban Refugees and the Access to Justice Dialogue. The purpose was to operationalize the NDP II plan to integrate the Justice Law and Order Sector (JLOS) institutions to enhance access to justice for vulnerable Ugandans and refugees in Uganda under objective 8 of the Governance and Security Program. The result of this dialogue was a Refugee Reference Handbook, [68] which creates institutional space for refugee leadership and participation in the justice and governance systems in Uganda. Moreover, refugee leadership also greatly benefits from Uganda's promotion of women's rights and gender equality by enabling women to gain skills, access resources, and participate in decision-making processes, which strengthens community resilience and inclusion.[69] Through tailored training and support programs,

refugee women can take on leadership roles in their communities, serving as community mobilizers, committee members, and translators, thereby improving access to services for all refugees and fostering self-reliance.

This inclusive approach, focused on both individual empowerment and gender-sensitive programming, leads to more effective, resilient, and sustainable refugee responses.

5.2.3 COMMUNITY MOBILIZERS

One of the roles of refugee leaders is to bring together communities for collective action especially in response to issues that affect refugee communities. In both the rural and urban areas, leaders regularly call upon refugees to attend meetings, participate in community activities, and protest oppressive policies and programs. The findings show a distinction between how formal and informal leaders mobilize communities and for what purpose. Refugee Welfare Committees in Nakivale mobilize communities by calling for community meetings whereby all village residents are expected to attend and where the course of action affects villages as a whole. The authority of the RWCs lies in the fact that they act as a critical link between refugees and the Office of the Prime Minister, the UNHCR and other stakeholders. In essence, meetings called by the RWCs have an element of obligation to attend and allow refugees to receive information and feedback from the formal structures that manage refugee affairs in the settlement. The OPM and the UNHCR also go through RWCs to call for community meetings, such as during the launch of programs and initiatives the require the involvement of refugees in the settlement. Similarly, in Kakuma, block leaders link refugees to the formal management structures, acting as a key liaison between the refugees, the Directorate of Refugees Services (DRS) and the UNHCR.

Unfortunately, the government and UNHCR tend to work with RWCs and block leaders as 'community mobilizers' and not as decision makers. The paradox here is that while RWCs and block leaders interface with government and UNHCR as leaders, the latter mainly perceive them as mobilizers and a conduit of information from them to the refugee communities.

Frustrated in the way governments and UNHCR work with the refugee leaders, one leader opined that,

"

You see, leadership comes with a lot of responsibilities, most of the refugee leaders are trying to do everything possible to lead the people they are leading but their leadership is not recognized. Most of them are used as community mobilizers. The humanitarian sectors take refugees as people who are just there to mobilize. But they are leaders, they have plans, they have projects to develop but they are never given the full potential to explore their leadership.

"

– Refugee leader

Stakeholders take refugee leaders as mobilizers not as leaders who have plans and projects to develop for their people. A closer look at the Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan (2024-2025) Refugee Welfare Committees are cited as mobilizers and not as leaders who represent their communities.

"

The Refugee Welfare Councils (RWC) composed of refugees will continue to play a pivotal role in mobilizing refugees for livelihood activities and communal engagement (i.e., maintenance around water collection points, cleaning around community centers, maintenance of access roads). The partners will also work with RWCs and other community structures to select beneficiaries, based on set criteria.[70]

"

– UNHCR, "Uganda Country Refugee Response Plan"

While plans and projects for the refugee communities cannot be implemented without the endorsement and approval of the government and UNHCR, the latter are more interested in the ability of RWCs to mobilize communities for them as opposed to active engagement with them in decision making processes.

In Kampala, where there are no recognizable formal leadership structures, communities are mobilized along ethnic and nationality lines, area of residence, NGOs where they receive assistance, and Refugee-Led Organizations. Leadership is organized around community leaders such as the Somali community, the South Sudanese community, and the Ethiopian community, whose jurisdictions are area-based within the divisions of the city with no overreaching influence across the entire city. The limitation of such leadership is mainly because the urban refugees are scattered in different parts of the city.

One of the key roles of refugee leaders is to mobilize communities to collectively respond to issues that concern them.
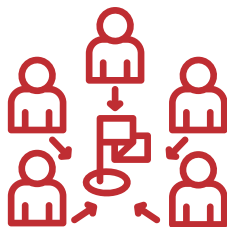
Refugee leaders start at the community levels by organizing regular meetings, building trust and finding solutions to refugee needs such as for water, health, education and conflicts between refugees and hosts. In Nakivale for instance, Refugee Welfare Council I calls for regular community meetings at least once every month. The most vibrant of these meetings is usually the Water Committee meeting because the settlement faces an acute water shortage.

At this level, RWCs mobilize communities by word of mouth and community megaphones. Refugees in urban centers, given the dispersed nature of their residences, were found to mainly use social media such as WhatsApp groups to mobilize communities for any social action or protest, as well as disseminate information about job opportunities, training, and community events. In both Kampala and Nairobi, refugees use WhatsApp groups to share information. Non-Governmental Organizations and RLOs have also found the medium useful in reaching communities. For instance, refugees use WhatsApp groups to access information from the Jesuit Refugee Services to economically empower themselves. Furthermore, community bulletins, mainly printed materials, are distributed within the settlement to inform residents of available services. Leaders also engage in individual outreach, whereby leaders engage directly with community members, especially those in need of immediate assistance.

Refugee leaders also mobilize communities to resist programs and interventions that they think are not in the best interest of their communities. In July 2024, Kakuma refugee camp was engulfed in deadly protests against extreme food cuts announced by the UNHCR and the World Food Program. Riots were triggered by the news that food rations had been cut by up to 60% per household which left refugees with only 1,000 Kenya shillings (USD 2) worth of food for a month without prior warning about the funding cuts. The cuts were also received by fears about sources for means of survival for the communities given the legal and political restrictions on refugees' freedom of movement and work, avenues that could be used to find alternative means of survival.

> **Families are starving. Even children sleep hungry for days without food. It has become hard for the refugees to fend for their families.**[71]

– Kakuma refugee leader

Refugee leaders organize protests whenever they are frustrated with food cuts, insecurity and or when seeking to voice their concerns. Whereas in the camps and settlements it is easier to mobilize refugees because of the proximity of residences, in the urban centres, refugee leaders must adopt creative ways of mobilizing and bringing people together for a demonstration. Some of the creative ways of mobilising and bringing refugees together include:

Mediation: In times of conflict, refugee leaders play a crucial role in ensuring that there is peace and that the parties involved embrace peace. Leaders are responsible for resolving conflicts and maintaining peace within their communities.

Advocacy: Refugee leaders engage in advocacy to raise awareness of the importance of refugee education and other refugee issues.

Role models: RLO leaders are looked up to by other refugees as role models in the community for the role they play in empowering their fellow refugees.

Resource mobilization: Refugee leaders mobilize resources to carry out initiatives that empower their communities. They mobilize resources from within their community, including in-kind contributions to initiatives as well as externally through local initiatives and external donors, but rarely from the private sector.

Lead and manage: Refugee leaders lead and motivate their followers to take on roles and serve their fellow refugees within their organizational structures.

Develop programs: Refugee leaders design and implement programs that address the specific needs of their communities. For instance, livelihood programs and or English literacy classes. Including referral services to other organizations and agencies.

Reporting Gender Based Violence (GBV): related cases, encouraging women's social participation such as income generating activities and education, and to identifying and responding to cases of child abuse.

5.3 REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS

RLO: Refugee-Led Organization

One of the most prominent informal refugee leadership structures are the Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs). RLOs emerge not only as advocates of refugee rights but also as providers of critical services for refugees in settlements and urban areas. It was established that RLOs emerge out of self-help groups in refugee communities as ways of finding solutions to their problems within the rural settlements or urban areas. Initiatives aimed at solving community problems such as around education of children, access to health care, and livelihoods. They arose out of a concern that the existing humanitarian services did not in several ways address their core needs for education. For instance, children from French speaking schools had found it difficult to integrate into the Ugandan schools, which use English as a language of instruction. Father Lingisi, faced with a challenge of many children not going to school, founded French schools as one way to counter this challenge. This initiative was facilitated by presence of teachers from French speaking countries among the refugee population. One such school is now the BONDEKO centre, founded in 1997 by Father Micheal Lingisi. Besides offering education for children, the centre also established an English for Adults class targeting mainly refugees from non-English-speaking countries. Between 1997 and 2025, however, needs beyond language became apparent from among the refugee communities, making it necessary to expand services to livelihood and psychosocial counselling.

Similarly, YARID (Young African Refugees for Integral Development) was established by three Congolese refugees who first brought together Congolese young people to play as one way of passing time in their community. According to a participant, the football game was aimed at keeping the young people engaged instead of becoming involved in crime and drugs within the Nsambya areas. Football was seen as a way of helping the young people get to know each other, hopefully finding ways of solving their own problems.

> **The football field in Nsambya for us became a place to meet, make friends and to find ways of how to overcome the challenges we faced.**[72]
>
> – Kampala refugee leaders

The more the young people interacted, the more they came to realise that to make it in Kampala, they had to learn English as one way of gaining access to livelihood opportunities within the city.

The organizations were founded by individuals who identified unmet needs in their communities and created avenues to resolve these challenges within their communities. They took it upon themselves to find avenues to assist their communities to overcome their challenges. Notable here, the leaders did not seek out their positions but took responsibility graduating from self help groups to RLOs. Refugee leaders see their role as first responders to community needs and as the eyes of the community:

> **The leader is a first respondent in taking responsibility for all the problems that may occur in the community and solving them, the leader is the voice and the eyes of our community, a leader doesn't speak as I do but we do.**
>
> – Kampala refugee leaders

RLOs fill gaps left by aid organizations, as well as the legitimate refugee leaders, such as the land conflicts between refugees and hosts over grazing areas, documentation, and freedom of movement issues. Others were formed as a way of advocating for more support from aid organizations.[73] Where the environment is conducive, such support results in both formal and informal networks through which refugees meet their needs. From individuals and groups coming together to solve community problems to formation of recognized organizations, RLOs go through stages of growth defined by the challenges and expectations of community members. Each stage of growth represents an increase in community expectations from the self-help phase where informal groups aim at providing services to their members.

It is important to note that RLOs are not a recent phenomenon in East Africa. RLOs existed in Uganda as early as 1997, see the case of Bondeko above.

KINTSUGI, a refugee-led community-based organization formed in 2016 in Nairobi Kenya aims to improve the lives of refugees who reside in Nairobi by advising them where to access services, while also implementing community outreach and empowerment sessions.[74]

The COVID-19 pandemic further brought into prominence RLOs as they stepped up to provide critical assistance to their fellow refugees at a time when humanitarian agencies were under strict lockdowns. Examples of Refugee-Led Organizations in Nakivale include Nakivale Green Environment Association (2016), UNIDOS Social Innovation Centre (2018), Kabazana Women's Centre (2018), and MOBAN SACCO (2016). In Kampala, examples include Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Center (1997), Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) (2007), Association of Refugee Women in Uganda (AORW-U). There is also a network of RLOs (RELON), a coalition of more than 25 refugee-led CBOs in Kampala, aiming to unify efforts, coordinate advocacy, and bolster legitimacy. In Kakuma Refugee camp, Resilience Action International (RAI) established in 2010 evolved from a self-help group into a full NGO by 2016, REHORI (Refugee and Host Resilience Initiative) was established in 2018, and Action pour le Progrès is a Community Based Organization established in 2018.

These organizations may have boards of directors, executive committees, or other governance structures that operate similarly to NGOs. Quite often the founding members also form the core leadership structure for the RLOs. Others are selected or appointed based on their skills, experience, and commitment to the organization's mission. Refugee leaders from RLOs see their roles as advocates; as a voice for the voiceless; as promoters of peace; as mediators between refugees, host populations, and main stakeholders; and as mentors for young people. Furthermore, leaders of Refugee-Led Organizations also see their roles as finding solutions to the challenges faced by refugees.

A refugee leader from Ethiopia revealed that in his engagement with stakeholders in Kenya, he advocates for the naturalization of refugees in protracted refugee situations.

"

The refugees who have stayed over time should have been given the available option rather than being a forever dependent on humanitarian aid. So, what we need is a clear structure dealing with this thing, if it is possible they could have looked at these things and resettle these people or they are being given an option to be naturalized and start a new life from what we have now. I think the government needs a clear structure to address the problem that we have.[75]

"

– Ethiopian refugee leader

Other leaders are concerned with the high levels of youth unemployment, something they see as a main cause of high incidences of crime and robberies within the camp. Their solution to this problem is to invite youth to skills development training as one way of keeping the young people busy to prevent idleness, but to also to improve their livelihood prospects.

"

What we are trying to do at a community level what we are trying to do is, to make sure every center opens up maybe to young people, maybe we give them the classes so that they become busy rather than idle. That is what is within our limit to address the challenges that we are facing so that they cannot be on the road to rob anyone but when they are in classes of learning and developing the skills they have.[76]

"

– RLO leader

Leaders of RLOs frequently engage in advocacy at local, national and international levels. Humanitarian organizations and NGOs often collaborate with refugee leaders and RLOs to implement programs and provide services. In Kampala, it was interesting to find RLOs working closely with Non-Governmental Organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Services, International Rescue Committee, Norwegian Refugee Council and the Kampala Capital City Authority to meet needs of refugees in the urban areas. Moreover, organizations such as the Refugee Led Organisation Network (RELON) brings together several RLOs in a consortium through which member RLOs can also access financing for their programs. Similarly, in Nairobi, organizations such as OXFAM, R-SEAT, and the Refugee Led Research Hub are known to work closely with Humanitarian Agencies to not only advocate for refugee rights, but also to meet needs of refugees in urban areas. These partnerships can influence leadership structures by providing resources, capacity building, and recognition. Many external organizations such as Oxfam and Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS) and Refugee Led Research Hub (RLRH) and Jesuit Refuge Services (JRS) invest in capacity-building initiatives to strengthen the leadership skills of refugees, particularly women and youth. These initiatives can lead to the emergence of new leaders who are trained in areas such as project management, advocacy, and organizational governance. The availability of funding from donors and international agencies can shape leadership structures by incentivizing certain types of organizations or activities. For example, RLOs that align with donor priorities may receive support, which can impact their influence within the community.

5.4 PARTICIPANT EXPERIENCES NAVIGATING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

This section explores how political opportunity structures, made up of both formal and informal institutional, political and environmental factors either facilitate or constrain refugee leaders' collective action and meaningful participation. Refugee leadership in East Africa takes place within a complex, multi-layered processes involving host states, international agencies, host populations and refugee communities. The interaction at the interface between these actors is shaped by legal frameworks, policies and institutional arrangements, all of which influence how leadership is organized and exercised.[77] The study establishes variations between these structures by location, rural camp or settlement or urban, and by country.

Refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda is shaped by differing political opportunity structures informed by the differing legal and policy frameworks, host government policies, and geographical setting, especially the distinction between refugee camps versus settlements.

There are also differences between rural camps or settlements, versus urban leadership structures. Uganda's settlements have a more formal structure through the Refugee Welfare Committees, while in the cities there is a more diffuse leadership structure supported especially by RLOs. In Kenya, the camp-based structure institutionalizes camp leadership. Like in Uganda, the urban refugee leadership is diffuse with the support of RLOs.

The findings of the study show that refugee leadership in East Africa manifests as both formal – whereby leaders are elected through formal processes overseen by host governments – and informal, whereby refugee leaders emerge as individuals or as heads of RLOs. Refugee leaders, elected in the settlements or camps gain access to formal recognition through Refugee Welfare Committees (settlements in Uganda) or block leaders and community leadership committees (camps in Kenya). In the urban areas, refugee leaders gain recognition through the RLOs widely seen as key advocates for the refugees.

Recognition of refuge leadership comes with opportunities to represent the refugee voice, a platform for advocacy, and resource mobilization, though with limitations discussed below.

Besides recognition by the state and UNHCR, within the urban and rural communities refugee leaders are widely seen as mediators in disputes, coordinators of humanitarian assistance, and advocates for improved service. In Nakivale for instance, RWCs participate in OPM/UNHCR coordination meetings and peace building meetings, while in Kakuma, block leaders are actively involved in coordination of humanitarian assistance and peace building efforts. According to the RWC leaders we interviewed, their presence at the decision-making table does not translate into participation in decision making processes since they lack a voice even in such fora!

Furthermore, in Uganda the regulatory framework supports refugees to found and organize themselves into RLOs.

As noted above, RLOs have managed to use the progressive refugee law that grants them residence in any part of the country to negotiate for economic inclusion at the local government and municipal levels. Refugees have attained economic integration by negotiating directly with the local governments and municipalities, circumventing the direct oversight of the Office of the Prime Minister. The ability to advocate and negotiate at a municipal level shows that within the existing frameworks refugees can exercise agency and bypass the OPM, NGOs, and UNHCR acting as gatekeepers.[78]

The legal and regulatory frameworks in Kenya and Uganda are characterized by both opportunities and restrictions for refugee leadership.

Formal leaders are expected to be an extended administrative arm of the state and UNHCR in the settlements and camps, and key conduits of information between refugees and the stakeholders. RWCs and block leaders in such circumstances are expected to remain neutral, apolitical and aligned to the state/UNHCR. From the community perspective, formal leadership structures aligned to the state are restrictive. The state and the UNHCR define the terms of engagement thereby limiting their autonomy. As a result, formal leaders often approach refugee concerns with neutrality, which leaves refugee voices and concerns rarely heard or acted upon. Expression of leadership under formal structures is largely seen as tokenistic, without the ability to push for structural change.

Furthermore, political opportunity structures determine who can become a leader under the formal structures.

From identifying who is suitable based on their language proficiency or leadership abilities, political opportunity structures privilege certain identities over others.

For instance, it was established that from the time of arrival, key stakeholders in the humanitarian response search for individuals to act as interpreters and thereby act as intermediaries between the asylum seekers and the humanitarian actors, assist in food distributions, and or organize basic services, including registrations and health screenings. In Uganda for instance, the OPM and UNHCR search for persons from the refugee communities to coordinate and pass on information, as well as receive feedback on service delivery and existing vulnerabilities within the population. Inevitably, from the point of first entry into the country, that is the transit centres, forms of refugee leadership begin to emerge. In Nakivale, it was observed that men from among the Congolese refugees are more likely to be recognized as leaders as compared to women. Furthermore, English proficiency was preferred. In urban areas such as Nairobi and Kampala, men, mainly the Congolese, dominate leadership of RLOs, with women mainly sidelined to issues of gender-based violence, reproductive health, and support of children.

Political opportunity structures also shape the access to funding for both formal and informal refugee leaders.

In Uganda for instance, to access any form of funding, a RLO must be formally registered as a Community-Based Organization under the Ministry of Internal Affairs, NGO board. In addition, they must have a bank account and financial management system. They must also be registered with the Office of the Prime Minister. The challenge, however, is that because of the bureaucracy involved in registrations, many self-help groups and RLOs are not formally registered in Uganda, something the limits their access to funds. Lack of legal recognition means that many RLOs cannot access grants or build sustainability. In Kenya, the restrictive encampment policy and legal barriers limit refugee access to registration and bank accounts. To access funds, most RLOs receive financing through established Non-Governmental Organisations, leading to funding dependency and reduced autonomy. Here RLOs are also susceptible to funding cycles, donor preferences, and policy shifts, which can have an immediate impact on their effectiveness in meeting needs of refugees. Limited resources restrict implementation of activities, including advocacy campaigns and programs that are necessary to meet community needs. Gaining access to resources requires particular skills in fundraising, report writing, and accountability. Community fundraising among refugee communities is rather limited because of the extensive poverty and limited sources of incomes among refugee communities. Consequently, refugee leaders often must find sources of funds outside their communities with donors or other humanitarian agencies. The challenge is that refugee leaders and RLOs must compete with established NGOs and Civil Society Organizations for scarce funding.

RLOs' access to funding is further constrained by RLO registration status, bank accounts, financial management procedures, and government regulations. Constraints in accessing resources disproportionately impacts women refugee leaders and self-help groups.[79]

Despite the constraints, it was found that refuge leaders exercise agency by finding creative ways to navigate and reshape political opportunity structures. For instance, while majority of the RLOs were disjointed, each operating in their own communities, leaders came up with the idea of creating networks for better management and coordination of their activities. Networks such as Refugee Led Organizations Network of Uganda (RELON) was born to coordinate the activities of the organizations. Networks present the strong informal refugee leadership by bringing together different RLOs. For instance, RELON brings together organizations such as YARID, Refugee Youth Action, BONDEKO, the African Youth Action Network (AYAN) and other RLOs. In so doing, RLOs can access both international and local funding sources to facilitate their activities and are becoming a recognisable refugee voice within the urban areas of Kampala and Nairobi. Creative organising has also taken the form of creating WhatsApp groups or other forms of digital networking through which leaders share information, opportunities, and challenges, as well as inform refugees about upcoming meetings and events. Refugee leaders address the challenge of information sharing and also limitations on freedom of movement by sharing information in a timely manner limiting, to a degree, the need for frequent movements.

In addition to the Refugee Welfare Committees, there are several forms of informal leadership within the settlements.

> **Informal refugee leadership** here refers to representation of refugees by refugees who are not officially appointed, elected or recognized as leaders by formal structures, that is the government, humanitarian actors and donors.

Generally, informal refugee leadership emerges out of a need for an individual or groups of individuals to take responsibility, to coordinate, and to be a critical link between refugee communities and the government authorities or humanitarian actors at a given point in time. Such leadership takes on several forms ranging from traditional and cultural leaders, Refugee-Led Organizations, individuals as leaders, and women and youth leaders. Within refugee settlements, refugee leadership structures are largely shaped by traditional and cultural leadership structures as exercised by communities before crossing the border. These structures often mirror the traditional leadership systems in their countries of origin. Leaders are typically elders or respected figures within the community and their authority is derived from cultural norms and practices. This form of leadership is prominent in both rural and urban settings where communities such as the Somali, Congolese, and Sudanese by their tribes subscribe to particular leaders. One form of refugee leadership is around clan and ethnic elders, for whom it is a continuation of their leadership roles prior to displacement. This form of leadership is most prominent among the Somali communities in both Uganda and Kenya.

The influence of these traditional leaders is recognized by host governments, UNHCR, and NGOs working with refugees. Community leaders exercise power over refugees mediating disputes among the refugee communities and imposing penalties according to their traditional norms and values, sometimes against the established laws of Kenya and Uganda for similar offences, as well as enforce customary law practices against female circumcision, forced marriages, and gender discrimination.[80]

In addition to cultural leaders, there are also refugee leaders who emerge as individuals to intervene in given situations.

> **Refugee leaders are largely perceived as individuals or groups of persons who 'see' a problem within the community and take action to either solve the problem or mobilize people so that they can speak in one language in having the problem solved.**[81]

Informal leaders can be women, youth, persons with disabilities, religious leaders, or businesspeople. Others are thrown into leadership roles because of their unique skills such as knowing a language. It was observed that among the South Sudanese who mainly speak Arabic, and among the Congolese and Rwandans from the French-speaking countries, a knowledge of English and/or Swahili is a significant asset. Taking on the role of interpreters, they ensure access to protection and social services within the settlements. As interpreters, such individuals become key liaisons between the government, humanitarian actors, and the refugees.

In so doing, the role casts them, for some rather reluctantly, into leadership roles. As interpreters, educated refugees negotiated on behalf of other refugees access to social services and documentation, or helped to fill out papers for resettlement. For instance, in Nairobi, a refugee youth leader revealed how becoming an interpreter later cast him into a youth leadership position with UNHCR and also community leadership. He said,

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In 2015, I started working for UNHCR here as an interpreter, as a language interpreter… for refugees from Rwanda, Burundi, and Congo, because I grew up with these people, so we could speak and that is how I also learned these languages, Kirundi, Kinyamulenge from Congo. So when I got there, that's when people in the community come to ask for help, because you now have exposure to the other side, the organization and that can be beneficial to the community. And before you know it, you find people coming to ask you for help, on issues like documentation, how to go about certain things. And because you happen to be in the organization, sometimes you get some information, not leaking any confidential information, anything like that. So, with that, I started to realize that I have a great passion for my community and the youth in particular and I like to get people together for different functions.

I'm one of the few youth leaders in the community who has not started a specific organization, but then again, ended up being very instrumental to the people in the community because of consulting for so many organizations and even so many RLOs and CBOs. Because you find people are trying to do something and they feel like you are the right person to go to for advice and the right person to advise on certain issues and in a way give guidance due to the exposure. •••

••• People have that trust in you, people feeling like you have some information that can be beneficial. I think that also contributed into that. And when I started working for UNHCR, at some point got out, started also working for other organizations who are serving refugees. I also worked with Refuge Point as a community navigator, and my role is more of the link between the community and the organization. I was in charge of this whole Dagoretti region from Jamhuri all the way to Kikuyu. My role was mainly to identify vulnerable cases in the community and just serving the people that the organization serves in the community, whether it's the ones receiving medical treatment or getting medication, whilst following up on different things.

– Refugee youth leader

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Prominence of individual leadership is also visible in the early phases of displacement in Uganda before refugees are transferred to settlements. Refugee leadership during the emergency phase is largely ad hoc and short term. During the entry phase, refugees fleeing across the border are first received at reception centres where they undergo health screening and registration of all household members. They are also provided with food – often cooked – and non-food items before transfer to the settlements or camps.

The findings indicate that on arrival, refugees often rely on informal leaders who emerge spontaneously within the community, sometimes to help organize access to services, as interpreters, as liaisons between refugees and the government/humanitarian agencies, or simply to mediate conflicts within the communities.

Informal leaders on arrival may include community leaders before flight, religious persons within the fleeing communities, and former teachers who often speak up with confidence on behalf of both refugee women and men. In Nakivale, for instance, Congolese refugees speaking English and having organizational skills take initiative to coordinate, with the humanitarian agencies, food distributions and shelter arrangements. According to the Camp Commandant in Nakivale, such individuals are often key in easing the interactions between new arrivals and in identifying needs within the community to conjure up an appropriate response. They not only communicate with fellow new arrivals but also call for patience whenever there are service delivery delays, which is always the case.

The refugee leadership structure in Kakuma is also made up traditional/clan leaders, religious leaders, women, and youth leaders who play leading roles in community mobilization, conflict resolution and community management. Elders as informal leaders take on the role of preserving cultural norms and values, at times in direct contrast to established laws. Elders among the Somali refugees for example oversee customary systems concerned with communal reconciliation as families seek redress through compensation (diya). In situations of gender-based violence, emphasis is placed on the preservation of social cohesion and pacification rather than on punishing perpetrators or protecting individual rights. [82] One drawback of cultural leaders and elders is their pursuit of strict cultural norms and values that are patriarchal in nature and are generally against the promotion of women's rights.

Leadership demands support from the community whereby community members must trust that the leader(s) can come up with a solution to their predicament or at least represent their voice to those who can better address their problems.

Gaining community buy-in for leaders is a slow and gradual process. It begins by individuals recognizing that the leaders can solve their problems before they can win their trust and support. How leaders become recognized varied from one community to another. Commenting on why they found ready acceptance among the Sudanese refugees, a refugee leader in Kakuma said that:

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Most of the households in the community are women led and are not educated, and the parents were mostly dependent on the children to in terms of organization, sharing information and passing information, reading and writing. Fathers were mostly not around, as they remained in Sudan, so the men in the community were few. Mothers therefore rallied behind us, their children and offered support in very many ways.[83]

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– Kakuma refugee leader

Leadership also comes with a level of individuality. Individuals make leaders. Individual charisma, ways of organizing and networking determine effectiveness of leadership and the size of the following.

In Kampala, among the urban refugees, leaders organize communities around themselves, leaving little room for the emergence of other leaders. There is politics in leadership: who is the leader and who is the spokesperson who represents the organization in which meeting, or better still, who is the face of the organization? Leadership here also takes on gendered dimensions with a sharp difference between male and females emerging as leaders within their communities.

Within the settlements and urban centres, refugee leaders are known to negotiate with the local governments and urban councils for better service delivery for refugees. In Nakivale, for instance, refugee-led councils often negotiate with the settlement and local government leadership for improved service delivery.[84] In Kakuma, despite the increased number of RLOs, refugees' leaders are not recognized. During a focus group in Kakuma, on the question of the challenges refugee leaders face, they revealed that not being recognized as leaders is a major problem for them:

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The recognition, we have refugee leaders who are skilled and talented and who are potential leaders. But when it comes to opportunities, we are not recognized by the high levels, like for example, the agencies, the government and all these other protocols. And when it comes to participation, refugees are left behind. Even in terms of their own policy making or discussions to do for refugees, they are left behind.[85]

"

– Kakuma focus group discussion participant

On why they were ignored by the camp leadership, refugee leaders attributed this situation in part to the security issues that arise in the camp. While the leaders tend to step in to speak up for their community members, the camp administration sometimes does not listen to their concerns, such as with security issues surrounding the curfew in Kakuma. According to one participant:

"

I will start on this happening, mostly in our community. First of all, it's about security issues. You know, we have all the protocols, such as the government of Kenya, we have the police to make the security of the refugees. But when it comes to implementation, it is not well implemented. And we have talked too much about this in different meetings, but still it is happening. You may see that someone came in the camp. Yes, we know that there is a curfew, but that at that time they came around 6 p.m., 6 30 to 7 p.m., and that someone who is at his compound, they pick him out to police station. When the leaders complain to the authorities, they are told 'you know, we are the law'. Even though they are the leaders, but they have to see how to deal with people. So refugees are not animals, and we are not business.

"

– Kakuma focus group discussion participant

The challenge here is largely because refugees are largely framed as security threats thereby restricting their participation.[86].

In the urban centres, where asylum seekers are required to undergo status determination procedures and are not considered for protection and assistance under UNHCR,

informal leaders also emerge. Here the first arrivals of any group take on a leadership role to help the newer arrivals navigate the immediate needs of food, shelter and formal registration with the UNHCR and/or Directorate of Refugees in Nairobi, or the Office of the Prime Minister in Kampala.

> **First responders – who may include women leaders, shop keepers, volunteers, or persons widely known in the community as 'refugee leaders'**[87] **– offer valuable advice and assistance to asylum seekers with regards to where to obtain assistance and how to contend with harassment and extortion by law enforcement agents, in addition to hostility from members of the public.**

Such leaders are instrumental in introducing new arrivals to organizations such as the Jesuit Refugee Services in Kampala where asylum seekers are helped to find accommodation. Others have been introduced to Refugee-Led Organizations where they quickly form networks with other refugees and asylum seekers. In addition, informal leaders also act as translators for the new arrivals in community settings as well as with their interface with formal institutions including the police of the Directorate of Refugee Services in Nairobi or the Office of the Prime Minister in Kampala.

What is evident is that leaders' access to institutional structures and decision-making spaces can expose them to leadership because of their skills and knowledge.

Knowing how the system works is an asset for such leaders. As a result, such leaders build influence with their communities by building trust, helping community members navigate complex decision-making processes, and providing insights into what is possible, whom to approach, and how for favourable outcomes. Often this work is done without self-interest of the individual but a desire to meet community needs and demands. Generally, to be a leader one does not need a position per se. Instead, they need to speak up for their communities, which makes the community willing to follow a particular individual.

 Such individual leaders transcend the limitations of associations and organizations to instead link community-based organizations and associations, as well as act as bridges to sources of support for refugees such as with states and humanitarian agencies.

Notable here, some individual leaders end up founding or being actively a part of Refuge-Led Organizations for want of a more structured way to meet community needs. However, not all individual leaders end up founding or working for Refugee-Led Organizations and/or Associations.

Unlike Uganda, Kenya's refugee policy is more restrictive and offers limited opportunities for refugee participation. The political environment in Kenya can be thought of as evolving in relation to enhancing refugee leadership and participation in decision making processes. The Refugee Act of Kenya 2021 for instance introduces several opportunities that, if implemented fully, can promote refugee leadership and participation in decision-making processes.

The Act for instance creates a Refugee Advisory Committee, which includes refugee representatives.

Not only does this committee provide an opportunity for refugee participation in decision making processes, but it is also likely to result in institutionalization of refugee leaders as refugee representatives at both the county and national levels.

Room for representation is evident in the SHIRIKA plan whereby refugees are included in the governance structure under the technical working groups. Refugees are included under the Technical Committee alongside line ministry focal points and representatives, donors, county governments, UN agencies and Development actors (World Bank, International Finance IFC, African Development Bank). If implemented fully, the SHIRIKA plan is likely to improve refugee representation and reduce dependency on external actors, paving way for refugees to actively take part in decisions that affect their lives. The SHIRIKA plan also comes at a time when there is increased advocacy for refugee participation in decision-making processes, as well as an increased number of RLOs in both Kakuma and Nairobi.[88]

The Refugee Act of Kenya 2021 also formalizes camp management, which integrates refugee leaders as critical components of governance. One of the key activities of the Department of Refugee Services is to ensure that refugee communities establish leadership structures such as the block leaders in Kakuma refugee camp, and neighbourhood leaders in Kalobeyi. Like Uganda, refugees in Kenya's camps elect their leaders.

Kakuma camp management is further reaffirmed in the Kakuma Constitution adopted in November 2011, which lays the foundation of refugee leadership structures in the Camp. The constitution stipulates refugee leadership roles, as well as how elections are conducted bi-annually to elect new leaders at block, zone and camp levels. The block is the lowest level of camp administration followed by a zone. The camp level is the highest form of administration for formal refugee leadership structures. According to the DRS,

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So we normally do elections to the zone level where the block leader is selected at the lower level of the block, thereafter, we come together and select the zone leader. So in terms of the Peace Committee each block is supposed to select two people to sit on that committee. When a block leader is selected, he or she goes back to his block and nominates two people to join the peace committee.[89]

– DRS official

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Elected leaders also represent their communities in country-level decision-making processes. Whereas the DRS promotes refugee services, this work is not without challenges. According to a DRS official in Kakuma refugee settlement, one of the challenges of identifying good leaders is that some refugees and particular communities are not willing to take up the leadership role, since they fear that taking up leadership roles would expose them.[90] Even where opportunities for participation in decision-making processes are availed, security and safety concerns may hinder active participation in leadership roles.

Furthermore, while the SHIRIKA plan aims at promoting the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees in Kenya by transforming camps into integrated settlements, there remains a challenge of successful integration. Unlike Uganda, where the move towards refugee self-reliance dates back to the 1990s and is informed by a history of co-hosting of refugees such as in West Nile where the entire host population were once refugees in South Sudan, integration is difficult to achieve with a mere policy change. As one DRS official succinctly put it,

> **Like, for real until now, to me, I don't think the hosts are really ready for the integration. Because one, they have not been made to understand what integration is all about. Since I think no one has done community engagement for the host community to make them understand this integration. How is it coming about? How will it affect or how will it benefit them?**[91]

– DRS official

Refugees, though seemingly excited about the SHIRIKA plan, remain cautious with a view that integration and improved services delivery are likely to diminish the opportunities for third country resettlement. In an engagement in Nairobi between the government, humanitarian actors and refugee leaders it came out clearly that one of the questions for the RLOs is who represents refugees in the implementation of the SHIRIKA plan. RLOs seek for a greater say in representing refugee voices, but they lack the legitimacy to do so since they are not elected refugee representatives. The concerns are founded on the fact that founding RLOs is generally seen as one path towards achieving livelihood goals by accessing resources,

however limited are the resources that come through the NGOs and various donors. Prioritizing the elected refugee representatives in the SHIRIKA plan means limits on access to resources for the RLOs.

Furthermore, RLOs operate in a rather restricted political space that leaves them very little room for maneuver. Unlike Uganda where civil society is strong and inclusive, in Kenya it is highly restricted, especially in the camps as compared to the urban areas. In Kakuma refugee camp for instance, the DRS and UNHCR enforce strict oversight over RLOs and other Civil Society Organisations operating in the camp. The government generally seeks to have control over the operations of all organizations within the camp. Ideally, they should seek permission to operate in the camp. Commenting on the growth of RLOs and operations of other agencies besides UNHCR, the DRS field officer revealed that,

> DRS being a government organization we have been facing challenges with these other agencies or even private partners. The camp is a restricted area where people operating should have permission from the Camp Manager. But you find that sometimes some private partners or even agencies will try to engage with the (refugee) community without getting permission from the Camp Manager. So sometimes we see leaders being spoiled, they tend not to value our time because when they are engaging with this private partner and they're getting money. But when attending the government or attending any other meeting where they're not given anything they do not want to show up![92]

– DRS official

While Kakuma is home to several RLOs and Civil Society Organisations, the space for operation is rather restricted and controlled by the government of Kenya. The large number of RLOs has drawn concerns about their goals, objectives and how to regulate them. During the time of fieldwork, it was ascertained that the government through the DRS was seeking for ways and means of regulating the activities of RLOs both in the camps and in urban areas such as Nairobi. The DRS is taking the lead to make sure that RLOs are registered and or assisted with the registration process and obtaining the necessary documentation. Registration of RLOs also means that government will be in a position to monitor activities of the RLOs, as well as the sources of funding and how these funds are utilized. DRS is assisting them to acquire documents required for the registration process.

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We are also interested in monitoring, and getting feedback from these RLOs, that once they register, they have activities that they are carrying out. So we will also be getting feedback on what they're doing and what's their source of funding? How did they get their funding?[93]

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– DRS official

The move towards registration of the RLOs is also linked to their ever-growing number with no clear goals and objectives. The result is that there several organisations with overlapping mandates, advocating for the same issues and representing different communities and individuals.

In the absence of a strong regulatory framework, refugee and refugee leaders have found it easy to establish RLOs, some of which are single-member organizations – 'briefcase NGOs' – which engage in advocacy and participate in various programs with the government and other humanitarian agencies. It is common to find that some RLOs represent particular communities, whereas others are single member associations, which is visible in how they attend meetings and whose views they represent.

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We have several single member RLOs. We identify them by looking at how they attend meetings. In every meeting, these individuals come alone and mention their organizations but you will never see any other person representing them. Dig deeper and you find that they have no membership yet at times they are the most vocal in meetings![94]

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– Focus Group participant

The challenge of single member RLOs in Kenya is linked to the economic challenges refugees face in the country and also the protracted nature of displacement. Moreover, refugees come from diverse countries and nationalities. To feel that their issues are well represented and articulated, they tend to subscribe to RLOs that are closely linked to their nationality and or ethnicity, which causes further fragmentation of the RLOs. Consequently, this situation has brought about competition among the RLOs, with almost each RLO seeking to prioritize their agenda and to maintain visibility. The government views this trend as worrying, and as already noted, one that demands urgent regulation.

Expressions of refugee leadership within urban centers are influenced by the legal and policy framework as well as the government attitudes towards urban refugees. Uganda's refugee policy, which grants refugees freedom of movement, has supported the decision of many refugees to live in Kampala and other emerging cities as urban refugees. Unlike Nairobi, refugees do not need a special permit to live in urban areas of Uganda and movement out of the settlements is not strictly enforced by movement permits and limits on duration of stay outside the settlement. With only a few refugees recognized under the urban case load, the majority of the refugees live as self-settled within Kampala. Within Kampala, urban refugees and host community members live side-by-side in Kampala's five divisions: Makindye, Rubaga, Central, Kawempe, and Nakawa. Unlike in the settlement, the urban refugee population is made up of a more diverse population of Congolese, Burundians, Sudanese, South Sudanese, Ethiopian, Eritreans, Rwandans, Somali, and Pakistani refugees. The refugee leadership structure is mainly structured by nationality and by RLOs. It was established that the various nationalities in Kampala have a recognized leader to whom they subscribe and who represents their issues to the Office of the Prime Minister and other stakeholders.

Furthermore, refugees in Kampala are able to organize themselves in RLOs where they speak up about their needs and use RLOs as a platform to negotiate better livelihood outcomes.

It was established that refugees focus on economic integration within the urban areas, negotiating with local governments and municipalities for inclusion into both economic opportunities and social services delivery within the urban areas. For instance, in Kampala, the Refugee Led Network Organisation (RELON) has successfully negotiated with the Kampala Capital Authority (KCCA) to humanely deal with refugee vendors and to give them space in the city markets so that they can trade at per with the Ugandan nationals.

Before we engaged with KCCA, the law enforcement officials used to harass the refugees selling on the streets, confiscating their merchandise and sometimes putting them into prison. However, gradually, we have opened up discussions with the city authorities. Now they can listen to us and I think the situation has greatly improved.[95]

– RELON Kampala

Furthermore, Kampala provides space for refugee women and young people to take on leadership roles within the RLOs or in Women Led Organisations. Inclusion of women in refugee leadership is in part a consequence of an enabling environment created by government policy that promotes women's empowerment and NGOs that promote inclusive governance with a special focus on women's empowerment. Notable here are the Somali women who have defied cultural limitations to actively advocate for the rights of refugee women. For instance, it was interesting to find Somali women in Kampala who advocate for the rights of women and employment opportunities, access to education, and health.

They also address increasing incidents of Gender-Based Violence, many times against the cultural barriers of the Somali community. Within the RLOs, women bring unique perspectives and approaches to leadership that are more collaborative, empathetic, and more focused on community welfare than their male counterparts. The women leaders interviewed also stressed the importance of men being involved and included in some of the programs being conducted to empower men in the community.

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> These displacements have made the people very vulnerable and especially the men, our most vulnerable people, although when you go to the organization for help they say no, we don't help men we only help women and ladies but I'm telling you, our men have become very vulnerable and this has led to GBV in their homes, because now it is the woman who goes out and comes back with food, it's now the woman who is working and has taken the traditional role of providing for the family, which was a man's role.[96]
>
> – Female refugee leader

These approaches can help foster stronger, more resilient communities, particularly in crisis situations, because in many communities, traditional gender roles and cultural norms can restrict women's participation in leadership. These norms may dictate that leadership is the domain of men, leading to resistance against women taking on such roles. Women and girls have less access to education and leadership training, limiting their opportunities by developing the skills needed for leadership roles.

This gap can be exacerbated by the demands of caregiving and household responsibilities that disproportionately fall on women. This situation further reinforces existing gender inequalities and makes it harder for women to break into leadership positions, where they could advocate for the needs of their communities, including other women. Women often bear a double burden of leadership and domestic responsibilities, which can limit the time and energy they can devote to leadership roles, leading to burnout or the inability to fully engage in leadership activities.

In response to these challenges, some RLOs such as YARID, RELON, and Youth Action implement women empowerment projects that specifically aim to increase women's access to education, leadership training, and economic opportunities. These initiatives are not only critical for address the gender gaps but also ensure that women can participate fully in community leadership. Although these projects have been successful in empowering women and increasing their participation in leadership roles, they at times result in feelings of marginalization, especially where young men feel left out.

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> **Women are already leaders in their community but they are humble/modest about it. I come from a community where men have been weakened because women have been empowered by most of the organizations, many of the project initiatives support mostly women and not men.**[97]
>
> – Male refugee leader

In some cases, a focus on women's empowerment may inadvertently neglect men's needs, who often face significant challenges in accessing education, employment and leadership opportunities in refugee settings. Generally, empowering women is seen as coming at the expense of men, particularly in contexts where resources are scarce, and competition for opportunities high. While it is essential to address the specific barriers that women face, there is also a need to ensure that men are not left out of the equation, as that can lead to resentment, social tension and a backlash against the progress made in women's empowerment. A more inclusive approach would therefore involve designing empowerment programs that address the needs of both women and men, recognizing that both genders face unique challenges.

By providing education, leadership training, and economic opportunities to everyone, such programs can help build stronger, more cohesive communities where leadership is shared and all members can contribute to the decision-making process.

In Nairobi, refugee leadership takes place in a restricted political and legal landscape. By promoting refugee encampment, urban refugees in Nairobi live in a situation of uncertainty. Most refugees live without any official documentation and are largely regarded as illegal living in urban centers. Therefore, they occasionally experience police harassment. Moreover, is it more difficult to register a RLO, which requires partnership with a Kenyan National or NGO before legal registration.

Consequently, many RLOs in Nairobi operate informally, something that greatly limits their voice, access to funding, and participation in decision- making processes. While in Nairobi, we met a Ugandan refugee who complained about 'his RLO' being taken over by Kenyan nationals whom he had partnered with to register the organization. He said,

> **Right now I would like to wrestle control of my Organization from the Kenyans who took it over. The law does not favour me nor do I have the resources to do so. I have approached UNHCR for assistance but so far no tangible results have come out of my efforts!** [98]

– Ugandan refugee

While refugee leaders must navigate a rather complex environment, Nairobi also offers some opportunities for meaningful refugee participation. Buttressed by a vibrant civil society of both international and national organizations, refugee leaders can leverage these networks to gain visibility, a voice, and protection. For instance, strategic partnerships with organizations such as Kituo cha Sheria, Refugee Consortium of Kenya, and the Kenya Human Rights Commission have given room to refugee leaders to challenge police harassment, push for reforms and raise awareness of urban refugee issues. Organizations such as R-SEAT and the Refugee Led Research Hub in Nairobi have further contributed to the visibility of RLOs and their recognizable voice within the decision-making fora of government, especially the Directorate of Refugee Services.

Through their regular joint workshops and meetings between major stakeholders and RLOs representatives, the two organizations have created a platform of engagement for RLOs. In April 2025, R-SEAT in partnership with Oxfam Africa, Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (REDSS) for the Horn of Africa and the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN), co-organized a two-day interactive workshop to discuss and consider ways to utilize meaningful refugee participation as a tool for an effective refugee response throughout the SHIRIKA Plan's development and implementation. The workshop provided a platform for the Government of Kenya, UNHCR, humanitarian organizations, and RLOs in the Kenya refugee ecosystem to engage with a conceptual framework on refugee participation in the Shirika Plan, developed by R-SEAT and its partners. Bringing together key stakeholders to explore concrete strategies to institutionalize meaningful refugee participation in the SHIRIKA plan's development and implementation provides insight into how RLOs in Nairobi have room for maneuver to positively influence national policies. Despite these initiatives, RLOs in Nairobi face a serious hurdle of shortage of funds and lack of access to long-term capacity building to effectively carry out their programs, even though they continue to assert their presence in resilient ways such as through informal education centers, youth entrepreneurship hubs, and cultural collectives.

Unlike Kenya, Uganda has a more progressive legal framework derived from the Refugee Act of 2006 and refugee regulations of 2010. Promoting a self-reliance strategy and implementation of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework has resulted in

visibility as well as room for refugees to voice their concerns in the Refuge Engagement Fora, even in urban areas where refugees are seemingly not included in official policy frameworks.[99]

Within both rural settlements and urban spaces, RLOs have leveraged opportunities for organizing and advocacy on behalf of refugees to also provide services,

such as seen during the COVID-19 pandemic where RLOs almost took over responsibility from established humanitarian agencies to meet needs of refugees during national lockdowns.[100] While in the rural areas refugee leadership is further strengthened by the Refugee Welfare Committees who work alongside the RLOs, it is not the same for the urban areas where RLOs are largely excluded from formal decision making processes and governance.[101]

In Kenya, refugee leadership operates in a more securitized and constrained environment marked by government concerns about national security, encampment policies and securitisation of refugees as threats rather than rights-holders.[102]

Securitisation negatively impacts leadership in as much as it hinders formal integration of refugees with host populations, which would provide opportunities for refugee leadership.[103]

Moreover, refugee communities including their leaders are vulnerable to being used as scape goats by political actors, who can exploit mass media to spread negative narratives and foster hatred.[104] For instance, refugees, especially Somalis were suspected of being behind heightened terror attacks within Kenya resulting into directives in 2012 and 2014 which sought to relocate all refugees and asylum seekers living in urban areas to the existing refugee camps.[105] Not only does this limit it recognition of refugees in urban areas but also greatly curtails refugee agency and participation in decision-making processes. This kind of narrative reinforces negative stereotypes, exacerbates discrimination, and fosters an environment of control rather than empowerment, diminishing the ability of refugee communities to self-organize, advocate for their rights, and contribute to their own protection and integration.[106] For instance, restrictions on freedom of movement have a negative impact on forming and maintaining their own structures and community organizations. This environment creates significant challenges, leading to a transition from policies of integration to stricter encampment, while also fostering discrimination and exacerbating vulnerabilities for refugees.[107] RLOs face several registration hurdles because of the security concerns even though the strong presence of international and local NGOs provide some alternative forms of refugee engagement.[108]

Overall, in both Uganda and Kenya, refugee leadership is more manifest in service delivery roles as opposed to decision making processes and opportunities for self-determination. Whereas RLOs and refugee leaders are seen as supportive of government efforts to meet the social service needs,

the same does not apply to their human rights advocacy, where they are constrained by state control that is ready to stamp out any form of dissent, such as seen in putting down of refuge riots in Kakuma 2025.[109]

> **When refugee communities are viewed primarily through a security lens, their capacity to lead, organize, and advocate for themselves is diminished, as their actions are seen as potential security risks rather than legitimate expressions of community self-determination.**

Given that RLOs are dependent on external donors and often lack direct access to sustainable funding or decision-making power[110] refugee leaders therefore must navigate a delicate balance: leveraging the limited political and institutional space available while avoiding activities that may result in repercussions.

Generally, Refugee Welfare Committee are problem solvers in their communities, arbitrators during disputes and mediators between refugees and hosts, as well as between refugees and the Office of the Prime Minister, humanitarian agencies and donors.

RWCs are not only concerned with issues reported by community members, they also work correspondingly with the host population's Local Councils to mediate and manage issues that arise between refugees and host populations.

For instance, in Nakivale settlement, RWCs and the LCs have been at the forefront of arbitrating land issues between refugees and host communities, including boundary disputes and disputes arising out of disagreements between refugees and hosts over land rented, land use, and water access. Refugee Welfare Committees also represent refugee interests in meetings convened by the OPM, UNHCR and the district local governments among others. In such meetings, including inter-agency coordination meetings at the settlement level, RWCs are more a source of information on challenges refugees are facing, with no final say on the course of action to resolve such challenges. Decision making power is largely in the hands of the OPM and the UNHCR. According to the RWC in Nakivale, when refugee leaders participate in formal meetings with the OPM and the UNHCR, they are listened to but not responded to.

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Of course they perceive refugee leaders in a good way. Like when we raise issues that are facing the refugees, they take initiative, but not as expected.[111]

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– Nakivale RWC leader

RWCs present refugee concerns to the OPM and UNHCR but have no power or authority to determine when these issues will be addressed or resolved. While some issues such as a breakdown in water services are urgent and need immediate action, the OPM and the UNHCR may not perceive it the same way. Consequently, the response rarely matches the urgency of the matter for the refugees.

Whereas RWCs have no decision-making power, the fact that they are elected refugee representatives grants them legitimacy as refugee leaders. Their position is strengthened by the fact that their role is enshrined in the Refugee Act of 2006. Refugee leaders also enjoy legitimacy based on the fact that they are elected by a diverse group of refugees by nationality, age, gender and political opinions. As noted above, the refugee settlements bring together refugees from diverse nationalities and countries of origin. For instance, Nakivale alone is host to refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Somalia, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Eritrea. RWCs are elected by all refugees irrespective of nationality, which gives the RWCs a broad mandate from all refugees within the settlement to represent refugees in decision-making opportunities under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF).

The legal and policy framework also influences who participates in decision making spaces. Whereas under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework there is a provision for involvement of refugees in decision making processes, who participates ad how these are elected are in several ways governed by the prevailing legal and policy frameworks. The CRRF is a multi-stakeholder coordination model on refugee matters focusing on humanitarian and development needs of both refugees and host communities.
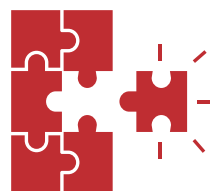
 At the heart of the CRRF is the overreaching idea that refugees should be included in the communities from the very beginning, including decision making processes.

Refugee participation in decision making processes in Uganda is made possible through the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Steering Group (CRRFSG) which consists of 35 members, with 20 seats being held by the Government (MDAs and Local Governments) engaged in the refugee response and 15 seats by non-government of Uganda agencies such as representatives of UN agencies, development and humanitarian donors, 2 elected refugee representatives, 1 representative for each of the International and National non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Private Sector and International Financial Institutions. Representation to the CRRF SG is based on nominations from within existing structures and coordination mechanisms for the refugee response.

Consequently, refugee representation is made possible through the elected Refugee Welfare Committees under their coordination body, the Refugee Engagement Forums. It was established that the Refugee Engagement Forum was established in 2018 by the Office of the Prime Minister and the UNHCR to ease communication and coordination between refugees and various stakeholders under the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework Steering Group (CRRF-SG). The Refugee Engagement Forum is a refugee representative participation mechanism designed to ensure that refugee voices are heard and considered in national decision-making processes. According to an official from the OPM,

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The Refugee Engagement Forum was formed in response to the CRRF and New York Declaration call for all actors in the refugee response including refugees to work together to better support refugees and the communities hosting them.

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– OPM official

The Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) is an exceptional participatory mechanism designed to ensure that refugee voices are taken into account at local and national decision-making levels. Supporting refugee meaningful participation in decision making processes about the way aid is designed and delivered is a global campaign that Uganda seeks to implement fully. At a national level, REF represents refugee voices at the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) Steering Group, which is also responsible for the coordination of the refugee response in the country. Generally, the REF is made up of 37 refugee leaders representing Refugee Welfare Committees from the refugee settlements and Kampala. The composition of the REF enables participation by gender, nationality, and age group including young people. In so doing the REF provides space for a national level presentation of refuge issues to the CRRF secretariat.

By composition, that is one woman and man settlement-level elected refugee leader (Refugee Welfare Committee – RWC III leader) from the 13 settlements (26), two representatives from Kampala (where positions are assigned to refugee community leaders of two different nationalities), two settlements (Bidi bidi and Adjumani settlements) with two additional representatives to reflect their larger refugee population (4) and a youth member from each of the 5 refugee desk regions following the OPM/GoU established structure (5) [112]. The youth are representative of the five regional refugee desks, that is, Arua, Adjumani, Mbarara, Hoima and Kampala Urban refugee desks.

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) can act as a political opportunity structure for refugee leadership by providing a platform for refugee participation in decision-making processes related to their own lives and communities. It fosters inclusion of various stakeholders, including refugees, in the management and governance of refugee situations, moving beyond traditional approaches that often excluded them.

Refugee participation within the REF is realized through a multi layered feedback system. Ideally, RWCs collect community concerns and priorities through community meetings at the levels RWC1 to RWC III. These concerns are presented in at the quarterly meetings which bring together all the 37 members as well as the agenda points for the CRRF-SG. Here two representatives are selected to present the REF issues and priorities at the CRRF SG for policy proposition and adoption. The feedback process is completed when the REF representatives share feedback from the CRRF SG with their communities. Despite this elaborate structure, it was observed that meetings are more an exchange of information with power skewed in favor of the OPM, UNHCR and other partners present. A review of the REF SG minutes reveals that refugee representatives hardly bring forward issues for discussion. In one meeting, a youth leader from Arua only requested more seats for youth leaders from different regions on the CRRF SG.

At a district level, refugee leaders through the REF interface with local government officials through the district Engagement Forum.

One of the main objectives of the district forum is to promote peaceful co-existence between refugees and host communities.

The District Engagement Forum is credited for promoting integrated participatory planning for inclusive service delivery by the refugee hosting local governments and integration of refugees in key decision-making processes. Through this overarching objective, it was established that District Local Governments involve refugees in the drafting of District Development Plans to reflect their needs and priorities in local government development strategies.[113] Even though these participatory mechanisms are not implemented uniformly across the refugee hosting districts, Uganda is way ahead of Kenya in promoting meaningful refugee participation. Whereas minutes of such meetings are widely shared on the UNHCR portal and accessible to both refugees and other stakeholders, the outcome information is also widely shared on the UNHCR portal. [114] Refugees are able to raise pertinent issues such as the encroachment of host population animals on refugee gardens resulting in community conflicts; pressure on public services brought about by the sharing of social services and environmental resources, including firewood, by both refugees and host populations; and inadequate infrastructure at schools, health centres and water supply. In so doing, the DEF provide room for refugees to raise their concerns within the Local Government Structures. However, the meetings of the DEF and REF are constrained by limited resources to support regular meetings including transport for the delegates.

Furthermore, besides raising issues in the DEF and REF, refugee leaders insist that often they only share information about their communities in such meetings but do not make decisions. According to one RWC of Nakivale, RWC leaders have no decision-making power within these meetings.

> " **We are basically communication channels-we bring information to the OPM and donors and we take back information to the refugees. We have no say on anything discussed in those meetings.**[115]

– RWC III committee member

Refugee leaders act with caution taking into account the fact that whatever achievements they can draw from these fora largely depends on their standing with the OPM and donors.

The government of Uganda (OPM) and UNHCR established the inter-agency Feedback, Referral and Resolution Mechanism (FRRM) to improve timely information sharing of information between refugees and various stakeholders and to provide safe, accessible and reliable communication channels to refugees and asylum seekers. By way of set up, the FRRM includes a centralized call center with an inter-agency toll-free countrywide helpline as one of its essential elements. Refugees with urgent protection cases or assistance related problems are able to lodge requests and complaints and or request for information through this system. According to the NGO representative in Nakivale,

> " When a call is received, information is immediately transferred to the relevant agency for action. Sometimes we receive very sensitive information like reporting cases of Gender Based Violence. Information received through the helpline has to be treated with utmost confidentiality.[116]

– Nakivale NGO representative

The FRRM because of its information feedback mechanisms has improved dialogue between refugees and various stakeholders and improved timely response to expressed needs. By facilitating dialogue and information sharing, it greatly reduces protests and riots as a mechanism of expressing discontent about particular programs. The FRRM is made up of several communication channels such as the toll-free helpline, suggestion/complaint boxes at protection desks, community structures such as through RWCs and face-to-face communication with refugees. Such channels support refugee information-sharing with stakeholders but not participation in decision-making processes. For the UNHCR and donors, the communication channels avert riots and strikes among the refugee population by providing an avenue for voicing of grievances.

Refugee leaders make use of meetings, workshops, and policy dialogues to draw the attention of policy makers to the needs of refugees and displaced populations.

The findings indicate that in both Uganda and Kenya, fora that are meaningful for the refuges are those that bring together key decision makers such as the Office of the Prime Minister (Department of Refugees) or Department of Refuge Services (DRS) Kenya, local government, government ministries and departments working on refugee issues, hosting District leadership representatives, UNHCR and other UN agencies, Development Partners, donors, International and Local NGOs and Civil Society Organizations, and the private sector. The ways in which fora are structured can either facilitate or constrain meaningful refugee participation, from who sets the agenda, who is invited, who attends, who speaks, and whose voice is listened to.

In Kakuma refugee camp, there are also regular formal meetings organised by the Department of Refugee Services in conjunction with the UNHCR to which block and zone leaders are invited as the elected representatives of the refugees. The main meeting that brings together refugees and stakeholders is the Peace Committee, which mainly addresses the issue of peaceful co-existence between refugees and hosts. Speaking on how the meetings are convened, the representative from the Directorate of Refugees said:

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We normally help refugees to form a structure, in the structure we have many sectors and in these sectors, committees have been formed. So the one that normally brings both the host and the refugees together is the Peace Committee. And whenever there are meetings the committees are expected to take the feedback of the meeting to the communities.[117]

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– Directorate of Refugee Services, Kakuma representative

Even where the RLOs are invited for the formal meetings, attendance is always for the elected refugee leaders who in turn are expected to take back feedback to their communities after the meetings. From the refugee leaders' perspectives in the camp, such fora are structured in such a way that governments and stakeholders collect information from the refugee leaders but do not provide feedback to the refugee leaders. Instead, they provide information that they expect the refugee leaders to pass on their communities. Moreover, issues raised by the refugee leaders are rarely implemented. This problem is made worse by the fact that refugee leaders remain powerless in obtaining decisions from the major stakeholders. Speaking about his frustrations, an Ethiopian refugee leader revealed that,

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We may do whatever we want to be heard, but the problem is there is no feedback. We don't have a strategy or a means to reach out to these people. Let's take for example, UNHCR will organize a conference where we discuss several issues, but we don't have a strategy or means to get proper feedback. Why, because they have their own structure, we are disconnected from them. They can say you participated but we don't get feedback, we don't know if these things were even implemented or not.[118]

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– Ethiopian refugee leader

In the refugee settlements in Uganda, it was established that there are regular formal meetings, policy dialogues, workshops and conferences that bring together refugees and various stakeholders on issues affecting refugees.

Formal meetings at the settlement level are organized by the Office of the Prime Minister (Refugee Desk) in conjunction with the Refugee Welfare Committees. Refugee Welfare Committees sit in these meetings as the elected representatives of the refugees. RLOs are also invited as part of the Civil Society Organizations whose role is largely seen as that of advocates for refugees. Unlike Kakuma, a sharp distinction is rarely made on who participates in such meetings.

Participation in fora is often governed by several factors. Refugee leaders are invited to participate in fora. While formal leaders such as the RWCs, and block and zonal leaders in Kakuma are often readily invited to fora as refugee representative, RLOs and individual refugees find it more difficult to access such fora. For a RLO/individual refugee leader to get an invitation, they must belong to particular networks, their activities must be visible, and above all they must be known for a particular message or advocacy issue.

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I think it will depend on each and every organization which is organizing the meeting. But who will attend will depend on how you speak, how you are related to the group because if you are a straight talker or someone having an idea that is difficult to comprehend or maybe it is challenging, you may be side-lined. So, that is why I said, it will depend on the group that is organizing because it is all about presenting the idea, they were also having an interest to protect. For example, if I tell the government today you are not doing anything no one wants to listen to such kind of talk whether the organizers or the government. So, this is what affecting. ●●●

●●● It will depend on the people who are organizing these things. So, they were selected based on the people's interest.[119]

– Kakuma refugee leader

Participation in fora requires excellent networking skills to take part or even enter given spaces. Effective networking requires leaders to build strong relations with other refugee leaders as well as with individuals in formal structures such as government and humanitarian agencies. Building networks takes time. No wonder that newly appointed refugee leaders may find it difficult to enter particular spaces compared to others. In essence it means that refugee leaders much be vocal, visible and valid in their message.

"

I can't tell but I feel like it's a matter of connections because I can't say that I don't take part or participate in the conference. If you have connections or partnerships with organizations, you are able to get that chance to attend. It is really hard for those who are just starting to be recognized.[120]

– Female refugee leader in Kakuma

While Uganda's legal and policy framework provides a good foundation for meaningful refugee participation in decision making processes, meaningful participation has not been the case in practice. Whereas Uganda's policy framework provides several opportunities, that is centralized coordination and refugee integration into national development plans,

it also characterized by several drawbacks such as lack of political will and tokenistic approaches to meaningful refugee participation. Local governments have varying capacities and political will for the adoption of refugee friendly policies. It is also at this level that Uganda has seen the greatest form of refugee advocacy and organizing with mixed results, as some manage to push through progressive policies and inclusion, while others resist refugee involvement and integration into local level programs and leadership. Kenya on the other hand maintains a restrictive encampment policy, which limits the extent to which refugee enjoy fundamental rights including freedom of movement and founding of associations. Refugees who live in urban centers go without formal recognition[121] and live at risk of police and immigration harassment. While reforms such as the Shirika Plan signal a shift toward more integrated responses, the political environment remains securitized.

5.5 CHALLENGES FOR REFUGEE LEADERSHIP

Programs co-designed with refugees are more likely to be more sustainable and relevant since they are likely to reflect the priorities and capacities of the communities. However, refugee leaders' meaningful participation faces several constraints in both Uganda and Kenya.

5.5.1 STRUCTURAL BARRIERS & POWER IMBALANCES

Generally, the greatest challenge to meaningful refugee participation lies in restrictive national legal and policy frameworks.

While Uganda is applauded for a progressive policy towards refugees, it does not provide space for political participation of refugees in national affairs. Refugees have no seat at local governments nor parliaments where decisions about their welfare are often made. In Kenya, the encampment policy that restricts freedom of movement not only constrains meaningful refugee participation, but also constrains access to livelihoods, thereby limiting their ability to participate in decision-making processes. Power asymmetries limit political representation, reinforcing dependency and marginalization of refugee leaders, as well as RLOs.

Power imbalances persist with Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR on one hand and the refugee leaders on the other. Power imbalances in Uganda mainly arise out of the fact that while refugees, especially the RWCs, participate in decision making processes, the Office of the Prime Minister and UNHCR hold final authority over all key decisions with refugees having very limited influence. Decisions that are critical to refugees relating to resource distributions, access to documentation, education services and water are decided by the OPM / UNHCR with limited involvement of the refugees. Within the settlements as noted above, refugee leadership whether formal or informal is subject to the Office of the Prime Minister. Even where through the Refugee Engagement Forum refugees access national decision-making processes, still their voices and concerns are subject to the OPM. Power imbalances are also a consequence of refugees having no political rights because they are not citizens of Uganda. The Refugee Act 2006 clearly restricts refugees from political activities within the country, thereby leaving refugees with no voting rights and ability to influence policies and programs affecting them.

This issue is most evident in the urban areas where refugees often face harassment as they attempt to eke a living out of the urban areas. This problem is made worse by the fact that refugee leaders are largely perceived as intermediaries between the government, UNHCR and donors on the one hand, with the refugees on the other hand, thereby making their participation in decision making processes more tokenistic.

In Nakivale, it was also established that while refugees attend camp meetings, they have no control or contribution to the agenda making process. However, during information sharing sessions, refugees are able to voice their community concerns.

Whereas meaningful participation is understood differently by refugee communities in both rural and urban areas, they agree on one thing that it involves having a voice to influence decisions in their communities.

Having a voice is one thing but the voice resulting into tangible outcomes for the refugee communities is another thing altogether. Moreover, which issues this voice represents remains a critical question for refugees. As noted above, there are both formal and informal refugee leadership structures in both Uganda and Kenya. In the settlements, elections are held for refugee leaders supervised by the Office of the Prime Minister and the UNHCR. Refugee leaders therefore draw their legitimacy from the fact that they were elected to represent refugees in decision-making processes at both the local and national levels.

Similarly, in Kenya, power imbalances between refugee leaders and the formal structures are in part enshrined in the Refugee Act 2021, which centralizes authority in the Department of Refugees Services, leaving the block and zonal leaders, even though duly elected, with no formal authority in decision making processes. Moreover, the block and zonal leaders are not legally recognized in national governance structures leaving the state as the ultimate authority over refugee affairs. Like Uganda, refugee political activities are restricted in as much as refugees cannot legally form or be members of any political party. The government of Kenya interacts with refugees from a security lens, fearing terrorism and instability such as from Al Shabab militants from Somalia.[122]

Such fears are used to justify restrictive policies and exclusion of refugees from formal roles. Participation in policy making processes remains tokenistic, such as seen in the SHIRIKA plan where refugee leaders' involvement is limited to 'technical working groups' with no decision-making power.

Instead, the UNHCR and NGOs continue to represent refugee interests against the ethos of meaningful refugee participation. In addition, refugee leaders remain overly dependent on external funding, leaving them with little or no say in in the design and implementation of programs. RLOs, on the other hand, as non-elected refugee leaders lack the legitimacy to speak on behalf of the refugees.

Their influence is further curtailed by the fact that they are many in number, not united and some are known to front their organizational or individual agendas as compared to pursuit of refugee community goals as a whole.

5.5.2 LIMITED CAPACITY TO ARTICULATE POLICY ISSUES

Furthermore, the capacity of the refugee leaders to articulate issues on the behalf of refugees is rather limited. Whereas a good number of refugee leaders have charisma and can mobilize communities, there remains a challenge of being able to articulate and or raise policy issues on behalf of the refugees with the relevant stakeholders.

How to design interventions that benefit them remains a challenge or even how to advise governments and humanitarian organizations in ways that cause the latter to act also remain challenges for the leaders.

Without prior training in host country refugee policies and legal frameworks, leaders find it difficult to align community concerns with prevailing policies. In both Kenya and Uganda, there remains a challenge of how to link refugee policy to national policies and programs. The study findings show how government institutions generally work in 'silos' in relation to refugees. While the departments for refugees are largely aware of the refugees and their obligations as government, this is not the same for other sectors of the government such as health, the police, immigration, education, and District Local Governments.

As a result, refugees are denied access to services that they would otherwise have received using their refugee IDs. Others have gained access to opportunities within government ministries and departments that would otherwise not be available if the refugee policies were followed strictly and to the letter. This gap in knowledge among the technocrats about prevailing refugee policies has provided refugee leaders especially in Uganda an opportunity to push for policy changes at the district local government that favor refugees, something that would have been more difficult if they had tried to push through the Office of the Minister. A case in point is convincing certain municipalities and local governments to recognize the refugee ID in granting trading licenses to refugees. In addition, some refugees have accessed national identity cards or gained admission to schools and universities not as refugees but as nationals. For some, one just has to tick a box as 'Ugandan' to be included on the list for the nationals as compared to that of foreigners. While that is generally possible in Uganda, it is more difficult in Kenya which has a stricter enforcement of rules and regulations.

5.5.3 COMPETITION BETWEEN HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND RLOs

The competition between humanitarian organizations and RLOs is a significant dynamic in the backdrop of refugee response efforts. This competition is apparent and it impacts the effectiveness, sustainability, and inclusiveness of aid support provided to refugee communities.

Humanitarian organizations, often larger and more established, have more access to funding from international donors, governments, and private sources. RLOs, on the other hand, often struggle to secure adequate funding due to their smaller size, lack of visibility, or perceived capacity limitations. This situation can create a competitive environment where RLOs struggle to secure the necessary resources to carry out their initiatives. Despite their deep understanding of local needs, RLOs may lack the administrative capacity, visibility, or networks to compete effectively for these funds. Consequently, RLOs are underfunded and remain unable to scale up their operations to meet the needs of their communities. [123]

Humanitarian organizations often control the distribution of resources and aid within refugee communities, which can lead to frustration among RLOs if they feel that their local knowledge and expertise are being overlooked or undervalued in the decision-making process.
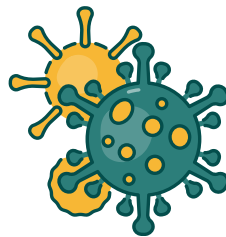
Humanitarian organizations usually operate with centralized power structures, making top-down decisions that may not fully incorporate the perspectives of refugee communities. This process can lead to tensions with RLOs, who advocate for more decentralized decision-making that includes refugees as key stakeholders. RLOs often seek greater representation and influence within the humanitarian system, pushing for recognition of their leadership and the inclusion of refugees in governance structures. Competition arises when humanitarian organizations are hesitant to cede control or share decision-making power. RLOs and community-based organizations may be viewed with skepticism by some humanitarian organizations, particularly if there are concerns around transparency or legitimacy.

Conversely, RLOs may perceive humanitarian organizations as disconnected from the realities on the ground, leading to competition over who is best positioned to lead certain initiatives.

> **If you keep giving small money, 'bread crumbing' it's not really doing the impact that it's supposed to do in the community. Give full power, give full resources, and mentor RLO leaders. Don't just give funding, allow them to grow. And if you're in a position to mentor them, mentor them and they can mentor the rest of the organization.**[124]

– Female refugee leader

The impact and relevance of RLOs was significant during the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced refugee communities to organize themselves in light of the lockdowns and restrictions on gatherings.[125]

While the pandemic brought about numerous challenges, it also created opportunities for RLOs to strengthen their roles within the refugee communities and in the broader humanitarian response.

As the pandemic disrupted the operations of many international humanitarian organizations, RLOs were often the first responders within their communities. Their ability to quickly mobilize and provide essential services, such as distributing food, disseminating health information, and supporting vulnerable community members, brought increased visibility to their work. The limitations on movement and operations for international organizations highlighted the crucial role of RLOs, which led to greater recognition from governments, NGOs, and international agencies of the value of local knowledge and leadership in crisis response. RLOs gained credibility as key partners in the humanitarian ecosystem. With the pandemic straining the capacity of traditional humanitarian actors, RLOs stepped in to fill critical service gaps and expanded their roles from advocacy and community mobilization to direct service provision, including healthcare, mental health support, education, and livelihood assistance. RLOs, refugee leaders and community-based organizations played a vital role in educating communities about COVID-19 prevention, dispelling myths, and promoting vaccination. Their culturally sensitive approaches and deep community ties made them effective leaders in public health campaigns, further solidifying their role in community leadership. Thus, the pandemic necessitated closer collaborations between RLOs and international organizations, as the latter relied more on the former's presence and insights.

5.5.4 CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN REFUGEE LEADERS

Women and youth are increasingly taking on leadership roles within refugee communities in Nairobi, often through RLO initiatives targeting these groups.

While traditional structures may limit their participation, external support and advocacy efforts have helped elevate their voices. Women and youth leaders often face challenges related to gender norms, lack of resources, and limited recognition within their communities.

However, their involvement is crucial for addressing issues such as

 gender-based violence

 education

 and youth unemployment

Leadership structures within the refugee communities are not without challenges; they can be fragmented, with power dynamics leading to rivalries or conflicts. Different groups or leaders may compete for influence, resources, and recognition from external actors. The legitimacy of leaders within the refugee communities can vary, with some leaders being widely respected and trusted, while others may be viewed with skepticism, particularly if they are perceived as being too closely aligned with external organizations or interests. Despite challenges, leadership structures within refugee communities in Nairobi often demonstrate a high degree of adaptability and resilience. Leaders and organizations are frequently required to navigate complex and changing environments, balancing the needs of their communities with the demands of external stakeholders.

The gender imbalances in migration profiles have also brought to the fore women as leaders, a traditional role often preserved for men.

The emergence of women as leaders is partly linked to displacement dynamics, policy environments, and community responses to humanitarian challenges.

While most African societies are patriarchal with community leadership roles reserved for men, forced displacement disrupts conventional household and community structures forcing women to take on non-traditional roles. Moreover, most gender-sensitive programming promotes the empowerment of women in taking up leadership roles. Women are empowered to speak up about their needs and concerns most often not addressed by male led leadership structures. Women taking on leadership roles has not always been easy because of gender stereotypes that sideline women from leadership roles. One respondent explained:

"

I started out as a secretary and not by choice but the role was imposed on me because I was a girl. My work was to take part in the meetings, take notes and be able to read out the notes. The role was given to me because I was a woman/a girl. There is a notion that top leadership (Chairperson, Assistant Chairperson) should be reserved for men.[126]

"

– Sudanese Refugee Woman leader

In both Kenya and Uganda, leadership roles are largely reserved for older men who give lesser leadership roles to women. Overcoming this form of stereotype remains a challenge for the women and often requires gender conducive environments for the emergence of female leaders. A good example here has been the emergence of refugee women advocates who speak up, despite patriarchal cultural norms and values that deny them a voice, to articulate issues pertaining to women.

Gender plays a significant role in refugee leadership, influencing both the opportunities and challenges faced by individuals in leadership positions. Gender dynamics can shape who has access to leadership roles, how they are perceived, and the effectiveness of their leadership. Women face unique barriers that limit their ability to participate and lead within their communities, yet their involvement is critical in addressing issues such as gender-based violence and access to education. The study found that women who have successfully taken on leadership roles tend to focus on issues that are often overlooked by their male counterparts, such as education, protection of women and children, and assistance for the men in their communities. For example, one of the areas missed out by the male-dominated RLOs is that of Sexual and Reproductive Health. SHE RISES in Kakuma refugee camp was mainly established to advocate on the question of Sexual and Reproductive Health and to set up a mentoring and coaching program for the high school graduates in Kakuma refugee settlement. According to the founder of SHE RISES,

> **I came up with an initiative called She rises initiative. I felt like I should not also leave behind the boy child yeah, so we basically target both in schools. We do create clubs and in the clubs we educate them on the SRH matters, and we have another club for the mentorship programs in high school. Currently we are working on how to help the teenage mothers, and then single mums. Like to train them on some life skills training. For example, we are teaching them how to make beads, and bedsheets and handcrafts within Kalobeyi. We also look for a market if possible out of Kakuma. Because that alone will help them to earn something for their family and depend on themselves.** [127]

– Founding member SHE ARISES

Women also report facing resistance from within their communities and especially in their homes, by their spouses, as well as external actors who may not fully recognize their authority.

> Jack is a young man who is able to articulate what he does in his community. Jill is not doing the same thing that Jack is doing. But imagine if Jill was doing the same, articulating what she has been doing for all those three decades, and shining the same light to what other women are doing. I think for women, they take what they do very lightly, and they don't voice it out. They don't show you; they don't document it. Because they feel like, we're just helping our people.[128]

– Kampala female refugee leader

Refugee leadership also evolved from the call for refugee participation in decision making processes in affairs that affect them as articulated in the New York Declaration of 2016 and the corresponding Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) that placed an emphasis on a whole of society approach to refugee management. According to the New York Declaration:

> […] recognizing the significant contribution and leadership of women in refugee and migrant communities, we will work to ensure their full, equal and meaningful participation in the development of local solutions and opportunities. We will take into consideration the different needs, vulnerabilities and capacities of women, girls, boys and men (paragraph 31).

– New York Declaration

Here, the declaration also emphasizes the importance of considering gender in refugee responses.

6. DISCUSSION

This study reveals that refugee participation in Uganda and Kenya operates within a complex web of political, institutional, and social tensions. While both countries host large refugee populations, their contrasting policy frameworks — Uganda's self-reliance strategy and Kenya's historically encampment-based approach — create distinct challenges for refugee leadership. It draws on the findings of the study as well as contemporary academic and policy debates to critically examine the contested nature of refugee inclusion, the dynamics of leadership, and the political frameworks within which refugee agency is both enabled and constrained. In addition, the findings illuminate core tensions shaping the legitimacy, efficacy, and inclusivity of refugee participation in both Uganda and Kenya.

6.1 RETHINKING "MEANINGFUL" PARTICIPATION

A central concern in current scholarship is the tension between symbolic and substantive forms of refugee participation. While refugee participation is increasingly emphasized in international policy frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees and its implementation mechanism, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), the reality often falls short.

Participation is frequently reduced to tokenism, wherein select refugee individuals – often those who are educated, male, and fluent in official or donor languages – are invited to participate in consultative spaces without real influence over decision-making processes.[129]

From an intersectional perspective, this selective participation is not neutral but deeply shaped by social hierarchies, including gender, age, ethnicity, and disability. Refugee women often face layered exclusions: they are underrepresented in leadership structures and disproportionately burdened with caregiving responsibilities, which further limits their ability to engage in formal political spaces.[130] Thus, meaningful participation cannot merely be about inclusion but must address the power asymmetries that determine who can participate, under what conditions, and with what level of influence.

Despite structural constraints, refugee leaders in both Uganda and Kenya demonstrate significant agency. In Uganda, RLOs (RLOs) strategically frame their work in terms of service delivery rather than overt advocacy in their interaction with local and international actors, thereby remaining relevant and non-threatening to the state.[131]

Agency of refugee leaders is also manifest in how they navigate legal channels and bureaucratic processes, creating opportunities within Uganda's legal framework,[132] and how women create spaces for themselves within the RLOs against restrictive gender social norms and practices. Refugee leaders through meaningful participation can achieve improved outcomes through everyday practices of leadership, negotiation, and innovation.[133] The study concurs with Stephenson[134] who observes that it is 'imagination-led' leadership that can enable communities to overcome social conflict and develop resilient social orders. Refugee leaders are better placed to shape the emergence of such new social imaginaries.

The study also shows how refugee leaders exercise agency by reading the situations around them and framing their action in line with the available opportunities.

In so doing, they assert their relevance in the refugee response. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic, in both Uganda and Kenya, refugee leaders distinguished themselves as critical partners to the state. With the humanitarian staff grounded by strict lockdown procedures, refugee leaders distinguished themselves as key helpers and service providers meeting needs in their communities. For instance, refugee leaders mobilized resources within their communities to assist those most in need including transporting these to hospitals and meeting community needs using meagre resources they could find.

In so doing, refugee leaders gained trust as persons or organizations that could deliver for the needs of the displaced persons, thereby strengthening their voice and relevance within the humanitarian world.

6.2 LEGITIMACY AND REPRESENTATION

Who represents the legitimate voice of refugees is one of the issues that comes out strongly when thinking about meaningful refugee participation. Legitimacy here is used to refer to which refugee leaders are recognized as credible, authoritative, and representative by key stakeholders, that is, refugee communities, host governments, and humanitarian actors. In East Africa, legitimacy is a central concept in understanding how refugee leadership emerges and functions within the broader political opportunity structures, the institutional, legal, and sociopolitical environments that enable or constrain political action by non-state actors, including refugees. Two forms of legitimacy emerge, that is the institutional/formal leadership structures that are aligned to the state and UNHCR through elections conducted in the settlements/camps and community, while community legitimacy refers to the extent to which refugee leaders are accepted and recognized within their own communities. Formal refugee structures are widely perceived as the legitimate refugee voices in decision making processes. Legitimacy is drawn from the fact that leadership is based on elaborate elections through which refugees elect their representatives from the lowest levels of camp or settlement setup. Such state recognized leadership accords a voice to the RWCs and block leaders, though absent in the urban areas.

In Uganda, Refugee Welfare Committees are recognized as the legitimate voice for the refugees by the OPM and the UNHCR. RWCs are seen as the refugees' representatives who speak on behalf of their communities in meetings convened by the major stakeholders including the CRRF steering group committee meetings. RWCs are the legitimate refugee voice under the national Refugee Engagement Forum and in the CRRF Steering Committee alongside government ministries and departments, UN agencies, donors and NGOs. In Kenya, formal leadership is exercised through the block leaders and refugee committees. Like Uganda, there are refugee community voices against the status quo arguing that block leaders are more of an extension of camp management than representatives of the refugees' aspirations. While the government has devised the SHIRIKA plan as one way of including refugees, the question remains who represents the voices of refugees or better still, whose voice is heard? From the government perspective, formally organized elections that involve all refugees give legitimacy to the block leaders as refugee representatives.

> **While formal leadership is recognised by the state and the UNHCR, it generally lacks grassroots legitimacy. Not only do the RWCs/block leaders lack decision-making power on issues concerning refugees, but also, they are widely perceived as an extension of the government and UNHCR in refugee management.**

Moreover, the state's tight control over refugee political activity—often justified by national security concerns—means that even community-elected leaders may have limited space for genuine political engagement, which may further complicate their legitimacy.

Unlike the formal structures, informal refugee leadership structures, like RLOs, enjoy widespread community legitimacy. RLOs remain vibrant among the urban refugees who, as seen in Kampala and Nairobi, are without formal leadership structures and state representation. These structures are largely grounded in ethnic associations, faith-based networks, women-led self-help groups, digital organizing (WhatsApp groups), youth initiatives, and networks that bring together different refugee organizations such as Refugee Led Organization Network (RELON) Uganda. In Kenya, informal leadership includes RLOs focussed on education, livelihoods, and women's rights.

Such informal leadership practices are often more inclusive of marginalized voices and operate in spaces not visible to or sanctioned by the state or humanitarian agencies. [135]

Legitimacy in such associations is based on trust, shared identity, responsiveness and everyday support (such as seen during the COVID-19 lockdowns in both Uganda and Kenya). Whereas refugees remain skeptical that their voices can be heard through leaders elected through the state/UNHCR-organized elections, the informal leaders face barriers in the extent to which they can represent the refugee voices.

While RLOs are eager to represent the voice of the refugees, they are not elected or chosen by refugees. From the government and UNHCR perspective they lack the mandate to represent the refugee voice in formal decision-making processes. Whereas RLOs enjoy wide support within their communities their legitimacy is limited by several factors such as how they are formed, their structure, composition, mission and objectives.

Even though the RWCs in settlements and block leaders in camps face limitations in the extent to which they can meaningfully represent the refugee voices, the plethora of RLOs in both urban and rural settings leave the RWCs as the most viable representative voice for the refugees. Moreover, leadership structures within refugee communities are diverse, reflecting a mix of traditional practices, the influence of external organizations, and the specific needs and challenges faced by these communities.

While traditional leadership systems remain important, the rise of RLOs and the involvement of women and youth in leadership are reshaping how refugee communities organize and advocate for themselves.

Despite the challenges, these structures are critical for the resilience and empowerment of refugees in both rural and urban areas.

The SHIRIKA plan in Kenya provides a unique interaction between the government of Kenya, humanitarian agencies, refugees, and donors. The process is central government led with the UNHCR, humanitarian actors and refugee leaders playing an auxiliary role. Refugee leaders are relegated to the technical working groups with the least decision-making power in the whole framework. The question remains who represents refugees in the implementation of the SHIRIKA plan. There is a discernible difference between the goals and aspirations of RLOs and the refugee elected leaders who also have the legitimacy to represent refugees. The main concern for the RLOs is how individuals and RLOs benefit from the SHIRIKA plan. Attention is paid to who represents rather than the question of where within the framework of the SHIRIKA plan do refugee leaders have the greatest opportunity to influence decision-making processes. Furthermore, representation of refugees within the framework of the SHIRIKA plan raises the pertinent question of legitimacy, that is, who is qualified to represent refugee communities. During the conversations, one refugee leader invited to Geneva for the Global Refugee Forum revealed that, "Once in Geneva, I represented the needs of my organization and not those of the refugee communities as a whole." In seeking involvement in the SHIRIKA plan, refugee leaders are keen on establishing points of entry and how to access the finances and benefits that come with the inclusion but not necessarily how to represent the needs of the refugees. In so doing, RLOs can be attributed with the power of agency, that is the capacity to process experience, make decisions and act upon them.[136]

Organizations should commit to genuinely empower refugee leaders by providing them with decision-making authority, resources, and the support needed to succeed, ensuring that refugee leaders are not just present but are also actively involved in shaping policies and programs, with their input given real weight in the decision-making process.

Investing in building the capacity of refugee leaders through training, mentorship and access to resources enables them to take on more substantial leadership roles. By moving beyond tokenism and fostering authentic refugee leadership, international and humanitarian organizations can ensure that their programs are more inclusive, effective, and responsive to the needs of the communities. That was seen during the COVID-19 pandemic, which despite its challenges, acted as a catalyst for the empowerment of RLOs and community-based organizations. Through increased visibility, expanded roles, enhanced collaboration, and innovation, RLOs strengthened their capacity to serve their communities and gained greater recognition and influence within the humanitarian sector. This empowerment not only improved the immediate pandemic response but also laid the foundation for more sustainable and community-driven approaches to refugee support in the future.

6.3 INTERSECTIONALITY

Expressions of refugee leadership in both Kenya and Uganda are influenced by gender, nationality, legal status, language and duration of stay.

Paying attention to how these factors intersect to influence expressions of refugee leadership is crucial to our understanding of the challenges refugee leaders face in navigating multiple and often overlapping forms of disadvantage. An intersectional analysis reveals how refugee leadership is differentially shaped by intersecting identities.

Leadership in refugee communities is not universally accessible. It is mediated by country of origin, socio-cultural norms, donor expectations, and institutional logics that favour certain traits and backgrounds.

For example, male leaders from dominant ethnic or religious groups are often more readily accepted by both host governments and humanitarian actors as legitimate representatives. In contrast, women and those from marginalized ethnicities face barriers to recognition and legitimacy.[137] Gender plays a pivotal role in shaping refugee leadership, with women leaders contributing valuable perspectives and advocacy for issues that are critical to the well-being of refugee communities. The findings show that while women leaders are present in both rural and urban settings, they face significant barriers, which limit their participation and effectiveness in leadership roles. Barriers such as harmful gender norms and ingrained patriarchal structures often marginalize women and girls, limiting their participation in decision-making and leadership roles.[138] In both Uganda and Kenya, gendered dynamics deeply influence who is perceived as a legitimate refugee leader, how legitimacy is acquired, and whose voices are amplified or ignored.

Uganda demonstrates a more structured approach to gender inclusion driven by donor pressure and national policy commitments but faces ongoing challenges with implementation and deep-rooted cultural norms. International agreements like CEDAW and national policies such as the Uganda Gender Policy (2007) mandate gender-responsive planning and budgeting, while donor-funded programs like the World Bank's GROW project also push for change. Despite progress in areas like financial inclusion and social protection, achieving substantive gender equality requires addressing persistent barriers in education, employment, and political leadership.[139] For instance, women's representation in formal refugee leadership bodies such as Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs) is often mandated by policy —typically through reserved quotas or affirmative action provisions.[140] However, institutional inclusion does not automatically translate to actual influence or perceived legitimacy. Women in RWCs often occupy tokenized roles and report limited decision-making power.

Their legitimacy is frequently undermined by cultural norms that prioritize male leadership, skepticism from male counterparts and even community members, and lack of institutional support for issues predominantly affecting women, such as sexual and reproductive health, childcare, or Gender Based Violence (GBV).[141]

In Kenya, women's leadership is more limited, especially in Kakuma where patriarchal norms and insecurity restrict leadership, especially in Somali-dominated areas.

Instead, leadership structures are dominated by men mainly because of patriarchal norms and selection mechanisms that do not address gender imbalances. Even where refugee women are involved in camp committees or incentive work, they often struggle for recognition within male-centric leadership hierarchies and are assigned roles aligned with caregiving or welfare, rather than political decision-making.[142] The findings of the study also indicate that women also face discrimination from leadership structures within RLOs, which are mainly dominated by men. The study demonstrated how women many times find it a challenge to take on key responsibilities within the RLOs as well as promote issues that concern women and children in particular.

Despite exclusion from formal leadership spaces, many refugee women in both Uganda and Kenya have carved out alternative spaces of influence. Some have created spaces within established RLO networks for women representation and by founding their own associations, such as SHE RISES in Kakuma to advocate for and respond to women's concerns. Others have established women's savings groups and community-based microfinance, as well as informal schools, health initiatives, and GBV survivor networks. [143]

Whereas these informal forms of leadership hold high grassroots legitimacy and strong meaning for women, they are often undervalued by humanitarian actors and host governments because they do not fit bureaucratic or masculinized models of "governance."[144]

In Nairobi, for example, while refugee women leaders have built support networks for survivors of domestic violence and urban poverty, their leaders often struggle to access donor funding, registration, or participation in official decision-making bodies.[145]

Gendered representation is also shaped by intersecting factors of ethnicity, nationality and age. Here refugee women from marginalized ethnic groups or minority nationalities face greater barriers to being recognized as legitimate leaders, especially in inter-ethnic or politically divided settlements. [146] Furthermore, age is another key factor in whether women can take on leadership roles within their communities. While the dominant literature views young refugee women as often lacking recognition as leaders, with elder male leadership dominating decision-making spaces, the findings of the study show otherwise. Young women have taken on leadership positions within their communities to promote women's issues among the urban and rural refugee communities. In both Kampala and Nairobi, it was interesting to observe Somali young women taking on community leadership roles, something largely against their cultural norms and values.

Acknowledging the women's needs in their communities with no one to help unless they stood up to do so, young women continue to defy restrictive cultural norms and values that sideline them and their concerns.

Indeed, women's representation and participation are supported by national and global gender policies and legislation.

In Uganda, for instance, gender responsive policies promote the rights of women and advocate for gender responsive programming in social services delivery, including humanitarian assistance. For example, Chapter Four of the Ugandan 1995 constitution and policies of UNHCR and United Nations Women are part of a widespread push to promote women's participation in decision-making processes and to pay attention to the specific needs of women. In Kenya, the emergence of women as leaders is partly linked to displacement dynamics, policy environments, and community responses to humanitarian challenges. Despite the opportunities for emergence of women leaders, most African societies are mainly patriarchal with community leadership roles reserved for men.

The status quo also plays out in refugee settings, where even though conventional household and community structures have been disrupted, leadership continues to be viewed in a patriarchal lens.

Furthermore, women refugees contend with sexual and gender-based violence, barriers to income-generating activities, and caregiving responsibilities, which also limit their effective participation. These intersectional factors mean that not all refugees experience the same pathways to leadership and some are structurally excluded from both formal and informal decision-making processes.

Finally, the current trend towards localizing humanitarian responses and supporting refugee-led organizations has sparked debates about autonomy and co-optation.

While RLOs are increasingly recognized and funded, critics argue that the aid system often imposes rigid accountability frameworks and capacity-building agendas that marginalize grassroots knowledge and leadership styles. This system risks reproducing the very inequalities the localization agenda claims to redress.[147]

Intersectionality deepens this critique by showing how funding tends to favour male-led, formalized RLOs that align with Western organizational norms.

Women-led and community-rooted initiatives often struggle for recognition and resources, even when they have strong local legitimacy.

6.4 REFUGEE AGENCY

In Kenya, refugee agency manifests in how refugees engage with or interact in a relational way with states, humanitarian organizations and host communities.[148] In their interactions with the state and humanitarian agencies, refugees engage in acts of resistance, adaptation, and negotiation to improve their lives. Recent protests in Kakuma 2024 were about opposition towards a reduction of food rations for the refugees.[149] Whereas the refugees complained that the reduction in food rations left their families starving, making it difficult for the refugees to fend for themselves, the camp authorities did not listen to their pleas. Refugees organized themselves collectively to challenge the injustices and cause a change.

These actions concur with Betts who also observed that refugees may exercise collective agency by organizing themselves to challenge injustices and creating self-sustaining networks.[150]

Furthermore, refugee agency is shaped by gaps in policy and service delivery, as well as available opportunities. Policies that restrict freedom of movement, the right to a travel document, and political participation in decision-making processes[151] created the opportunity for emergence of refugee leaders who contested the status quo promising to find solutions for their communities. Through grassroots organizing and mobilization, supported by a conducive environment calling for more meaningful refugee participation such as through the Global Refugees Forum, refugee leaders contested policies that did not include them. Using the global slogan of "Nothing about us without us" refugee leaders continue to advocate for inclusivity within national policies and programs such as the recently launched SHIRIKA plan in Kenya. Such advocacy, according to UNHCR, brings to the front the fact that refugees should not be seen as beneficiaries of services, but as active members of the local communities. Such advocacy is also relevant to the humanitarian agencies in causing much needed changes in the refugee policies and programs at a state level. Key policy makers and decision makers in both Uganda and Kenya, either as politicians in parliament or bureaucrats in government ministries, departments and agencies are not schooled in the rights and obligations of refugees. To push through critical policies in support of the refugee response, advocacy of refugee leaders is key in raising awareness of the need and urgency of policy reforms.

Refugees use WhatsApp groups in Uganda to mobilize refugee communities and social media to both articulate their voices and mobilize other refugees for collective action. More established leaders and RLOs use diasporic connections to mobilize resources and advocate for their rights.[152]

Political opportunity structures significantly influence refugee leaders' access to funding. In Uganda, where the national refugee policy is more inclusive, some refugee-led organizations (RLOs) are able to register and access limited donor support, although often through intermediary NGOs that control resources and visibility.[153] In contrast, Kenya's more restrictive encampment policy and limited civic space inhibit refugee leaders' ability to formally organize or receive funding directly, particularly in Kakuma and Nairobi. Additionally, donors tend to favour project-based, short-term funding that aligns with humanitarian priorities, limiting refugee leaders' autonomy. These dynamics are further shaped by intersectional factors—such as gender, language, ethnicity, and legal status—which determine which leaders are considered legitimate, visible, or "fundable."[154] Thus, while political opportunity structures do not fully determine refugee leaders' access to funding, they critically mediate it through formal rules, informal practices, and institutional hierarchies.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda, we call for changes that focus on refugee

agency

inclusion

and sustainability

For Kenya, refugee leadership can be enhanced by reforming the Kenyan refugee regulatory framework, such as the encampment system, and by reducing restrictions on freedom of movement and association. Such reforms are likely to provide room for refugee leaders to organize and meet freely, including attending critical meetings with no inhibitions. While Uganda formally boasts of a progressive refugee policy and is way ahead of Kenya, refugee leaders are not fully integrated into decision-making processes. The power imbalances within the decision-making arenas hoard decision-making to the government donors and humanitarian actors

with refugees coming to either be consulted or as conduits of information from the major stakeholders to refugee communities. Uganda has created a robust space for refugee participation across its policy frameworks such as the Refugee Engagement Forum and the Settlement Transformative Agenda. Nevertheless, refugees often fall short of full participation.[155]

Furthermore, we recommend providing prolonged capacity building programs to both refugee leaders and government institutions that interface with refugees or whose work is likely to impact refugee communities.

On the one hand, refugee leaders need to develop skills in advocacy, governance, policy analysis, fundraising, financial management, and conflict resolution. On the other hand, government ministries and departments need to be made aware of refugee policies as well as the rights and obligation of refugees and how these can be integrated into national policies and plans. Capacity building programs ideally should focus on the lowest level refugee leaders within the communities to national representatives. Capacity building does not need to be in a classroom setting. Instead working with refugees, especially young people, through mentorship programs and opportunities for research or workshops at national and global

levels can go a long way in empowering refugees and developing critical leaders. In Nairobi, it was observed that the majority of the RLO leaders were mentored through involvement in organizational activities. For example, organizations known to mentor and grow refugee leaders include the Refugee Led Research Hub, Refugees Seeking Equal Access to the Table (R-SEAT), Samuel Hall, and the Refugee Consortium of Kenya. In Uganda, organizations such as the Refugee Law Project, Jesuit Refuge Services, YARID, and RELON Uganda are also known to mentor and grow leaders.

> **Efforts to promote refugee participation often fall into tokenism: inviting select individuals into predefined spaces without shifting power or resources. Meaningful participation requires more than presence; it demands influence, autonomy, and sustained engagement.**[156]

Although platforms like Uganda's Refugee Engagement Forum and Nairobi's Urban Refugee Protection Network offer promising models, they remain fragile and frequently dependent on donor support. Donor-driven inclusion efforts must grapple with unequal capacities, lack of core funding for RLOs, and the tendency to instrumentalize refugee voices for program legitimacy.[157] To move toward meaningful participation, the system must recognize refugee leaders as political actors, not just service providers, and address the structural inequalities that limit their voice and leadership in the first place.

Funding greatly constrains the activities of refugee leaders. Refugee leaders in Uganda and even more so in Kenya cite lack of funding as a barrier to sustaining leadership. [158]

Providing long-term and direct funding to RLOs will enhance their activities and result in tangible outcomes for the refugee communities.

Before direct funding can be achieved however, there must be an enabling framework that supports RLOs to formally register and obtain a bank account, tax identification numbers, and financial education as prerequisites for accessing direct external funding. Currently, RLOs mainly access funds as parts of consortia or rerouting via NGOs, which reduces autonomy.

NOTES

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