

East Africa Study Report

Executive Summary

The Politics and Processes of Refugee Leadership



Global refugee policy increasingly calls for meaningful participation, yet refugee leadership—how displaced people influence decisions—remains underexplored, especially in the Global South. This study in Kenya and Uganda shows that leadership extends beyond protests to include policy engagement, advocacy, self-help, media, and research, often through Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs). Refugee leadership is influenced by prevailing opportunity structures, agency, and intersecting identities such as gender, ethnicity, and refugee status. In East Africa, traditional communal models of leadership adapt to displacement, emphasizing collective responsibility and negotiation within restrictive environments.

The study was carried out in two countries: Uganda (Nakivale and Kampala) and Kenya (Kakuma and Nairobi).

Refugee leaders thus emerge as key actors linking communities with institutions, reshaping responses from within. The majority of the refugees in Kenya live in camps with leadership shaped by government and UNHCR oversight. Nairobi also hosts 112,988 urban refugees who engage through Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) linking their communities to national and international actors.

112,988

urban refugees in Nairobi

The Politics and Process of Refugee Leadership: A Comparative Analysis of Factors Conditioning Refugee Leadership in the Global South

Executive Summary

Background

Global refugee policy increasingly calls for meaningful participation, yet refugee leadership—how displaced people influence decisions—remains underexplored, especially in the Global South. This study in Kenya and Uganda shows that leadership extends beyond protests to include policy engagement, advocacy, self-help, media, and research, often through Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs). Refugee leadership is influenced by prevailing opportunity structures, agency, and intersecting identities such as gender, ethnicity, and refugee status. In East Africa, traditional communal models of leadership adapt to displacement, emphasizing collective responsibility and negotiation within restrictive environments. Refugee leaders thus emerge as key actors linking communities with institutions, reshaping responses from within.

Kenya's model is camp-based, with leadership shaped by government and UNHCR oversight. Kakuma is a key hub, while Nairobi's 112,988 urban refugees engage through Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) that link communities to national and international actors.

Uganda applies a more integrated settlement approach, granting refugees land, mobility, and participation in local governance across 13 settlements in 11 districts. In Kampala, urban refugees—largely self-settled—lack formal structures but rely on RLOs to provide services, mobilize resources, and advocate for rights. By mid-2025, Uganda hosted 1.9 million refugees, with 263,373 living in Nakivale Refugee Settlement, while Kenya hosted about 849,600 refugees, with Kakuma Refugee Camp accommodating 224,082.

The participation of refugees in decision-making and leadership processes has become a central issue in humanitarian and development policy. While global frameworks increasingly call for inclusion, practice often falls short. This study explores the politics of refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda, focusing on how refugee leadership is defined, understood, and expressed within displaced communities. It analyzes variations in leadership across contexts and the factors shaping these differences, with particular attention to human agency and the intersecting roles of gender, power, and identity. Refugees remain largely viewed as aid recipients rather than partners with the capacity and leadership to influence their own futures.

Methodology

The East African case study examined refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda, focusing on how it is defined, expressed, and shaped by gender, power, and identity. Using the concepts of political opportunity structures, agency, and intersectionality, the study highlights how refugees navigate institutional and social constraints to exercise leadership. Kenya and Uganda were chosen for their shared colonial history, large refugee populations, and contrasting governance contexts that influence refugee leadership dynamics.

The study was carried out in Kenya (Kakuma and Nairobi) and Uganda (Nakivale and Kampala) combining participant observation, key informant interviews, and focus groups. Co-designed with displaced leaders, the study engaged 91 participants across the four sites through key informant interviews and focus group discussions, ensuring strong representation of both male and female perspectives.

Researchers observed refugee leaders in meetings and workshops with communities, policymakers, donors, and academics, providing insights into leadership behaviours, agendas, and strategies for influence. Fieldwork required navigating complex power dynamics and security risks in displacement contexts, which were mitigated through official authorizations, trusted networks, and strategic site selection (e.g., Kakuma Refugee Camp instead of Dadaab Refugee camp). Researcher positionality was central as team members with displacement experience brought linguistic, cultural, and contextual fluency, enabling deeper trust and nuanced interpretation. Their involvement also advanced epistemic justice by positioning refugees as co-producers of knowledge rather than mere subjects of study.

Emerging Themes

The analysis of field data reveals several emerging themes that illustrate the diverse expressions of refugee leadership, the structural barriers faced, and the contextual factors shaping participation across settlements and urban environments. Notably, gender dynamics and funding accessibility emerge consistently as critical cross-cutting issues that affect the extent and effectiveness of refugee leadership and participation.

1. Meaningful Participation

Refugees view leadership and participation as active involvement in decisions that affect their lives, not token inclusion. They emphasize recognition as skilled agents of change, yet face persistent power imbalances and tokenism from governments and humanitarian actors.

2. Roles of Refugee Leaders

Refugee leaders act as community managers, advocates, and mobilizers. They resolve conflicts, coordinate daily affairs, represent community needs, and organize collective action. Despite their central roles, humanitarian agencies often undervalue them, limiting influence to mobilization rather than decision-making.

3. Formal versus Informal Leadership

Refugee leadership operates through both formal and informal structures that shape representation and influence. In Kenya and Uganda, formal systems such as block leaders and Refugee Welfare Committees act as intermediaries between refugees, UNHCR, and government authorities, though their decision-making power is limited. Alongside these exist informal networks that often fill leadership gaps but sometimes compete with formal structures over who legitimately represents the refugee voice.

4. Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs)

RLOs are vital in service delivery, advocacy, and peacebuilding. They provide education, health, and livelihoods support while advancing refugee rights at local and global levels. Partnerships with NGOs and donors bring resources and legitimacy but risk aligning agendas with external priorities.

5. National contexts of Leadership

Refugee leadership is shaped by national policy environments. In Uganda, progressive laws enable elected Refugee Welfare Committees and structured forums for participation, though influence remains limited. In Kenya, securitization, heavy oversight, and fragmented RLOs restrict refugee leadership, particularly in urban areas. Across both contexts, refugees remain visible in service delivery but underrepresented in policymaking.

6. Funding constraints for refugee leadership

Refugee leadership in Kenya and Uganda is significantly constrained by limited and inconsistent funding. RLOs often rely on short-term, donor-driven projects routed through NGOs, which undermines their autonomy and sustainability. Barriers such as lack of legal registration, bank accounts and compliance capacity further restrict access to direct funding. This financial precarity restricts their ability to sustain initiatives, plan long-term, retain skilled leaders, and meaningfully engage in policy spaces.

Critical Gaps

Despite valuable insights into refugee leadership, the study also highlights several significant gaps that continue to limit meaningful leadership and participation. These include structural, institutional, and resource-related challenges that continue to undermine refugee agency and require targeted policy and programmatic responses.

1. Structural Barriers and Power Imbalances

Restrictive legal and policy frameworks in Uganda and Kenya limit refugee leaders' influence. In Uganda, refugees lack political rights and remain under the control of the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM) and UNHCR, making participation largely tokenistic. In Kenya, encampment policies, securitization, and the Refugee Act 2021 centralize authority in the state, leaving elected leaders with little power. Refugee voices are often overshadowed by governments, UNHCR, and donors, reducing them to intermediaries rather than decision-makers.

2. Limited Capacity to Influence Policy

Although many refugee leaders are charismatic and trusted within their communities, they lack training to articulate policy issues or align advocacy with national frameworks. Host governments across different levels and departments frequently work in silos, resulting in service delivery gaps and limited acknowledgement of refugee rights. While some Ugandan refugee leaders have managed to influence local policies (e.g., using refugee IDs to gain trading licenses), this is far more difficult in Kenya due to stricter enforcement. Ultimately, gaps in technical capacity and governance linkages impede the realization of meaningful outcomes.

3. Competition and Resource Limitations

RLOs face competition with larger humanitarian organizations for funding, legitimacy, and visibility. Humanitarian agencies dominate decision-making and control resources, sidelining refugee-led initiatives despite their community knowledge. Many RLOs are underfunded, limiting their ability to sustain or expand their work. Although COVID-19 showcased RLOs' role as first responders, partnerships with donors often result in fragmented "bread-crumbling" rather than sustainable support. This fosters dependency and undermines the sustainability of refugee leadership.

4. Gendered Barriers and Leadership perceptions

Refugee Leadership is significantly influenced by gender and the socio-political implications of the "refugee" label, which often perpetuates narratives of dependency and marginalization. These intersecting factors constrain the recognition of refugees—particularly women and youth—as capable leaders and active contributors. Gendered power dynamics and patriarchal structures further limit women's participation in decision-making, frequently relegating them to secondary or informal leadership roles. Nevertheless, women leaders continue to play critical roles in addressing issues such as gender-based violence, sexual and reproductive health, and livelihoods for vulnerable groups. Initiatives such as She Rises highlight the resilience and transformative potential of women-led leadership, underscoring the need for enabling environments and institutional support to advance equitable representation within refugee leadership spaces.

Call to Action

The study provides some specific recommendations for key actors:

1. Policy Reform

- a) Kenya: Reform restrictive refugee policies, including the encampment system, and expand refugees' freedom of movement and association.
- b) Uganda: Extend refugee integration into decision making processes to move beyond consultation and tokenistic participation.

2. Capacity Building

- a) Enhance refugee leaders' competencies in advocacy, governance, policy analysis, fundraising, financial management and conflict resolution.
- b) Build awareness within government institutions on refugee rights and integration into national policies.
- c) Support mentorship and experiential learning opportunities, especially for the youth and grassroots leaders, through partnerships with organizations already nurturing refugee leadership.

3. Meaningful Participation

- a) Move beyond tokenism by ensuring refugee leaders have real influence, autonomy, and sustained engagement in decision-making platforms.
- b) Recognize refugees as political actors, not just service providers, and address structural inequalities that limit their leadership.

4. Sustainable Funding

- a) Provide long-term, direct funding to Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) to strengthen autonomy and sustainability.
- b) Design inclusive systems for RLO registration, financial management, and access to financial infrastructure as prerequisites for direct funding.

AUTHORS

Kalyango Ronald Sebba, Zigashane Pascal, Lavender M. Mboya,
Sajja Andrew

PROJECT PAGE



LERRN

LOCAL ENGAGEMENT REFUGEE RESEARCH NETWORK



GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

Canada

This research was funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation and facilitated by LERRN, Carleton University