

REFUGEE COMMUNITIES MOBILISING IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS
IN JORDAN, LEBANON, AND TURKEY

Oroub El Abed, Watfa Najdi, Mustafa Hoshmand, and Farah Al Hamouri



This Executive Summary presents key findings from the Middle East portion of the project “Evaluation of Refugee-led Organisations in East Africa and the Middle East.” The Middle East component was designed and undertaken in dialogue with the team conducting the parallel research in East Africa, based at the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) in Nairobi. Results from the East Africa study are available at: <https://refugeeledresearch.org/> The Middle East research was facilitated through a collaboration between the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and the Centre for Lebanese Studies (CLS).¹

LERRN is a partnership of researchers and civil society partners committed to promoting protection and solutions with and for refugees. Its goal is to ensure that refugee research, policy, and practice are shaped by a more inclusive, equitable engagement of those closest to the phenomenon of forced migration. Through collaborative research, training, and knowledge-sharing, LERRN aims to improve the functioning of the global refugee regime and ensure more timely protection and rights-based solutions for refugees. LERRN’s Secretariat is based at Carleton University, in Ottawa.

CLS is an independent academic institution established in 1984 to undertake impartial and balanced research and contribute to Lebanon’s development. CLS is affiliated with the Lebanese American University in Beirut, the Middle East Centre at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, and the History Department at the University of Cambridge. Its mission is to conduct research and organise conferences that address key issues in the Middle East region. CLS opened an office in Lebanon in 2012 where it is currently affiliated and based at the Lebanese American University. This research was managed from its office in Amman.

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Researcher team

An important dimension of this research is the fact that it was designed and implemented by a research team that lives and works in close proximity to the phenomenon of forced migration in the Middle East. The team included a Regional Lead Researcher, Country Lead Researchers in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, and Refugee Researchers working with Lead Researchers to complete the country research teams. Refugee Researchers were involved from the design stage of the country-level research and played critical roles in mapping the field, conducting interviews and discussing country-level findings.²

Oroub El-Abed was the Regional Lead Researcher for this project. She is senior researcher for the CLS in Jordan and co-investigator on several projects involving diverse communities (nationals and refugees) with intersectional approaches in the Middle East. She completed her PhD in Political Economy of Development Studies from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). Her research has focused on socioeconomic conditions of refugees and vulnerable minorities in the Middle East. She has numerous publications on the topics of Palestinian refugees from Gaza living in Jordan, Palestinian-origin Jordanians and their access to economic opportunities, youth refugees and citizens in the Levant and their limited opportunities, and the ability of Iraqi and Syrian refugees in Jordan to access basic rights.

¹Report cover designed by Wafaa Najdi.

²In response to the diversity of conditions in which this research was undertaken, some research team members are referred to only by their first names.

Wafaa Najdi was the Lebanon Lead Researcher for this project. She is an architect, urban planner, and researcher. Her work focuses on the intersection between urban and refugee studies. She has conducted and contributed to research projects on social cohesion and communal relations between refugees and host communities, refugee shelter programs and housing, land and property (HLP) rights, as well as refugee entrepreneurship and digital livelihoods. She has published and co-authored several articles on these themes. Najdi is the program coordinator of the Refugee Program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University in Beirut (AUB).

The refugee research team in Lebanon included: Kholoud AH, a Palestinian refugee whose work focuses on highlighting the struggles of refugees and marginalised communities, particularly women and people with disabilities in the camp of Bourj al Barajneh; Alaa D., a Palestinian refugee living in the Beddawi camp, North Lebanon, who works in the humanitarian sector and recently co-founded a refugee-led initiative that aims to provide community service projects to the residents of the camp; Amin K., a Syrian refugee living in the Bekaa who works at a refugee-led initiative; and Sageda M., a Syrian refugee living in Tripoli.

Mustafa Hoshmand, originally from Afghanistan, was the Turkey Lead Researcher for this project. He holds an MSc in Quantitative Economics from the University of Glasgow. His lived experience as a refugee in Iran has informed his research and practice to support refugee communities. His experience of working with refugees began in 2016 when he started to volunteer with a local NGO, working on the well-being and empowerment of refugees in Istanbul. He also served as a project manager within that same NGO which provided educational and social events for unaccompanied Afghan, Iranian, and Syrian minors. Moreover, he has provided volunteer interpretation services from and to Turkish, Dari, Arabic and English in many local and international NGOs in Turkey.

The refugee research team in Turkey included, Imad, a refugee from Syria living in Turkey since 2016 who has a bachelor's degree in information technology; Mohammad, a refugee from Syria, living in Turkey since 2015 and has a master's degree in civilization studies; Yasmin, a refugee from Syria, living in Turkey since 2017 and has a bachelor's degree in communication and political science and international relations; and Mohammed, a refugee from Syria, living in Turkey since 2016 and has a high school diploma.

Farah Al Hamouri joined the team as Jordan Lead Researcher for the final stages of the project replacing Osama Okour who served as Jordan Lead Researcher for the desk research and mapping phases of this project, and who conducted a good part of the face-to-face interviews. Farah holds a master's degree in Social Work focusing on refugees and migration. She has been involved in training of students focusing on facilitation skills, helpline services, and relational needs. She also has more than eight years of experience working with a range of research projects on refugees in Jordan.

The refugee research team in Jordan included: Mubarak A. who works with the Sudanese community in east Amman, runs an RLO teaching English and was an active volunteer at Sawyan; Sarah M, a Syrian refugee in Amman; Faisal A., a Palestinian refugee from Gaza; and Adib and Ibrahim, both Syrian refugees currently studying for their masters in social work.

Introduction

Since 2016, there has been a commitment by the international humanitarian community to devolve funding and decision-making power to national and local actors, known as the localisation of aid. At the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, there was an emphasis on the importance of supporting 'crisis affected people' as first responders. Furthermore, in the Grand Bargain, the idea of strengthening local humanitarian actors' capacities, along with access to funding and information, was presented as having the potential to enhance the effectiveness of the humanitarian response due to the contextual and cultural knowledge of local and national responders. Likewise, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees placed an emphasis on enhancing refugee self-reliance and recognising the value of refugee participation in decision-making.

In light of these developments, and the increased attention paid to refugee-led responses since the early days of the lockdown caused by COVID-19 pandemic, this project has examined refugee-led responses in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey and the potential role they have been able to play in light of the politics of the host states. Our research has been animated by four questions:

1. What is the nature and scope of refugee-led responses in diverse contexts in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey?
2. How do various actors perceive the impact of refugee-led responses, especially in light of other forms of humanitarian response?
3. What are the opportunities and constraints, including local, national, and international politics, that shape the work of refugee-led responses, in general, and Refugee-led Organisations (RLOs) in particular?
4. What are some best practices from RLOs and mechanisms to reduce the barriers that RLOs encounter in order to enhance their impact?

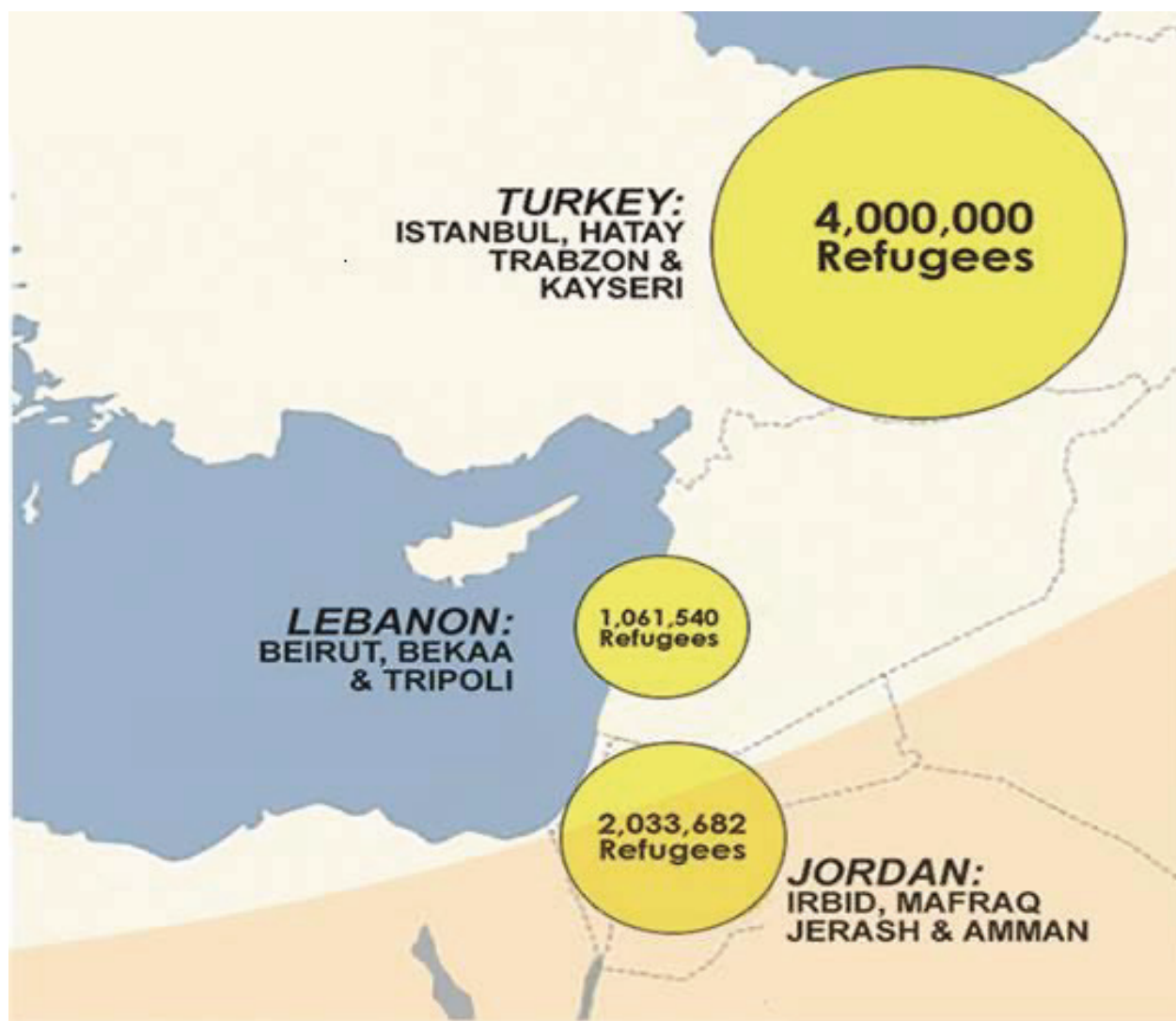
To answer these questions, we have contextualised the mobilisation of refugees within local, national, regional and international ecosystems in order to understand the role they have been able to play within these structures. We situate refugee mobilisation within the diverse policy environments of the Middle East to understand the possible structures they managed to create for themselves and the impact they are inflicting on their communities.

Through 18-months of desk research, mapping, field research, interviews, focus groups and comparative analysis, we have identified various patterns and types of refugee-led responses, including a limited number of registered RLOs, along with a much wider range and greater number of more informal and typically smaller RLOs. Given the restrictive regulations of host countries and the requirements of donors, the majority of RLOs are not registered, especially in Jordan and Lebanon, have not been able to secure external funding, and have very limited visibility beyond the communities they serve.

Through this work, we seek to highlight the important role of the localised humanitarian supported by refugees, regardless of the size and registration status of their organisations. The findings of this research highlight the agency of refugee communities, their ability to evaluate choices and make decisions. The work focuses on the role of agency and the capacity of refugees to take action, albeit very restrictive policy environments. These findings provide important evidence for policymakers, funders, and practitioners to guide their engagement with various types of RLOs in the region, mindful of the diverse structures, strategies, and levels of formality that refugee-led responses assume.

Methodology

To study the dynamics of the RLOs in the Middle East, we focused on three countries that received the highest influx of Syrian refugees since 2011: Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.



Under the overall leadership of a regional lead researcher, a team of three country lead researchers in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey were selected to co-design the research and coordinate with a team of refugee researchers that were involved in developing the project's methodology and workplan. Together, they mapped refugee-led responses in both prominent and less visible contexts in a selection of cities in the three study countries.

In Turkey, this included Istanbul, Hatay, Kaysan and Trabzon. In Lebanon, this included Beirut, Bekaa and Tripoli. In Jordan, this included Amman, Jaresh, Irbid and Mafraq.

From the mapped organisations, both registered and unregistered, an average of 25 refugee-led organisations were selected on the basis of intersectional variables for face-to-face interviews with leaders, staff, volunteers and beneficiaries. Interviews were also held with several external actors who support the RLOs in their programmes.

TURKEY

- Istanbul
- Hatay
- Kayseri
- Trabzon

LEBANON

- Beirut
- Bekaa
- Tripoli

JORDAN

- Amman
- Jaresh
- Irbid
- Mafraq

Key findings

Several key findings emerge from this research that can usefully inform future policy, practice and research on refugee-led responses in the Middle East. They include:

1. The phenomenon of refugee-led responses in the Middle East is more present and takes more diverse forms than expected from larger, registered and more visible RLOs to smaller, less visible and typically unregistered RLOs. Future engagement needs to reflect an appreciation for this diversity of forms taken by refugee-led responses.
2. Refugee-led responses are engaged with a wider range of activities than expected. Beyond responding to needs in the areas of social protection and assistance, refugees organise to provide support to their communities in the areas of preserving and celebrating culture as a means of re-creating a sense of homeland in exile, along with providing a space for refugees to act and demonstrate agency by supporting a range of training and self-help initiatives.
3. Only a small sub-set of RLOs currently benefit from external support in terms of funding and advocacy. They often enjoy a well-established administrative and financial management that fulfils the conditionalities of funders. External support for RLOs can be more fully informed by an appreciation for the diverse forms that RLOs take and the range of activities in which they are engaged.
4. RLOs have been found to have considerable measurable and non-measurable positive impact in responding to the diverse needs of their communities. Access to external funding is, however, only one factor that has limited the impact of RLOs. In fact, one of the most significant constraints on RLOs was found to be the domestic policy context in which they function. Future efforts to support and enhance the impact of RLOs needs to focus not only on financial support to RLOs but also on understanding and addressing the restrictive domestic policy environments in which they function.

Defining a Refugee-led Organisation (RLO)

The findings of our research informed the development of the following definition of an RLO relevant to the context of the Middle East:

An RLO is an organised, formal or informal response initiated, led, or managed by a forcibly displaced person(s) to provide the community with humanitarian, socioeconomic, cultural and/or protection services.

This definition covers the wide spectrum of RLOs, from grassroots and small-scale unregistered organisations to registered, large-scale and more visible organisations. The definition also reflects our finding that these responses often build on existing social networks between people of the same religion, sect, ethnicity, nationality, or profession, and are influenced by a set of local, national, and international policies and conditions.

RLOs in Middle East: Present and Active

Our findings highlight how the various manifestations of RLOs can be characterised as being grouped according to several layers of RLO action across the thematic areas in which they are engaged. In response to the policy environments in which they function, refugees have established RLOs that take various shapes and pattern their mobilisation in different ways. The layers below illustrate how RLO action takes shape in particular ways in response to the availability of funding, legal status, community mobilisation structures and access to local and international networks.

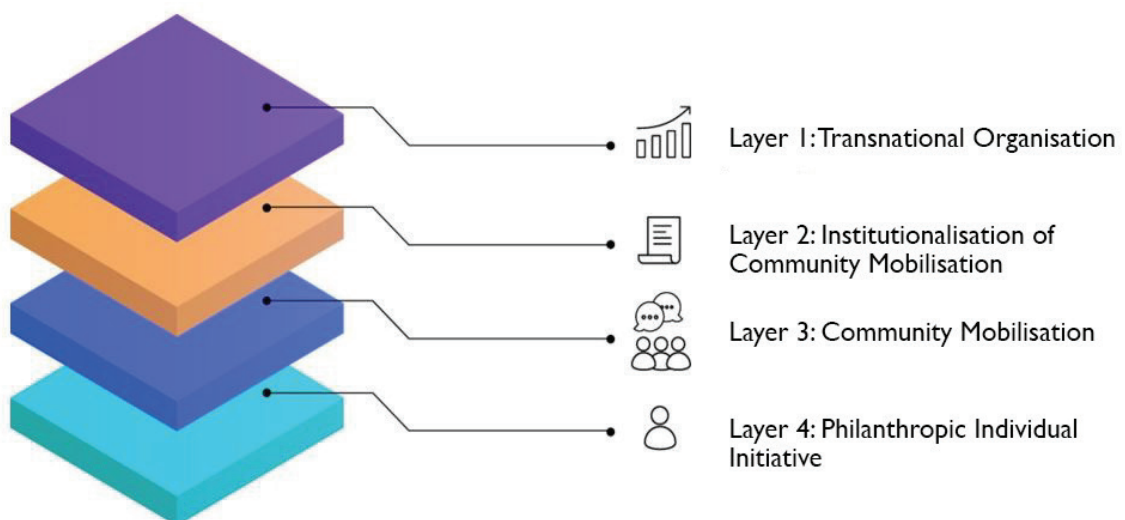
We identified at least four different layers of RLO action:

Layer 1: Transnational Organisation: When RLOs reach the capacity to work across borders and mobilise transnational networks with refugees in exile and diaspora communities. This represents the ability of refugees to widen their scope of services, their target group, their networks with funders and their relations at the international level with refugees in exile and with international donors.

Layer 2: Institutionalisation of Community Mobilisation: When refugee mobilisation is institutionalised and becomes established and registered as an organisation or as profit company (social enterprise) or as association. This facilitates the organisation's ability to attract external funding and enables the RLO to broaden the community it serves.

Layer 3: Community Mobilisation: When members from a refugee community are brought together, by a leader or few leaders who mobilise the community through networking to have a wider outreach to refugees and through securing funds and support for the community from local actors.

Layer 4: Philanthropic Individual Initiative: The sustained action by a single person or a small group of people from the community who have identified a particular need and have organised themselves to respond. These initiatives are often present in the host countries as businessmen or investors.



According to this typology, we can begin to disaggregate the RLOs identified during the mapping exercise in each of the countries included in this study:

| Country | Transnational RLOs (Layer 1) | Registered RLOs (Layer 2) | Unregistered RLOs (Layer 3) | Other initiatives (Layer 4) | Total |
|---------|------------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-------|
| Turkey | 6 | 80 | 56 | 3 | 145 |
| Lebanon | 12 | 36 | 57 | 5 | 110 |
| Jordan | 5 | 5 | 58 | 13 | 81 |
| Total | 23 | 121 | 171 | 21 | 336 |

Patterns of RLO action

The establishment of RLOs and the patterns of the action they undertake are found to be conditioned by several factors:

- the ambiguous or restrictive policies of the host country in relation to refugee status and the ability to register organisations;
- the prevailing policy environment relating to refugees;
- the level of refugees' awareness about navigating domestic laws and policies.

The result was significant diversity in the forms that RLOs take, the shapes and size of the organisation, and their presence as a formal or informal, registered or unregistered entity.

The size and scope of RLO action further varied according to the needs of the community, the concentration or dispersal of community members (either dispersed in large urban areas or concentrated in semi-urban or rural contexts), in addition to the ability of RLOs to liaise with established humanitarian aid organisations to coordinate services and secure funding.

A defining feature of an RLO is the role of refugees in an organisation's decision-making and leadership. As such, the legal status of refugees themselves matters significantly in determining their ability to register their organisation, to be visibility active in a leadership role, and to expand the scope of their work by securing external funding.

Understanding the work and impact of RLOs in the Middle East requires a deep understanding of the diverse realities of local and national refugee governance in the region. Refugee governance in the region has been described as a "meta-governance" where national, regional, international and transnational actors contribute to "shaping" the policies of each country towards refugees.³ In meta-governance, the state "continue[s] traditional statist styles of governance in terms of bureaucratic rule making" and exercises power over refugees.⁴ This consequently shapes the scale, the working agenda, the possible funding and the impact on the served community.

The policies in host states

The three countries included in this study have different policies towards refugees that are responding to changing power dynamics, international relations and shifting interests. The work and impact of RLOs across the region is largely a condition of the policy context in which they are found.

In **Jordan**, non-Jordanians are denied the right to form civil society bodies and if one of the members is non-Jordanian, they require special prime ministerial consent which is

³Mencütek ZŞ. *Refugee Governance, State and Politics in the Middle East*. Routledge; 2018, p. 47.

⁴*Ibid*, p.48

⁵Law on Societies (No. 51 of 2008). Article 8

⁶The association is considered foreign if its founder or director is not Lebanese, if it is based outside Lebanon, or if more than a quarter of the members of its general assembly are foreigners.

⁷ It is governed by the provisions of Decision No. 369 LR dated December 1, 1939.

extremely difficult to obtain⁵. Refugees in Jordan are considered “asylum seekers” due to the fact that Jordan is not a signatory of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees hence refugees are denied the right to organise as non-Jordanians. This policy environment largely explains the limited number of registered RLOs in Jordan relative to the number of unregistered and other refugee-led responses.

While equally difficult to register a refugee-led organisation in **Lebanon**, Lebanese policies vis-à-vis different refugee groups are constantly changing. Yet, for foreign organisations⁶, the registration process is established by virtue of a special decree⁷ issued by the Council of Ministers. The registration of an RLO follows the same procedure as a local NGO. Registration of such an organisation must include the organisation’s name, address, the professions, and nationalities of its members, and two copies of the organisation’s statutes and bylaws. A given license could be temporary or restricted by strict conditions set by the state. It is important to note that Syrians, Palestinians, and other refugees are denied the ability to create organisations, and therefore are forced to rely on Lebanese allies to help, protect, and perhaps represent their organisation publicly before the state.

As **Turkey** treats some refugees as nationals, some refugees in Turkey have been able to create and register their own organisations if they abide by certain conditions that govern and regulate the NGO sector. Turkish law does not draw a distinction between foreigners and Turkish citizens with regard to forming an NGO in Turkey. There are a set of conditionalities that must be met in order to create a legal association or NGO in Turkey, such as having at least seven founding members, either Turkish or foreigners who have legal status in Turkey, having a charter stating the name, address, aim, and other regulations of the entity, and having an address.⁸ After registration, the association needs to have a bank account for its financial activities and an accountant to do the bookkeeping and reporting duties.

In response to these diverse policy environments, we identified RLOs that have been successfully registered by:

- an individual or group of naturalised refugees;
- refugees who partnered with naturalised refugees or with a local organisation;
- refugees with dual citizenship;
- refugees whose status had been regularised, as in the case of those who benefit from Kimlik (local permanent documents) in Turkey.

More generally, refugees were found to use their networks and social capital for different reasons, including securing funding and expanding the scope of their activities. In some cases, these networks go beyond the immediate community to reach refugees through transnational funding and registration. Many of the identified RLOs depend on external donors and access to various forms of private funding. They are valued by the communities they serve for the positive impact they have through their programs and their ability to manage their programs in a way that is seen by the community to demonstrate utmost integrity and accountability.

Yet, the vast majority of RLOs in the region are not able to access external funding due to the conditions of donors, especially in relation to their capacity to administer complex funding arrangements, or the policy environment in which they operate. In many cases, the combination of lack of registration status, restrictive policy environment and their limited administrative capacity limit their ability to access the international sphere of funders.

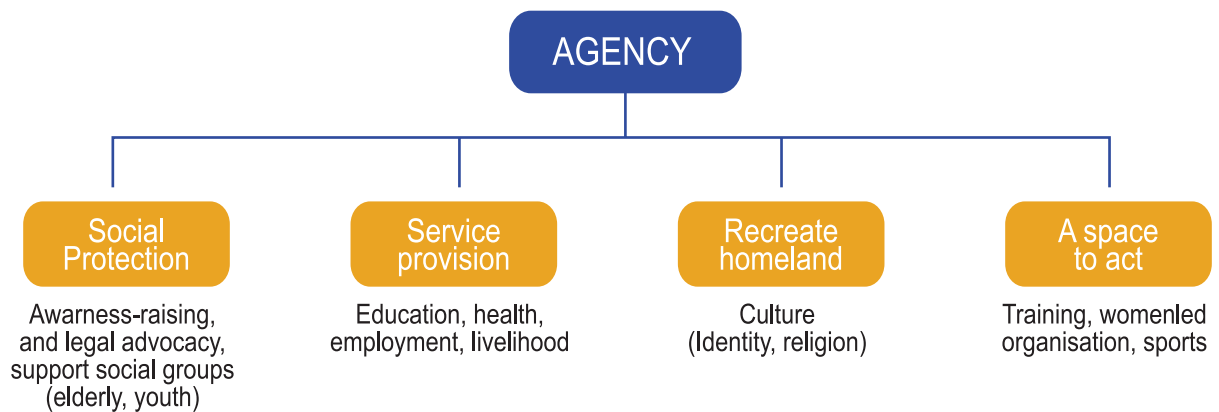
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⁷It is governed by the provisions of Decision No. 369 LR dated December 1, 1939.

⁸Ministry of Interior, Directorate of Civil Society Relations, how to create an association. Available in Turkish at <https://rb.gy/n9pxdm>

RLOs: Diverse Activities

Regardless of the scale of activity, we found that all RLOs were created to fill gaps in protection and assistance left by international humanitarian actors and resulting from host state policies in providing access to basic rights and services. We found that RLOs demonstrate agency through their activities in the areas of social protection and service provision, while also providing a space to act and efforts to maintain or recreate their homeland in exile.



RLOs were found to have had significant positive impact in their areas of activity across all 11 locations of our research. The significant impact of RLOs, whether the small and non-registered or big and registered, is found to be derived primarily from the strength of established relations between the members of the RLO, on one hand, and members of the host community, on the other. More successful RLOs have also established sustained relations with host state officials and members of international organisations and donors. The impact of RLOs was measured through the numbers they serve, the programmes they deliver, the staff they recruit and the target objectives they meet.

Moreover, RLOs that are connected to transnational networks, while limited in number in the Middle East, have had greater impact due to their capacity to work across multiple contexts, their access to institutional actors, and their ability to receive external funding. They have also been able to articulate the effectiveness of their programmes in terms of targeted goals, planned milestones, achieved results and beneficiaries reached. Their work is situated in an institutional framework that responds to the conditionality of their funders and the needs of their served community.

Meanwhile, the impact of non-registered RLOs was found to be limited to members of their immediate community and more reliant on the social networks they have established amongst members of the communities they serve. This non-quantifiable impact was identified as being significant and important for refugees as it helped sustain a supporting community, which, in turn, facilitated social protection and other forms of support.

While it is important to recognise the impact of larger, more visible RLOs and the significant contributions they make to respond to the needs of their community, it is equally important to not overlook the important work and role of smaller, often unregistered RLOs. While it is important to advocate for a wider space for RLOs to grow, it is equally important to appreciate the role refugee communities play at multiple scales in relation to the provision of humanitarian services and protection, as well as community support and empowerment.

Recommendations

To host states:

RLOs make important contributions to addressing the otherwise un-met needs of refugees and related communities. Their impact, however, is limited by restrictive or ambiguous policies relating to refugees and the registration of RLOs. In a region with a history in receiving refugees, more permissive laws and policies are needed, including:

- Reliable access to legal status for refugees, including refugee status that meets international standards, the regularisation of status for long-staying refugees, and access to citizenship for refugees who meet national standards;
- More permissive laws for refugees to create their own organisations and serve their own communities. Refugees will always endeavour to mobilise visibly and invisibly. Host states are better off to value the refugees' agency and should make registration systematic and straightforward through communicating clearly the steps required to register an RLO according to the framework for other civil society actors and as per the conditions of reception of funding;
- A unified domestic policy, with clear measures to explain how to enhance engagement with RLOs and with refugees as civic society actors. This will affirm refugees' rights to mobilise and to localise their support as self-reliant agents acting in a welcoming environment.

To donors:

In light of Grand Bargain commitments and the principles of the Global Compact on Refugees, donors should develop more flexible and permissive policies towards funding for RLOs by:

- Establishing reliable funding streams for RLOs with the administrative capacity to receive and manage funds;
- Appreciating the diversity of RLOs and the needs they help address by ensuring that support for RLOs is not exclusively accessible to the limited number of prominent RLOs in the region. Instead, donors should develop mechanisms to ensure that funding is also accessible to smaller RLOs;
- Recognising the restrictive policy environments in which RLOs function, explore mechanisms to provide support to smaller, unregistered RLOs;
- Advocating with host states in the region to develop more permissive policies towards the registration and activities of RLOs.

To humanitarian organisations:

In response to commitments by humanitarian NGOs to localise action and transfer power to actors closest to the communities in need of humanitarian assistance, humanitarian organisations should develop innovative mechanism to support RLOs as they navigate restrictive policy environments by:

- Viewing RLOs as equal and valued partners within the community of humanitarian actors;
- Ensuring the equal participation of RLOs in humanitarian decision-making structures;
- Exploring partnerships with unregistered RLOs to help provide an administrative structure through which these RLOs can access external funding and other forms of support;

- Recognising the expertise of RLOs and the potential value of capacity-sharing relationships where RLOs can benefit from training while contributing deeper insight into the needs of refugees and related communities;
- Advocating for changes in national policy frameworks to allow RLOs to become registered and assert their independent identities and capacities.

To UNHCR:

Given its own commitments to refugee participation and the commitments of the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR should:

- Advocate for policy change by host governments to create conditions more permissive and supportive for RLOs;
- Include RLOs as full partners in its planning and programming structures;
- Recognise the various patterns of RLOs and what they can make in addressing the needs of refugees and related communities.

To researchers:

While the focus of this research has been on the impact of RLOs, it has also illustrated the value of participatory research, led by researchers closest to the phenomenon of forced migration. Given the substantive benefits of this approach, researchers should:

- Involve refugees as full members of the research team from the design stage of research;
- Recognise the important contributions that RLOs can make to research, especially by identifying research needs, understanding local conditions, and navigating the complex environments of research;
- Establish and sustain trust-based and mutually beneficial relationships with RLOs, recognising that while RLOs can make important contributions to research, research can make important contributions to the current and potential work of RLOs.