



---

# REFUGEE-LED RESPONSES AND AGENCY

in East Africa, the Middle East, and South America

---

Synthesis of research findings and policy recommendations



## SUMMARY

This paper presents a synthesis of the results of two special research projects carried out from 2020 to 2025 by partners in the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN)<sup>[1]</sup> in East Africa (Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania), the Middle East (Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey), and South America (Chile, Colombia):

- I. “Evaluation of Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa and the Middle East” in partnership with the Center for Lebanese Studies at the Lebanese American University and the Refugee-Led Research Hub at Oxford University’s Refugee Studies Center.<sup>[2]</sup>
- II. “The Process and Politics of Refugee Leadership: A Comparative Analysis of Factors Conditioning Refugee Leadership in the Global South”, carried out in East Africa and South America.<sup>[3]</sup>

Aiming to expand the knowledge on refugees and refugee-led organizations (RLOs), what their role is, how they are perceived, and how they navigate the political opportunity structures in which they work, the results of these research projects provide a first view on refugee agency situated in different displacement contexts. From these results, the goal of this policy brief is to understand the implications of refugee-led responses for the global refugee regime in these uncertain times.

The report was prepared by Stephanie López Villamil, LERRN Research Associate.

### Citation:

López Villamil, Stephanie. 2025. Refugee-Led Responses and Agency in East Africa, the Middle East, and South America. Synthesis of research findings and policy recommendations. The Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN).



# INTRODUCTION

As a global network, over the past seven years, LERRN has developed research co-produced with individuals who have lived experience of displacement, aiming to shift the power imbalances in knowledge production between the Global North and the Global South. The two projects we synthesize here are the result of partnerships with a diversity of actors, including RLOs, refugee leaders, and researchers in the Global South, some of whom have lived experience of displacement.

For the research projects, we selected three regions for our case studies: East Africa, the Middle East, and South America. Each region has its own unique characteristics regarding forced displacement, with different movements occurring at various times across the nine countries where the fieldwork was undertaken.<sup>[4]</sup> These regions also have specific aspects in the formation of RLOs and the emergence of refugee leaders, which highlight the importance of not homogenizing notions of refugee leadership or refugee participation. However, some common themes emerge from the studies, especially the vital role of refugee-led responses, particularly during crises and protracted displacement.

Despite facing numerous barriers to their participation in the political arena, refugee leaders have learned how to navigate the political opportunity structures in their host countries, creating opportunities to exercise their leadership and make their voices heard. Research on these populations often focuses on their challenges but pays little attention to their capacity to act and lead within political structures (Shivakoti & Milner, 2021).

The two projects reviewed in this synthesis report involved the participation of over 100 refugee leaders and identified over 400 RLOs in 25 different locations across the 9 countries. Local expertise from persons with experience of lived displacement, along with researchers living and working in the contexts of research, allowed the research to reach both formal and informal RLOs on the ground through participant observation, in-depth and semi-structured interviews, and workshops involving host communities. We considered the positionality of the researchers, many of whom have experienced displacement, which often brought excluded perspectives into the research process. LERRN partnerships further facilitated access to some spaces.

To synthesize the main findings of LERRN's research on RLOs and refugee leadership, this paper aims to present these findings through a comparative analysis of the roles of these actors and to offer recommendations to various stakeholders for enhancing meaningful refugee participation and fostering equitable partnerships within the global refugee regime.<sup>[5]</sup>



# THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF REFUGEE-LED RESPONSES:

## FROM COMMUNITY SERVICE-DELIVERY PROVIDERS TO ADVOCATES IN THE INTERNATIONAL ARENA

Literature on refugees has pointed out the crucial role of refugee-led responses for the communities they serve (Alio et al., 2020). Whether it is the agency of refugee leaders or RLOs that provide services to their communities, they are pivotal in responding to the needs of their communities. Before digging into their roles, it is key to draw a line between refugee leaders and RLOs: not all refugee leaders have organized and created RLOs. While some of them act individually, supported by their community most of the time, others have created RLOs which are diverse in the forms adopted but also in their capacities, as we will examine.

### The Role of RLOs

RLOs have been created in different contexts: camps, settlements, and urban areas, which will be considered in the analysis of their capacities. We adopt here UNHCR's definition of an RLO:

An organization or group in which persons with direct lived experience of forced displacement play a primary leadership role and whose stated objectives and activities are focused on responding to the needs of refugees and/or related communities (UNHCR, 2023).

Their role as first responders and service delivery providers is not new; however, it was emphasized across the different regions. The importance of RLOs became more prominent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the suspension of activities by international actors gave greater visibility to the work of RLOs in providing critical assistance to refugees.

Many times, RLOs are service and protection providers in the absence of the host government in contexts of protracted displacement. RLOs address the humanitarian, developmental, and cultural needs of refugees and host communities. RLOs emerged from self-help groups to address community issues such as education and access to healthcare. For example, initiatives such as the BONDEKO center and YARID, both in Uganda, were created to address the educational and social needs of refugees.

In terms of their activities, RLOs fill gaps left by humanitarian organizations, addressing issues such as land disputes and child abuse. However, they are not limited to social assistance but also include cultural preservation, training, and community empowerment. They design and implement programs tailored to the specific needs of their communities, such as English literacy classes and livelihood programs. Their activities aim to improve social cohesion and integration with host communities.

RLOs are, by definition, led by people who have experienced displacement. They can be formal or informal, registered or unregistered, sometimes depending on the host country's regulations. RLOs evolve in three phases (self-help, growth, expansion, i.e., NGO scale), with their progress depending on access to humanitarian and diaspora networks. With different layers or scales identified in each case. They mobilize internal and external resources to support their initiatives, but rarely from the private sector.

Beneficiaries of RLOs appreciate their dignity, adaptability, accessibility, and positive impact on well-being, self-reliance, and community cohesion. However, concerns about ethnic favoritism and self-serving leaders are noted.

Indeed, RLOs have a significant impact on their communities due to the role they play and the activities they implement, even with resource scarcity and funding constraints. In most of the countries of our study, their potential is limited by restrictive national policies and limited access to external funding.

## **Refugee Leadership**

Regarding refugee leaders, we identified a range of roles across all research sites, varying from resolving conflicts at the community level to advocating in international and multilateral spaces. Their roles involve managing community affairs and resolving disputes, advocating for refugee rights and needs, and mobilizing communities for collective action and demonstrations. In the case of leaders who have already created RLOs that engage in advocacy to raise awareness of refugee education issues, they are seen as role models by other refugees, inspiring empowerment within the community.

In East Africa, informal leadership among refugees plays a vital role in managing community needs and mediating conflicts. Informal leaders often emerge to address immediate needs, such as accessing services and mediating conflicts.

They include interpreters, who facilitate access to services and represent the interests of refugees to authorities. Community recognition and support are crucial to the effectiveness of this type of informal leadership. Traditional leadership structures, such as clan chiefs and elders, also continue to influence community dynamics.

Gender also plays an important role in refugee-led responses, with variations depending on the region. Women, as well as unregistered RLOs, face significant obstacles in the Middle East and East Africa.

In East Africa, women are often marginalized in leadership structures, despite their central role in the community. However, empowerment projects are emerging, aiming to increase women's access to education and economic opportunities. In South America, in contrast, Venezuelan women leaders make up most of the leaders and encourage women's social participation, while Haitian women struggle to obtain leadership positions because of the patriarchal culture. Across contexts, some women refugee leaders report cases of gender-based violence.

The research on refugee leadership asked how they navigate the political opportunity structures of the contexts in which they work. Regulations, access to protection, and the political context play a role in when, where, and how individuals can exercise leadership. In general, we found that the social capital of refugees played an important role in accessing spaces. In the next section, we look at the constraints and opportunities both refugee leaders and RLOs have while navigating the political opportunity structures in each region.





# CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

## NAVIGATING POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

### *Context-specific barriers to the exercise of leadership in selected countries*

First, there are changing regulatory frameworks and political circumstances that potentially harm the exercise of leadership and the response of RLOs. The barriers include ambiguous laws on the registration of organizations, limited administrative capacity, and hostile political environments. Legal frameworks vary by country. For instance, in Ethiopia and Tanzania, unregistered RLOs face difficulties operating, while in Uganda and Kenya, they can operate but with limited access to funding. Restrictive policies in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey strongly influence the ability of RLOs to register, obtain funding, and expand their impact.

Besides the barriers for RLOs depending on legal frameworks, refugee leaders face obstacles such as a lack of institutional knowledge, fear of approaching authorities, and racist structures. This is the case of Haitian leaders in Chile who face discrimination, which is compounded by them primarily speaking French and Creole, not Spanish, which is the language of the host country. Women leaders, although they make up most of the Venezuelan community in Chile, face additional challenges in terms of recognition and funding.

The political environments in Uganda and Kenya also influence refugees' ability to participate in decision-making processes. Uganda has a more progressive legal framework that promotes refugee empowerment and participation. In Kenya, restrictive policies and stigma against refugees limit their ability to organize and claim their rights. RLOs in Kenya must navigate a restricted political space, which complicates their recognition and access to resources.

Initiatives such as the SHIRIKA plan in Kenya aim to improve refugee participation, but its implementation remains a challenge.

Refugees in Uganda and Kenya face significant challenges in terms of representation and participation in decision-making processes. Refugee Welfare Committees (RWCs) in Uganda are elected by refugees and have a legitimate role, but their decision-making power is limited. The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) in Uganda promotes refugee participation, but final decisions are often made by the government and UNHCR. In Kenya, refugee leaders are often perceived as extensions of camp management, which limits their legitimacy.

Structural barriers and power imbalances hinder meaningful refugee participation. Refugees have no political rights in Uganda, limiting their influence over decisions that affect them. In Kenya, the camp policy restricts freedom of movement and access to livelihoods, limiting refugee participation. Refugee leaders are often perceived as intermediaries, making their participation more symbolic than substantive.

Refugee women face unique challenges in accessing leadership roles. Gender norms and cultural stereotypes often limit women's participation in leadership structures across contexts. Women leaders focus on issues that are often overlooked, such as gender-based violence and education. In South America, women leaders, although they make up most of the Venezuelan community, face additional challenges in terms of recognition and funding. In Kenya, initiatives such as SHE RISES in Kakuma show how women can create spaces to advocate for their concerns.

Refugee leaders often reported a lack of capacity to articulate policy issues on behalf of their communities.







Many refugee leaders have not received training on host country policies and legal frameworks. Government institutions often operate in silos, complicating refugees' access to services. Refugee leaders must navigate complex environments to make their concerns heard.

### ***How they navigate the political opportunity structures: multi-level advocacy/activism***

When asked by research team members to define leadership, every refugee has a different definition. Generally speaking, however, responses defined leadership as the ability to advocate for the voiceless and inspire shared goals. Refugee leaders express their leadership in different ways, influenced by their nationality, gender, and context. Refugees see themselves as active agents, not passive beneficiaries. To illustrate this, in East Africa, some refugee leaders expressed frustration with meetings where their concerns were not considered, which is also the case in other regions.

Refugee agency manifests itself in their ability to organize and claim their rights. Refugee leaders adopt different strategies to pursue their goals. Four main leadership strategies have been identified by them:

1.   
**awareness-  
raising and  
training**
2.   
**access to  
information  
and services**
3.   
**lobbying**
4.   
**media  
leadership**

Refugee leaders are known for mobilizing communities to respond to common challenges. For instance, refugees in Kakuma have organized protests against food ration cuts, illustrating their ability to challenge injustices.

They also carry out different types of political actions. These include collective responses to policies and programs perceived as harmful by organizing community meetings to discuss the concerns. Some leaders use digital platforms to share information and strengthen solidarity within their communities. Indeed, using social media to mobilize urban refugees is a strategy many of them use, particularly young leaders. Refugee leaders use platforms such as WhatsApp to mobilize their communities and voice their concerns. Political opportunities and gaps in service policies influence refugees' ability to claim their rights.

While efforts at the local level are primarily focused on mobilizing their communities, the efforts of refugee leaders at the national level primarily involve advocating for changes in laws, policies, and regulations. This is the case of Venezuelan leaders in Chile or Colombia who have targeted changing and harmful regulations for refugees and migrants to advocate for their rights. At the international level, and with the recent growth of the importance of meaningful refugee participation, both RLOs and refugee leaders have adopted strategies to raise awareness of their situation and gain visibility in political spaces.





# IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GLOBAL REFUGEE REGIME

Developments in the global refugee regime since 2016 have contributed to the emergence of a norm of meaningful refugee participation (Milner et al., 2022). There are growing demands from RLOs and refugee leaders amongst protracted displacement situations and constrained funding, aggravated in 2025 due to the funding cuts from the United States and other donors. The politics of the global refugee regime are best understood in terms of power imbalances (Milner & Wojnarowicz, 2017). This is salient when analyzing the donor countries and the displacement crisis funding. RLOs are, unfortunately, at the base of the pyramid, above them being the humanitarian actors, INGOs, and UN agencies.

Additionally, the possibility of reforming the United Nations system, long underfunded, will have implications for refugee participation. The UN80 Initiative,<sup>[6]</sup> launched in March 2025, sets the tone for a reform of the UN. Regarding migration and refugee issues, the role of UNHCR and IOM includes a new route-based approach to protection. In the meantime, in 2026, a new High Commissioner will start their term at the head of UNHCR, where they will need to confront funding cuts and declining donor support,<sup>[7]</sup> combined with efforts to undermine the core principles of the refugee regime and growing opposition to the importance of multilateralism and collective action.

Around the world, the political climate is increasingly against refugees, and protection has diminished alongside growing anti-refugee narratives. In this context, what is next for RLOs and refugee leaders? The need for shifting power is first in the need for equitable partnerships. The funding models need to shift in East Africa since donors are not funding RLOs directly but INGOs, who profit from RLOs' knowledge on the ground of the necessities of the population, which limits RLOs' autonomy.

Collaborations with NGOs and donors are crucial for the legitimacy and funding of RLOs. However, these partnerships often remain limited and insignificant. Access to funding is often conditional on formal registration of RLOs, which is difficult due to bureaucracy in some countries in the Middle East. Networks such as RELON enable RLOs to coordinate their efforts and access sources of funding.

What about meaningful refugee participation? There has been progress in the participation of refugees in the global space. The example of the Global Refugee Forum in 2023 is one of them; the growing number of individual refugees attending this high-level space showed the importance of participation. An analysis by R-SEAT is essential to determine whether their participation was meaningful. Refugees still face many barriers to accessing the space, including issues related to visas and travel restrictions, lack of equal importance, absence of specific speaker roles, and tokenism (R-SEAT, 2024). At the regional level, it is important to highlight the Cartagena+40 process, in which a network of RLOs participated in all the meetings and were given a voice in the event of the Declaration in Chile in 2024.<sup>[8]</sup>

There are indeed old and new global high-level spaces for dialogue, where there could be an open door for meaningful refugee participation despite the challenges both RLOs and refugee leaders face to participation in their local and national contexts. However, in the context of reform of the humanitarian system, many questions arise on their role and capacity to influence policy.





## CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of research on refugee leadership show significant variations in the expression of refugee leadership between Uganda, Kenya, Colombia and Chile. Refugee leaders navigate complex power structures and face both visible and invisible barriers to achieve their goals. Research on RLOs in East Africa and the Middle East confirmed their role as service providers and analyzed how they are perceived by their communities.

Looking ahead, the recent shifts in the global refugee system and the potential for reforming humanitarian efforts in the coming years will call for research to explore best practices in meaningful refugee participation and equitable partnerships. In the current context, it is vital to recognize different kinds of leadership and to value RLOs as legitimate voices in decisions that impact them.

### Recommendations

Based on our findings from both projects, we propose recommendations for donors, host-country governments, UNHCR, humanitarian organizations, and RLOs ahead of the next Global Refugee Forum Progress Review, to be held in December 2025.

#### To Donors:

- Provide direct, tailored funding to RLOs and adapt funding mechanisms to include small, unregistered RLOs so they can apply.
- Support marginalized groups and promote their inclusion in the humanitarian sector to expand the response and access to services.

## To Host Countries:

- Simplify laws to allow refugees to create organizations and regularize their status for improving their capacity to respond to their communities' needs.
- Reform the regulatory framework for refugees to improve freedom of movement and association.

## To UNHCR:

- Improve communication with RLOs.
- Advocate for regulatory changes and promote favorable policy changes in host countries where participation is limited.
- Integrate RLOs in equitable partnerships with other stakeholders from the global refugee regime to improve their capacity to influence global policy.

## To Humanitarian Organizations:

- Establish long-term and equitable partnerships by including RLOs in decision-making and integrating capacity building into projects.
- Continue capacity-building programs for refugee leaders and government institutions to improve meaningful participation.

## To RLOs:

- Strengthen community accountability to avoid negative perceptions of RLOs' activities.







## NOTES

[1] Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

[2] Supported in part by Open Society Foundations (OSF), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Robert Bosch Stiftung (RBS), the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Impact Prize, the IKEA Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Foundation, and the Global Whole Being Fund. More information about the project: <https://carleton.ca/lernn/special-projects/lernn-rsc-clc-evaluation-of-rlos/>

[3] Funded by the Gerda Henkel Foundation. More information about the project: <https://carleton.ca/lernn/refugee-leadership-in-south-america-and-east-africa/>

[4] Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Chile and Colombia.

[5] This synthesis draws its analysis from the full reports of the research projects:  
- Yousif, A., Getachew, A., Gitahi, M. and Ramazani, U. Refugee Led Organisations in East Africa. September 2022. <https://refugeeledresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Refugee-Led-Organisations-in-East-Africa-Regional-Full-Report.pdf>

- El Abed, O., Najdi, W., Hooshmand, M. and Al Hamouro, F. Refugee Communities Mobilising in the Middle East: Refugee-led Organisations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. January 2023. [https://carleton.ca/lernn/wp-content/uploads/LERRN\\_RLO\\_Study\\_Middle\\_East\\_Final\\_Report\\_may\\_16.pdf](https://carleton.ca/lernn/wp-content/uploads/LERRN_RLO_Study_Middle_East_Final_Report_may_16.pdf)

- López, S., Lobos, C., Duarte, C. and Torreblanca, A. The politics and Processes of Refugee Leadership in South America. February 2025. <https://carleton.ca/lernn/wp-content/uploads/South-America-Report-Final.pdf>

- Kalyango, R., Zigashane, P., Mboya, L. and Sajja, A. The politics and Processes of Refugee Leadership in East Africa. September 2025.

[6] More information available here: <https://www.un.org/un80-initiative/en>

[7] See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2025/10/15/who-could-be-next-un-refugee-chief>

[8] See: <https://www.refugeesseat.org/blog/cartagena40-y-la-participacin-significativa-de-personas-refugiadas-en-amrica-latina-y-el-caribe>





## REFERENCES

Alio, M., Alrihawi, S., Milner, J., Noor, A., Wazefadost, N., & Zigashane, P. (2020). By refugees, for refugees: Refugee leadership during covid-19, and beyond. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 32(2), 370–373. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eeaa021>

Milner, J., Alio, M., & Gardi, R. (2022). Meaningful Refugee Participation: An Emerging Norm in the Global Refugee Regime. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 41(4), 565–593. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdac007>

Milner, J., & Wojnarowicz, K. (2017). Power in the Global Refugee Regime: Understanding Expressions and Experiences of Power in Global and Local Contexts. *Refuge: Canada's Journal on Refugees*, 33(1), 7–17. <https://doi.org/10.25071/1920-7336.40444>

Shivakoti, R., & Milner, J. (2021). Beyond the partnership debate: Localizing knowledge production in refugee and forced migration studies. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/JRS/FEAB083>



## REFERENCED LERRN'S RESEARCH REPORTS

El Abed, O., Najdi, W., Hooshmand, M. and Al Hamouro, F. Refugee Communities Mobilising in the Middle East: Refugee-led Organisations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. January 2023. [https://carleton.ca/lerrn/wp-content/uploads/LERRN\\_RLO\\_Study\\_Middle\\_East\\_Final\\_Report\\_may\\_16.pdf](https://carleton.ca/lerrn/wp-content/uploads/LERRN_RLO_Study_Middle_East_Final_Report_may_16.pdf)

Kalyango, R., Zigashane, P., Mboya, L. and Sajja, A. The Politics and Processes of Refugee Leadership in East Africa. September 2025. <https://carleton.ca/lerrn/wp-content/uploads/The-Politics-and-Processes-of-Refugee-Leadership-East-Africa-Research-Report.pdf>

Lopez, S., Lobos, C., Duarte, C. and Torreblanca, A. The Politics and Processes of Refugee Leadership in South America. February 2025. <https://carleton.ca/lerrn/wp-content/uploads/South-America-Report-Final.pdf>

Yousif, A., Getachew, A., Gitahi, M. and Ramazani, U. Refugee Led Organisations in East Africa. September 2022. <https://refugeeledresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Refugee-Led-Organisations-in-East-Africa-Regional-Full-Report.pdf>

