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Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance



Key Points

- Refugees are important and neglected providers of protection and assistance.
- The ways in which international organisations and NGOs work with refugee-led initiatives vary across contexts. Generally, however, despite commitments, international organisations are failing to recognise or fund refugee-led community organisations (RCOs).
- RCOs generally struggle to access recognition and funding. They are often viewed by donors and international organisations as unable to meet vetting and compliance standards.
- A small number of 'outlier' RCOs thrive largely because of individual leadership and the creation of transnational networks that bypass the formal humanitarian system.
- By engaging with RCOs, donors and international organisations can meet their commitments to the localisation agenda.

Recommendations

- UNHCR should adopt a global policy framework on refugee-led community organisations (RCOs).
- Refugee agencies and policy-makers should undertake systematic mapping of RCOs in order to identify opportunities for collaboration.
- International organisations and NGOs should develop training and capacity-building schemes for refugee leaders.
- Donor governments should pilot direct funding for RCOs.
- The international community should include RCOs within formal partnership structures.

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Background

Across low- and middle-income countries, protection and assistance is provided to refugees by United Nations organisations in collaboration with a network of NGO implementing partners (IPs). Whether in camps or urban areas, the dominant humanitarian model remains premised upon a provider/beneficiary relationship: international organisations are the protectors and refugees are the protected.

In parallel to this model, however, is a largely neglected story: refugees themselves frequently mobilise to create community-based organisations or informal networks as alternative providers of social protection. They mobilise to provide sources of assistance to other refugees in areas as diverse as education, health, livelihoods, finance, and housing. Sometimes they create registered organisations, other times they mobilise through networks, including those based on cultural and faith-

based associations. They usually do so despite a lack of access to external funding or recognition. Sometimes, these informal sources of social protection may even be regarded by refugee recipients as more important than formal sources of assistance.

To take an example, in Kampala, home to nearly 100,000 refugees, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) has delegated its urban services programme to a single national NGO called Interaid since 1995. Despite the existence of over 30 refugee-led organisations (RCOs) in the city, these organisations are generally not funded through UNHCR or considered seriously as potential implementing partners. Many UNHCR staff in the city are unaware of their existence. Yet when asked to whom they would turn for social protection in an emergency, nearly 90% of refugees in the city said they would turn to their own communities (Figure 1). In other words, refugees are a significant provider of the very global public goods supposedly provided by international organisations.

Using a mixed methods approach based on ethnographic research and survey methods, we have examined four contrasting cases of refugee-led social protection in Kenya (Nairobi and Kakuma) and Uganda (Kampala and Nakivale). In our research, we explore what constrains and enables affected communities to be active providers of social protection. In this brief, we outline some of our findings and their implications for policy and practice.

Global policy context

At the global level, the rhetoric around refugee-led organisations is gradually changing. At international conferences and summits, there is increasing recognition of the need to support refugee-led initiatives. The World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 placed a strong emphasis on ‘localisation’, recognising ‘crisis affected people’ as important first responders in a crisis. As part of the resulting Grand Bargain, donors committed to allocating 25% of their funding through local and national responders by 2020. In June 2018, the Refugee Council of Australia convened a Global Summit of Refugees in Geneva, alongside UNHCR’s Annual

NGO Consultations. Its aim was to build a ‘new international movement for refugee-led advocacy’.

UNHCR’s *Community-Based Protection Policy* (2013) provides an aspirational framework. It notes that ‘every community that faces threats engages in forms of individual or collective self-protection’ and that ‘it is almost always better to work through existing institutions and programmes rather than establish new or parallel ones’. However, refugee community organisations (RCOs) are absent from most key UNHCR strategy documents, including its *Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas* (2009), its *Policy on Alternatives to Camps* (2014), and its strategy for *Mapping of Social Safety Nets for Refugees* (2018). Although the *Global Compact on Refugees* (2018) mentions ‘civil society organizations, including those that are led by refugees’ as contributing to ‘assessing community strengths and needs, inclusive and accessible planning and programme implementation, and capacity development’, UNHCR documents do not discuss formal partnerships with refugee community organisations. The 2017 Global Report chapter on Expanding Partnerships, for example, mentions RCOs in only one small side box which simply provides examples of runners-up in the UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award. While an article by the UNHCR Innovation Service discusses the rewards and necessary considerations of working with refugee and other community-based organisations, their recommendations do not seem to have been incorporated into policy.

Consequently, the practice of how UNHCR and its implementing partners works with RCOs varies significantly across different countries and contexts. In Nairobi a number of RCOs are at least invited to collaborate with some of the United Nations’ implementing partners. In Kampala, by contrast, ties between UNHCR and refugee-led organisations are virtually non-existent. In Kakuma, RCOs are encouraged to register with the government but are told to compete with more established providers. In Nakivale, the relationship between UNHCR and RCOs is characterised by mutual mistrust.

It is rare to find international NGOs willing to work collaboratively with RCOs. But there are some exceptions.

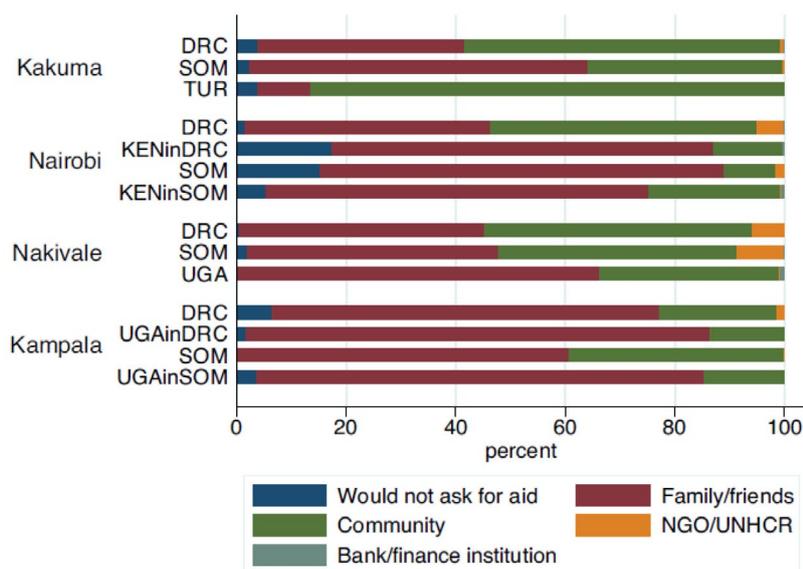


Figure 1. ‘Who would you ask in case of an emergency?’ Question asked as part of the Refugee Economies survey of over 8000 refugees and host community members across our research sites. [DRC=Congolese; SOM=Somalis; TUR=Turkana; KENinDRC=Kenyan in Congolese neighbourhoods; KENinSOM=Kenyan in Somali neighbourhoods; UGA=Ugandans]. It should be noted that UNHCR and NGOs provide much of the underlying social protection base in Kakuma and Nakivale, while governments provide much of that base in the capital cities.

The Finnish Refugee Council (FRC) has a capacity-building programme for RCOs. Each year 10–12 RCOs are selected by FRC to take part in a two-year training programme, which includes courses on management, leadership, and accounting, for example. At the end of the programme, it offers refugee-led organisations up to US\$1500 to start or expand programmes that contribute to the community. The organisation Urban Refugees also has a similar though nascent scheme.

The World Bank's Development Response to Displacement Impacts Project (DRDIP) in Uganda seeks to employ participatory, community-based approaches, which may create future opportunities for engaging RCOs. But existing practices for working with refugee leaders tend towards tokenistic representation rather than meaningful engagement. For example, refugee representatives are now included in CRRF consultation meetings in Uganda and Kenya, but there are no funds allocated to pay them for their work, let alone the travel or communication expenses they incur. With no mention in the DRDIP agenda of refugees as potential providers of assistance, there is a similar risk that refugees may be invited to participate in only the most arbitrary ways. Organisations that aim to empower refugees should do more than consult them; they should build capacity to carry out protection and assistance work themselves.

Refugee-led social protection

Across our four research contexts alone we mapped out over 80 registered RCOs providing social protection services to tens of thousands of refugees. They vary in scale, scope, and specialisation. Most focus on the nationality group of the founders, and some target refugees across communities. They are shaped by gaps in formal service provision, cultural norms, and the experiences and aspirations of their leaders. Most are small and struggle to access funding or recognition. Despite this, a few outliers flourish, mainly because of their founders' exceptional leadership and the creation of transnational networks that offer opportunities for funding. Here we outline some examples.

Hope for Children and Women Victims of Violence (HOCW)

HOCW is a Kampala-based organisation started in 2008 by Congolese refugee Bolingo Ntahira. Initially an informal community self-help group, it expanded when international volunteers helped connect Bolingo to potential donors. HOCW provides various livelihoods activities for both refugees and local Ugandans, who make up 40% of its beneficiaries. It has a well-regarded English language programme, with refugee teachers representing several different nationalities and teaching classes based on ability and nationality. HOCW is responsive to the needs of the community in Ndeje, where it is based, and started a tailoring programme to help its members, who are primarily poor women, to diversify their skills. Today, it runs a range of activities in addition to its central livelihoods and English programmes, including child sponsorship, modern agricultural training, and psychosocial counselling. It currently assists over 1300 refugees and Ugandans. In 2018 HOCW ran all its operations, including activities, overheads and staffing costs, on a budget of \$104,000.

Solidarity and Advocacy with Vulnerable Individuals in Crisis (SAVIC)

SAVIC is an organisation which works with vulnerable young people in Kakuma camp, northern Kenya. SAVIC was registered in Kenya in 2010 by two Congolese refugees named Muzabel Wulongu and Vasco Amisi, who met in Tanzania's Kigoma camp in 1996. They both ended up in Kakuma when the camp closed, and recognised the need for a similar kind of sexual and reproductive health training that they had been involved in delivering as youth chairmen back in Tanzania. Although Muzabel was resettled to the United States in 2014, he remains involved in directing and fundraising for SAVIC, successfully securing funding from various American foundations as well as getting contracts to deliver training from Swiss Contacts and Xavier Project, two of UNHCR's implementing partners in Kakuma. Since 2010 SAVIC has trained 6000 young people, with 2000 graduating from SAVIC programmes in English, tailoring, ICT and financial literacy, and 2500 girls educated on sexual and reproductive health. In 2018 SAVIC held assets worth \$165,000 and has an operating budget of \$200,000 a year. They have now registered as a NGO operating under the name of Resilience Action International.

Kobciye

Kobciye, meaning 'empowerment' in Somali, is a community organisation in Nairobi that was started in 2009 by the father of the current director, Afrah Abdullahih. Afrah's family had been resettled in Ottawa, Canada, in the early 1990s from Somalia. In 2001, Afrah's father returned to Somalia and Kenya to work as a Child Protection Officer for UNICEF but felt he could make a bigger impact through his own organisation, focusing on youth empowerment. Kobciye's community centre in Eastleigh opened in 2010; it offers training in leadership, conflict resolution, and life skills to residents of Eastleigh, whether refugees or Kenyans. Members can also study accounting and computer literacy. Kobciye holds various community events, including an annual sports tournament known as the Unity Cup, a youth conference on countering violent extremism, and has also hosted a technology and entrepreneurship summit. Kobciye trains over 450 students a year, and also has wider impact through



Photo: Posters in the office of RCO 'Men of Peace' in Nakivale settlement. Credit: Kate Pincock.

its conferences and outreach activities. In 2018 it ran all these programmes and activities on a budget of \$125,000.

Wakati Foundation

Wakati – meaning ‘the passing of time’ in Swahili – was created in 2013 by Alex Mango, a Congolese refugee who lives in the Nakivale settlement. The organisation employs refugees to undertake small-scale public works projects such as building latrines and sports facilities, and builds houses and community structures for vulnerable people who are struggling to set up secure homes on their allocated land. The idea for Wakati Foundation came to Alex when he saw the impact of displacement on the mental health of refugees, which was driving young men to drink and to use drugs. Many of them had skills that they were unable to use, and they felt hopeless and frustrated by the passivity expected of them in the settlement. Alex has used his own education in community development and business acumen to negotiate and sub-contract building work from implementing partner organisations including the American Relief Committee. Wakati Foundation also has connections to the Congolese diaspora, which supports its activities through remittances. In 2018, Wakati Foundation operated on a budget of \$75,000, supporting at least 250 families.

Community Empowerment and Self-Support Initiative (CESSI)

CESSI was started by Ugandan refugee Charles Kyazze in 2015, shortly after he came to Kenya. Charles had been in the middle of a Master’s degree in Community Development when he was forced to flee the country during a spate of homophobic violence. Soon after arriving in Nairobi, Charles came up with the idea for a community organisation which would assist LGBTI refugees, who were particularly vulnerable due to being excluded from many of the informal community-based sources of social protection available to other refugees.

CESSI delivers livelihoods training to LGBTI refugees so that they can set up their own small businesses, including hair salons and restaurants. Charles’ connections and advocacy for LGBTI refugees means that CESSI benefits from local partnerships with organisations that are trying to work with LGBTI refugees, including UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council, which help them to run their programmes. Their affiliation with a local Kenyan LGBTI organisation called Health Options for Young Men enables them to legally receive funds from outside Kenya. CESSI currently has 156 members from Uganda, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Burundi, Somalia, Congo, and even Yemen, and its 2018 budget was \$45,000.



Photo: Member of RCO ‘URISE’ making art to sell in Kampala. Credit: Felicity Suzan.

Research findings

The chicken-and-egg problem

RCOs face a chicken-and-egg dilemma. In order to receive recognition and funding, they need to have capacity. But in order to have capacity, they need recognition and funding. As Farhan, founder of a Somali-led RCO in Kenya explained, ‘we want international organisations to engage us directly... but if you don’t have the money, you won’t get the money.’ Meanwhile, a senior UNHCR staff member confirmed that the agency wants to be able to support RCOs: ‘I want UNHCR to do less...refugees are capable of doing lots of what IPs are currently doing.’ The challenge, as he highlighted, is that RCOs are expected to compete immediately. They are expected to either be able to offer services to NGO implementing partners or be able to provide services for a fee to the community. But most need support to develop in order to be competitive within this type of social protection marketplace.

The implementing partner/operating partner system

The global refugee system is based on the top-down delegation of authority. UNHCR receives its protection mandate from the UN General Assembly and funding mainly from donor states. It then delegates recognition and funding to ‘implementing partners’ (IPs) to deliver services to refugees. These are invariably international or national NGOs. Alongside this, UNHCR designates ‘operating partners’, to which it provides recognition but usually not funding. IP status is generally not granted to RCOs. Usually it is a status that is given through a tripartite agreement between UNHCR, the host government, and the NGO. In Kampala, UNHCR’s only IP is a Ugandan national organisation called Interaid, which has implemented Kampala’s Urban Refugee Programme since 1995. Refugees across our field sites raised concerns that RCOs are excluded by this model. However, INGOs equally raise concerns about RCOs’ inability to meet vetting and compliance standards.

Inspiration-opportunity-network model

The few RCOs that thrive usually do so by bypassing the formal humanitarian system and its funding structures. The ‘outliers’ that build significant capacity usually have a strikingly similar background. Usually, the process involves three steps. First, it involves an individual refugee arriving in the host country, experiencing personal challenges, interacting with another NGO, and then deciding to create a CBO. Second, the key event that leads to take-off is often a chance meeting with an actor from outside the community who connects the refugee leader to a wider network. These networks often include foundations, governments, philanthropists, and academics. Third, the breakthrough comes when people or organisations within an often transnational network provide funding. This story of inspiration-opportunity-network lies behind the narrative of nearly every successful refugee social entrepreneur we met in Uganda and Kenya. But within this process, individual leadership matters. From Felicity Suzan at URISE, to Robert Hakiza at YARID, to Charles Kyazze at CESSI, to Bahati Ghislain at Kintsugi, charismatic leaders make a difference.

Policy recommendations

Organisations like UNHCR should adopt a global policy framework relating to refugee-led community-based organisations. In the absence of a clear policy framework at the global level, there is enormous variation in the practice of how international organisations work with refugee-led organisations at the field level. However, the general trend is that refugee-led initiatives find themselves locked out of the formal humanitarian system, and those that succeed largely do so by bypassing formal delegation structures. Four specific recommendations stand out.

First, **mapping and recognition**. Too few international organisation and NGO staff are even aware of the landscape of RCOs. There needs to be a systematic way of mapping them, in terms of leadership, activities, budget, beneficiaries, and partnerships, for example. In our work, we have developed an approach to such mapping (illustrated in Figure 2). Understanding what exists is the first step towards being able to make sensible policy decisions about whether and how to partner with such organisations.

Second, **capacity-building**. Refugees perceive the current humanitarian system as set up in a way that reproduces inequalities between international organisations and refugees, excluding voice and participation. Meanwhile, many of the international organisations are concerned that RCOs may be inefficient or lack the capacity to be given responsibility for key protection tasks. This leaves refugee leaders facing a chicken-and-egg dilemma. There is a logical way out of this dilemma: develop ways to systematically build capacity for community leadership. Just as entrepreneurship and business leadership are increasingly encouraged in refugee camps, so too should community leadership capacity be supported. Basic skills like management, accounting, auditing, strategy, and coaching could improve community leaders’ ability to lead and manage viable partner organisations. Meanwhile, to make this feasible, training, mentorship, and seed funding should be made available on a more consistent basis.

Third, **direct funding and bypassing**. At the moment, only very small amounts of funding are available to refugee-led organisations through UNHCR and other actors working within the UN humanitarian system. The main sources of grants are eclectic and based on personal networks. One problem that most refugee leaders have is that they cannot meet the onerous accounting and auditing standards required

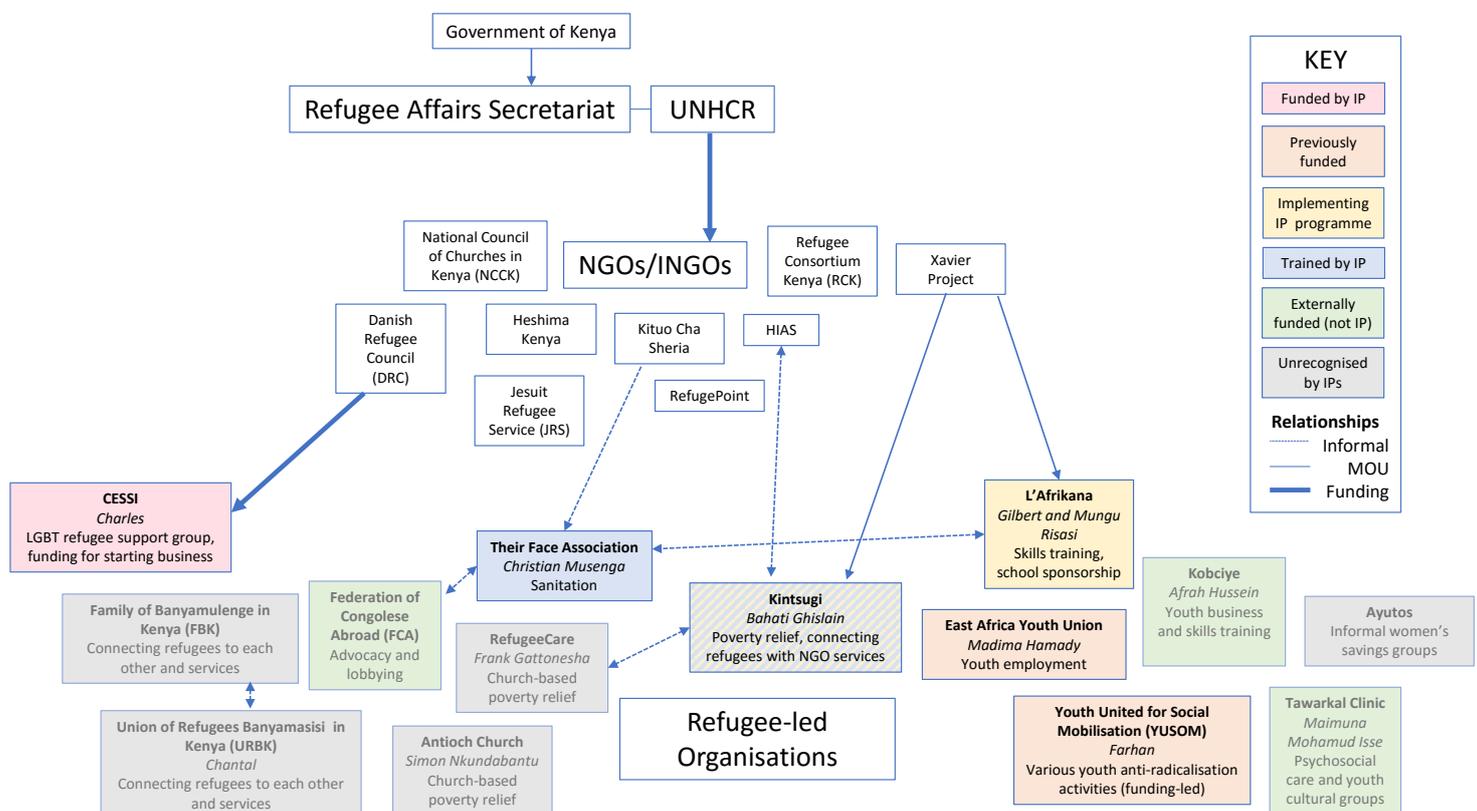


Figure 2. Example ‘map’ illustrating the landscape of RCOs, and their relationship to other organisations in Nairobi, Kenya

by most traditional donors. However, donors have much to gain from piloting direct funding for refugee-led organisations: with support, they may represent much more cost-effective ways to allocate resources than working through multi-layered processes of delegation. While risk levels may well be higher with supporting small-scale refugee-led organisations, piloting, learning, and innovating about direct financing schemes would be worthwhile. At the moment, some NGOs like the Finnish Refugee Council do offer grants to RCOs, but they are few and far between.

Fourth, **partnership and process**. At the moment, it is generally unrealistic for refugee-led organisations to become implementing partners or even operating partners of UNHCR. Indeed, most could not take on large-scale delivery tasks within the humanitarian system as it is currently designed, at least not without significant capacity-building over time. Nevertheless, it is clear from the successful outliers observed in this brief that many RCOs have the potential to fill important niches in key areas and to be important intermediaries between international organisations and the community. Rather than having to consistently work outside the humanitarian system, a range of institutional opportunities for RCOs to engage UNHCR and its implementing partners in direct and regular dialogue need to be created. Meanwhile, the processes for localisation and delegation need to be made much more inclusive and transparent.

Towards participatory governance

International organisations and NGOs provide indispensable sources of social protection. In refugee camps, they provide the

social protection base. They cannot and should not be replaced by refugee-led social protection. At least not in the short term. However, there is a need to reconceive refugee governance on a more participatory basis. Participation exists on a spectrum: consultation, consent, co-design, delegation of decision-making authority, self-governance.

Rather than lament the lack of capacity within existing RCOs, UNHCR and donors should invest in building the capacities of RCOs or other community-based initiatives so that they can gradually become sustainable providers of social protection. A more participatory model is not only more inherently just, it may also offer more widespread refugee protection and significant efficiency gains compared to the very expensive international humanitarian system.

Meanwhile, RCOs can do a number of things to enhance their own recognition and sources of funding. First, *advocacy*: UNHCR's Community-Based Protection Policy commits it to working collaboratively with refugee-led initiatives. RCOs can work to hold international organisations and NGOs accountable to these commitments. Second, *collective action*: RCOs can have a stronger voice and greater influence working together. Initiatives like the Refugee Led Organisations Network (RELON) offer a means to mobilise across communities, share best practices, and have greater voice. Third, *transnational networks*: even if funding and recognition are difficult to attain through the formal humanitarian system, the most successful RCOs have found ways to bypass the system by developing their own global networks.

Everyone stands to benefit from a world in which refugee-led organisations are able to effectively and efficiently serve the needs of their own communities.



Photo: Mural painted by RCO 'URISE' at the Antonio Guterres Centre for Urban Refugees, Kabusu, Kampala. Credit: Kate Pincock.

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Further resources:

Forced Migration Review, Mini-feature on refugee-led social protection, Issue 58, June 2018. Oxford: Refugee Studies Centre.

Cover photos: Left: Antonio Guterres Centre for Urban Refugees, Kabusu, Kampala. Credit: Kate Pincock. Right: Teacher at the refugee-led organisation Hope of Children and Women Victims of Violence (HOCW), Kampala. Credit: HOCW.