



Transforming Refugee Response: RefugePoint's Impacts

Vol. 7: Elevating Refugee-Centered Approaches and Support to Refugee-Led Organizations

Quick summary: Acting as a lead contributor, RefugePoint has helped strengthen the role of Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) in refugee response, including shifting resources toward RLOs, changing mindsets and power dynamics, normalizing the presence of refugee leaders in global policy discussions, and building relationships between RLOs and other stakeholders.

Description of the systems change

RefugePoint has committed to upholding the value of refugee-centeredness by elevating the voices of refugee leaders and partnering with refugees to realize their goals. Key to putting this value into practice is bolstering the work of refugee-led organizations (RLOs). RLOs are composed of current or former refugees and are regarded as one of the least recognized but most impactful civil society actors in global refugee programming. Since 2015, there has been a shift in mindsets in the refugee response space, reflected in a growing acknowledgment of the role of RLOs in supporting their communities and influencing refugee policy,² reinforced by the trends toward localization of humanitarian response and including aid recipients in decision-making, as put forth in the Grand Bargain of 2016.³ RefugePoint recognized the importance of supporting and elevating the work of refugee leaders, committed its own staff time and financial resources to this, and influenced other stakeholders in the field to engage with RLOs in similar ways. Along with the efforts of other organizations, this has helped to shift resources toward RLOs, change mindsets and power dynamics between refugee leaders and international agencies and governments, normalize the presence of refugee leaders in global policy discussions, and build relationships and expand engagement between RLOs and other stakeholders.

Why change was needed

RLOs play a critical role in meeting the needs of refugee communities and are often the first—and sometimes only—providers of assistance for refugees in

ABOUT THIS SERIES

RefugePoint partners with refugees to access life-changing solutions and transforms how the world supports them. This series showcases examples of how RefugePoint contributes to systems change, which we understand as changing one or more of the factors that keep existing refugee response systems from serving refugees adequately and equitably. These factors include policies, practices, resources, relationships between actors, distributions of power, and mindsets (beliefs and ideologies).¹ This brief presents the results of an externally-led, participatory evaluation that draws on extensive interviews with RefugePoint partners, colleagues, and other stakeholders, participatory sense-making activities with RefugePoint staff, and document review. The brief summarizes what has changed, why change was needed, how change came about, RefugePoint's unique role, and the relevance of the change for refugees.

1 Kania, J., Kramer, J., & Senge, P. (2018). ["The water of systems change."](#)

2 Khan, F. (2021). ["Reference Paper for the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention 'A historical overview of forcibly displaced persons in Southern Africa \(2011- 2020\): Realising the Expectations of the Global Compact on Refugees."](#)

3 Inter-Agency Standing Committee. (2025). ["The Grand Bargain \(Official website\)."](#)



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emergency situations. Despite the valuable insights and roles of RLOs as responders and service providers within their communities, refugees' input is often missing from policy decision-making, resource allocation, and programming discussions. Historically, the authority to decide refugees' fate rests in the hands of just a few UN agencies, governments, and large INGOs. It can be difficult for RLOs to gain visibility and access to international donors and decision-makers. Further, state laws on money transfers and institutional donors' cumbersome application and due diligence systems can make funding RLOs very challenging. As a result, the organizations with the most direct line to affected populations often lack funding, and those with lived experience of forced displacement are often excluded from the decision-making circles that concern them.

Levers of change

Levers of change are relatively small changes that actors such as RefugePoint can make that can bring about a bigger change in the overall system.⁴ The evaluation identified the following as the most important levers used by RefugePoint to help bring about a change in the system.

Leveraging private funding: RefugePoint's mostly private and unrestricted funding model has been instrumental in facilitating its engagement with RLOs as it enabled the organization to identify the gaps and opportunities and respond in an independent and nimble manner. RefugePoint has gotten ahead of standard practice in the field, leading with innovative strategies (in this case, funding and building capacity of RLOs), and eventually attracting earmarked donor funding to scale up these efforts. *"The ability to invest in [RLOs] came from the flexible funds we get from private philanthropic donors. This fund allows for flexibility in investing in RLOs' capacity building and empowerment, to bypass the typical institutional donors' rules, regulations and restrictions."* (RefugePoint staff)

Building capacity of others in the sector: RefugePoint's formal engagement with RLOs began in 2020 when (during the COVID-19 pandemic) the agency conducted and published on its website a survey of 16 RLOs working in Nairobi and encouraged donors to support them. The following year, RefugePoint conducted a capacity assessment of RLOs in Nairobi and provided funding for a convening organized by Refugee-Led Organization Network of Kenya (RELON-KENYA) to develop a strategic plan for advancing their work. In response to the needs and priorities identified by the RLOs at that and subsequent meetings over the years, RefugePoint has engaged in capacity-building initiatives through peer-to-peer learning, sharing technical knowledge, and tailored financial grants. The agency has also endeavored to build the capacity of other stakeholders in the field to engage more extensively and effectively with RLOs. It has led by example with its approach of listening to and learning from RLOs and shared that approach with others.

Convening partners and stakeholders: RefugePoint seeks to bolster the position of RLOs as central actors in refugee response. RefugePoint has convened diverse groups of stakeholders, both independently and through the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI)⁵, to share tools, knowledge, and best practices for self-reliance programming and ensured that these forums increasingly involved RLOs. As a key partner shared, *"The engagement of RLOs has been a game-changer for the [RSRI] platform, amplifying their voice with donors, states, and policymakers—like at the Global Refugee Forum. This inclusive approach, which I've observed recently, is a new and significant aspect of the initiative, fostering collaboration between RLOs and policymakers."* (Solenne Delga, DRC). In August 2023, RefugePoint and the RSRI hosted a three-day learning event in Nairobi, Kenya, with over 80 participants, including 46 RLO leaders, NGOs, UN agencies, Kenyan government representatives, and donors to enhance RLO engagement. This event sought to promote refugee self-reliance through connection-building and knowledge exchange. *"[RefugePoint] leveraged their experience in Nairobi to raise awareness about self-reliance and engage local RLOs, a practice few organizations undertake. By showcasing self-reliance in action and highlighting best practices, they demonstrated its impact"* (RLO representative and academic partner).

RefugePoint and the RSRI also co-led an RLO Self-Reliance Learning Exchange in Kampala, Uganda in early 2024. Twenty-five refugee leaders and 25 representatives from various sectors met to exchange knowledge on the role of RLOs in local decision-making and policy engagement. These activities have drawn the attention of other actors in the humanitarian space and academia who have noticed the unique contribution

4 Meadows, D. (2015). ["Leverage points—places to intervene in a system."](#)

5 The [RSRI](#) was co-founded by RefugePoint and the Women's Refugee Commission and is hosted by RefugePoint.

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RLO representative and academic partner

of RefugePoint and the RSRI. “I don’t see many organizations doing this engagement. RefugePoint is one of a kind.” (RSRI academic partner)

RefugePoint’s unique contributions

RefugePoint is not alone in working to advance the recognition of and support for RLOs. Other prominent actors in this space include Cohere, Asylum Access, Women’s Refugee Commission, RSEAT, and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

itself, among others. In this context, and drawing on a typology of roles actors can play in advocacy work,⁶ the evaluation found that RefugePoint was a **lead contributor** to this systems change in the East African region, defined as an actor “that made a leading contribution, was prominent throughout, stayed the course, and made a number of significant interventions.”⁷ A partner described RefugePoint as uniquely effective in these efforts because of how it used the network and access of the RSRI to elevate this work. Through its convening power and direct experience with the many ways to support RLOs, a partner credited the RSRI for catalyzing a rethink within their organization. “At the time, we were scoping out how we want to work in the space of localization. Then at an RSRI meeting, RLO engagement was an unexpected item for discussion and we talked about what it would look like, and the practicalities around different ways to engage refugees such as hiring people with lived experience [of forced displacement] on our teams. That was very helpful.” (Partner organization staff)

Another unique contribution is the proactive approach RefugePoint takes to support RLOs, not just consulting them to “tick the box” but rather viewing them as vital voices in their programming. “I have not been part of implementation, but I observed in my research that they [RefugePoint] identified and approached the RLOs, more specifically in Kenya, and consulted them to understand their needs, and community needs. As it stands, a few RLO organizations have been supported to implement some projects within their communities, which is a very good start.” (RLO leader and academic)



RLO leaders deliberating during a break-out session at a RLO convening held in 2023 in Nairobi, Kenya.
Photo by Jessica Masibo

6 Coe, J., & Schlangen, R. (2019). “No royal road. Finding and following the natural pathways in advocacy evaluation.” Center for Evaluation Innovation.

7 Ibid

The organization's commitment to decolonial values also factored into this unique contribution. Stakeholders described RefugePoint's RLO engagement model as an area where the agency directly applies its anti-colonial values, placing trust and leadership in the hands of RLOs as the voices of refugees and often as first responders. "When we engage [RLOs] we build trust between us, and even if I or RefugePoint and partners support the implementation, they [RLOs] must own the objectives." (RLO leader and academic) A RefugePoint staff member stated that these values also had an impact on how the organization positioned itself at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, where the agency sponsored several refugee leaders to attend and ensured their engagement in high-level policy discussions.

As far as challenges and opportunities in this space, stakeholders described RefugePoint's model of



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RLO leader and academic

RLO engagement as impactful but still in its early stages, challenged by the dominance of restricted funding, restrictive host-country policies on refugees' civil, political, economic, and social rights, and RLO capacity constraints. "Barriers to RLO engagement are mainly due to bureaucracy, within UN agencies for example." (RLO leader and academic) The same partner suggested there was work to be done in documenting and comparing the most effective models of RLO engagement. "We see different organizations and agencies applying different models [of RLO engagement], but there is little to no documentation of what model works best." (RLO leader and academic)

Relevance for refugees

RLOs are typically the first providers of assistance to refugees in emergency situations. Refugees, and by extension RLOs, often face exclusion in decision-making on the programming that concerns them. Yet RLOs have firsthand experience and deep contextual knowledge of the challenges and opportunities within their communities. RefugePoint and partners' engagement with and support of RLOs contributes to more effective and sustainable solutions for refugees. Specifically, engaging RLOs in forming policy promotes self-reliance, empowerment, and autonomy among refugee populations, fostering a sense of ownership and control over their futures. Supporting these organizations also helps bridge gaps between refugees and other stakeholders, including governments and the private sector, enhancing collaboration and coordination for more refugee-centered responses.⁸

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Attribution

Ciara Aucoin Delloue and Walaa Abu Zaiter of [Key Aid Consulting](#) conducted and authored this evaluation. Patrick Guyer and Amy Slaughter served as editors and convenors of the evaluation.



⁸ RSRI. (2014). "Refugee-Led Organization (RLO) Involvement in Local Decision Making: Challenges and Opportunities RLO-Led Self-Reliance Learning Exchange Series." RSRI, Kampala, May 2024."