

Reference Paper for the 70th Anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention

Forging a new path, RLOs as Partners: Lessons from the Africa Refugee Leaders' Summit

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Abstract:

As international NGOs struggled to access the displaced during the COVID-19 pandemic, refugee-led organizations (RLOs) delivered vital support to vulnerable refugees. These RLO efforts demonstrated organizational capacity, leadership strength and innovation and exemplified RLOs' connections to their communities. Yet during 'normal' times, decision makers insufficiently consider RLOs as partners and RLOs lack access to participate in policy and decision-making. This is changing as the world commits to engage refugees through the Global Compact on Refugees. Using participatory data gathered from the 2019 Africa Refugee Leaders' Summit, we move beyond the pandemic to identify best practices created by RLOs through national and regional networks to secure funding, partnerships, and recognition. We close with recommendations for governance actors on the support refugees identify as required to expand their efforts.

Introduction:**Refugee-Led Organizations as Providers during COVID-19 and 'Normal times'**

As the humanitarian impact of COVID-19 turned global society upside down, refugee leaders and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) throughout the African continent sprang to action. For example, when Uganda announced its nation-wide quarantine and lockdown measures [Young African Refugees for Integral Development](#) (YARID), [an award-winning RLO](#) in Kampala that provides integrative, educational, and livelihood support to urban refugees, received a marked increase in the number of requests for assistance. YARID also received requests for rent assistance, food, and medical support—services it does not usually provide. Refugees who were previously employed were suddenly unemployed or under-employed as markets closed and informal economic activities like day trading and ‘hawking’ became impossible. Without income, refugees became food and housing insecure. In response, YARID fundraised and distributed food and non-food items to vulnerable community members, reaching over 1000 households.¹ In addition to relief distribution, YARID fought against misinformation on the virus by translating and sharing resources from the World Health Organization and the Ugandan Ministry of Health. YARID was not alone. Other RLOs from [KINTSUGI](#) in Nairobi, Kenya, the [Youth Social Advocacy Team](#) in Rhino Camp, Uganda, to the [Whole World Women Association](#) in Cape Town, South Africa also intervened, often delivering aid and support to refugee and citizen populations alike. Refugee-led interventions may only have scratched the surface to provide required support to the global displaced, but their efforts nonetheless were a lifeline to individuals marginalized not only by a global pandemic, but who are also doubly marginalized by insecure legal status in a nation that is not their own.

Although smaller and less resourced than national and international humanitarian actors who are largely credited for providing aid to the displaced, RLOs paradoxically had an edge to urgently mobilize their responses. Simply stated, RLOs were unencumbered by bureaucratic procedures to re-allocate restricted donor funds and did not risk international staff evacuations. The refugee-led crisis responders had other significant advantages such as an intimate knowledge of their communities’ needs. In urban areas, RLOs knew the neighborhoods where refugees reside and knew all available community support resources. In urban areas, refugee settlements, and refugee camps alike, RLO staff and volunteers quickly learned to navigate lockdown restrictions to reach displaced populations and deliver life-sustaining aid in ways outside actors could not. When they could not safely reach quarantined or physically isolated individuals, they leveraged technology—including sending mobile money—to support those in need.

As host governments broadcasted crucial updates on health, safety, and virus prevention measures, many refugees could not understand these updates so YARID and RLOs translated

¹ As of November 2020, [UNHCR](#) estimates that the urban refugee population in Kampala, Uganda is 86,770. Beyond YARID, numerous Kampala-based RLOs also provided food and material goods support. The total number of households served and the extent of households in need but not served by RLOs is unknown. YARID registered upwards of 2800 households in need of food and served 1500 households in total.

and disseminated this information into refugees' native languages. They launched mass sensitization campaigns, including use of creative arts and social media, to share accurate information on how to protect oneself, one's family, and one's community from contracting or spreading the virus. They shared timely updates to ensure refugee compliance to swiftly changing lockdown measures. Perhaps most importantly, refugee leaders and RLOs were able to share news and intervene effectively because they have existing and strong trust-based relationships with their fellow displaced. Many refugees habitually turn inwards first to refugee leaders and RLOs for help and guidance; the COVID-19 crisis was no different.

Although the work of RLOs frequently goes unrecognized by international NGOs, hosting governments, and funding bodies, their COVID responses garnered praise and attention. International press sources including [The New Humanitarian](#), [Radio France International](#), and [Forbes Magazine](#), as well as international organizations such as [Amnesty International](#), [the MasterCard Foundation](#), and the [Open Society Foundation](#) highlighted RLO successes and rallied for RLOs to receive increased funding. Additionally, international organizations and academic institutions such as the [Oxford Refugee Studies Centre](#), ceded space for refugees to speak directly to audiences of scholars, funders, and refugee service practitioners through its [#ByRefugees](#) webinar series.

While the attention given to refugee-led interventions during COVID is new, RLO efforts are not. RLOs and refugee leaders are accustomed to maximizing limited resources and rallying volunteer networks to reach marginalized individuals. They are accustomed to filling gaps when international support is limited or missing outright. For many years, RLOs have directly supported asylum seekers and refugees throughout all stages of exile. Many asylum seekers lack knowledge of asylum procedures upon arrival, so RLO leaders, staff, and volunteers help new arrivals file their asylum applications. They intervene and advise asylees to ensure they access legal protection; that they know their rights, restrictions and responsibilities; and to ensure they can access any available support—information that is critical to individuals who are often vulnerable and traumatized from their journeys.

Beyond support during the asylum process RLOs promote the integration of refugees and host communities by teaching host country languages, helping individuals adapt prior livelihood skills or develop new ones, and by providing cultural, social, sporting, and artistic activities, as well as providing mentorship, among many other services. Despite the scope of their activities, the number of RLOs globally is unknown. Many nations do not permit RLOs to formally register and some organizations fail to register even when they are so permitted due to prohibitive costs, bureaucratic procedures, or discrimination.

Although RLOs have been marginalized in the past, the global conversation about the merit and role of refugees as partners is taking a new shape. Refugee leaders including the [Global Refugee-Led Network \(GRN\)](#), a consortium of RLOs from across six geographic regions, are paying attention. In many cases it is refugees themselves who are steering these conversations. Refugees yearn to translate their successes of providing humanitarian aid throughout the COVID-19 pandemic into durable partnerships during 'normal times.' However,

refugees do not want to only become implementing partners. They want to contribute to refugee decision- and policymaking at every stage from design to implementation to monitoring and evaluation. Further, refugees want to influence scholarship to ensure data generated through research can be used by the displaced for their own advocacy efforts. The global displaced are putting in place a strong, viable agenda to achieve their rallying cry “nothing about us without us.”

To date, formal opportunities for refugee participation in policymaking, in humanitarian provision, or in shaping academic research agenda have been limited. Per [Betts et al \(2018\)](#), NGOs and implementing partners believe RLOs are unable to comply with operational standards or lack the organizational capacity to compete with more well-known iNGOs. A 2019 [Refugees International Report](#) additionally finds that refugees' participation is inhibited by a lack of procedural knowledge on how global policy and decision-making is conducted.

However, this is all changing. As the global number of refugees and average time in exile both continue to rise, UNHCR and its implementing partners struggle to sustain adequate budgets to respond to emergent and protracted refugee crises. Per [Torfa \(2019\)](#), refugee leaders and RLOs are increasingly demonstrating the value of their contributions as they fill critical gaps in refugee integration, protection, and provision at the grassroots level. Yet even beyond the local level we observe that RLOs are organizing into networks to share best practices, coordinate refugee-led efforts, and share information on legal frameworks, policies, and refugee rights. Whether through the [Refugee-Led Organization Network](#) and [Network of South Sudanese Community Organizations in Uganda](#), the [Stand for Nairobi, Kakuma and Dadaab Refugee Network](#) in Kenya, or the [Consortium for Refugee and Migrants in South Africa](#), these networks are developing the required skills and capacities to grow their efforts and engage in new partnerships. These networks are proliferating throughout the African continent and beyond. To date, Oxfam and the Open Society Foundation have led the way to fund and partner with these RLOs and RLO networks, creating a model that can be replicated by other organizations and across sectors.²

Moreover, through the [2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants](#), the [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework \(CRRF\)](#), the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#), and the [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\)](#), international governance actors have made new commitments for direct inclusion of the displaced into decision-making that impacts their lives and livelihood in exile, as well as commitments to systematically include the displaced in global conversations to achieve durable solutions that end refugeehood. [The Global Refugee-Led Network](#) has created an electronic platform where governance stakeholders, scholars, and humanitarian actors can further codify their intentions for refugee inclusion by signing a [pledge](#) to, “support the meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives.” As of December 2019 over [700 entities have signed this pledge](#).

² For an example of an Oxfam-funded project to South Sudanese RLOs, see <https://www.icansouthsudan.com/>. Additionally, both Oxfam and Open Society Foundation were significant funders of the 2019 Africa Refugee Leaders' Summit.

As a summary of the vision of the GCR and the CRRF, [UNHCR states](#), “Based on the New York Declaration, the Global Compact on Refugees recognizes that when refugees are given the chance, they can support themselves and their families, and make positive contributions to the communities hosting them.” Likewise Hon. [Bob Rae](#), the Special Envoy for the Prime Minister of Canada on Humanitarian and Refugee Issues declared, “Refugee-led organizations add clear value to international responses and help fill critical gaps. They...should be trusted partners in future responses.” The noted global policy instruments incorporate a “whole of society approach” that permits refugees to work alongside iNGOs, international financial institutions, governments, and other key stakeholders.

In the remainder of this article, we incorporate unique data gathered during and after the inaugural 2019 Africa Refugee Leaders' Summit held 30 November to 2 December in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia (hereafter referred to as the Summit). This Summit was organized by and for refugees as one of six regional Summits convened by the Global Refugee-led Network. The Summit gathered established and emerging refugee leaders from across urban environments, refugee settlements integrated into host communities, and rural refugee camps to share their experiences and to identify existing best practices refugees use to secure funding, resources, partnerships, and recognition for their work. The Summit further permitted refugee leaders to identify additional supports they require to expand beyond the grassroots level and to more consistently engage in national, regional, and international service provision, policy and decision-making. Through use of participation data and post-Summit survey data, we underscore refugees are not only requesting a seat—they have been steadfastly building the table.

The Africa Refugee Leaders' Summit and its Participants:

Over three days of Summit meetings and workshops, participants drew from their vast expertise to pinpoint problems and identify solutions in eight key areas: 1) protection, 2) education, 3) work/livelihoods, 4) energy and infrastructure, 5) durable solutions, 6) mobility, 7) addressing root causes, and 8) participation. To underscore the diversity within refugee communities, participants spoke from experiences of discrimination rooted in their gender, sexuality, and physical dis/ability, among other potential vulnerabilities as crosscutting themes throughout thematic areas. In total, 72 refugee participations of 14 nationalities who currently reside in 11 nations throughout Sub-Saharan Africa attended the Summit.³ Approximately one-third of participants identified as female and one participant identified as gender non-binary. The participants' ages varied greatly and included youth representatives as well as elders. The wealth of diversity in refugees' topical expertise, past practical experience in camps and settlements, as well as diversity in age, gender, nationality, and other factors generated a fruitful discussion of

³ Participants identified the following countries of origin: Burundi, Cameroon, D. R. Congo, Eritrea, India, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, and Uganda. Participants currently reside in Angola, Burundi, Ethiopia, Kenya, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia. Additional refugees were selected for Summit participation, but were unable to attend, often because they could not secure required passports or travel documents.

constraints and opportunities that refugees encounter across refugee hosting locales. Of 72 attendees, 34 leaders completed a post-Summit survey to share their participation takeaways.⁴

Significantly, summit participants are the exemplars of the comprehensive work currently done by the displaced for the displaced. The participants included civil society leaders, human rights defenders, journalists, teachers, religious leaders, national and ethnic community representatives, counsellors, women and gender experts, technological innovators, and leaders from vulnerable refugee sub-communities, such as LGBTQI and disability advocates. Some refugees have founded organizations to provide their fellow displaced with livelihood training and support, language instruction, and other integration support. Several of these RLOs provide services and support to refugees, asylum seekers, and to host country nationals to promote peaceful coexistence.

Some participants' RLOs, like YARID, have garnered recognition for their work. They have earned awards, been mentioned in policy and academic publications, and have received financial support from international NGOs, foreign governments, and UNHCR. Other leaders have experience as research assistants and translators. A select few had partnered with host governments, UNHCR implementing partners, and other humanitarian organizations as service providers. The Summit, thus, was an opportunity for these leaders to empower emerging leaders and other RLOs who have yet to gain recognition, and who struggle to cobble together the minimal resources to provide consistent programming.

Although it is difficult to give justice to the many insights garnered from the Summit, it is to this task that we now turn our attention. Our aims are to highlight how participation in the Summit facilitated transformation in how refugee leaders individually and collectively view their capacity to contribute across the eight thematic areas and beyond. Refugees were empowered to see themselves as forced migration experts not because of their legal status as being outside a country of origin, but because they have generated enduring successes to provide services, give hope, and to advocate for vulnerable refugees who are not yet empowered to self-advocate. Critically, the Summit allowed collective envisioning of new paths forward. Summit participants strategized and united under the burgeoning platform of the Global Refugee-Led Network and other refugee collectives to translate their lived knowledge and experiences into executable agendas to achieve their goal of “nothing about us without us.”

Summit Experiences & Analysis: Past Successes, Barriers, and New Paths Forward

I. Past Successes:

First and foremost, the Summit was a celebration. It was an opportunity for refugee leaders to critically reflect and acknowledge the significant areas where RLOs are most concretely making a difference. Through round table discussions on each of the eight thematic

⁴Of the 34 respondents, 33 self-identified as being a refugee. Respondents came from nine hosting nations and identified eight countries of birth. The average length of time in exile was 11.1 years for survey respondents and ranged from 2 to 25 years. Most respondents are in protracted exile (30 of 33 respondents) and 9 refugees stated being a refugee for 15 or more years.

areas (protection, education, work and livelihoods, energy and infrastructure, durable solutions, mobility, root causes, and participation) Summit attendees shared their innovative and impactful approaches to combat financial and resource deficiencies. Although their work was often limited to the grassroots level refugee leaders shared strategies to expand their services, both to higher levels as well as expanding to more vulnerable individuals within and outside of the refugee community. The roundtable discussions also afforded refugee leaders opportunities to name and share the best practices they have developed to make their work possible. Finally, discussions allowed refugees to pinpoint the persistent areas where refugee engagement remains relatively rare, chiefly refugee self-representation and involvement in policy and decision-making at the national, regional, and international levels. We examine each in turn.

Refugees as Service Providers:

Among the Summit participants, most identified as providing services within their local community. Their services are extensive and include providing emotional, spiritual, and material support, as well as vocational training, integration support, and mentorship. In discussing their current work, many leaders assessed their strengths as being rooted in a deep knowledge of their communities and in their innovative approaches to exploit new opportunities. A Somali woman refugee leader from Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya described her successes of overcoming cultural barriers to female education by organizing science and other non-traditional lessons through home-based classrooms. She additionally empowers elderly refugee women through English language and literacy training so they could freely communicate with others in the camp. The courses both empowered the women to hone their intellectual skills and enabled the women to speak directly for themselves rather than be spoken for. In an amazing sign of resilience, another young leader continued her teaching during COVID lockdowns by [broadcasting educational lessons](#) over the camp's radio station. Their work exemplifies the urgently important work that refugees currently do and demonstrates a resolve to continue their efforts even during trying times.

Despite their successes, some attendees lamented a prevalent myth of refugees only as a “burden.” All leaders rejected this narrative and instead reflected that many refugees are also resilient and resourceful rather than passive. A representative woman elder from South Africa noted that refugees are already challenging and changing, “the assumptions that the outside world have that refugees are people who need help who can't do anything by themselves.” One way refugees observed they are changing the narrative of refugees as active providers rather than as passive victims was to note that an increasing number of RLOs are receiving funding and formal partnership opportunities with international NGOs.

To identify the best practices of how RLOs have achieved new successes, RLO staff and founders described in round table discussions that they secured funding only after focusing on internal organizational and capacity development—including staff professionalization, gaining experience writing organizational governance policies, and improving budget and record keeping. Acknowledging that it is difficult to develop these capacities, refugees suggested a best

practice to complete grant and funding applications in partnership with other RLOs who have achieved international funding, partnership, or recognition, or to apply alongside iNGOs and current UNHCR implementing partners. They identified that joint proposals with NGOs may help refugee leaders influence processes at an earlier stage and clarify what refugees and RLOs bring to partnerships. Finally, leaders proposed best practices of strategically requesting development and capacity training from visiting scholars and research institutions,⁵ as well as working through broader refugee networks to both share available opportunities and to solicit feedback to strengthen their applications.

Refugee Experience in Policy and Decision-Making:

Despite the noted successes and innovations in current refugee-led initiatives, many Summit participants identified that refugees remain under-represented in global refugee policy and decision-making, particularly beyond the local level. The few leaders who had participated in these areas leveraged their experiences and educated other Summit participants on the operating procedures of multi-sectoral stakeholder meetings. They inspired others with the value of refugees' contributions in these high-level spaces by telling specific ways that their presence and advocacy engendered new conversations on global refugee situations. For example, a refugee leader in Uganda described her involvement as one of only two refugee representatives in Uganda's steering committee to implement the nation's Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework. Likewise, a small number of South Sudanese participants shared their representational experiences with African governance bodies Intergovernmental Authority on Development and the African Union. In sharing their experiences, leaders explained logistical and procedural details to better shape refugee expectations of how these meetings occur.

Beyond educating on meeting logistics, leaders with experience in higher-level decision- and policymaking affirmed that their participatory success was fundamentally enabled by broader support by refugees who were not physically in the room. To wit, they described how other refugees, refugee leaders, and RLOs supported their efforts by compiling original data and collecting broad repertoires of refugee narratives. Thus, rather than only representing themselves, the leaders were empowered to represent broader segments of refugee communities. For instance, members of the Refugee Led Organisation Network in Kampala, Uganda shared how at the invitation of the Lutheran World Foundation, they collectively contributed to the Ugandan [Universal Periodic Review \(UPR\)](#), a United Nations-led process to assess human rights conditions in U.N. member nations. Robert Hakiza of YARID and RELON explained how refugee leaders had prepared for the UPR by seeking feedback from refugees in both settlements and urban areas throughout Uganda. The refugee-led team compiled their collected data into a [comprehensive report](#) of the challenges, opportunities, and successes that refugees encounter to enjoy their rights. Hakiza reiterated the report and the direct participation in the UPR would not have been possible without the collective refugee efforts.

⁵ For example, during her doctoral research, co-author Christa Kuntzelman gave a grant writing seminar to RELON members in Kampala. The topics included in the seminar were jointly negotiated by RELON and the visiting scholar.

However, refugees expressed that it has not been easy to contribute towards national, regional, or international policymaking. To support decision- and policymaking efforts going forward, summit participants proposed best practices to develop new data, including refugee narratives and repertoires, that can support refugee leaders who gain access to these limited higher-level opportunities. In so doing, participatory space is expanded even to leaders and refugee communities who are not present. Refugees named as a best practice that they can utilize the burgeoning platforms of the GRN to systematically develop and share their unique data. The platforms allow refugees to have a broader landscape of the data that exists, and to coordinate efforts to fill data gaps in under-explored topics, such as the unique challenges that LGBTQ, disabled, and other minority refugees experience.

Refugees further discussed the transformative potential of refugee-led networks and identified how to bolster network capacity. In referring to refugee-led networks a Cameroonian refugee currently in South Africa for more than 15 years shared, “The Summit has positively changed my opinion. The more that organisations and leaders work together, I believe there will be a united front in solving issues.” Another attendee originally from D. R. Congo shared, “most importantly, we got to share best practices from our countries of refuge. Now together, we can change and improve the refugee system in Africa.” A Congolese refugee in Kampala for seven years explained, “when refugees are given a space... Refugee-led organizations are strong structures and are the right path for strong advocacy on refugee matters.” To wit, the networks allow refugees to clarify and then amplify a collective voice as they pursue their goals.

Summit attendees enumerated how to grow these networks to maximally respond to group member needs. Some proposed that the networks could develop mentoring and training programs to promote the skills and knowledge needed for coordinated advocacy. They envisioned mentoring as occurring through both in-person and online initiatives. A Congolese participant who was unable to attend the Summit but participated through a virtual format summarized that the value of the online networks would be most meaningful when they translated to physical representation in future refugee decision-making. He said, “Besides having a platform for voicing our everyday challenges, we still need representation in the regional agenda such as the AU Youth committee. Not to mention that we need our presence in the Ministry of Home Affairs-department of refugees- in different countries, where issues of refugees are being fully addressed.” In sum, refugees envisioned growing the networks’ capacities to strengthen individual RLOs and strengthen their collective advocacy efforts.

Shared Space to Develop New Tools and Advocacy Strategies:

Across topics, refugee leaders consistently commented in the post-Summit survey how participation in the Summit facilitated developing new knowledge and acquiring new advocacy tools. Among the specific advocacy tools that respondents named as permitting more professional, streamlined efforts were skills to craft targeted messages using issue linkages that identify shared values and common goals among stakeholders; skills to identify strategic partnerships to bolster advocacy efforts at grassroots to national and international levels; and

skills to integrate advocacy for refugee rights into broader efforts for human rights or into national development strategies. A Sudanese refugee leader summarized in his response, “I have learned more advanced ways of dealing with advocacy in a more professional manner than before.” In reflecting on the role of RLOs in advocacy, a Rwandese refugee now living in South Africa for over 25 years summarized that Summit participation renewed a sense that refugees can productively and proactively work together, stating, “We have shown that refugees are able to lead and take responsibility of their future.”

A Congolese leader who has founded an RLO to teach urban refugees about their rights summarized, “human rights advocacy is a journey that no one can dare alone. For local human rights experiences to advance the development of global human rights, we need to connect with (others).” Many refugee leaders acknowledged that host community members often experienced material, financial, and social service challenges alongside refugees. In response, leaders shared that partnerships and connections must also engage the local hosting communities. Some of the urban refugee participants from Kampala and Nairobi shared how their work intentionally includes refugees and citizens alike to promote community peacebuilding and integration.

Refugees further described how the Summit enabled them to envision new partnerships and new forms of advocacy. For example, a Burundian leader shared that through the Summit’s sessions he learned “how to approach decisionmakers and talk to them about my work of advocating for others.” He described how learning about advocacy and gaining new skills empowered him to be fearless in his continued efforts to represent the refugees in the camp where he lives in Malawi. Echoing the need for fearless, focused actions, another Congolese leader in Uganda shared, “the main thing I learned... is that I shouldn’t hesitate to knock on doors and meet with decisionmakers.” In brief, as refugees shared their experiences, others realized advocacy and actions they had not previously considered.

Overall, through collaboration and cooperation, refugees stressed that every actor has a role to play. Rather than continuously “reinvent the wheel” or duplicate efforts, participants committed to develop and share best practices and lessons learned. Likewise, refugees recognized that strategic planning could permit more coordinated and streamlined response efforts. Through learning about the multitude of existing networks and their strengths, refugees realized the extent to which they have already built this infrastructure and noted the ways in which these existent systems could be leveraged to share information and best practices.

II. Remaining Barriers:

Throughout the Summit, refugee leaders from throughout Sub-Saharan Africa listed barriers that inhibit refugee participation as service providers and inhibit participation in critical areas of governance and decision-making. At the Summit’s conclusion, participants drafted a document of key conclusions on the barriers that prevent refugees from full collaboration in the

eight thematic areas.⁶ Held constant across all areas were refugee perceptions that global refugee decision-making processes are opaque. Refugees were uncertain in which areas they had a right to participate, with which stakeholders, and uncertain whether the right to participate varied depending on the nation of asylum.

Barriers to Direct Representation:

At the fore of refugee-identified barriers to participation was an inability for their direct representation in global policy and decision-making. A Burundian attendee summarized, “We do not have enough representation. If only we can be involved when they make decisions about everything concerning refugees, it will be better. There is truly nothing for refugees without refugees.” At the grassroots level, many felt consultations with the displaced about policy, service provision, or protection occurred only after critical decisions were already made. Refugees felt excluded from collaboratively prioritizing which daily life issues most urgently need addressed. At best, refugees felt their participation was limited to implementation, but they felt excluded from vital functions of monitoring and evaluation. Refugees felt the value of their contributions were diminished by stakeholders who were seemingly more concerned about honoring donor wishes or domestic political agenda than about refugees. Similarly, refugees lamented that many visiting scholars and researchers blocked them from influencing broader research agendas and ensuring data is generated to maximally benefit the displaced and their advocacy efforts.⁷

Among the perceived reasons governance actors blocked refugee self-representation, respondents pointed to a deeper, more systemic issue of mistrust between governance stakeholders and refugees. A Rwandese leader in Uganda for 11 years said, “there is just no trust. Host countries don’t authorize refugees to make specific decisions. They think that anything can happen and that (refugees) will betray the host country.” Moreover, many refugees shared a common personal experience of being invited by implementing partners, local government officials, scholars, and other key stakeholders to share about their displacement experiences. Yet upon entering a venue to speak they were instructed what to say rather than allowed to speak freely. Refugees felt obliged to tailor their narrative lest they risk making their host look bad, particularly if funders were also present. In ways described by scholars, several refugees felt mistrusted by outside governance actors.⁸

In total, almost 25% of survey respondents (8 of 34) stated that stakeholders lack a desire to truly hear the opinions of refugees. A participant displaced from Burundi reflected the problem is that of mindset, and said, “few humanitarian agents allow refugees to participate in decision-making.” A South Sudanese participant currently in Uganda concurred by stating, “the most significant barrier is the unwillingness of the refugee agencies to interact and support

⁶The document is not published. A similar document published by the Global Refugee Network that summarizes barriers and opportunities for refugee participation globally may be found [here](#).

⁷In a separate piece, co-author Kuntzelman has advocated for increased refugee involvement in [academic agenda setting and research design](#).

⁸For scholarship on endemic issues of trust between the global displaced and refugee governance actors and researchers, see [Lyytinen](#) (2013), [Sandvik](#) (2011), [Kaiser](#) (2005), [Hynes](#) (2003), and [Malkki](#) (1996), among others.

refugees.” Similarly, in speaking to a lack of political will, a Congolese refugee in Kenya for more than two decades replied, “not all countries in Africa are ready to have domestic, regional, and sub-regional frameworks (that) engage refugees on issues that affect them.”

Finally, several refugees identified that the barriers to refugee partnerships are ultimately rooted in false stereotypes that refugees are a burden. A Congolese delegate echoed this frustration by commenting that “(refugees) are undermined as able of nothing. Policies are not favorable to the refugees. There is no awareness of refugees’ rights by the refugees themselves.” A former refugee now living in the United States decried what he calls stereotypes of refugees as, “refugees are still seen as a burden, not as assets. Refugees are still seen as a disability rather than an opportunity.”

In succinctly summarizing barriers for direct self-representation, a Sudanese participant shared his views, “I think the obstacles to refugee participation in decision making are the laws of the host countries, unseriousness in the field of implementing the existing laws, and weak rule of refugees in demanding for the participation in decision making processes.” Thus, although refugees are making efforts for self-representation from the ground up, many refugees feel that barriers remain that are outside of their control.

Barriers to Funding, Partnership, and Recognition:

Throughout the Summit, participants shared that even when they are invited for participation, they often experience logistical barriers including difficulties to secure funding or travel documents. Despite having a right to mobility, including the right to a Customary Travel Document under the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, many refugees stated that they have been unable to secure the necessary travel documents because local government bureaucrats are not knowledgeable about these rights. Refugee participants lamented missing conferences, speaking engagements, and other opportunities after being denied travel documentation. In some cases, refugees shared that host governments denied their applications because they did not consider their refugee identification cards as sufficient legal documentation.

Refugees also expressed frustrations with inconsistent ability to open saving accounts or acquire loans, and thus cited they could not access funding required for travel. Refugee leaders cited that underspecified national banking legislation created loopholes for banks to deny refugees’ access to accounts or credit and reflected that refugee experiences with banking and loans varied greatly depending on their host country. When accommodations were made for virtual participation, refugees, particularly those in remote refugee camps, struggled to access adequate wi-fi connections. Others failed to secure needed technology and computers because of their prohibitive costs. Low technological access concomitantly produced problems that refugees failed to learn about opportunities until it was too late to apply, or they simply never learned about them at all.

Additional barriers that many RLOs, especially new ones, cited to secure funding or receive recognition were a lack of knowledge on the legal and regulatory requirements to register as a community-based organization or NGO. In some refugee hosting nations, such as Kenya,

RLOs are legally barred from formal registration and must operate informally. The ramification of informal existence is that RLOs are largely unable to compete for funding opportunities on par with registered entities. Beyond regulatory barriers, other groups cited poor internal leadership and governance structures, including weak knowledge of prudent financial management or project management skills such as project cycle, monitoring and evaluation, measuring of impact, or other technical skills as impeding their work.

Furthermore, RLOs lamented that despite an increasing recognition of their potential as implementing partners, few INGOs directly invest in RLO capacity development. In part, NGOs have been barred from so doing as many refugee hosting governments have established laws that bar humanitarian agencies from hiring refugees. Among the exceptions are organizations such as Oxfam, [Independent Diplomat](#), [Urban Refugee](#), and [Asylum Access](#) who have begun capacity, networking, advocacy, and programmatic and leadership development training. However, in total, [Amnesty International](#) found that local organizations, including refugee-led initiatives, receive less than 2% of available global funding for humanitarian and refugee crisis response. A similar report by [Development Initiatives and Oxfam](#) found that despite a significant increase in international humanitarian assistance distributed through the CRRF in Uganda, only approximately 1% of funding went directly to local initiatives. A direct ramification is that despite these advancements, only a small number of RLOs have benefited from external training and capacity development interventions. Even with codified frameworks like the CRRF for more grassroots coordination and local stakeholder involvement, many qualified RLOs have yet to benefit from new funding and partnership opportunities.

Knowledge Barriers:

Finally, across each of the eight thematic areas discussed during the Summit refugees consistently acknowledge that they need enhanced knowledge on their rights. During roundtable discussions, several refugee [human rights defenders](#) educated their colleagues that although rights vary across hosting nations, all refugees have expansive human and refugee rights through UN Refugee Conventions, U.N. rights treaties, as well as through African Union Conventions and regional African treaty commitments- such as through ECOWAS or the EAC. Many refugees self-assessed as lacking formal *de jure* knowledge of their rights and leaders expressed confusion about national refugee policies due to gaps between the laws on paper and their implementation in practice.

Some participants advocated for African nations to progressively standardize refugee rights to reduce disparities between nations, suggesting that Uganda or South Africa may be potential models to emulate. Both Uganda and South Africa have expansive rights for refugees in urban areas outside of refugee camps and settlements. Refugees promoted that all refugees, regardless of their hosting nation, should enjoy the minimal protections and rights afforded them at the international and regional levels.

Acknowledging that this is an ambitious goal, refugees suggested that in the absence of rights standardization, more could be done to educate all stakeholders on national, regional, and

international refugee rights. This includes educating the displaced as well as host community members, local government actors, and humanitarian implementing partners on refugees' civil, economic, social, cultural, human, and other rights. Refugees proposed that organizations like [Urban Refugees](#) and Uganda's [International Refugee Rights Initiative](#) could lead the way to develop trainings and disseminate this knowledge. Refugees also advocated that rather than create bulky PDFs on international refugee conventions and human rights treaties that knowledgeable actors could draft simple summaries and key takeaways that could be translated into appropriate languages refugees could understand.

The knowledge gap is critical as many leaders believe that refugees who do not know rights are less empowered to claim their rights. In essence, when refugees are under-educated about rights, they may lose out on opportunities or miss claiming life-sustaining support. Furthermore, refugees stated that they need accurate information on their rights to enhance their advocacy efforts.

Beyond a lack of knowledge in the content of their rights, refugees expressed a lack of understanding in how these refugee rights and refugee policies are made and subsequently implemented at the local, national, regional, or international level.⁹ Refugees cited a dizzying number of stakeholders engaged in these processes but admitted they often did not understand how these actors coordinated. Nor did they understand the delineation of responsibilities or power hierarchies in decision-making, including, for example, whether nation states, UNHCR, or implementing partners decide vital refugee distribution, resettlement criteria, or urban refugee rights, among other key decisions. Some felt disempowered or overwhelmed at the opacity of decision-making processes. As shared by a South Sudanese participant who had sought asylum in more than one Africa nation throughout repeated experiences of displacement, "We simply need to understand the international refugee policy frameworks better and their application in different countries... to compare the experiences and use the lessons for effective advocacy."

III. A New Path Forward: Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout our analysis we have focused on refugees' strengths and accomplishments, and identified remaining barriers to grow and strengthen individual and collective RLO networks as partners in service provision and in global policy and decision-making. Refugees identified best practices and internal advocacy tools that can strengthen their efforts. However, refugees also identified additional supports required from external governance and multi-sectoral stakeholders so that they can benefit from the opportunities afforded them through the New York Declaration, the GCR and the CRRF. In this concluding section, we enumerate the additional training, knowledge, and capacity developments that refugees request to expand their efforts.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

⁹ Kuntzelman's forthcoming research analyzes variation in urban refugees in Uganda political knowledge on their rights, restrictions, responsibilities, and the state and non-state actors who decide these- research to be published 2022.

TO NATIONAL GOVERNMENTS:

Refugees identified that nations struggle to evenly implement international refugee rights within and across nations, such that one's experiences vary greatly depending not only on which nation they are hosted in, but whether they are in camps, settlements, or urban areas. Refugees called for nations throughout Sub-Saharan Africa to standardize refugee rights and protections regardless where they stay. To these ends, the displaced have committed to generating data to identify the best practices that bolster outcomes among diverse refugee populations across locations, and to document how refugees' needs change over time and based on personal protection needs. Unaccompanied minors, female-headed households, elderly refugees, refugees of disability status or sexual and gender minorities may all require different supports. At minimum, refugees request nation states to allow freedom of movement, choice of residence in or out of camps, and enactment of rights that support self-reliance, including right to education beyond primary school and right to gainful, wage-earning employment.

To UNHCR, International NGOS, and Implementing Partners:

Refugees request that UNHCR and implementing partners, including NGOs, will more systematically and seriously consider refugee leaders and RLOs as partners at all stages and in all activities that impact refugees. Specifically, refugees seek inclusion at the design phase rather than limited engagement in implementation. Refugees additionally request that all stakeholders honor their commitments to disseminate their research and policy evaluations findings back to refugee communities for review and comments. Refugees seek to ensure that reports are communicated in non-academic, accessible wording and translated into their native languages.

To Policymakers:

At the heart of the rallying cry "nothing about us without us" is the belief that one cannot make decisions about what refugees need to pursue a life of dignity in exile without directly consulting refugees. Refugees will no longer accept their voices being mediated through UNHCR, NGOs, or scholars. Refugees seek recognition that they are experts of forced migration, not because they bear a legal status that recognizes this, but because they have developed skills and expertise by consistently responding to refugee needs. They know refugee community members' vulnerabilities and have insights on which issue areas need most urgently addressed through policy and interventions.

Refugees request capacity development and training to know the formal protocols of how global refugee policy is made. They need training on the bureaucratic and administrative processes to better respond when they are given participatory opportunities.

To Scholars:

Refugees identified that researchers could consult with the refugee networks formed through the Summit and through the emerging GRN to collaboratively set the research agenda and identify

topics of mutual interest rather than only engage the displaced as research subjects, translators, or research mobilizers. Refugees felt left out of data analysis, and more importantly felt they were blocked from accessing reports written about them. Refugees seek involvement during all stages of data collection, analysis, and findings dissemination, including giving comments on research. Finally, refugees would like to work collaboratively with scholars to define broader research agenda and themes such that the displaced can influence data generated about them, and in turn use this data for their own advocacy efforts.

To Funders:

Refugees request international organizations and philanthropic institutions consider direct funding for refugee-led initiatives. Specifically, refugee leaders request appropriate accommodations to reflect that they often have unique challenges to formally register their organizations.

Secondly, funders can provide RLOs with capacity development to enable their organizations to produce the types of professional documentation required for competitive funding opportunities. Finally, funders can systematically encourage, if not require, international NGOs and academic institutions to partner with refugee-led initiatives and refugee-led networks. To bolster these outcomes, funders can create more networking opportunities for RLOs to collaborate with established organizations.

The Open Society Foundation and Oxfam have been exemplars to directly fund RLOs and thus provide a potential model that can be embraced and replicated by other funding bodies.

Conclusion:

After the Summit, there are already positive signs that the CRRF and GCR promises of increased refugee engagement and participation are starting to take hold. For instance, during the first Global Refugee Forum in December 2019, refugees were represented on high-level panels alongside governments, business leaders, and UN agencies. While only 2% of the approximately 300 participants were refugees, this still represented significant progress. We believe that with continued investments and new opportunities, RLOs and RLO networks represent a wellspring of untapped potential. Refugees are committed to demonstrate that they are experts, not because of their legal status as a person outside of their country, but that they are experts because of their hard-work and experiences. Refugee leaders and RLOs have a proven track-record of providing a multitude of services at the local level. They are now eager to demonstrate their worth as partners engaged at all stages of policy design and implementation, to engage in research about the forcibly displaced, and to directly contribute to refugee protection and provision.