



OXFAM'S ENGAGEMENT WITH REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS IN WEST NILE (UGANDA)

Lessons on opportunities and challenges

Since 2018, Oxfam in Uganda has been supporting South Sudanese refugee-led organizations (RLOs) with funding for a range of peacebuilding, COVID-19 and livelihood activities. Drawing on this experience, this briefing note summarizes some of the most important lessons learned in the working relationship of Oxfam and Uganda-based RLOs. Practical recommendations are also drawn that may be useful for international actors working with RLOs in various contexts, focusing on how to nurture meaningful partnerships, including with regards to funding, capacity building, representation of women and youth, advocacy, knowledge sharing and visibility. The note shows that some of the risks international actors often associate with working with smaller local RLOs are either unfounded or can be mitigated through sustained engagement and partnership. However, the flexibility of funders, international non-governmental organizations and the United Nations is essential for allowing RLOs to meaningfully amplify local voices and best serve their communities.

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This briefing note was prepared with support from an independent consultant, Yotam Gidron, and with inputs by Lydia Ayikoru (Refugee Participation and Refugee Engagement & Participation Coordinator, Oxfam Uganda), Geoffrey Owino (LHL & Policy Influencing Coordinator, Oxfam Uganda), Katja Kjar-Levin (Humanitarian and Peacebuilding Lead, Oxfam Denmark) and Marie Sophie Pettersson (Senior Humanitarian and Peacebuilding Adviser, Oxfam Denmark).

For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email advocacy@oxfaminternational.org

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Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Emmanuel Motuna (far left) is leading his own RLO in Imvepi refugee settlement to support young refugees take ownership of their lives and support their community. 'It's not easy living in a refugee settlement, especially not when you are young.' Next to him are John Mario, Betty Knight and his RLO colleague Vivian Night. Photo credit: Hans Bach/Oxfam.

1 INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND

With 1.5 million refugees, Uganda is the largest refugee-hosting country in Africa and the fourth largest globally, after Türkiye, Colombia and Germany.¹ The country is widely recognized as having one of the most progressive refugee policies in the world. Uganda's 'approach stands in sharp contrast to many other refugee-hosting countries in the region and globally, which often require that refugees live in camps where they have restricted socio-economic rights and freedoms.'² In addition to being able to access education and economic opportunities, refugees in Uganda are also allowed to self-organize and form their own civil society organizations and community-based groups, which can be registered with the government to develop into non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

This briefing note on Oxfam's engagement with refugee-led organizations (RLOs) in West Nile seeks to inform current policy debates on strengthening the role of refugees and refugee organizations, and the promotion of meaningful refugee participation in refugee responses.

These debates are espoused by the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR),³ and other related commitments, such as the Refugee Participation Pledge.⁴ These trace their origin to the commitments to 'participation revolution' and 'localization' introduced by The Grand Bargain, the main outcome of the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit, and further stressed in the current Grand Bargain 2.0.⁵

By supporting RLOs, Oxfam reinforces a refugee community-based and community-led approach putting refugees at the centre of the response, ensuring their voices are heard and shaping decision-making, while enhancing humanitarians' accountability to refugees.

The note draws on a summary of a series of interviews and focus group discussions conducted in February and March 2022 in Kampala, Arua, Koboko, Yumbe and in the refugee settlements of Rhino, Imvepi and Bidi Bidi with the staff and volunteers of Oxfam and nine RLOs that have partnered with Oxfam. These discussions were conducted in the offices of the respective RLOs (listed on p.4), and with Oxfam's staff in Arua, Imvepi and Kampala.

Discussions were also held with members of the refugee welfare councils (RWCs) in Bidi Bidi and Rhino settlements, as well as with the Office of the Prime Minister (in Bidi Bidi) and with representatives of three Ugandan civil society organizations based in Arua town.⁶ In Kampala, interviews were conducted with staff of the Network of South Sudanese Civil Society Organizations in Uganda (NoSSCOU) and the Ugandan Refugee-Led Organizations Network (RELON).

OXFAM'S WORK WITH RLOS IN WEST NILE

Close to a million of all refugees in Uganda are South Sudanese who reside in settlements in West Nile, in the northern parts of the country. After refugee influxes in 2013 and 2016, small community initiatives emerged led by South Sudanese refugees in Uganda, seeking to improve the wellbeing of their communities.

Oxfam has been supporting the refugee response in West Nile since 2014, first engaging with RLOs on the South Sudanese peace process. With time, it expanded to other programme areas, such as livelihood support, protection work and COVID-19 interventions, mainly through small grants and specific calls for proposals.

Since 2018, Oxfam has partnered with a total of 10 RLOs with support from Oxfam Denmark (ODK)/Danida, UNHCR, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, IKEA (via ELNHA II) and the Open Society Foundation. The refugee-led partners have mostly been operating in major refugee settlements located in the western parts of the West Nile sub-region.

The main RLOs with which Oxfam works are:

1. Action for People in Need Organization (APINO)
2. Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation (CECI)
3. Community Technology Empowerment Network (CTEN)
4. Dynamic Action for Peace and Rehabilitation (DA4PR)
5. I CAN South Sudan
6. Save Humanity Africa (SHA)
7. South Sudanese Refugees Association (SSURA)
8. Support Trust for African Development (STAD)
9. Youth Empowerment to Act (YETA)
10. Youth Social Advocacy Team (YSAT)

2 KEY LESSONS



The YSAT (Youth Social Advocacy Team) head-office, Rhino Camp Refugee Settlement. Photo credit: Katja Kjar-Levin/Oxfam Denmark

THE UNIQUENESS OF RLOS

RLOs have the unique advantage of social proximity, contextual knowledge and network to their communities, rendering them accountable to their populations. The proximity to local communities and affected populations that RLOs enjoy needs to be recognized as an asset. Many RLOs also work across the humanitarian–development–peace nexus and different sectors to respond to the needs and demands of their communities. This gives them the acceptance, opportunity and resources to engage directly with their local constituencies and community members. It is also important to recognize that their participation is relevant from the viewpoint of a rights-based approach to decision-making processes (including in humanitarian responses) in which the most affected must have a say.

RLOs also have the advantage of knowing one or several languages spoken in the refugee settlements. They may be best placed as first responders before, during and after crises. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic clearly illustrated where national and international NGOs and UN agencies struggled to move due to tight restrictions from the government, while several of the RLOs had the capacity and space to operate and respond to their communities' needs. Furthermore, they are in their communities not only during working hours, but also at night and at weekends, and can respond quickly to emerging issues: when local disputes erupt they are unusually

accessible and attentive, as a member of the Refugee Welfare Council (RWC) put it. Some refugee leaders in Rhino also observed that one of their peacebuilding activities, implemented in collaboration with Oxfam, was found to be influential due to the **active** involvement of some RLOs in the programme.

TAKING CONFLICT SENSITIVITY SERIOUSLY

The embeddedness of RLOs within their communities is a unique advantage for their effective engagement with the most affected members of those communities. Despite some concerns that RLOs may lack humanitarian neutrality, interviewees (both from RLOs and Oxfam staff) indicated that RLOs are better placed in terms of paying attention to nuanced community dynamics to which international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) often remain entirely oblivious. While friction around issues of bias or politicization have been minimal, with increased activities new challenges can emerge. RLOs, international partners and donors therefore need to pursue a conflict-sensitive approach and take advantage of the nuanced perspective RLOs and other community-based organizations have of local dynamics. In this sense, Oxfam takes a conflict-sensitive approach during the process of selecting which RLOs to fund, like with any other partner and programme implementation.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP

The talent, energy and potential of young refugees are vital resources in efforts to prevent and respond to challenges affecting refugees. During displacement, young refugees in Uganda lost access to skills, confidence, social circles, aspirations and dreams. They may have been in the middle of their education or about to start their lives as young adults, and now as refugees they have to start from scratch again.

This is why Oxfam in Uganda has targeted youth-led RLOs to support their work on youth empowerment through livelihoods, entrepreneurship, education, community activism and engagement efforts which can help young refugees regain a sense of dignity and purpose as they restart their lives. The youth RLO leaders engage, motivate and act as role models for the young people in their communities. They are agents of change. This may also help prevent youth from resorting to negative coping mechanisms or being exposed to protection risks.



Musa Rose Wani Rose is a leader of a local refugee women's council in Imvepi refugee settlement in northern Uganda, where women meet and talk about challenges and solutions to their daily problems. 'People here know who I am, they can see that what I do is working. We are able to change things because we do it together.' Photo credit: Hans Bach/Oxfam.

FEMALE LEADERSHIP AND GENDER EQUALITY

Most RLOs have several women employees, and in some cases, these represent more than half of the staff. However, there are hardly any women staff members in leadership positions among RLOs.

Most refugees in the West Nile settlements are women and children. Refugee women and girls in Uganda face multiple barriers to self-organizing, forming and leading RLOs, and seeking funding. They face restrictive social gender norms, roles and responsibilities, alongside heightened economic and social risks such as violence, poor nutrition, low school completion and attainment, unemployment and labour-intensive livelihoods. However, there are also female refugee leaders and women and girls in the settlements with leadership potential, strong skill sets, knowledge and commitment.

Refugee women's organizations and groups are the best placed to understand and respond to the needs and issues of women in their community, including in a way that best considers local gender norms, and identifies opportunities to transform gender relations and tackle inequalities. Yet, women-led organizations and women's rights organizations often do not have the capacity to engage in resource mobilization and they tend to remain small, have low staff retention and often face pushback and a shrinking space for their agendas.⁷

Oxfam has so far only partnered with one RLO which is woman-led. Moreover, while Oxfam supported RLOs to develop gender policies as part of the partnership, standalone activities on gender equality and the empowerment

of women and girls have not been a major focus for RLOs. In 2023, Oxfam has strengthened its support for refugee women leaderships and refugee women-led initiatives, including capacity strengthening and group cash grants only for refugee women-led organizations, as well as overall RLO efforts to address gender issues in their communities and in advocacy. This includes capacity strengthening of the coalition of 20 refugee women-led RLOs across the different refugee settlements in Uganda.

PARTNERSHIP

Partnerships with RLOs were very limited when Oxfam first engaged with RLOs. Most of the RLOs were small and community-based, and had received no or little funding from aid donors. Today, several of them have grown in scope and size and take an active part in a variety of sectors, receive funding from multiple donors and are recognized as leaders in their communities, as well as by other stakeholders.

In general terms, RLOs have good relations with the government (Office of the Prime Minister) and UNHCR, who appear to appreciate their strong familiarity with refugee communities and contact them when they need support with outreach and mobilization. Nonetheless, financial support from, or long-term partnerships with, these agencies remain rare.

For instance, several of the RLOs consulted for this briefing note observed that while many INGOs have signed the Charter for Change,⁸ most appear to be taking no concrete steps to advance the localization agenda. RLOs perceive some INGOs' actions as tokenistic measures prompted by conditionalities imposed on them by their funders.⁹ Given that RLOs will continue to rely on INGOs and UN agencies as intermediaries to access funds from distant donors, ensuring that the latter are familiar with RLOs and their potential and strengths is essential for developing these organizations.

From Oxfam's perspective, as with many international organizations, RLOs were associated with risks, particularly financial risks. In early 2020, Oxfam created a new Refugee Engagement and Participation Coordinator position based in Arua. This aimed to support RLOs and strengthen coordination and collaboration between Oxfam and RLOs, as often more hands-on support and collaboration were required than when engaging with more traditional NGOs. Strong emphasis was placed on ensuring RLOs comply with legal requirements essential to operating in the refugee settlements and that they are recognized as an actor by the aid sector, local authorities and other stakeholders. Moreover, sound financial management and organizational policies were prioritized, including statutory tax requirements, setting up bank accounts, and developing basic organizational strategies on gender, codes of conduct and financial procedures, including human resource policies.

The technical and financial support enabled RLOs to grow and increasingly become recognized as humanitarian and development partners. Having received funding from an INGO also gave the organizations a blueprint that

contributed to them being increasingly accepted as partners by other organizations and donors. It is important to ensure that the focus on bureaucratization and compliance does not overwhelm small RLOs or hinder the articulation of independent and locally inspired strategic visions and priorities. RLOs are as diverse as other actors, and not all benefit from becoming more formalized and NGO-ized. Their leadership should therefore be supported on other elements than merely compliance and operational aspects. Oxfam's group cash transfer modality¹⁰ is an example of a funding modality which allows for fund transfer to smaller informal community groups with higher flexibility and fewer compliance requirements.

Continued involvement of RLOs across the project cycle and allowing flexibility in their use of funds emerged as some of the most important and productive aspects of Oxfam's engagement with RLOs. In interviews, RLO staff often drew a distinction between calls for proposals, for example, on peacebuilding and COVID-19 responses, that leave room for local innovation and insights in shaping project design and those that rigidly dictate what local actors are expected to implement on behalf of the organizations that fund them.

The co-creation of programme design has also brought strong local knowledge to programmes and new knowledge to Oxfam and other RLO partners. However, ensuring mechanisms for timely information sharing, as well as strengthened feedback and continued inclusion in decision-making, are areas that will be given increased consideration in the future.

THE CHALLENGE OF SHORT-TERM AND INADEQUATE FUNDING

RLOs are cost-effective actors. However, they, as with other implementing actors and organizations, need adequate staff salaries, computers, a place to sit, and means of transportation to carry out their work. Nonetheless, in most cases, they receive only activity-based and short-term funding, which exposes them to operational and institutional fragility and risks (for example, staff may not benefit from health insurance and long-term contracts). Such a short-term funding approach by INGO, donors and aid agencies needs to be reversed to move localization from mere rhetoric to practice.

The first funding provided by Oxfam was also short-term (three months to a year), as it was Oxfam in Uganda's first experience with RLOs, and they were considered to be partners with financial risks. Other reasons were the short-term financial planning cycle, funding, and the intention to initially support pilot projects.

Based on its experience, Oxfam has introduced multi-year funding to RLOs while providing smaller, short-term funds to smaller start-up RLOs or refugee-led groups.

RLOs receive significant smaller donations from community members and staff that are flexible and creative. Yet, RLOs do not have sufficient

'If you look at it now, it was a worthy risk that Oxfam took ... You find that some of them have grown and have become big. They compete for funding – they even compete with Oxfam.'

Oxfam staff member

'Something I appreciate about the partnership with Oxfam is the flexibility ... It is not like, "do this!" No. We suggest, and they guide.'

RLO refugee leader

alternative sources of funds to pre-finance activities or retain core and skilled staff and continue operating between projects. Not receiving quality funding contributes to 'the downfall of RLOs', as a staff member of one powerful RLO explained. Transfers from INGOs, UN agencies and other actors are slow and, while this seems to be entirely bureaucratic, it has a significant negative impact on partnerships, in particular smaller organizations like RLOs which have little room for manoeuvre on pre-financing activities and staff costs. Such bureaucratic practices have a negative impact on RLOs' ability to retain staff and make it hard to respond quickly and effectively in emergencies. Grants to RLOs included budgets for indirect costs, usually comprising around 30% of the total funding for each project. From 2023, overheads were also provided to some existing RLO partners, where the back donor and/or organizational requirements supported this.

'Donors fund activities, but they forget that these activities are going to be implemented by people.'

RLO staff member

THE QUESTION OF VISIBILITY

In their local settings, RLOs have greater visibility for obvious reasons of proximity to the communities they serve. This visibility tends to fade from the local to the national and international levels. However, this comparative advantage is yet to consistently translate into RLO partnerships with new stakeholders and access to new funds and material support.

As part of its broader effort to enhance the visibility of refugees in local, national, regional and global discussions, Oxfam endeavoured to expose RLOs from Uganda to different stakeholders at the national, regional and international levels to increase their visibility and create opportunities for networking, learning and fundraising. Oxfam also supported refugees to write and publish opinion pieces in different media,¹¹ and facilitated international coverage and/or participation in regional and national events, which gave opportunities for direct engagement with different stakeholders, including donors.

ADVOCACY WORK AND REPRESENTATION

RLOs and refugee-led networks have a critical role to advocate for refugee-centred and rights-based solutions and influence decision-making at local, national, regional and global levels to feed into refugee policies, frameworks, strategies, responses and durable solutions.

Meaningful refugee participation means direct, substantive and formal inclusion of refugee leaders, networks and RLOs of all genders, ages and diversities to influence the design and outcome of negotiations and discussions, across all issues, as well as their implementation. Superficial, last-minute, informal, advisory or other observer status, without the opportunity to directly influence decisions and outcomes, is not meaningful.

RLOs are part of the sector working groups and inter-agency coordination meetings at the settlement and national levels. The transition from being RLOs without funding to organizations with financial support from donors bolstered their recognition and participation and increased their access to information. However, many spaces are dominated by the bigger agencies and often focused on information sharing.

In general, representation is strongest at the local level. At the national level, West Nile RLOs engage in working groups and a few have become active participants in civil society networks like the Ugandan chapter of the Charter for Change and other collaboration and coordination spaces.

Oxfam has played a brokering role in connecting RLOs to spaces and networks, supporting several RLO leaders to participate in regional and international events, including the Global Refugee Forum, localization events in Denmark, and relevant East Africa meetings. Most recently, Oxfam has also supported the Refugee Engagement Forum that brought together 38 refugees' representatives and leaders across 13 refugee settlements in Uganda to develop policy pledges for the Global Refugee Forum.

However, RLOs remain marginalized, particularly in government-led policy forums and spaces. Whenever this issue has been debated as a humanitarian question in the past, it has been in the context of the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF), from which RLOs have been absent. Even the Refugee Engagement Forum and its taskforce (bringing together the Office of the Prime Minister, the CRRF Secretariat, UNHCR and INGOs) appear to have had very little, if any, interaction with RLOs or refugee-led networks.

For international meetings RLOs have not only been hindered by economic constraints, but also barriers like a lack of conventional travel documents (CTD), lengthy visa procedures, and invitations that are received at short notice.

3 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

RLOs have a right to participate in policies, programmes and decision-making processes affecting their lives. RLOs are critical actors in identifying solutions and responding to issues in their communities. RLOs know the context, speak the languages, and are embedded in their communities. They are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist and are entrusted with financial resources.

It is essential to acknowledge that RLOs encompass a broad spectrum of organizations, and while each of them should receive timely and high-quality funding, partnerships should be founded on principles of equity; donors, as well as international and national organizations, should demonstrate flexibility and adaptability to cater to the unique needs of smaller RLOs, ensuring they too can access the necessary funding. Furthermore, it is imperative to highlight the importance of recognizing and addressing the diversity within RLOs, considering factors such as gender, age and ethnicity, among others. Emphasis should be placed on offering enhanced support to women-led refugee organizations and fostering women's leadership within the refugee community, given that a significant proportion of the refugee population comprises women and girls.

Oxfam's experience in West Nile offers an important set of lessons, demonstrating what it means to translate commitments to localization, meaningful refugee engagement and participation, and partnership with RLOs into practice.

RECOMMENDATIONS

EQUAL PARTNERSHIPS

Actors supporting RLOs must recognize their capacities and knowledge and avoid the notion that RLOs are high-risk partners.

- Meaningful partnership with RLOs requires a considerable degree of flexibility from international actors and donors and a willingness to adopt new practices and procedures. International and national actors should acknowledge the mandate of RLOs and offer flexibility on compliance requirements for smaller RLOs. Simple accountability mechanisms towards targeted populations and communities should be further explored and documented.
- RLOs must be given the opportunity to participate meaningfully and lead on project design and implementation.
- Greater attention should be given to the organizational and institutional sustainability of RLOs, including supporting their independent voices and

vision and strengthening their visibility and fundraising capacities.

- RLOs should approach INGOs, UN agencies and others with specific demands and expectations when entering into new partnerships, based on a clearer understanding of their own vision, mission and capacity gaps.
- RLOs should identify, discuss and demand change, including with donors, when formal requirements are disproportionately hindering partnership and project implementation or passing risks to RLOs or intermediaries.

INCREASED ACCESS TO QUALITY FUNDING

Increased funding – and quality funding – for RLOs will strengthen refugee rights and meaningful participation in project implementation and decision-making.

- There is a strong need for increased funding and quality funding to RLOs, including adequate administrative support, overhead costs and multi-year projects. Targeted funding opportunities for RLOs only is one option.
- Funding opportunities for RLOs should be made as flexible and non-bureaucratic as possible. Consider introducing different requirements according to the funding ceilings to allow for engagement and funding opportunities for smaller RLOs.
- Ensure timely support by making sure that lengthy risk assessment and fund transfer processes do not undermine project implementation and organizational sustainability or transfer risks to RLOs.
- For short-term projects, support for key technical staff beyond the project period should be considered to allow RLOs to retain knowledge and seek additional funding.

ENSURE DIVERSITY AND GENDER EQUALITY

RLOs should reflect and represent the diversity of their communities. The support to youth leadership has shown important achievements and great potential for the individuals, communities, and development and/or humanitarian organizations.

- More work is needed to ensure diversity and gender equality. It should be a priority for both RLOs and the organizations supporting them. This includes recognizing and supporting a diversity of RLOs and ensuring broad-based representation and opportunities, including support and funding opportunities for women refugee-led organizations and women leaders.
- RLOs should discuss their internal practices and how they ensure diversity and gender equality. Particular attention should be given to gender equality in senior leadership structures and actions taken to ensure women in senior management positions.
- A mentorship programming for women who show leadership potential, ensuring gender-equitable representation in decision-making processes and spaces, targeted outreach to women in recruitment processes, and

addressing gender-specific barriers are concrete actions that should be considered to ensure stronger gender equality in RLOs.

MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION AS STANDARD

The equal, direct and influential participation of refugees should be a standard requirement across all processes or convenings.

- There is a need for donor INGOs and the UN to provide dedicated funding opportunities for enhancing the capacities of RLOs, particularly women and youth RLOs, to advocate, participate in and influence decisions in the different spaces on issues that affect them at all levels.
- Deliberate efforts must be taken to make these platforms and spaces more inclusive to enable refugees' meaningful participation and representation. RLOs should be at the centre of such meetings, influencing setting agendas and as main speakers.
- Meetings and other processes should be planned to allow RLOs to prepare and consult their constituency, with related financial costs and other support provided promptly.
- More global meetings and preparatory meetings should take place in the Global South and at locations that are easier for RLOs to access.

SHARING GOOD PRACTICES AND STRONG COLLABORATION

- Share both achievements and challenges with other stakeholders as a way of encouraging increased partnerships and engagement between different stakeholders and RLOs.
- Encourage and support mentorships and collaboration between RLOs, including between more established and newer RLOs and RLO networks. This may also take the form of consortia, utilizing refugee networks.
- NGOs or other intermediaries should act as mentors and brokers to relevant actors and networks.

NOTES

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OXFAM

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