FROM THE FRINGES TO THE FOREFRONT

Refugee leadership within Uganda's humanitarian coordination mechanisms

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Abstract

This briefing note examines refugee leadership in humanitarian coordination in Uganda, a country widely recognised for its progressive refugee policies and its leadership in promoting refugee participation. Uganda's legal framework provides a strong foundation for inclusion, though gaps remain in practice as a result of barriers such as limited funding, information gaps and language challenges. This can hinder meaningful engagement – especially for women, young people and people with disabilities. However, a number of well-established and steadily strengthening practices are evident, including the creation of RLO networks and platforms such as the Refugee Engagement Forum.

To achieve a more effective and locally led response, this paper calls for inclusive coordination structures, direct funding and policy reforms that recognize and empower refugee leadership as a core part of humanitarian action.

This paper was written by Mary Gitahi with input from Hannah Cooper. Oxfam acknowledges the assistance of Oliver Waro, Geoffrey Owino, Lydia Ayikoru, Jane Margaret Nakiranda, Joel Dengel and Emma Kuria in its production, and would like to extend a particular thanks to the refugee leaders and other stakeholders who took part in or facilitated focus group discussions and interviews. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues.

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

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International in November 2025 under
DOI: 10.21201/2025.000108
Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, 2600 John Smith Drive, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

Cover photo: Women refugee leaders come together during a peer learning workshop, © Hannah Cooper/Oxfam 2025

INTRODUCTION

Uganda hosts one of the world's largest populations of refugees – over 1.9 million as of October 2025.[1] The national refugee response is anchored in the 2006 Refugees Act, one of the most progressive refugee policies in Africa.[2] The Act accords refugees a broad set of rights, including the right to work, freedom of movement, and access to education and healthcare. It reflects a shift away from viewing refugees as passive recipients of aid to recognizing them as active participants in both their communities and the broader host society. Importantly, the Act also provides for the establishment of Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs) – refugee-led governance structures that serve as key platforms for meaningful representation and participation in decision-making processes.[3]

In 2017, Uganda further advanced its refugee response by adopting the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF). The CRRF aligns itself with the 2016 New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants, and promotes a holistic, multi-stakeholder approach to refugee management. The CRRF engages actors and duty bearers, along five mutually reinforcing pillars: 1) Admission and Rights; 2) Emergency Response and Ongoing Needs; 3) Resilience and Self-Reliance; 4) Expanded Solutions; and 5) Voluntary Repatriation.[4]

Uganda's Refugee Act and the CRRF showcase the country's commitment to refugee inclusion and leadership. The Refugee Act emphasizes the importance of refugee participation in decision-making processes, while the CRRF promotes the integration of refugees into national systems and strengthens the nexus between humanitarian and development efforts. While Uganda's strong policy commitments provide an important foundation, some implementation gaps persist – reflecting challenges common across many refugee-hosting contexts. Refugee-led organizations (RLOs) in Uganda continue to face challenges, including lack of recognition, limited funding, restricted access to information, and language barriers. These challenges are acutely felt in the coordination structures that govern and guide the humanitarian and displacement response in Uganda.

Refugee leadership plays a crucial role in ensuring effective communication, representation and service delivery within refugee settlements and urban contexts. While refugee participation in coordination spaces continues to evolve, there remain opportunities to strengthen the depth and consistency of engagement. Doing so would help ensure that policies and programmes more fully reflect the priorities, needs and lived experiences of displaced populations.

This briefing note aims to examine the role of RLOs in Uganda's humanitarian coordination architecture, highlighting both the barriers to and opportunities for meaningful refugee leadership. Drawing on field research across refugee settlements and urban contexts, it outlines the

current state of refugee participation, identifies good practices, and presents actionable recommendations to ensure that refugee leaders are fully recognized and supported as central actors in humanitarian coordination.

Methodology

This study aimed to investigate the role of RLOs in humanitarian coordination in Uganda, exploring the challenges faced by refugee leaders and the opportunities for enhancing meaningful participation. By examining these dynamics, the research sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of how to promote inclusive governance and ensure that displaced populations are able to act as agents of change.

The research employed a qualitative, multi-site case study methodology to explore the role of refugee leadership in humanitarian coordination in Uganda. It focused on four key refugee-hosting contexts: Nakivale, Kyaka II, and Bidi Bidi refugee settlements, as well as Kampala as an urban refugee setting. These sites were selected to capture a range of experiences across different geographic, administrative and operational settings.

Data collection methods included focus group discussions (FGDs) and key informant interviews (KIIs). FGDs were conducted with refugee leaders – primarily from refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs) – to understand their lived experiences and perceptions of coordination mechanisms. KIIs were conducted with a range of stakeholders, including representatives from the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and RLO leaders. A literature review and review of relevant policies/legislation were also undertaken as part of the research.

Importantly, the research was led by a researcher with lived experience of displacement, bringing a grounded and insider perspective to the study's design, analysis and interpretation. This enhanced the study's participatory approach and helped ensure that the voices and realities of refugee leaders are reflected with authenticity and depth.

Despite this strong participatory approach, the study faced certain limitations. In some locations, refugee respondents cited research fatigue, raising concerns about repeated studies without visible impact. This affected participation levels and required trust-building to ensure open dialogue. Additionally, shrinking funding and staff turnover within INGOs limited the availability of non-refugee informants, especially in urban areas such as Kampala.

1. REFUGEE LEADERSHIP IN COORDINATION

Humanitarian coordination mechanisms are central to the way international actors plan, manage and deliver aid in displacement settings. Yet too often, these spaces remain inaccessible or unwelcoming to the very people most affected by crisis.[5] In humanitarian settings characterized by large-scale displacement, refugee leaders and RLOs offer an essential, yet underutilized, pathway to making coordination more inclusive, effective and accountable. However, meaningful participation means ensuring that refugees are not just present in coordination structures and meetings but are truly shaping the decisions that affect their lives and communities.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MEANINGFUL REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

Meaningful refugee participation in humanitarian coordination is essential for enhancing the effectiveness, equity and sustainability of refugee responses. When refugees are engaged as active agents in the design, implementation and governance of humanitarian systems, the response becomes more contextually relevant, locally owned and empowering for displaced communities.[6] This approach not only strengthens outcomes on the ground, but also reflects key global commitments – such as the Grand Bargain's localization agenda and the Global Compact on Refugees – which emphasize the importance of shifting power to local actors and ensuring that refugees are included in the decisions that affect their lives.[7]

Refugee leaders and RLOs are uniquely positioned to understand and respond to the specific needs of their communities. Their proximity and lived experience enable them to identify context-specific challenges, mediate tensions and shape appropriate interventions.[8] When refugees participate in leadership structures, they are able to leverage this proximity to actively contribute to conflict resolution and community support structures in order to mediate disputes and strengthen community cohesion.[9]

Furthermore, inclusive coordination promotes equity and accountability.[10] Refugee participation in decision-making ensures that humanitarian responses reflect the diverse voices and priorities of affected populations, including women, young people and people with disabilities. Programmes that support gender-sensitive leadership and youth engagement, for example, have demonstrated the transformative potential of empowering marginalized groups to lead and influence community outcomes.[11]

Meaningful refugee participation is also critical to shifting power dynamics in the humanitarian sector. RLOs challenge traditional top-down models that frame refugees as passive beneficiaries; they represent a paradigm shift towards collective agency and locally led development.[12] Yet, as numerous studies highlight, these actors remain under-resourced and often excluded from decision-making spaces dominated by international agencies and donors.[13] Structural inequalities in access to funding, recognition and coordination mechanisms continue to marginalize refugee leaders and refugee-led responses, despite their proven effectiveness.[14] This exclusion is not only unjust; it is also inefficient. Failing to include refugees in coordination undermines the relevance and responsiveness of humanitarian programming.

Ultimately, ensuring refugee leadership in humanitarian coordination is not only a matter of rights – it is a practical imperative for building more sustainable, dignified and effective responses. Recognizing and investing in the leadership of those directly affected by displacement strengthens community ownership, fosters trust and improves long-term outcomes for both refugees and host communities.

Refugee leaders and RLOs

In this paper, we often refer to refugee leaders and RLOs in a way that is interchangeable to reflect the reality of refugee leadership in Uganda's humanitarian context. While not all refugee leaders are affiliated with formal RLOs, and not all RLOs operate with the same structure or recognition, RLOs represent one of the most visible and organized expressions of refugee leadership within coordination spaces. They provide a practical entry point for examining how refugee voices are represented, excluded or empowered in humanitarian decision-making. Many RLOs have emerged from community-driven responses to unmet needs and are led by individuals with strong legitimacy and trust within their communities. At the same time, refugee leaders often work through RLOs to engage with humanitarian actors, advocate for their communities and participate in coordination forums.

THE UGANDAN EXPERIENCE

In Uganda – home to over 1.9 million refugees and celebrated for its progressive refugee policies – refugee participation is formally embedded in the legal and coordination frameworks. The 2006 Refugee Act and the CRRF provide a foundation for inclusion, recognizing the rights of refugees to work, enjoy freedom of movement, establish RLOs and participate in governance structures such as Refugee Welfare Councils (RWCs) and the Refugee Engagement Forum.[15] These structures are intended to bridge the gap between refugee communities and humanitarian actors. RWCs, in particular, play a vital role in community mobilization and communication, often supporting INGOs in facilitating community dialogues and identifying people in need of assistance. In a number of settlements, these structures have already

facilitated constructive collaboration between refugee leaders, government actors and humanitarian partners, demonstrating the potential of Uganda's participatory model when adequately supported. However, despite this enabling environment – and the key role played by refugee-led structures – meaningful participation remains uneven and is often symbolic rather than substantive.[16]

Humanitarian coordination structures in Uganda operate across national, settlement and district levels. While they formally include refugee representatives, coordination varies significantly between locations; while some promising practices are emerging, all too often entrenched dynamics continue to limit refugee leadership in decision-making spaces.

NATIONAL-LEVEL COORDINATION AND PARTICIPATION

At the national level, Uganda has established coordination platforms that involve RLOs. Structures such as the Refugee Engagement Forum and its Task Force, co-chaired by UNHCR and the Office of the Prime Minister (OPM), aim to incorporate refugee voices into the CRRF. RLOs are included in sectoral working groups on protection, gender-based violence, health and accountability. Some RLOs have also gained access to global policy platforms through the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and other channels.

'I always attend as a panellist or a speaker, which gives me an opportunity to have my voice heard. Their dynamics are changing, and they are now allowing us refugees to speak, but there is still a gap.'

Refugee leader in Kampala

Despite the presence of these formal structures, participation varies across coordination levels, often reflecting differing capacities, resources, and operational priorities. While UNHCR asserts that RLOs are meaningfully involved and supported through financing and technical assistance, RLOs describe these engagements as often transactional or tokenistic. For instance, one organization in Nakivale gave an example of obtaining a grant with a larger partner organization but then having to withdraw because they were not meaningfully included in the budgeting and implementation of the project, such that the activities did not align with their values. Other refugee leaders told Oxfam that representation is sometimes limited to better-resourced RLOs, while smaller entities struggle to access or influence policy processes.

'As RLO leaders, the coordination mechanism does not believe in our leadership skills. It's like they accept us but do not fully accept our expertise.'

Refugee leader in Kampala

SETTLEMENT-LEVEL COORDINATION REALITIES

Nakivale

In Nakivale, coordination between the OPM, INGOs and RLOs is generally collaborative, and structured efforts are led through regular coordination meetings and monthly sectoral working groups. During

these meetings, RWCs have the opportunity to present challenges at the community level, which are then relayed at the settlement and district levels. RLOs engage in joint monitoring, mental health programming and advocacy initiatives such as reintegrating refugee children into school.

> *'Previously, we never used to attend any meetings, but this year we have been attending district and settlement levels. As RWC representatives – and people with special needs – we are invited to coordination meetings from village to national level. There is also the REF, where representatives of RWCs from different camps meet and give feedback to the community. The meetings are held on a monthly basis and we attend at the district level.'*
>
> Refugee leader in Nakivale

However, the decision-making power of refugee leaders remains constrained. RLOs describe their involvement in meetings as limited; while they may be consulted, they are rarely decision-makers. The decisions taken in the wake of the cuts to US humanitarian and development funding in early 2025 were highlighted as an example of this lack of inclusion by several leaders; in particular, choices made around changes in food distribution were not felt to be inclusive. Even when decisions are made in a participatory way, these decisions are sometimes ignored or changed in implementation. Moreover, the level of participation varies among RLOs. Smaller, newer organizations often struggle to engage, as do those with limited budgets and human resources.

Kyaka II

Kyaka II features a layered coordination structure led by OPM and UNHCR, with implementing partners leading working groups and RWCs engaging at the zonal level. RLOs are active in the Kyaka Refugee-Led Organizations Network (KROLN), comprising 35 RLOs organized by sector. These groups attend monthly sectoral working group meetings, engage in community mobilization, and lead initiatives like energy and environmental programming.

However, while RLOs in Kyaka are increasingly present in coordination spaces, many feel that opportunities for shared leadership could be further strengthened. Opportunities to influence strategy, in particular, are rare. INGO and district representatives acknowledge the value of RLOs but see them mainly as implementing partners, not decision-makers. Refugee leaders express frustration at being *'there to listen, not to be listened to'*.

Bidi Bidi

Bidi Bidi presents a case of structured but sometimes shallow collaboration. The OPM and INGOs include RLOs in coordination forums, but leadership roles are rare. RLOs are recognized for their community links but are viewed as implementers for smaller activities that INGOs cannot cover.

RLOs attend coordination meetings, but their input is often limited to sharing updates; opportunities for leadership are sporadic and can be seen as symbolic, for instance, where they are linked to donor visits. While RLOs advocate on vital issues – such as family planning, education and access to clean water – they are largely excluded from strategic decisions.

Host community dynamics further complicate coordination. Host organizations sometimes perceive RLOs as privileged yet inexperienced, leading to mistrust and poor collaboration. RLOs feel underappreciated, and the lack of joint planning impairs the quality of service delivery.

> *'We participate in decision making at all levels as RWCs and our meetings are facilitated for. We receive invitations to the meetings because we represent the RLOs. Especially at the district level where we present the problems of our community. [But] there are some instances where we are not involved in some policies like on food policies and education; they just make decisions.'*
>
> Refugee leader in Bidi Bidi

URBAN COORDINATION REALITIES IN KAMPALA

Kampala's urban response presents a distinct picture: according to the refugee leaders that Oxfam spoke with, coordination mechanisms involving RLOs are largely absent or ad hoc.[17] RLOs report that no formal coordination structures exist between themselves, the OPM or UNHCR. Collaborations are often event-driven (e.g. planning World Refugee Day), with refugee involvement ending once projects conclude.

UNHCR highlights national-level platforms like the Refugee Engagement Forum, but acknowledges the absence of a dedicated urban RLO coordination platform. Refugee leaders in Kampala describe a fragmented landscape in which each RLO operates independently. The Refugee-Led Organizations Network (RELON) is the only consistent coordination body for many.

RLOs express deep frustration with what they describe as transactional relationships: they are consulted for visibility when donors are present, but otherwise excluded. Opportunities for collaboration hinge on financial capacity – those who can contribute to event budgets may gain visibility; others are ignored. Some refugee leaders described interpersonal or institutional tensions that at times negatively affected collaboration between themselves and government officials – highlighting the importance of continued trust-building across all actors.

Structural exclusion is pronounced. Many RLOs are not formally recognized or are registered as community-based organizations (CBOs), limiting access to resources. Consistent participation is further hindered by language barriers, limited access to transport and lack of

information.

FIRST TO RESPOND BUT LAST TO BE HEARD?

Our research highlights a situation where meaningful refugee participation in coordination mechanisms is by no means absent, but there is still progress to be made when it comes to fully recognizing and supporting refugee leadership in such structures.

In particular, the question of tokenism as opposed to genuine participation was raised repeatedly. While some well-established and better-funded RLOs do participate in coordination meetings, their role is often restricted to reporting and community mobilization, with little influence over decision-making. Many RLOs report being positioned as passive actors, expected to accept decisions made by others, with little to no opportunity for meaningful involvement in leadership or implementation. This dynamic is seen as limiting their potential and undermining their capacity to contribute their skills and expertise. RWCs show slightly more engagement, but their ability to speak freely is often constrained by the need to maintain favourable relations with government actors. Unlocking the full potential of RLOs will require not only formal inclusion but also shifts in funding, visibility and trust. As one refugee leader put it, *'We are the first responders – why are we the last ones to be heard?'*

'We have no say in the leadership; they only engage us when they need to implement our ideas, mobilize the community, or compile reports for meetings. We do not lead because we are not allowed to make decisions.'

Refugee leader in Nakivale

Some progress was noted, however, and RLOs acknowledge increased access to coordination spaces, even if decision-making power largely remains with established actors (such as the government, UN agencies and I/NGOs). One representative observed, *'There is much improvement in the collaboration between RLOs and the other stakeholders. At least now we are allowed to participate in the meetings, even if we won't make decisions.'* While such inclusion remains limited, it is viewed as a step in the right direction toward more meaningful and equitable collaboration (see below for more emerging examples of good practice).

2. BEST PRACTICES FOR STRENGTHENING REFUGEE LEADERSHIP IN COORDINATION

Our research identified a range of promising practices that have emerged to support and strengthen the leadership of RLOs within humanitarian coordination mechanisms in Uganda. These demonstrate that refugee leadership can be significantly strengthened through inclusive decision-making, targeted capacity support, meaningful partnerships and structural reforms. Scaling and replicating these approaches across Uganda's refugee response can lead to more effective, accountable and sustainable humanitarian coordination.

INCLUSIVE AND PARTICIPATORY DECISION-MAKING

Ensuring that refugee voices are reflected in planning, implementation and evaluation is a foundational principle of effective coordination. In Nakivale and Bidi Bidi, inclusive frameworks have enabled refugee leaders to participate in decision-making processes across all coordination levels. For example, Bidi Bidi has formalized refugee leadership roles in mobilization and planning meetings, while Nakivale emphasizes the importance of including RLOs at each stage of decision-making to ensure that their needs are addressed. In Kampala, refugee leaders participating in the Refugee Engagement Forum were involved in planning for high-level platforms such as the Global Refugee Forums of 2019 and 2023.

'Before it used to be a challenge for a woman to lead but after empowerment and skill training, women gained confidence and started leading.'

Refugee leader in Kampala

'Refugee leaders should be given direct access to decision-making spaces and be involved in designing their own training.'

Refugee leader in Kampala

The Refugee Engagement Forum

The Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) is widely regarded as a best practice for institutionalizing refugee leadership in humanitarian coordination. Established in 2018 by UNHCR and the OPM, the REF brings elected refugee representatives from across Uganda's settlements into national-level discussions under the CRRF. Unlike one-off consultations, the REF is a formal, regular platform where refugee leaders engage with government, UN and NGO actors to raise community priorities and influence policy and strategy. Its structure ensures that refugee voices are embedded in coordination processes – refugees are not just consulted, but are actively participating.

What sets the REF apart is its focus on building the capacity and legitimacy of refugee leaders. Members receive training to engage

meaningfully in policy spaces, and some have contributed to global advocacy platforms, including the Global Refugee Forum. While gaps remain – such as limited resources and barriers to broader inclusion – the REF demonstrates that refugee leadership can be formalized and influential when supported by political will and sustained investment. It shows how national coordination can shift toward more inclusive and accountable governance by recognizing refugees as partners in shaping the systems that affect their lives.

CAPACITY STRENGTHENING AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Targeted training and ongoing mentorship are central to empowering RLOs. In Nakivale, leadership and governance training have been instrumental in enabling RLOs to engage meaningfully with coordination structures. Similarly, in Bidi Bidi, leadership training has helped refugee leaders better articulate community needs and priorities. Kampala-based RLOs have benefitted from tailored technical support and user-friendly reporting systems. For instance, the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative has streamlined reporting processes in order to better reflect the structures and capacities of RLO partners. In Kyaka II, mentorship and support for RLO registration have also played a key role in preparing organizations for participation in coordination forums.

IMPROVED COMMUNICATION AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Effective communication underpins participation. In Nakivale, the use of interpreters familiar with refugee languages and timely access to coordination information have improved RLO engagement. In Kyaka II, a local platform was developed to ensure that RLOs can access coordination updates and calls for proposals, including those adapted for non-English speakers or semi-literate leaders (e.g. using voice apps). These practices support broader inclusion and empower RLOs to act on opportunities.

COMMUNITY-LED AND CONTEXT-SPECIFIC SOLUTIONS

RLOs bring deep contextual knowledge and are well-positioned to provide timely, relevant services. In Bidi Bidi, RLOs have implemented cost-effective WASH solutions, such as repairing local water infrastructure, and negotiated land use agreements with host communities; these are practices that enhance both service delivery and social cohesion. In Nakivale, local leaders have been supported to lead

emergency responses and deliver culturally sensitive interventions, demonstrating the potential of community-led models.

Refugee Welfare Committees

Refugee Welfare Committees (RWCs) are formal community governance structures established within refugee settlements to represent and organize refugee communities. Mandated by Uganda's 2006 Refugee Act, RWCs are part of the government's broader approach to refugee self-reliance and participation. The OPM carries out regular capacity strengthening of RWCs, aiming to strengthen the leadership capabilities of refugee representatives and ensure inclusive governance, especially for refugee women.

RWCs operate at multiple levels (village, zone and settlement) and are composed of elected representatives. These committees are intended to serve as a bridge between refugee communities and humanitarian actors, including the OPM, UNHCR and I/NGOs. Their roles typically include community mobilization, information sharing, conflict mediation, supporting service delivery and identifying individuals for assistance. They also help coordinate community responses during emergencies or major initiatives like registration or food distribution.

RWCs have proven to be a vital component of Uganda's humanitarian response architecture. Their flexible, decentralized structure enables them to respond swiftly to community needs, leveraging local language, shared experiences and strong community networks. This localized approach fosters trust and ensures that RWCs deliver accessible, culturally appropriate and community-centred services, particularly to those who face significant barriers to assistance.[18]

However, while RWCs are recognized in policy and widely present across refugee settlements, their effectiveness and influence vary. In practice, they often act more as implementing partners or community liaisons, rather than decision-makers. Their ability to lead or influence coordination processes is frequently limited by structural hierarchies, political constraints, and their dependency on humanitarian agencies for resources and legitimacy. Nonetheless, RWCs remain a key mechanism for community-level participation and representation, often acting as the first point of contact for both refugees and humanitarian actors in settlement areas.

PARTNERSHIP AND NON-TOKENISTIC COLLABORATION

Genuine partnerships between RLOs, government bodies and I/NGOs are key to effective coordination. In Nakivale, collaboration between the OPM and RLOs within coordination structures has addressed governance challenges and improved service delivery. Bidi Bidi offers similar examples where RLOs complement partner services and fill gaps, using their local insight and networks to strengthen coordination efforts. In Kampala, collaboration between refugee leaders and local council leadership has enhanced peaceful coexistence between the

refugee and host community, leading to improved local coordination.

POLICY REFORM AND STRUCTURAL INCLUSION

Finally, supportive policy environments are essential to promoting leadership and meaningful participation. In Bidi Bidi, RLOs have called for reforms to streamline registration processes and remove bureaucratic barriers. Similarly, in Kyaka II, there have been efforts to make funding processes more accessible and inclusive, including advocating for application formats that accommodate different literacy levels. RLOs also pointed to efforts to streamline and simplify processes for legal registration at a national level.

3. BARRIERS TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

Despite growing national and global commitments to refugee leadership, systemic barriers continue to undermine the meaningful participation and leadership of RLOs in humanitarian coordination. This section outlines the structural, financial, social and legal obstacles that limit refugees' influence across different coordination spaces – especially when it comes to decision-making, funding and representation.

INADEQUATE OR UNCLEAR COORDINATION STRUCTURES

The absence or inconsistency of coordination structures, particularly in urban areas, significantly hampers meaningful refugee participation. While settlements like Kyaka II have functional coordination mechanisms, including regular monthly meetings, urban areas like Kampala lack such structures, despite having large refugee populations. RLOs operating in Kampala report that although policies exist to guide coordination, these are poorly enforced, leading to operational inefficiencies, duplication of efforts and weak collaboration. The uneven application of coordination mechanisms leaves RLOs in Kampala without the institutional entry points necessary to participate in decision-making and humanitarian coordination/planning. This gap undermines the spirit of inclusive leadership and weakens the overall response.

EXCLUSION FROM DECISION-MAKING

Despite their deep understanding of community needs, RLOs are routinely excluded from key decision-making processes. A number of RLOs felt that their presence in meetings is often symbolic or tokenistic, with limited influence on programme design or policy decisions. RLO representatives report being invited to events only when visibility is needed for donors, with their contributions sidelined or ignored. In some cases, they are actively discouraged from organizing or participating in community planning efforts. *'The events we participate in feel undermined... we're only present when big donors need to see beneficiaries'*, noted one refugee leader based in Kampala. Another woman refugee leader told us that there was little space to bring the priorities and concerns of women in their communities to the fore in such decision-making spaces, with members of coordination structures feeling that they need to align with the leadership, even if this does not

'We are able to influence small decisions in our communities, but when it comes to big ones – like the reduction in food rations – we have no say.'

Refugee leader in Nakivale

reflect what they are hearing from refugee communities themselves.

Moreover, even where coordination at the local level works well, many of the RLOs we spoke to felt disconnected from higher levels of decision-making – particularly at national and regional levels, where key policies and programmes are shaped. In such platforms, RLOs felt that they lack clear representation, which further disconnects grassroots voices from strategic discussions. This reduces trust in coordination mechanisms and risks discouraging sustained engagement by RLOs.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION GAPS

Access to timely, relevant information remains a key barrier to RLO engagement, particularly in relation to the supra-national level. Information flows often depend on existing networks and relationships, which can unintentionally leave newer or smaller RLOs less connected. The result is that a small circle of well-connected RLOs – sometimes perceived as an 'elite' – receive regular updates, while many grassroots groups remain in the dark. This creates inequities within the refugee leadership ecosystem and limits the diversity of voices involved in humanitarian response. As one leader stated: *'I'm aware of collaboration opportunities, but I can't say the same for all refugee leaders. I've worked with INGOs before, and I know how to access this information.'*

Language barriers further exacerbate this challenge. Many coordination meetings and documents are in English, with little to no interpretation or translation support, excluding those who are more comfortable with French, Arabic or local languages. These information asymmetries not only affect the participation of individual RLOs, but also fragment the community's collective advocacy potential.

FUNDING AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Financial limitations significantly restrict the ability of RLOs to participate meaningfully in coordination structures. As is common across many refugee responses globally, limited access to direct and flexible funding constrains RLOs' ability to sustain engagement in coordination. This limits their ability to build internal structures, retain skilled staff and sustain long-term programming. Without dedicated resources, RLOs struggle to attend meetings, conduct joint planning activities or mobilize their communities.

'Other than preparing RLOs for meaningful participation in coordination activities, direct funding to RLOs will improve the sustainability and self-reliance of forcibly displaced communities.'

Refugee leader in Nakivale

Even when they are invited to participate in high-level global events, many RLOs rely on donor sponsorship, which can come with implicit pressure to align with funders' agendas. This dependency compromises RLOs' independence and may discourage them from raising dissenting views. Some refugee leaders expressed frustration with the expectation

that they will self-fund travel or attend unfacilitated meetings: *'Some of the high-level, meaningful opportunities are not funded and […] they expect refugees to fund themselves.'* Delays in transport reimbursements further undermine meaningful participation. Budget cuts in settlements like Nakivale have also led to reduced frequency of coordination meetings, making it even harder for RLOs to stay engaged.

CAPACITY AND LEGITIMACY DOUBTS

Humanitarian actors frequently question RLOs' capacity and legitimacy, which restricts their ability to lead or manage projects. Stereotypes persist about refugees' lack of professionalism or formal training, despite many RLOs demonstrating strong community engagement and expertise. This perception results in limited access to funding, resources and equitable partnerships. Some INGOs, for instance, prefer to engage RLOs only as community mobilizers rather than as strategic partners.

The bureaucratic process for formal registration further complicates matters; many RLOs lack the financial means to complete registration or abandon the process midway due to its complexity. These institutional barriers are compounded by unhealthy competition among RLOs, where collaboration is sometimes undermined by fear of losing visibility or funding. In Bidi Bidi, for example, RLOs reported being seen as 'competitors', discouraging transparency and information sharing. These dynamics limit the emergence of a strong, united voice for refugee leadership.

NEED FOR INVESTMENT IN REFUGEE LEADERSHIP

A lack of sustained investment in the skills and capacities of refugee leaders remains a significant barrier to meaningful participation in coordination structures. While many RLOs and RWCs demonstrate strong grassroots leadership, they often lack access to the structured support necessary to navigate complex humanitarian systems and contribute effectively to decision-making. Refugee leaders across the research locations consistently pointed to gaps in technical skills such as report writing, financial management, fundraising and public speaking. The absence of formal training in areas like coordination, negotiation and humanitarian governance further limits their ability to engage on an equal footing with institutional actors.

In Bidi Bidi, refugee leaders highlighted the importance of internal coordination and peer learning as a way to strengthen collective advocacy – yet these practices are rarely supported or resourced. In Nakivale and Kyaka II, RLO representatives stressed that leadership potential is often constrained by disrupted education and a lack of targeted development programmes. As one refugee leader noted: *'Some of the leaders are not educated, and others need support in leadership*

skills. If they receive these, then we will have better representation of RLOs in coordination structures.'

Without accessible and context-specific capacity strengthening opportunities – ideally co-designed with refugee leaders themselves – the full potential of refugee leadership remains untapped, and refugee participation continues to be perceived as symbolic rather than substantive.

INTERSECTING INEQUALITIES AND MARGINALIZATION

Marginalized groups within refugee communities, especially women and people with disabilities, face additional and compounded barriers to leadership. Women-led RLOs often focus on issues like gender-based violence and empowerment, yet receive limited support and face heightened operational risks. For women leaders, participation in coordination meetings is constrained by safety concerns and a lack of targeted resources.

People with disabilities also face exclusion: inaccessible meeting venues, absence of braille or sign language interpretation, and dismissive attitudes all limit their involvement. One RLO leader noted that *'there appears to be a bias against people with disabilities taking on leadership roles'*, reflecting deep-rooted prejudices. In addition, refugee leaders with limited education or language fluency face hurdles in navigating complex humanitarian systems. These intersecting forms of marginalization reduce the diversity and representativeness of RLO participation, and perpetuate inequities in humanitarian response.

Strengthening the leadership of marginalized groups

Efforts have been made to promote women's leadership and representation within the Ugandan refugee response, with some progress observed over the years. Women refugee leaders and representatives of women-led RLOs are increasingly attending meetings at the district and settlement levels, and some have achieved success in their endeavours. However, despite these efforts, women's leadership is still not culturally acceptable in some communities, limiting their potential to take on leadership roles.

Moreover, in certain communities women do not have the political or financial capital to exercise their leadership. As one refugee leader stated: *'When it comes to general leadership positions, women do not have the financial muscle to influence elections. As a result, they are left with complementary positions which are still less likely to influence decisions at the coordination level.'* Women participants in the FGDs mentioned that, in some cases, according to cultural norms they are not supposed to contradict decisions, and this affects how they conduct themselves in coordination meetings. *'If you make a lot of noise in the meetings you may not be acknowledged or even invited to the next meetings'*, reported one woman representative from Nakivale.

While frameworks and policies promoting women's representation exist, they often remain theoretical, and practical implementation is lacking. Women are often engaged to participate rather than make decisions, and in many cases their leadership roles are not fully accepted. As a result, women continue to face challenges in accessing leadership positions.

People with disabilities can face even greater challenges in accessing coordination structures, let alone exercising leadership within these. Their representation is limited, and they are often only involved in meetings and activities that directly relate to their specific needs. People with disabilities face significant barriers in accessing national-level meetings and vying for general positions, due to their unique needs and challenges.

Overall, there are still significant barriers to ensuring participation of the most marginalized groups; these include cultural bias, lack of access to funding and limited leadership skills. To address these challenges, it is essential to promote inclusive and equitable opportunities for all groups, including women and people with disabilities, and to address the cultural and structural barriers that limit their participation and leadership in humanitarian coordination structures.

FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

Legal and mobility restrictions present another layer of exclusion for RLOs. Refugee leaders based in Kampala reported difficulties in obtaining travel documents and visas, limiting their ability to travel (even within the East African region), and as a consequence their ability to engage in regional or global advocacy spaces. Some also struggle with obtaining official letters from the OPM to authorize their activities within communities. Without legal recognition or documentation, RLOs risk being blocked from participation altogether. Refugees in settlements face similar issues, often lacking the freedom to travel to district- or national-level meetings. These restrictions not only impact their physical participation, but also send a broader message of exclusion. In some cases RLOs are advised to participate online, yet lack the tools or resources to do so effectively.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Uganda continues to be recognised globally for its progressive refugee policies and inclusive legal framework. Building on this strong foundation, there are valuable opportunities to deepen meaningful refugee leadership across coordination structures. Uganda's refugee coordination architecture provides a strong formal framework for refugee participation, supported by progressive policies such as the 2006 Refugee Act and the CRRF. Structures like RWCs and the REF embody this commitment in principle. However, our research with refugee leaders found that meaningful refugee leadership in humanitarian coordination remains constrained by structural, financial and institutional barriers.

Refugee leaders are active, engaged and essential to effective humanitarian response. Despite this, they are often relegated to consultative roles, with limited access to decision-making, funding and influence. Uganda's refugee coordination system provides multiple formal entry points for refugee engagement, but meaningful participation of refugee leaders remains constrained by power asymmetries, informal gatekeeping and structural exclusion. While some promising practices exist – particularly at settlement level – these remain fragmented and underleveraged. Of course, refugee leadership is not monolithic. Some RLOs, especially those with donor backing or strong networks, have carved out leadership roles in sector-specific working groups or policy platforms such as the Refugee Engagement Forum. But such experiences remain the exception, not the norm, and they highlight the persistent gaps in consistently realizing inclusive and equitable participation across coordination spaces.

Strengthening refugee leadership is not only a matter of principle; it is a practical imperative. Refugee actors bring contextual knowledge, cultural fluency and deep community trust – assets that should be central to coordination and policymaking. As Uganda continues to set a global example on refugee protection and inclusion, a more deliberate and equitable approach to refugee participation must remain a top priority.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE GOVERNMENT OF UGANDA:

- **Ensure meaningful participation in all coordination mechanisms:** Embed RLOs more systematically in coordination structures at all levels – including through rotating leadership roles and dedicated RLO seats.

- **Simplify RLO registration:** Continue with efforts to streamline the legal registration process and reduce associated costs to enable more refugee groups to formalize and access funding and partnerships.
- **Enhance dignity and accessibility:** Institutionalize respectful, non-discriminatory engagement with refugee representatives; provide interpretation in official forums; and act on refugee leaders' contributions.
- **Expand the concept of localization:** Recognize RLOs as central actors to the humanitarian/refugee response, in line with global localization commitments.
- **Support women and marginalized leaders:** Increase outreach, protection and incentives for women-, youth- and disability-led RLOs to ensure their sustained and safe participation in leadership spaces.

TO OTHER REFUGEE-HOSTING GOVERNMENTS:

- **Learn from Uganda's progressive model:** Draw on Uganda's experience with inclusive legal frameworks, the CRRF, the Refugee Engagement Forum, and settlement-level leadership structures to strengthen refugee participation in national coordination systems and policy processes.
- **Address structural barriers to participation:** Review and adapt national policies, coordination structures and funding arrangements to address challenges similar to those identified in Uganda to ensure that refugee leaders and RLOs can participate fully and equitably in decision-making.

TO UN AGENCIES (INCLUDING UNHCR):

- **Continue and expand investment in refugee leadership:** Co-design and implement sustained leadership development programmes with RLOs, including capacity strengthening in coordination, advocacy, financial management and rights-based approaches.
- **Provide direct and flexible funding to RLOs**: This should include dedicated funding mechanisms for RLOs that enable their operational autonomy, long-term planning and consistent participation in coordination structures.
- **Ensure inclusive representation:** Institutionalize the participation of diverse RLOs in sectoral and strategic coordination platforms – ensuring meaningful, not tokenistic, engagement.
- **Strengthen visibility and recognition:** Acknowledge and publicly credit the contributions of RLOs in reporting, advocacy and programme delivery to enhance their legitimacy and standing.
- **Promote replication of Uganda's model:** Facilitate regional and global learning exchanges that highlight Uganda's participatory coordination structures and support other refugee-hosting governments to adapt similar approaches.

TO INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL NGOS:

- **Build equitable partnerships:** Engage RLOs as strategic partners in project design, implementation and monitoring. Avoid tokenism by integrating them in governance, financial decisions and reporting.
- **Acknowledge and share credit:** Promote RLO visibility by publicly recognizing their work in joint projects and ensuring fair attribution of achievements.
- **Tailor capacity support**: Offer accessible, context-specific training opportunities and mentorship, particularly in areas such as compliance, proposal writing and advocacy. These should reflect the needs expressed by RLOs themselves, and ideally be co-designed with RLOs.
- **Avoid duplication**: Coordinate with RLOs to strengthen complementarity and avoid parallel programming that sidelines refugee leadership.
- **Champion inclusion in coordination platforms**: Advocate for RLO representation and inclusion in coordination bodies and planning processes.

TO REFUGEE-LED ORGANIZATIONS:

- **Strengthen internal coordination:** Build structured leadership and communication systems to ensure consistent, representative participation in external forums.
- **Maintain community focus**: Ensure independence and commitment to the priorities of refugee communities by resisting pressures that compromise accountability to affected communities.
- **Foster collective action**: Unite through coalitions or networks to amplify refugee voices, share resources, and strengthen advocacy at national and international levels.

Notes

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18 Okello and Sebunya (2022), op cit.

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