

# Expanding the Meaningful Engagement of Refugee-Led Organizations in Kenya

SPOTLIGHT ON SELF-RELIANCE  
PROGRAMMING, POLICIES, AND EVIDENCE



In partnership with  
refugee-led organizations  
operating in Nairobi, Kenya



## I. INTRODUCTION

Between August 30 and September 1, 2023, RefugePoint and the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) convened a three-day learning event in Nairobi, Kenya, gathering more than 80 refugee leaders and representatives of NGOs, UN agencies, the Government of Kenya (GoK), and donors. The convening facilitated connection-building and knowledge exchange to expand the meaningful engagement of refugee-led organizations (RLOs) in Kenya, with a specific focus on advancing refugee self-reliance. The agenda and objectives for the meeting were developed through a co-design process with 14 RLOs in Nairobi.

## II. CONVENING BACKGROUND

Despite the acknowledged value of their contextual insights and roles as responders and service providers within their communities, the input of RLOs is often missing from discussions related to policy decision-making, resource allocation and prioritization, and programming. Moreover, when RLO inputs are solicited, it is often done in a cursory, top-down way that does not allow for refugee leaders to prioritize issues that matter to them and fully understand windows for influence. Often, consultations with RLOs also lack a feedback and accountability loop.

With this recognition, RefugePoint and the RSRI, in collaboration with RLO partners in Nairobi, designed a workshop that addressed these barriers and facilitated opportunities for RLOs to contribute to ongoing policy discussions related to Kenya's involvement in the Global Refugee Forum. Additionally, the workshop explored approaches to programming and collaboration with other stakeholders operating in the Nairobi response ecosystem.

The agenda was designed through a series of collaborative meetings with RLO leaders and informed by a survey of RLO leaders working in Nairobi.

The convening was the first in a series of RLO Learning Exchanges and Dialogues that RefugePoint and RSRI plan to host in the coming year to facilitate broader RLO engagement and perspective-sharing on self-reliance programming, policies, and learning from a variety of contexts. It builds on

the ongoing work of RefugePoint and the RSRI to support and strengthen the work of refugee-serving RLOs and was designed to fill knowledge gaps that were identified through consultations with RLOs.

In the future, RefugePoint and RSRI also hope to broaden exchange opportunities for leaders from different contexts and regions, recognizing that few opportunities currently exist to convene in person across geographies, in part due to travel constraints faced by RLOs and limitations in funding.

### III. CONVENING OVERVIEW

#### CONVENING OBJECTIVES

1. Share and exchange perspectives amongst RLO leaders on priorities areas related to advancing refugee-self reliance in Kenya.
2. Develop a shared understanding between RLOs and key partners related to ongoing coordination efforts, opportunities for joint work, and challenges.
3. Promote common understanding between RLO leaders and the supporting ecosystem related to priorities for policy reform, programming, and evidence generation on refugee self-reliance and meaningful refugee engagement in Kenya.

#### PARTICIPANTS

The event brought together more than 80 participants, including 46 RLO leaders working in Nairobi and 40 representatives from key entities supporting the RLO ecosystem. These included NGOs, UN agencies, philanthropic institutions and donor agencies, research institutions, embassies, the private sector, and the Government of Kenya (GoK).



## CONVENING ROADMAP

The 3-day event centered on the perspectives of refugee leaders and facilitated connections and dialogue with key partners and stakeholders from the supporting ecosystem.



The first day of the convening brought together 46 leaders of refugee-serving RLOs in Nairobi and focused on gathering RLO perspectives on priority areas related to advancing self-reliance in Kenya. Leaders learned about opportunities for refugee engagement in the GRF and were introduced to the Multistakeholder Pledge on Economic Inclusion and Social Protection (a large-scale, multi stakeholder pledge). Leaders co-developed a set of recommendations related to law and policy reform and programming efforts related to economic inclusion and social protection in the Kenyan context.



The second day of the convening facilitated a learning exchange between refugee leaders and key agencies supporting their work in Kenya, including NGOs, UNHCR, and GoK. Together, participants mapped the current coordination space in Nairobi to develop a common understanding of potential opportunities for deepening coordination, engaged in dialogue on challenges and opportunities related to partnership approaches (including funding and compliance), and developed joint recommendations on how to promote meaningful engagement of RLOs in various aspects of programming design and implementation. Participants also heard from a colleague working in Uganda who described the RLO ecosystem journey within the Ugandan context.



The final day of the convening focused on building connections between refugee leaders and stakeholders in the broader supporting ecosystem in Kenya, including philanthropic foundations, embassies, multilateral institutions, and the private sector. A variety of leaders shared perspectives and experiences, including during the plenary and in table group discussions. In plenary, several RLO leaders discussed how their organizations were established and shared more information about their work and challenges they encounter. The Country Director from RefugePoint also shared his perspectives about the work that RefugePoint undertakes to support the RLO ecosystem. A number of representatives from embassies involved in the Multistakeholder Pledge on Economic Inclusion and Social Protection, UNHCR, and the Kenyan government also briefed the group on their ongoing work related to these topics in the Kenyan context, with an opportunity for the larger group to ask questions and engage in discussion. Refugee leaders presented the recommendations that they developed on the first and second days of the convening in 'conversation corners', with new participants rotating between discussions.

*See Annex 1 for a full agenda, Annex 2 for a list of participants, Annex 3 for slides and materials, and Annex 4 for convening evaluation results.*

## IV. KEY TAKEAWAYS

The convening was designed to catalyze conversation, promote the sharing of perspectives and experience, and build connections between participants. Over the three days, discussions generated actionable insights and recommendations for ways forward.

### CONVENING HIGHLIGHTS

- Expanding the understanding of self-reliance in the urban Kenyan context, beyond its formal technical definition.
- Formulation of RLO recommendations on law and policy priorities to advance refugee self-reliance in Kenya.
- Joint identification and development of upcoming opportunities for RLOs to engage and influence, such as the Global Refugee Forum and Shirika Plan.
- Recognition of different perspectives among RLO, NGO, government, and UN partners and the identification of gaps and common priorities. This included identifying actionable opportunities to promote stronger engagement of RLOs in coordination discussions.
- Developing joint recommendations on building equitable partnerships and recognition, approaches to capacity sharing and mentorship, and modalities for financial support and compliance.
- Inspiration from the journey of RLOs in Uganda in terms of persistence and patience, as well as building a broader understanding for Kenya-based participants of the contextual differences and learning that can be gleaned from the Ugandan RLO experiences.
- Joint appreciation for the opportunity to build connections through opportunities for conversations and small-group dialogue.
- Insights from various RLO leaders who shared perspectives about the journeys of their organizations and agencies partnering with them in the Nairobi ecosystem.
- Learning more about the ongoing and planned work of various organizations, embassies, UNHCR, and GoK in supporting economic inclusion and social protection opportunities for refugees in Kenya, including engagement with the Economic Inclusion and Social Protection multi-stakeholder pledge for the Global Refugee Forum.





## RECOMMENDATIONS

### RLO recommendations to advance self-reliance in Kenya (law and policy and programming)

During the first day of the convening, RLO leaders conducted a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis of the existing legal and policy framework in Kenya concerning economic inclusion and social protection.

Based on that analysis, several recommendations related to reform priorities were highlighted:

- Legally recognize the refugee ID as a valid document that can be utilized in all aspects of life in Kenya, including for access to financial services, mobility, and the right to work (in lieu of a work permit).
- Ensure that the refugee ID enables access to other governmental functions for refugees.
- Build awareness of government line ministries, embassies in Kenya, and the private sector to the latest government policies and legal parameters of the 2021 Refugee Act, including the right to an ID and travel documents.
- Enact a predetermined timeline for the issuance of IDs and other documents for refugee populations (ex., a GoK commitment to approve or deny an application of RLO registration within 6 months).
- Emphasize the potential advisory role of RLOs, other civil society stakeholders, and the UN in defining and sequencing the operationalization of a refugee documentation policy.

These recommendations were presented to and discussed with GoK, embassy, donor, and civil society leaders participating in Days 2 and 3 of the convening. These recommendations were also shared with the co-conveners of the Multistakeholder Pledge on Economic Inclusion and Social Protection to promote sharing with GoK counterparts.

## Joint recommendations on building equitable partnerships and recognition, approaches to capacity sharing and mentorship, and modalities for financial support and compliance

On Day 2, participants worked jointly to conduct a similar SWOT analysis focused on approaches to capacity sharing, mentorship, and modalities for financial support and compliance under the broader theme of building equitable partnerships and recognition for RLOs. A number of practical recommendations emerged under the themes below.



### ***Addressing Administrative Barriers***

- Simplify the process for RLO registration at all levels and establish a GoK commitment to a set turnaround/response time for review of applications (e.g. 3 months or 6 months).
- Facilitate direct access to funding for RLOs through the removal of key barriers and restrictions from donors.

### ***Modalities for Financial Support and Compliance***

- Promote systems that encourage the co-creation of proposals and joint project design between INGOs and RLOs (e.g. through grant requirements from donors).
- Ensure that funding covers the organizational and administrative costs of RLOs (overheads, salaries, etc.).
- Standardize and facilitate a common approach to compliance and vetting requirements needed to access resources, and consult RLOs in this process to ensure requirements are fit for purpose.
- Recognize the desire of RLOs to be adaptive to respond to emerging needs that arise within their community during program interventions through inserting crisis modifiers or similar mechanisms into grant funds to allow for responsiveness and flexibility in programming.

### ***Capacity Sharing and Mentorship***

- Develop a fellowship program for RLOs that includes learning exchanges, seed funding, and peer mentorship.
- Encourage exchanges originating from RLOs and offer learning and capacity development for other actors in the ecosystem from RLO perspectives.

- Promote informal team-building opportunities between RLOs and INGOs to encourage collaboration.
- As an RLO community, model meaningful engagement through consultation processes with refugee communities, recognizing that tailored approaches are needed to be inclusive.

### ***Coordination***

- Facilitate collaborative mapping of gaps by RLOs and INGOs alongside needs for capacity sharing and professional/organizational training to avoid duplication of services and ensure services meet the expressed needs of RLOs.
- Ensure that RLOs actively participate and have representation in Kenya-based RLO coordination groups and broader coordination fora.
- Map expertise in particular sectoral areas to encourage specialization of programming services and reduction of duplication of programming support to refugee communities.
- Promote increased coordination among RLOs and strengthen existing networks, including through outreach and support to smaller, emerging RLOs (in terms of visibility, organizational development support, etc.).
- Consider the establishment of a joint RLO-INGO-National NGO forum.

## **V. LESSONS LEARNED: CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED AND HOW THEY WERE ADDRESSED**

### **ACCESSIBILITY AND LANGUAGE**

Accessibility of the convening and language considerations emerged as key challenges. Key points that came out for consideration in the design of future convenings included:

- The importance of selecting a central location with accessible public transportation routes and timing of sessions that allowed participants to travel to and from the venue while avoiding traffic rush hour.
- Ensuring that the workshop venue is accessible, including for persons with disabilities.
- The need to consider a variety of translation options.

Some of these challenges were anticipated with the selection of a centrally located, accessible venue and provision of a small transportation stipend for participating RLOs to facilitate participation.

While translation was not identified in advance as a major need, it became clear that some translation would be required for a number of participants as the convening progressed. This was



accommodated by the selection and inclusion of facilitators who were able to share content in both English and Swahili, and – as needed – some translation into other languages by participants. Language accessibility was also considered via small-group work that was primarily conducted in Swahili rather than in English.

For future events, the organizing team recommends that a pre-workshop survey include more detailed questions to participants with regard to language and other accessibility needs.

## GENDER BALANCE

One key challenge for this convening was ensuring a gender balance of participants. To a large extent, this challenge stems from the already low representation of female refugees in RLO activities and leadership, as well as systemic barriers to women’s participation in civil society initiatives due to a variety of constraints. To mitigate this, the organizing group prioritized the participation of women from the RLOs whenever possible, such as through the provision of additional slots to delegations that wanted to open up participation to women, including those who were not in traditional leadership positions within the organizations.

## VI. BEST PRACTICES FOR FUTURE CONVENINGS AND COLLABORATIVE EFFORTS

### CO-DESIGN PROCESS

RefugePoint, the RSRI, and 14 RLO leaders participated in a co-design process for the convening. Leaders from a cohort of RLOs already convened by RefugePoint in Nairobi were also invited to be a part of this process, which was conducted over an 8-week period through three online planning meetings aimed at defining learning and priorities, fostering active participation by a wide range of stakeholders and opportunities for conversation, and developing common objectives and anticipated outputs to ensure the convening aligned with the goals of participating organizations.



## Key questions considered by the group during the co-design process included:

- The explicit and implicit goals of participating organizations.
- Tradeoffs between process/relationship-building goals and outcome goals.
- Approaches to broadening participation and ownership, and identification of multiple 'entry points' for engagement and leadership for different stakeholders in the convening.
- Opportunities for creativity.
- Potential derailers and mitigation strategies.
- In addition to the planning meetings, a survey was also sent out to all RLO partners to solicit input into topics and approaches.
- The convening facilitation team, which included a representative from the RLO group, along with representatives from the RSRI and RefugePoint, developed a meeting agenda based on input and feedback from the group. A number of priorities emerged during discussions, including:
  - Focusing a portion of the meeting on learning about the Global Refugee Forum
  - The desire to organize conversation opportunities between RLOs and other stakeholders rather than presentations from one group to another
  - The importance of bringing space for informal networking into the convening.

Adjustments to the initial convening design were made to reflect these points, including through the extension of time for the convening from one to three days, the participation of RLOs across all three days, and the set-up of opportunities for conversation corners, informal experience exchange between stakeholders, and small-group discussions.

Support for this process was provided by a workshop design consultant who provided feedback on the process and served as a thought partner for the facilitation team on the development of a theory of change and participatory tools for reflection/adaptation. Reimbursement for the internet/data expenses of RLOs participating in the co-design process also allowed for broader participation of leaders with limited core budgets to accommodate non-program-based work.

## Opportunities for building connections and networks

A key theme that emerged from the convening was the strong desire of RLO participants to build connections and networks within Kenya (and specifically Nairobi) the region, and beyond. Several participants from RLOs based in Uganda joined discussions and were able to share

perspectives from that context, which enriched discussions. Several RLO leaders also shared that the opportunity to network with other RLOs was also a priority, recognizing the limited platforms for coordination of efforts and the emerging issue of duplication in services to clients.

## Commitment to Continuing Efforts

The convening on Expanding Meaningful Engagement of Refugee-Led Organizations provided a platform for meaningful dialogue and collaboration, emphasizing the critical work of RLOs in addressing challenges that their communities face and the importance of supporting them in these efforts. Recommendations emerging from this convening will be carried forward to influence pledging priorities for the Global Refugee Forum under the Multistakeholder Pledge on Economic Inclusion and Social Protection, and inform approaches for meaningful, long-term RLO engagement in policy engagement, programming, and evidence generation processes in the Kenyan context.

## Next Steps:

RSRI will bring forward recommendations to the GRF through the economic inclusion and social protection pledge platform and to other networks.

RefugePoint will re-convene stakeholders to check in on progress against recommendations in 6-12 months.

RSRI will convene similar learning exchanges in additional contexts next year, building on the experience in Nairobi, and will look into the possibility of organizing exchanges between different regions of the world at the request of refugee leaders who were consulted during the initial scoping conversations for the learning exchange series.



## ANNEXES

[Annex 1: Convening Agenda](#)

[Annex 2: List of Participating Agencies](#)

[Annex 3: Convening Slide Deck](#)

[Annex 4: Convening Evaluation Report](#)

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