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Spotlight on Local and Refugee-Led Efforts to Address Key Protection Needs

HIGHLIGHTS FROM IRAP'S 2022 REGIONAL STUDY

In 2022, the International Refugee Assistance Project (IRAP) undertook a geographic rapid assessment project to better understand the unmet legal needs and protection gaps faced by displaced people in three regions of the world: Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and South and Southeast Asia.

We consulted with **107 organizations in 22 countries**, with an emphasis on learning from refugee-led initiatives (RLI) and local organizations serving populations facing

acute systemic legal rights violations. As key connectors with displaced communities, RLIs and other local organizations are often best positioned to understand the unique protection needs and barriers faced by displaced communities, develop the most innovative solutions, and provide the most linguistically and culturally accessible services.

The full report, [***Spotlight on Local and Refugee-Led Efforts to Address Key Protection Needs***](#), synthesizes insights and recommendations from

“We hope international funders and donors will understand the unique existence of refugee-led groups. We might not be at the same level as other bigger organizations but it is possible that if trusted, guided, and given proper capacity strengthening and training, we can deliver even better results. We know the issues of refugees best because we experience them ourselves first hand.”

— Youth Voices Community, Nairobi, Kenya

our interviews, shares key trends impacting displaced populations in the three regions, and identifies opportunities for more productive and inclusive philanthropic engagement and international cooperation with historically excluded RLIs.

The innovative and pivotal work of RLIs is often unrecognized and under-resourced. With systemic inclusion; sufficient and well-structured financing; and a redistribution of power in the prioritization, design, and implementation of efforts to protect the rights of forcibly displaced people, **RLIs and local organizations can transform the refugee protection landscape, creating a more equitable and effective global refugee support ecosystem.**

We hope the report will be a welcome contribution to recent global efforts calling for increased financial support for RLIs and a redistribution of power in strategy and decision-making spaces.

Regional Trends Affecting Displaced Populations: Systemic Barriers Block Access to Safety and Dignity

- **Displaced populations are denied crucial rights and services.** National governments in all three regions often deny displaced populations crucial rights and services, which constrain displaced people's ability to live with dignity, regularize status, and access pathways to safety. Limited or inadequate access to temporary and permanent lawful status, personal documentation, lawful employment, education, and medical care result in pervasive discrimination, exploitation, and other grievous harms. Policies and practices of encampment and detention of displaced people contribute to further severe rights violations.



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- **Existing resettlement processes only meet a small fraction of pressing relocation needs, and some populations with high needs are excluded from pathways to safety.** In South and Southeast Asia, for example, UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) processing categorically excludes certain populations for political reasons, in contravention of human rights norms. Complementary pathways, which partially mitigate the limitations of UN-referred refugee resettlement, suffer from parallel gaps in scale, accessibility, and equity. Populations exposed to systemic rights violations in countries of origin, transit, and destination warrant particular attention given the disproportionate exclusion and persecution that they suffer in forcible prolonged international displacement.
- **Refugee-led initiatives are hamstrung by steep regulatory barriers and limited access to funding.** RLIs are uniquely well-equipped to understand and help meet the needs of the displaced communities they work alongside, yet in many countries a strict regulatory environment effectively prevents RLIs from

establishing formal organizations. In addition, international donors and partners often structure opportunities in ways that severely limit RLI's ability to access funding streams, international support structures, and other crucial resources.

Refugee-Led Initiatives Play a Major Frontline Role

- Despite regulatory barriers and continued exclusion from funding opportunities and global policy-making spaces, **RLIs and local organizations in all three regions are addressing pervasive protection gaps while advancing community empowerment models.** RLI's provide legal information and other vital services to displaced populations navigating complex bureaucratic processes, and advocate for systemic change informed by the views and needs of the displaced people with whom they share a community.
- Because RLI's are not just integrated into, but are themselves members of displaced communities, they are able to **identify, triage, and design solutions to address some of the most profound, compounded, and hidden rights violations.**

Key Recommendations For The Philanthropic Community

1 Invest in RLI's and other local efforts to address displacement gaps. RLI's and other local groups are poised to meet legal representation, legal information, referral, and policy advocacy needs – at scale and on behalf of the most marginalized populations. These groups often face significant hurdles to accessing international funding opportunities and a closer look at the barriers they face and their needs



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would positively impact global solutions for displaced populations.

2 Engage RLI's in cooperative partnership models. Greater inclusion of RLI's in UNHCR-referred resettlement and complementary pathway networks would have an enormous impact on the breadth and depth of outreach and referrals, especially with the most isolated and marginalized populations. Donors should incentivize and reward meaningful partnerships with RLI's and accord more autonomy to RLI's in program design.

3 Support RLI's through direct and flexible funding structures. RLI's report that often they are denied direct funding opportunities and limited to subgranting structures or restrictive project-based funding. Direct and flexible funding structures, including fewer prohibitive administrative and reporting requirements, would improve the ability of RLI's to respond to emergent community needs, develop long-term strategies, and build sustainable institutions.

4 Support initiatives that disrupt traditional funding flows by sharing and pooling funding directly with RLIs. The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative's [RLO-to-RLO grant-making program](#), the [Refugee Leadership Alliance at APNOR](#), and efforts by [We are Cohere](#) are a few compelling examples of innovative funding models already in place.

5 Support meaningful refugee participation and leadership in global, regional, and national decision-making spaces. Donors should support efforts such as [R-SEAT](#) (Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table) designed to amplify refugee participation at the global level. Donors can also facilitate RLI participation in decision-making fora by funding training, capacity strengthening, and travel.



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6 Support systematic mapping of RLI networks to enhance opportunities for global support and collaboration. Some examples of this cooperation already exist on a regional or local level, such as We Are Cohere's [Reframe](#) database in Kenya and Uganda, the [Working Group on Migratory Policy's](#) Regional Mapping of Actors on Human Mobility in Latin America and the Caribbean, and [Equilibrium - Center for Economic Development's](#) mapping of Venezuelan RLIs. Publication of existing resources as well as new mapping efforts would better position local organizations and RLIs to receive support, coordinate with one another, and connect to larger institutional frameworks.

“The biggest challenge is to convince donors in the refugee space to become flexible in grant-making and [have] faith and trust in refugee-led initiatives.”

— Najeeba Wazefadost

Co-Founder and Executive Director, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees
Co-Founder, Global Refugee-Led Network