

Case study Uganda 2022 - Refugee Led Organisations

Headline	
VOICE OF REFUGEES: REFUGEE LED ORGANISATIONS IN RHINO CAMP BECOMING STRONG ACTORS	
Domains of change	
<i>Please mark each domain that is significantly covered within the case study. At least one box should be marked, and as many as appropriate. You should only mark a box if there is reported change, not if it is only expected in the future.</i>	
Changes in the lives of people facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability, and/or the realisation of their rights	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changes in laws, policies and practices that affect people's rights	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changes in the capacity of organisations and communities to support people's rights;	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Changes in partnerships and collaborations that support people's rights;	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changes in the participation of groups facing poverty, marginalisation or vulnerability in their own development	<input type="checkbox"/>
Changes in local leadership and ownership of development and humanitarian work.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Basic Information	
Name of Danish CSO	Oxfam IBIS
Name of Southern partner(s)	I CAN (South Sudan); CECI Uganda (Community Empowerment for Creative Innovation); YETI (Youth Empowerment To Act); YSAT (Youth Social Advocacy Team, South Sudan and Uganda).
Year of submission	2022
Name of project / programme / approach	"Humanitarian, Development & Peace initiative for crisis affected population in Uganda."
Project / programme period	January 2022 – December 2025
Country	Uganda
Constituency	Refugees and host communities in Rhino Camps, (West Nile region in the district of Terego, Yumbe and Madi Okolo)
Strategic priorities	Capacity of organisations and communities to support people's rights and local leadership and ownership of development.
Summary (1000 characters only, including spaces)	The intervention in question is implemented in Uganda, the top refugee-hosting country in Africa. Here Refugee Led Organisations, RLOs, have demonstrated increased proficiency as a development and humanitarian actor and executed political influence. Oxfam has supported a group of four RLOs, taking the point of departure in a localization approach entailing accompaniment and mentorship as well as customized capacity building for the RLOs. Initially being small youth led volunteer groups, RLOs have now become recognized, trusted and influential actors in management and coordination in the camps. The increased recognition and political influence of the RLOs draw on strengthened capacity of the organizations to manage projects, understand camp management structures and contribute to coordination mechanisms, because of the tailor-made and contextualized capacity development and mentorship provided by Oxfam. Increased capacity of RLOs results in refugees' needs and priorities being better represented and promoted.
Context	
The intervention in question is implemented in the Rhino Camp in Uganda, the top refugee-hosting country in Africa, more specifically in the West Nile sub-region which hosts more than 900.000 refugees. This is the highest number of refugees in the country of Uganda which totals 1.5 million refugees and asylum seekers.	

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The influx of refugees is mainly a result of conflicts and political volatility in the neighboring countries of South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Oxfam has for approximately five years increased the focus of their work in the refugee settlements on support to the local community-based organisations, the RLOs. Engaging with RLOs is considered an effective strategy to promote localised development in the West Nile camp communities, working to support refugees and host communities, involving livelihood and peacebuilding. At the initial stage, RLOs operated as small volunteer organisations with limited knowledge and proficiency in project management. They were contracted on short term basis to support distribution of goods and social activities in the camps. At this point, the RLOs did not have any insight into the overall camp management and coordination structures and they were not involved in these forums. With Oxfam's support and capacity development, RLOs have gradually expanded their capacity. Based on the growing proficiency and the validity stemming from Oxfam's backing as an INGO, donors and authorities have increasingly come to value RLOs as formal partners.

Objectives

The support to the RLOs take place within the SP project named "Humanitarian, Development & Peace initiative for crisis affected population in Uganda". It is structured around the following Project Change Objectives: 1) People live in more equal, peaceful and gender just societies based on inclusive democracies, human rights and accountable institutions; Project Change Objective 2) Crisis affected population in particular women and youth are increasingly safe, resilient and empowered; and Change Objective 3) Communities and their local governments affected by displacement are supported to mitigate and adapt to climate and environmental crises. The specific project outcome 2.2 highlights the focus on RLOs: "*Civil society and local actors incl. RLO's and community leaders lead and participate in decision making in humanitarian action and peacebuilding, challenging harmful social norms and promoting gender justice.*"

Engaging with RLOs in different ways serve to maximise the outcome of the intervention. This aims to ensure the rights of beneficiaries are monitored, protected and met. The relevance of the intervention is enhanced due to RLOs better advocating for the needs of refugees. Worth highlighting is also their role as mediators and peacebuilders. Maintaining social cohesion and peace among hosts and refugees, encompassing different nationalities and ethnic groups with potential conflicting interests is an ongoing challenge. In cases where conflicts have erupted, RLOs have often played a key role as negotiators and mediators. RLOs are refugees themselves, speaking the languages and understanding the culture among the many ethnic groups. The refugee constituencies have trust in the RLOs. "*We ARE them, there are no dividers. It is a shared faith, we live in the community – opposed to actors who at the end of the day leave and go to the town of Arua.*" (RLO director).

While promoting refugee ownership, Oxfam contributes to meet the quest for localization in development and humanitarian work, partnering up with RLOs to support them in obtaining a position in the overall camp coordination structure to enhance their influencing channels. RLOs get the opportunity to engage directly with government authorities and leading multilateral actors with the opportunity to influence camp policies and procedures.

Change

The change witnessed among RLOs in the Rhino Camp which can be synthesised as the fact that **RLOs have come to demonstrate proficiency in project management and political influence to promote refugees' needs and rights.**

RLOs have taken a significant leap forward, drawing upon their growing visibility, recognition and influence. The change is evidenced in various ways: RLOs have opened bank accounts, they are in the process of achieving legal registration and they are developing key organisational policies and procedures to meet standards required by international donors and INGOs. This change was corroborated by the assistant settlement commandant in Bidibidi, Mr. Hafizu Luwambo, Office of the Prime Minister Department of Refugees, the OPM. (Interviewed 2022-10-27).

Also, as a direct result of their increased capacity, RLOs participated actively in co-creating the Danida-funded program in Uganda for the period 2022-2025. For the first time RLOs had sufficient insight and strength to independently present this new program to external stakeholders. Yet another documented change is the fact that RLOs are increasingly recognised by various stakeholders and contributing to the coordination structures in the camp. Tokenism may appear in this regard but according to one of the RLOs,

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they are well recognised: *“This year we are even tasked with taking minutes. This is not just a trivial task, it requires a genuine understanding of the many strategic issues and conflicting interests at stake.”* (RLO director).

To keep their position, RLOs must uphold the trust they have from the community. If this trust disappears, the comparative advantage of RLOs will vanish. It is indeed a balance for RLOs to build their professionalism and expand their operations, also hiring and managing staff, without ending up being perceived as ‘external’ and pursuing individual interests. A director from one of the RLOs stated that the litmus test is continued local presence, given the tendency of becoming more professional and mainstream humanitarian actors would be the following: *“... if RLOs leave their localities and start moving to office facilities in the town of Arua, they will eventually lose their strong affiliation with their community and their people.”*

As described, the present route RLOs are taking comes with challenges. With the new funding opportunities occurring, requirements for formalisation and professionalism will increase. It is hoped RLOs will find ways to remain truly local, despite they are widening their operations into new areas. According to the assistant settlement commandant in Bidibidi, Mr.Hafizu Luwambo, Office of the Prime Minister Department of Refugees, the OPM, the RLOs are matchless given their affiliation with the communities, and their voluntaristic background. In expanding their geographical outreach, as a result of new funding, they are challenged by the enhanced operational requirements, Mr. Luwambo says. But he stresses that *“...the RLOs engaging at this level, they also show a remarkably proficiency. I believe they will catch up”*.

Yet another aspiration is for the RLOs to meet a current gap with respect to gender. The RLOs have female staff members, around half are female. However, women are still to a large degree absent in leadership positions. This will be given continued focus in the years to come, aiming to lift the presence of women in leadership in the RLO partner organisations.

Contribution

The increased recognition and political influence of the RLOs described above was partially facilitated by the strengthened proficiency of the organizations to manage projects, understand camp management structures and contribute to coordination mechanisms, because of the tailor-made and contextualized capacity development and the mentorship provided by Oxfam.

Oxfam applied a double lane approach to support the RLOs. This has involved running a ‘test and trial’ strategy, a process of gradually increasing funds to enhance programmatic responsibilities of the RLOs. At the same time Oxfam has accompanied the RLO partners closely in their efforts to meet the demands and learn from this. RLOs have praised this as a dignified and efficient way of knowledge and skills acquisition. In addition, a specific Oxfam staff was appointed to support the partnership with RLOs. Quotation from Oxfam IBIS Peacebuilding Global Evaluation Report, p. 49 supports our claim in respect of our role in capacity building: *“The capacity of partner organisations was assessed by Oxfam country offices and the findings used to inform a capacity building plan for each partner. Overall perceptions of Oxfam’s capacity building approach were positive. Partners in all six countries appreciated the capacity building provided and noted a constructive relationship with Oxfam country office staff based on mutual respect and effective communication.”*

Likewise, the accompaniment and mentorship were praised: *“The focal person was always reachable and ready to help. There was good communication and there was a lot of capacity building plus guidance from Oxfam. The relationship was good and the technical support was very helpful. They built our capacity in areas where we had issues.”* (Uganda Evaluation Report, p. 237-245). Oxfam IBIS has provided technical assistance to the country team and the local partners, respectively, in terms of conflict sensitivity, linking development, humanitarian and peacebuilding efforts in a triple nexus approach. Oxfam’s tools to support gender and women’s inclusion have been mentioned as particularly valuable by the RLOs. Moreover, Oxfam also facilitates that RLOs are represented at international level. In 2022, Oxfam has successfully supported the participation of a refugee leader from East Africa at the 2022 Executive Committee Meeting of UNHCR, that took place in Geneva in the middle of October 2022.

Lessons

The main lessons learned are the following:

- In working with refugees, RLOs are truly indispensable partners due to their uniqueness. They have an exclusive advantage of social proximity, contextual knowledge and networks and affiliations in the community they serve, rendering them accountable to their constituencies. Uniqueness includes speaking the languages

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and being familiar with the social architecture in the camp community. INGOs partnering with RLOs should in all possible manners support approaches that work to harness RLOs distinctiveness.

- In partnerships, RLOs needs with respect to advocacy should be attended to and seen as equally important compared to managerial and technical capacity. Policy engagement of RLOs in for instance coordination forums have proven to be particularly vital as RLOs bring foreword the expressed opinions of the refugee constituencies.

- Unfortunately overlooked in the onset of the collaboration was the quest to ensure women an equal role in decision-making, allowing women to obtain management and leadership posts in the RLO organisations. To learn from this deficiency, we must systematically apply appropriate measures from the onset, including to run mandatory gender marker assessments.

Recommendations:

- In working with non-traditional actors such as RLOs, it is recommended to take the specific circumstances into account. Customised support requires significant and dedicated staff time allocated in terms of mentorship and accompaniment in order to harvest the full potential from the collaboration and partnership with RLOs.

- Women's equal representation in the management of the RLOs should be addressed from the very beginning of the partnerships established with RLOs, considered this as an essential requirement, systemically promoting women's leadership among refugee communities.

Evidence

Linkages to further evidence or information:

To get a broader picture of approaches and methods in promoting an active role of the informal groups in peace building, please consult on the lessons learned from six countries, Uganda inclusive, please check the thematic evaluation of Oxfam IBIS peacebuilding programmes:

- *Evaluation: 2021: Caroline van Koot Social Impact Consulting: Final Evaluation of Oxfam IBIS' Peacebuilding Programme.*

Refugees meaningful participation and influence is vital in order to ensure that rights are met and that the relevance of the intervention is continuously monitored. Read more:

- *Article: Oxfam 2022: [Refugees want a real say in decisions shaping their lives: here's how that could happen. Views & Voices \(oxfam.org.uk\)](#)*



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- DAC 5 Digit Sector ([DAC 5 Digit Sector - iatistandard.org](#))
- Humanitarian Scope Type (where applicable, [Humanitarian Scope Type - iatistandard.org](#))