
the Humanitarian Leader

**Back to basics: Re-centring refugees in humanitarian
and development action**

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Cover image: A member of the Vijana Twaweza Community chicken farming program with her flock. © Dieu Merci Luundo, Vijana Twaweza Community

Abstract

Despite decades of rhetoric around localisation and inclusion, mainstream humanitarian and development systems continue to marginalise refugees, relegating them to passive recipients of aid rather than recognising them as capable leaders and innovators. This article critiques the entrenched architecture of exclusion that defines much of global aid practice, arguing that meaningful reform must begin with re-centring refugees as agents of change. Drawing on recent evidence from refugee-led organisations (RLOs) such as the Vijana Twaweza Community (VTC) in Kenya's Kakuma refugee camp, the article showcases the productivity, contextual intelligence, and transformative potential of refugee-led development, particularly in sustainable agriculture. It highlights how RLOs are already filling critical gaps left by international actors, despite facing legal, financial, and structural barriers. The article explores how scalable, tech-enabled knowledge sharing could support the growth of such initiatives and calls for a fundamental shift in how resources are distributed and how refugees are included. Ultimately, it argues that empowering RLOs is not only a moral imperative but a pragmatic strategy for a more effective and just humanitarian future. The real question is no longer whether refugees can lead, but whether the sector is willing to follow.

Relevance to leadership and systems change

This paper informs humanitarian leadership and systems transformation by calling for a re-centring of refugees as agents rather than beneficiaries. It challenges top-down, donor-driven models and advocates for inclusive, locally led decision-making rooted in lived experience. By highlighting refugee-led initiatives like Vijana Twaweza Community in Kakuma refugee camp, the article demonstrates how leadership grounded in trust, accountability, and partnership can transform humanitarian systems, moving them from reactive aid delivery to collaborative, sustainable development that values knowledge, dignity, and self-determination.

Introduction

Mainstream humanitarian and development action has long operated on the logic of external intervention. Refugees are framed primarily as vulnerable victims, in need of assistance and rarely included in the decisions that shape their lives. From climate change imperatives to population management fora, refugees are still not welcomed at the negotiating table (Hellen et al., 2024). Such exclusionary ways of doing dominate donor policies, NGO practices, and coordination mechanisms, reinforcing top-down structures where power, knowledge, and resources are monopolised by international actors who hold all the power and suffer little of the consequences (Bautista-Chavez et al., 2024). While discourse has evolved over the years to include lofty notions of localisation, inclusion and co-creation with affected populations, the reality on the ground remains largely the same with refugees, and to a lesser extent, host populations, continuing to be sidelined, underfunded, and over-regulated (Khoury and Scott, 2024). This article argues that re-centring refugees to become empowered actors in the realities of their lives requires not just reform on the ground where humanitarian action and development takes place, but a reimagining of the global infrastructure that dictates whose voices are heard and included. Refugees are already leading the charge, but a challenge remains as to whether the humanitarian and development systems that hold all the power can change enough to support and learn from them.

This article argues that re-centring refugees to become empowered actors in the realities of their lives requires not just reform on the ground where humanitarian action and development takes place, but a reimagining of the global infrastructure that dictates whose voices are heard and included.

The architecture of disempowerment

The persistent exclusion of refugees from decision-making and leadership is not an accident of implementation, it is an all too blatant feature of the system. While the post-COVID academia may frame inclusivity and participation as a key method to humanitarian success, large international NGOs and UN agencies still control the majority of resources, influence coordination platforms, and write the policies that shape program design (Diab et al, 2024). The stark reality for refugees who try to push the boundaries and forge their own development pathways is often a difficult one, with legal and bureaucratic barriers to everything,

including employment opportunities and project funding. Moreover, when refugees come together to try to strengthen their efforts by creating refugee-led organisations (RLOs) to lead their own development initiatives, the legal hoops they are required to jump through are all too often designed with large institutional actors in mind rather than the realities of smaller-scale community-based organisations (Sturridge et al., 2023a).

The long-accepted paradigm in which aid flows from North to South, from expert to beneficiary, and from institution to individual, is increasingly being questioned for the perpetuation of dependency it encourages (Opalo, 2025). Its undermining of local approaches, local solutions and local capacity often erodes confidence and trust in the humanitarian-development aid system. Even well-intentioned efforts which facilitate participation through localisation or other forms of inclusion, often fall short by limiting refugee involvement to consultative roles, pilot projects or worse, placebic positions (Shuayb, 2022).

The productivity of refugee-led development

Despite the lack of global support, refugee-led development is not only present across development and crisis contexts, but also thriving (Alrustm and Kallas, 2023). In Kenya, refugee-led organisations have demonstrated their ability to energise development and elevate capacity in education, health, livelihoods, and advocacy. One notable example is the Vijana Twaweza Community (VTC) in Kakuma refugee camp. Founded and run by refugees in 2018, VTC has developed a range of community-based initiatives including farming fish and other sustainable agriculture programs to promote food security, training and equipping women with the resources they need to become farmers, and running various community cohesion programs to empower youth in the camp (Luundo et al., 2025). These initiatives are built on transformative principles that build on local knowledge and the inclusion of a wider range of voices to strengthen the social fabric of the community and sustain the trust and commitment that is needed to enable faster developmental and humanitarian success (O’Keeffe, 2024). A good example of this came during the COVID-19 pandemic, when VTC was among the first to mobilise. Using the knowledge and skills the members had learned from taking various educational health courses, they disseminated vital health information, distributed hygiene advice and supported vulnerable households through mutual aid networks. Unlike many INGOs constrained by travel restrictions and centralised operations, refugee-led groups were agile, embedded, and responsive (O’Keeffe and Carron, 2020). The work of VTC and other RLOs fills critical gaps and challenges the myth that displaced people are inherently dependent.

What makes refugee-led development more responsive and productive is not just its cost-effectiveness and leaner chains of command, it is contextual intelligence, cultural fluency, and relational accountability that are fundamental to their constitutions (Tonks, 2024). Not only are RLOs like VTC more likely to design solutions that are culturally relevant, but they have access to social networks and local legitimacy that international actors struggle to build, especially in situations of sudden and complex crises like the pandemic (Vuni et al., 2024). For example, by creating simple videos in French, English, and Kiswahili and sharing them over the WhatsApp messaging platform, VTC rapidly reached thousands of people living in the camp with vital hygiene information during the COVID-19 pandemic—something international development and humanitarian agencies, with their slower and less embedded operations, struggled to achieve.

Another area in which refugee-led development shines, is in its ability to meet community needs through sustainable agriculture. In many displacement settings, food insecurity is a persistent challenge for international development institutions and INGOs. Given adequate support, the gaps that hunger leaves in these contexts can often be filled by community-driven agricultural innovation. This approach not only offers a pathway to self-reliance but to broader economic development, with positive implications for health, employment and overall wellbeing (MacPherson and Sterck, 2021). VTC runs a chicken farming training program for refugee women in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya that exemplifies this approach. In 2024, the program trained 10 women to become farmers in the camp and in 2025 it is training 30 more. Participants in the program follow an eight-week course in which they receive hands-on training in poultry rearing, covering the full cycle of production from building chicken coops and managing feed to vaccination, animal health, and sustainable waste use. The training also incorporates basic business and financial management skills, equipping participants to treat chicken farming as a viable small enterprise rather than subsistence activity. After completion of the course, VTC provides the participants with start-up resources such as chicks, feed, materials to build their own chicken coops and access to shared facilities, reducing the initial financial risks that often prevent women from engaging in income-generating activities. This small-scale initiative is having a ripple effect by improving nutrition, creating income-generating opportunities, and strengthening social cohesion by connecting women refugees from different communities to come together and improve their communities' health, wealth and future prospects (O'Keeffe, 2025).

While sustainable agriculture offers clear opportunities for scalability when it comes to feeding the world's poor, it offers other benefits that are less well known. For example, in the Global North where hunger is not

an immediate concern, sustainable agriculture practices such as regenerative farming, permaculture, and other organic farming methods are well established practices used to restore ecosystems, build soil health, and reduce emissions (Sher et al., 2024). In displacement settings, by contrast, agriculture is primarily driven by the need to address immediate hunger or generate income. Similarly, at the global policy level, sustainable agriculture is often framed around its scalability as a solution to hunger, which can obscure its broader ecological and social contributions. Yet regenerative and other restorative practices are increasingly relevant in the Global South, where they have the potential not only to meet basic survival needs and scale production but also to enhance environmental stewardship and build long-term resilience.

Global knowledge sharing through technology

A powerful way to scale refugee-led agricultural development could be through technology-enabled knowledge sharing approaches. This has been done to good effect through online and blended learning models such as those used in the education in emergency contexts sector over the last decade. Blended learning, which combines online modules with in-person mentoring, has proved itself to be a particularly effective education solution in such refugee contexts (Lovey et al., 2021). Although connectivity and other resource issues remain in places like Kakuma, technological advances and other improvements could present an opportunity to democratise access to the sustainable agricultural knowledge that could improve the lives of all concerned. Initiatives that offer potential for future exploration and development could be farmer-to-farmer platforms, virtual training programs and refugee-to-refugee digital hubs where sustainable agricultural knowledge can be easily shared. As shown in the example of VTC using instant messaging technology to protect against COVID-19, even the simplest forms of technology can move beyond narrow applications to provide solutions in new and previously unexplored ways.

Evidence-based impact and research findings

There is a growing amount of evidence that RLOs can yield more positive results than INGOs can in specific circumstances. This is bolstered by their cost effectiveness and their ability to accomplish their goals without the bureaucratic overheads that characterise larger organisations (Sturridge, 2023). However, as a relatively new and under studied phenomenon, it warrants more attention to fully understand when and how RLOs can be more effective (Easton-Calabria, 2023).

In general, this echoes a broader shift in development thinking that local solutions are often the most sustainable solutions and offer great potential for the future of a much-maligned sector (Gercama and Ainsworth, 2024). However, the productivity of refugee-led development in places like Kakuma is not a matter of potential, it is already the reality. The challenges organisations like VTC face are how to remove the structural barriers that prevent them from scaling their efforts to reach many more people than they currently do. Addressing these barriers requires targeted external support. Different actors bring different limitations: INGOs often provide resources but maintain top-down control; UN agencies and bilateral donors remain slow, centralised, and disconnected from local realities; philanthropy is flexible but tends to be short-term and project-based; diaspora contributions are critical but fragmented; and national actors may prioritise their own political agendas over refugee agency. Where support aligns with local needs, RLOs thrive; where it reinforces dependency or control, they are held back (Tafech, 2025).

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No matter how committed RLOs are, their efforts will remain limited unless international institutions, with their often slow, centralised, and disconnected from local realities ways of doing things, step aside or actively enable them, at least until RLOs are fully empowered to lead development themselves.

Beyond rhetoric: What reform requires

Despite all the fanfare of global commitments around localisation in humanitarian and development efforts such as the Grand Bargain and the Global Compact on Refugees, progress has been modest. Funding remains concentrated in a handful of large INGOs, with RLOs and other community-based organisations receiving less than 1% of global humanitarian funding (Chiu, 2020). There may be various reasons put forward for this, but there is a growing consensus that the current system is not working and something needs to change.

To move from rhetoric to reality, reform of the sector is required and must be structural, not symbolic. Unsurprisingly a key challenge for this is the financing of RLOs. Within the development sphere they are often viewed as riskier and more wasteful than INGOs, which can limit the amount of funding that they receive (Sturridge et al., 2023a). However, to be effective,

reforms of the system need to take place and should start by increasing the amount of humanitarian funding that goes to RLOs, which is currently only a fraction of the 1.2% of total global aid funding that goes to local actors (Sturridge et al. 2023b). In addition to increasing the amount of direct funding they receive, the structure of funding also needs to change. Currently most of the funding that goes to RLOs is short term in nature—usually for projects of one year or less (Sturridge et al., 2023 b). This is the case for VTC's chicken farming training program, which, without external funding, will not be able to sustain the project beyond the current project cycle.

Beyond financing of RLOs, an immediate recalibration of how humanitarians and development practitioners operate in crisis contexts appears necessary. As mentioned previously, questions of waste and risk abound in narratives around RLOs and development (Sturridge et al., 202 a). While it is important that the sector acknowledges such concerns, it is just as important that solutions are put forward to ensure that these do not occur. For this to happen, agency is key and the task for humanitarian sector is to stop getting in the way of it. For instance, the international humanitarian infrastructure in places like Kakuma refugee camp regulates even the most basic aspects of community life, such as movement within the camp to obtaining permits for establishing community-based organisations. This system of layered permissions often delays or obstructs refugee-led initiatives, sapping energy and resources that could otherwise be invested in building sustainable livelihoods. Such experiences highlight how red tape does not merely create inconvenience but actively undermines the agency and effectiveness of RLOs.

The international humanitarian infrastructure in places like Kakuma refugee camp regulates even the most basic aspects of community life, such as movement within the camp to obtaining permits for establishing community-based organisations. This system of layered permissions often delays or obstructs refugee-led initiatives, sapping energy and resources that could otherwise be invested in building sustainable livelihoods.

Bound up with the issue of agency, is the notion of inclusion. For far too long refugee participation in development initiatives has been framed as a box ticking exercise to appease funders and utilised as a marketing slogan (Carron et al., 2023). This is particularly ironic given that the humanitarian sector frequently champions

the inclusion of minorities and underrepresented groups, whether along the lines of gender, race, disability, or other forms of marginalisation, yet seldom extends the same commitment to refugees themselves in decisions that directly shape their lives. What often passes for participation amounts to little more than lip service, with refugees invited into consultative spaces only after agendas have already been set (Essex-Lettieri and Zahreddine, 2024). To move this will require an amount of humility often lacking in the sector and true recognition that refugees need to be included every step of the way.

Getting back to basics and re-centring refugees in humanitarian and development practice is both a moral imperative and a pragmatic strategy for overcoming the challenges facing our sector. Refugees are not clients, stakeholders, or whatever technocratic label is currently in vogue. They are leaders, innovators, agents of change—and yes, victims of circumstance. As the world contends with protracted crises, climate displacement, and growing competition for limited resources, we must keep this in mind as we chart the

future of humanitarianism and pursue the structural changes it urgently requires.

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The work of VTC in Kakuma illustrates what this shift looks like in practice. Through initiatives such as its chicken farming training program, VTC not only supports livelihoods but also builds leadership capacity and community resilience from within. This kind of refugee-led leadership demonstrates that sustainable, context-sensitive solutions already exist, even in the most challenging environments. With local leadership at the helm, RLOs that offer such solutions can, and will, light the way. The question is no longer whether they are capable of doing this, but whether the humanitarian and development sectors are truly willing to follow.

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