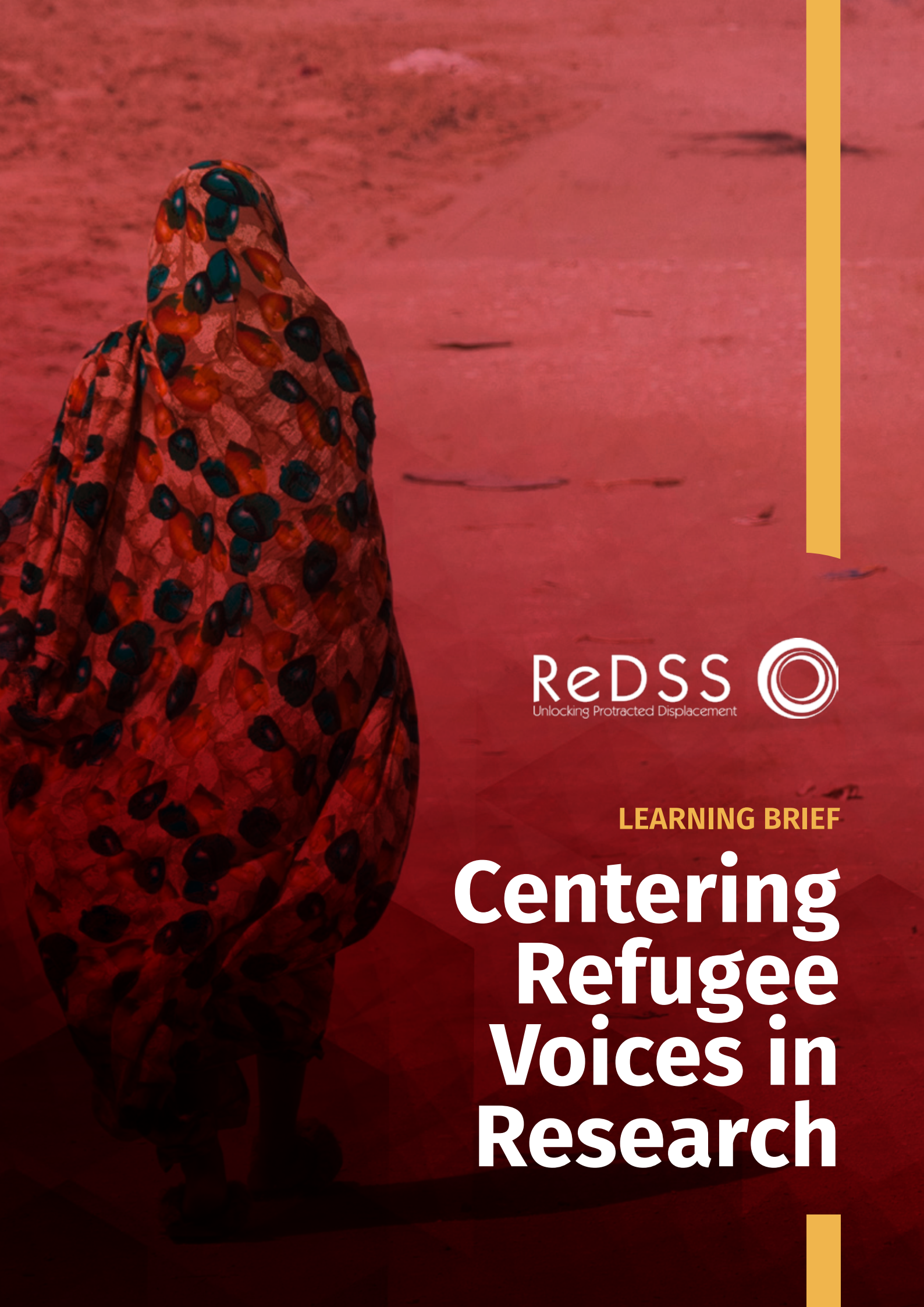




ReDSS 
Unlocking Protracted Displacement

LEARNING BRIEF

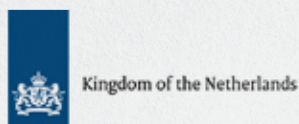
Centering Refugee Voices in Research

About Kenya Evidence Platform:

Funded by the **Kingdom of the Netherlands**, Kenya Evidence Platform is a collaboration between the **Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS)**, **Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)** and **Maseno University**. As Kenya works to shift from camps to integrated settlements under the Shirika Plan, the platform aims to ensure policies and programmes are shaped by evidence generated by local and refugee researchers, reflecting the lived realities of refugees and host communities.

Each partner brings complementary strengths to enhance project delivery: **ReDSS** leverages its connections with key decision-makers and policy platforms; **RLRH** produces high-quality, locally generated evidence through refugee researchers; and **Maseno University** contributes its established networks across local academia in Kenya.

By fostering multi-stakeholder coordination and dialogue, the platform bridges the gap between evidence and practice, strengthening accountability and promoting durable solutions rooted in local contexts.



Centering Voices and Evidence: Advancing Refugee-Led Research on Forced Displacement in Kenya.

01 Introduction

Over the last decade, Kenya has emerged as a regional leader in refugee policy reform and inclusive development. Hosting over 830,000 refugees and asylum seekers as of September 2025, with majority coming from Somalia and South Sudan.¹ The country has set a path to transition from a purely humanitarian approach to one anchored in self-reliance and socio-economic inclusion. The Refugee Act (2021) and the Shirika Plan (2024–2030) embody this shift, aiming to integrate refugees into national systems through area-based, market-driven, and rights-centered approaches.

Yet, while inclusion frameworks have advanced in policy, the knowledge architecture that informs them remains uneven. For decades, research on displacement in Kenya has been dominated by external actors, often international researchers, think tanks, and donors,

resulting in limited ownership and context sensitivity. Refugees have largely been treated as subjects of research rather than as co-creators of knowledge. This imbalance has profound implications for evidence quality, policy uptake, and the sustainability of interventions.

A growing movement across East Africa and globally is challenging this paradigm. From Uganda's ReHoPE framework², which integrates refugee-led data into development planning fuelled by Principle 9 of the Framework on Addressing Evidence Gaps, to Lebanon's Refugee Research Network³, which foregrounds displaced scholars' perspectives, there is growing recognition that those with lived experience of displacement produce richer, more grounded evidence. Kenya's own emerging refugee-led research ecosystem offers critical lessons for the region, postulating that centering refugee voices is not only a moral imperative but also evidence imperative.

02 Overview of the Brief

This Learning brief aims to: share insights from initiatives supporting refugee-led research in Kenya, highlight the rationale of refugee-led research and challenges and opportunities in promoting refugee leadership in research and suggest recommendations to practitioners, donors and policy makers to support more inclusive research practices.



Over 836,466

Number of refugees and asylum seekers **hosted in Kenya as of February 2025.**

¹ [Country - Kenya](#)

² [REHOPE-Refugee and Host Population Empowerment-Strategic Framework: Uganda](#)

³ [The-Lebanon-Policy-and-Research-Network-on-Displacement-a-Knowledge-Sub-Ecosystem-on-Forced-Displacement.pdf](#)

03 Key Messages

- Refugee-led research (RLR) enhances the quality, legitimacy, and policy relevance of evidence on forced displacement by grounding it in lived experience and local context. An Example is a Working Paper published by the Refugee-Led Research Hub on the Impact of Drought and Livelihood Adaptive Strategies of youth living with physical disabilities in Kakuma Refugee Camp that captures forgotten aspects on their daily struggles on access to livelihoods.⁴
- Kenya's new policy environment (Refugee Act, Shirika Plan) provides a fertile enabling space for institutionalizing refugee-led research within national and county systems.
- Effective models such as the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) and partnerships under the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN), demonstrate the feasibility of inclusive research collaborations.
- Key challenges persist: power asymmetries in research partnerships, limited access to funding and infrastructure for refugee researchers, and fragmented coordination among stakeholders.
- Global experiences from Uganda, Ethiopia, and Lebanon underscore that structural inclusion of refugee researchers in policy cycles enhances uptake and accountability.
- To scale impact, aid actors in Kenya must invest in capacity strengthening, institutional partnerships, and financing mechanisms that embed refugee-led inquiry within local governance and humanitarian systems.

04 Why is it Important:

The Rationale for Refugee-Led Research

Refugee-led research⁵ addresses two interlinked challenges: the decolonization of knowledge production about displacement-affected communities and the localization of humanitarian response. Historically, much of the data and analysis informing displacement policy in Kenya has been externally driven. This has often led to findings that are contextually shallow or disconnected from displacement-affected community's priorities.

Refugee-led approaches reposition displaced individuals as agents of inquiry and change, capable of producing rigorous, policy-relevant insights. Beyond ethical imperatives, this approach contributes to:

- Improved Data Quality and Relevance:** Local researchers possess nuanced understanding of displacement dynamics, social relations, and informal economies, leading to more credible and actionable evidence.
- Enhanced Trust and Access:** Community-based researchers can navigate complex cultural and linguistic spaces, building trust with respondents who might be reluctant to speak to external actors. Refugee-led research shifts the power dynamics to ensure knowledge and perspectives of displacement-affected communities are central to how issues affecting them are addressed.
- Policy Uptake and Legitimacy:** When evidence is co-produced with displacement-affected communities, it carries greater legitimacy and is more likely to inform inclusive policy and programming. The communities are hence given an opportunity to create evidence-based advocacy to hold various institutions accountable.
- Sustainable Impact:** Building research capacity among refugee communities increases long-term benefits: individuals gain transferable skills (e.g., data collection, analysis, writing, publishing), which can translate into livelihood

⁴ [Adaptation in Adversity: The Impact of Drought on Livelihood Adaptive Strategies of Refugee Youth with Physical disabilities in Kakuma refugee Camp](#)

⁵ Refugee-led Research refers to research driven by people with lived experiences of Forced displacement, from defining the Research Questions, designing the Methodology, conducting the Analysis to contributing to the publication and dissemination.

opportunities. Over time, this can contribute to stronger evidence, more appropriate programmes and policy change

Globally, the shift toward participatory and refugee-led research aligns with calls under the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and Agenda 2030 for inclusive, locally owned development. Countries such as Ethiopia, through its CRRF-linked academic collaborations, have shown how integrating refugee scholars into national research agendas can improve data credibility and inform durable solutions.

05 Emerging Models in Kenya

Refugee-led research in Kenya is evolving rapidly, driven by a combination of policy reforms, donor interests, and local innovation. In Kenya, among other actors, it is primarily supported by Refugee-led Organizations (RLOs) through initiatives that enables refugees and other displacement-affected communities to become leaders in producing evidence on issues affecting them.

Several initiatives in Kenya illustrate this transformation, this brief will draw insights from the Refugee-Led Research Hub's work and effort:

Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)

The Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) was founded in 2020 as a global initiative of the Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, with a core team and offices in

Nairobi and Kakuma camp. From the outset, RLRH has championed the idea that people with lived experience of displacement should not only participate in but lead the production of knowledge on forced migration. This vision has helped normalise the concept of refugee-led research in Kenya and beyond. RLRH builds capacity among refugee researchers through mentorship, technical training, and funded research projects. It has created a cadre of researchers from refugee backgrounds who conduct independent studies on education, livelihoods, gender, and displacement governance. Its emphasis on co-authorship and equitable partnerships has shifted norms around research inclusion. RLRH also pioneers fellowships and placements with I/NGOs, Think tanks, and Universities, demonstrating the value of refugee researchers as knowledge leaders.

To date, RLRH has supported over 500 learners and researchers through a three-pillar model combining: **Academic training** (e.g. the Refugee Studies Centre Pathways programme and Graduate Horizons scheme), **Research initiatives** (where refugee researchers design and lead studies from start to finish) and **Professional placements** (embedding refugee scholars in humanitarian and development organisations).

Funded by the **Kingdom of the Netherlands**, Kenya Evidence Platform is a 3-year project implemented by the **Regional Durable Solutions Secretariat (ReDSS)**, **Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)** and **Maseno University**. The platform aims to: increase locally generated high-quality research, strengthen the research capacity of local upcoming researchers (refugees and Kenyans) and promote evidence-based policy and programming in Kenya.



500+

Learners and Researchers have been supported by the **Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)** to date.

Under the Kenya Evidence Platform (KEP), RLRH has, since 2023, strengthened the refugee research ecosystem by equipping emerging refugee researchers with the skills, mentorship, and resources required to lead evidence generation. These efforts directly contribute to more inclusive, locally informed research and policy influence in Kenya.

a. Research Trainings - To strengthen core Research Competencies

RLRH has successfully delivered three research capacity-building trainings; two in-person (Nairobi and Kakuma) and one virtual, benefitting over **45 refugee researchers** to date. Participants demonstrated improved knowledge and practical skills across proposal development, qualitative and quantitative methods, ethics in conducting research, and data analysis.

Topic Selection: training content directly aligned with the evidence gaps identified under the Common Refugee Research Agenda⁶'s 5 pillars (Refugee Governance Frameworks, Service Integration, Socio-Economic Inclusion, Environmental sustainability and Climate Change and Durable Solutions). This was complemented by participant's motivation letters.

Training Methodology: The blended **in-person format**, conceptual sessions in the morning complemented by applied exercises in the afternoon, resulted in stronger learning retention and higher levels of participant engagement. While the **virtual model** expanded reach, challenges such as unstable connectivity and varied digital literacy affected consistency in participation. These lessons are informing adaptive strategies for future online delivery.

b. Independent Research Papers (IRPs) - Generating locally driven evidence

Each year, through KEP support, three competitively selected refugee researchers receive funding and facilitation to lead independent studies. Researchers are responsible for the full research cycle from topic selection

to dissemination resulting in: More credible and contextually grounded evidence from refugee communities, Strengthened visibility and leadership of refugee researchers in national evidence spaces, Uptake opportunities among humanitarian and development actors seeking locally informed evidence. RLRH facilitators provide targeted technical support, helping ensure the quality and policy relevance of outputs.

c. Mentorship and Coaching- Sustaining Capability and Influence

Post-training mentorship has been critical in maintaining progress and momentum. Participants continue to receive individualized coaching on: Refining proposals for funding and ethical approval, advancing data management, strengthening dissemination and advocacy strategies, and Expanding research networks and collaboration pathways among other topics. This has contributed to increased confidence, technical independence, and professional visibility of upcoming refugee researchers within Kenya's research ecosystem.

What has worked Well:

- The Hub's participatory model fostered a sense of ownership and legitimacy among Refugee Researchers and their communities and subsequently with their research outputs. One Independent Researcher from the 2024 cohort noted that this approach has significantly contributed to their personal growth, strengthened their confidence, and enhanced their ability to design and lead independent studies.
- The timely topic of discussion on AI and plagiarism in the Kakuma in-person training early 2025. Participants reported that the discussion equipped them with practical guidance on responsible use of AI tools in academic writing and helped clarify ethical boundaries for their own research papers.

⁶ The **Common Research Agenda** is an analysis of Evidence Gaps in refugee management identified post an Evidence Mapping conducted on refugee management in Kenya in 2024 by the Kenya Evidence Platform project. The Evidence gaps are classified into 5 areas: **Refugee Governance Frameworks, Service Integration, Socio-Economic Inclusion, Environmental sustainability and Climate Change and Durable Solutions.**

- Partnerships with Academic Institutions/ Universities enhanced visibility through researcher's networking forums and publication opportunities for the researchers. One trainee emphasized that the one-on-one pairing between mentees and university professors fostered trust, ensured consistent engagement, and enhanced prospects for collaborative authorship.
- Mentorship programs, and flexible research topic selection enabled refugee researchers to generate original, policy-relevant data. Trainees highlighted that the combination of virtual and in-person mentorship significantly enhanced access to academic experts and RLRH facilitators, ensuring continuous support throughout their research process.
- Targeted capacity strengthening on conducting research has been critical in building up upcoming researchers to begin their own research journeys in Forced Migration Research. One Independent Researcher currently supported under the program highlighted the value of RLRH's facilitation approach, noting that continuous feedback throughout the research cycle has significantly improved their skills and overall research quality.

What are the Challenges:

- **Short-term grants limit continuity** in the research training for populations that have had no prior education or experience in research methodology. In the case illustrated above, the trainings are 2 times a year and have participants limits due to budget constraints. Relatedly only 3 independent research papers can be supported per year. This poses sustainability risks making long-term institutionalization fetched.
- **Unequal representation of all nationalities for camp-based participants;** when a call is put out for a training or for papers, different factors such as fluency in English skews the participation towards some nationalities (frequently South Sudan nationals) as opposed to others. This also speaks

to the social networks that different groups of participants have built at the camps (the experiences suggests that South Sudanese nationals have more social networks amongst themselves as compared to the rest).

- **Low engagement & participation for virtual sessions;** this was due to unstable internet connectivity exacerbated by rains. Additionally, language barrier played a role in the low engagements as well.
- **Diverse skill levels:** The variation in skills for participants remains a challenge when it comes to crafting training materials and contents for engagement. Many training participants had only enumerator experience, making training sessions on proposal development more difficult.
- **Power Asymmetries:** International partners often control research agendas, funding, and publication, perpetuating inequities.

What are the Lessons Learned:

- **Targeted investment rapidly professionalizes refugee-led research** The provision of both financial support and leadership autonomy has significantly strengthened the quality and legitimacy of research outputs. Refugee researchers under RLRH lead the full research cycle, from design to dissemination with their papers hosted on the RLRH website for open access. Thus far, 3⁷ Independent Research Papers have been published, 3 additional publications expected in December 2025 and 3 more scheduled for 2026.
- **Partnerships grounded in equity and not tokenism produce stronger outputs and mutual learning;** while developing independent research papers, empowering refugee researchers to select their own topics, aligned with the Common Research Agenda, ensures relevance and authenticity of insights. While facilitators provide technical oversight, refugees are the primary decision-makers from proposal to publication, strengthening confidence, influence, and skills transfer.

⁷ [Working-paper-4-Peter-Muraya-FULL-REPORT-1-2.pdf](#) [Working-paper-3-Asrat-Koricha-Tolossa-FULL-REPORT.pdf](#) [Working-paper-5-Wala-Mohammed-FULL-REPORT-v2.pdf](#)

- **Institutional Linkages expand credibility and policy reach:** Linking refugee researchers to local universities, think tanks, and county governments ensures credibility and access to policy processes. Maseno University and the associated research network play a key role in the mentorship of researchers trained by RLRH. They provide dissemination platforms and exposure to national research forums and opportunities to influence programming and policy.
- **In-person, learning formats maximize engagement and skills acquisition:** Trainees reported that interactive, practice-oriented sessions in Nairobi and Kakuma offered stronger peer exchange, real-time feedback, and community building. This approach unlike virtual engagement reinforced confidence and belonging in the research space.
- **Virtual models require local hubs (ICT centres, group workstations) and smaller cohorts to be effective:** The 2024 online training highlighted challenges with connectivity, difficulty engaging with content and language when participants joined individually from dispersed locations. Adaptive measures for 2025 include the use of local group workstations to enhance the learning experience by improving connectivity, strengthening peer interaction, and supporting more effective networking.
- **Motivation letters strengthen participant selection and topic relevance:** Reviewing applicants' motivation letters enables alignment between lived experience, personal interests, and priority thematic areas resulting in more meaningful and grounded research topics.
- **Embedding lived experiences in the Training Modules enhances relevance and agency;** Participants' contexts and expertise now shape training design; informing exercises, case studies, and research themes. These validates their knowledge and positions them as subject-matter contributors, not beneficiaries.





06 Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- a. **Institutionalize Refugee-Led Research within National Frameworks:** Integrate refugee-generated evidence into Kenya's National Research Agenda and the Shirika Plan M&E system. County governments could formalize partnerships with refugee-led research collectives to inform planning and service delivery.
- b. **Create Dedicated Funding Mechanisms:** Donors and government agencies should establish flexible research funds accessible to refugee researchers and community-based organizations. Small grants with mentorship support have proven effective in RLRH and similar global models (e.g., Uganda's RLO Innovation Fund).
- c. **Invest in Research Infrastructure and Networks:** Support shared research spaces, digital access, and libraries within refugee-hosting areas such as Garissa and Turkana counties to nurture sustainable ecosystems.
- d. **Promote Ethical and Equitable Partnerships:** Adopt ethical guidelines that ensure equitable authorship, data ownership, and compensation for refugee researchers. Global partnerships should emphasize reciprocity and co-governance.
- e. **Embed Research-to-Policy Pathways:** Establish mechanisms linking refugee researchers with the National Steering Committee on Refugee Affairs and county-level planning units. Regular policy dialogues, policy briefs, and joint workshops to enhance uptake.
- f. **Strengthen Regional Learning and Exchange:** Facilitate South-South collaboration among refugee-led research networks in Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia to share tools, methodologies, and advocacy strategies.

07 Conclusion

Kenya's trajectory in refugee policy reform provides a critical opportunity to embed inclusive, locally owned research as a pillar of sustainable solutions. As Kenya shifts toward integration and self-reliance, it's crucial to ensure refugee researchers have both voice and agency.

Refugee-led research is not a parallel or supplementary exercise; it is a core driver of credible, context-relevant evidence. By investing in capacity, networks, and equitable partnerships, aid actors can help transform research landscape into one where refugees are not merely consulted but recognized as co-architects of knowledge and policy.



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