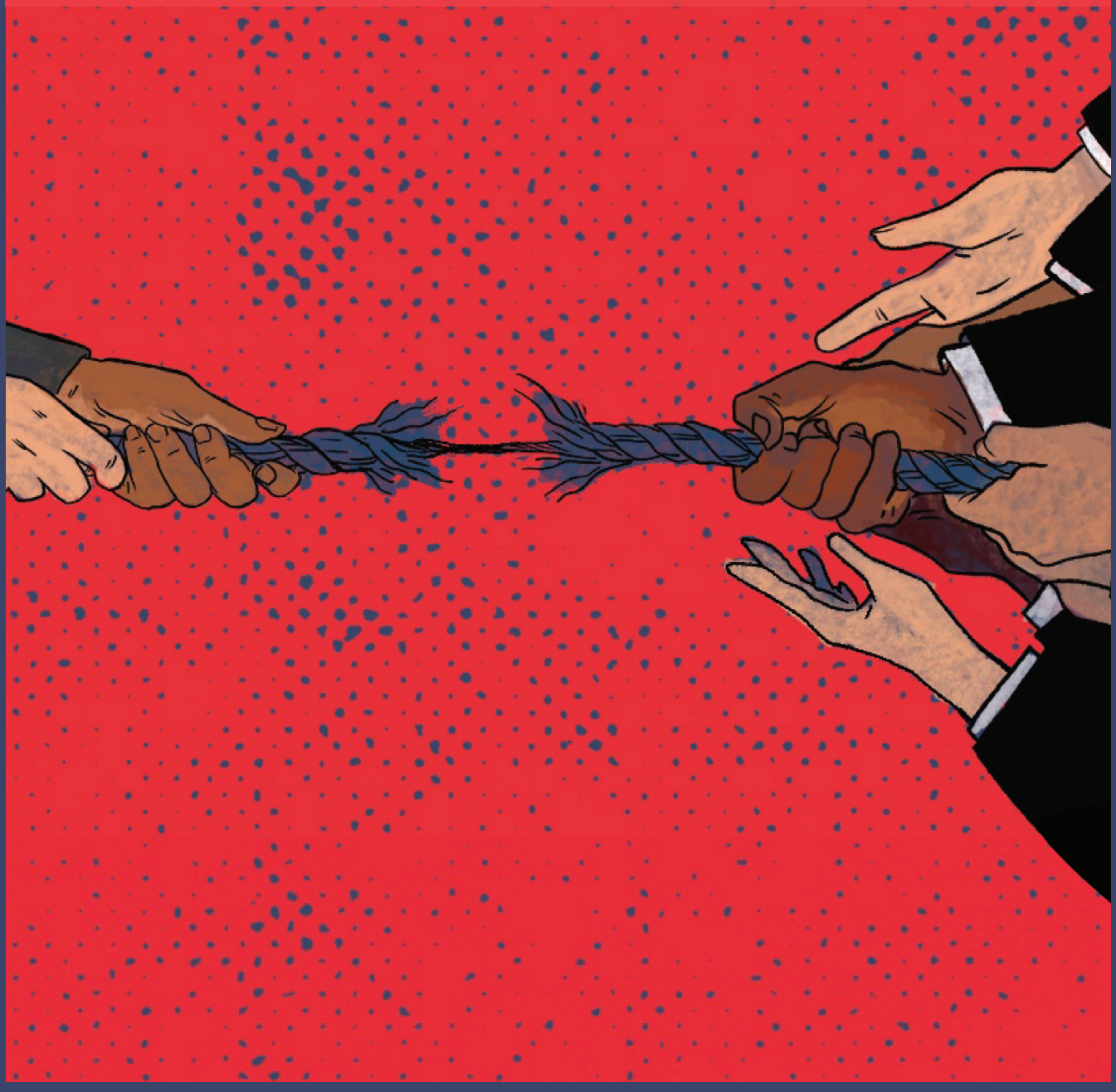
HPG REPORT

How to finance refugee leadership

Navigating a humanitarian system at breaking point

Caitlin Sturridge[ID], Fran Girling-Morris, Claude Samaha and Mike Pearson

November 2025



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Acronyms

APNOR	Asia Pacific Network of Refugees
CBPF	country-based pooled fund
CRLM	Collective for Refugee Leadership in MENA
FTS	Financial Tracking Service
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
IATI	International Aid Transparency Initiative
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LERRN	Local Engagement Refugee Research Network
LGBTQIA+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual plus
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OCHA	(UN) Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
ODA	official development assistance
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
RLIF	Refugee-led Innovation Fund
RLO	refugee-led organisation
RRLI	Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	UN Refugee Agency
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WPHF	Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund

Foreword: A call to recentre refugee leadership

This report emerges at a time of rupture. Refugee-led organisations (RLOs) have long operated with minimal and inconsistent support from the international community, despite their essential services and deep community legitimacy. Recent funding cuts are not a sudden collapse – they intensify a pattern of chronic neglect that now threatens the fragile infrastructure that RLOs have worked hard to sustain.

What this report documents is not merely a funding crisis – it is a systemic unravelling of international commitments to refugee leadership, unfolding in real time. But RLOs are not retreating. They are reorganising their operations amid shrinking budgets, reimagining service delivery in the absence of institutional support, and resisting the structural marginalisation that treats them as expendable.

From Lebanon to Uganda, Egypt to Colombia and beyond, RLOs deliver critical services – health, protection, education, legal aid – as well as initiatives in economic development that foster livelihoods, skills-building, and community resilience. They mediate local conflicts; support LGBTQIA+ survivors; and advocate for justice in spaces where their presence is barely acknowledged. They do this while facing burnout, reduced rations and the erosion of funding mechanisms that once promised inclusion.

Drawing on participatory research, this report offers more than critique. It challenges the symbolic inclusion of RLOs and calls for structural shifts: funding that is direct, flexible and sustained; partnerships that are equitable and transparent; and governance models that centre refugee agency rather than extract it.

These solutions are already in motion. RLOs show what is possible when trust, proximity and lived experience guide humanitarian action. What we need is not another round of pilot projects or symbolic gestures, but a shift in how the sector values and funds refugee leadership. The report lays out concrete mechanisms that are scalable, replicable and designed to endure.

As practitioners who have worked alongside refugee-led teams and witnessed their courage and moral clarity, we believe this report is not just timely, but necessary. It reminds us that leadership is a continuous practice, and that solidarity must finally move beyond rhetoric into embedded infrastructure.

Claude Samaha and Ralph Hadad (Basmeh & Zeitooneh)

1 Introduction: the funding landscape in 2024 and 2025

Billion-dollar cuts to humanitarian and development funding have profoundly impacted refugee-led organisations (RLOs), their staff and the communities they serve.[1] 'We haven't received any funding since the beginning of 2025,' admitted an Egypt-based RLO. A survey among Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) members found some RLOs in Uganda lost up to 80% of their funding overnight (RRLI, 2025), while 60% of Venezuelan organisations have reportedly already shut down their operations (Coalición por Venezuela, 2025). Across the board, RLOs are having to make significant cuts to their staff, offices and programmes, with some unlikely to survive the downturn. Many described the pressure of working longer hours for less (and often no) pay, compounded by the double blow of reduced refugee food rations and services. 'Our team is exhausted,' described one RLO. Another explained how efforts to avoid a total shutdown come at a high cost of 'staff burnout, reduced flexibility and limited capacity for innovation'. The impacts are not just personal – as many RLOs put their community needs first, they can no longer afford to invest in their institutional capacity and systems, raising concerns about their long-term operations.

> We are actively working on proposals and seeking solutions, but if no viable path emerges, we know we will have to make tough decisions in the coming months – with long-term consequences for our sustainability and reach. (Middle East and North Africa (MENA)-based RLO)

RLOs have long been underfunded and sidelined. Indeed, the funding cuts are exacerbating a much deeper issue that goes beyond a narrow focus on funding. It is about the aid system as a whole, and the unequal power dynamics that underpin it. But this devastating picture of RLOs being pushed to the limit by the funding cuts feels unsustainable. To make matter worse, the space for advocating for sustainable funding models and equitable partnership is reducing as competition for funding intensifies - reflecting a broader pattern in the localisation and meaningful refugee participation agendas. 'All of these conversations are now going away,' lamented one RLO. 'Is this refugee participation in reversal?' worried another. Some INGOs took a more moderate stance, suggesting that while funding for localisation may be drying up, the conversations are still happening, at least at the international level. But the tangible impacts are already being felt by RLOs facing cuts to the travel budgets they need to make their voices heard at global convenings. If RLO funding is seen as a litmus test for wider questions about how to address protracted displacement, the current backsliding on refugee leadership and sustainable programming raises significant doubts about the international community's commitment to finding durable solutions.

1 In particular, the sudden withdrawal of billions of dollars of United States Agency for International Development (USAID) funding in January 2025 combined with substantial cuts by other government donors, including the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands, Belgium, Switzerland and Germany.

This paper is part of a five-year research project that analyses the quantity and quality of funding to RLOs over time. Our initial 2023 report documented for the first time the amount of trackable funding ($22.3 million) reaching RLOs – confirming the widespread assumption that refugee leaders are 'not being given the funding and, by extension, the recognition and influence, they need and deserve' (Sturridge et al., 2023: 7).[2] Two years later, this second publication finds that just **$49 million of trackable funding reached RLOs in 2024** (Figure 1; see also Box 1). While a noticeable increase (more than doubling) from 2022 funding, closer inspection suggests this isn't a significant funding shift after all. The increase largely reflects a sizeable one-off philanthropic donation in 2024 (totalling $12 million), improved reporting and data availability, as well as the entry of some new donors – the 2024 snapshot is based on data from 45 sources compared to 34 in 2022. There was a modest uptick in funding to RLOs from sources included in both snapshots, of just under $5 million. But, when put into the wider context of humanitarian funding, $49 million is a drop in the ocean compared to the $4.7 billion provided to nine United Nations (UN) Refugee Response Plans in 2024 (Figure 2). RLOs continue to be excluded from international funding streams – as illustrated by the average size of their grants. The $35,000 they receive is significantly lower than grants given to local and national actors ($88,000) and to United Nations (UN) agencies ($320,000).[3]

Alarmingly, the 2024 data on which these figures are based precedes the funding cuts, subsequently announced in 2025 – suggesting that the RLO funding landscape could get considerably worse. Radical change is urgently needed. And, with this in mind, this paper is framed around three narratives that are at the heart of the failure to adequately finance refugee leadership:

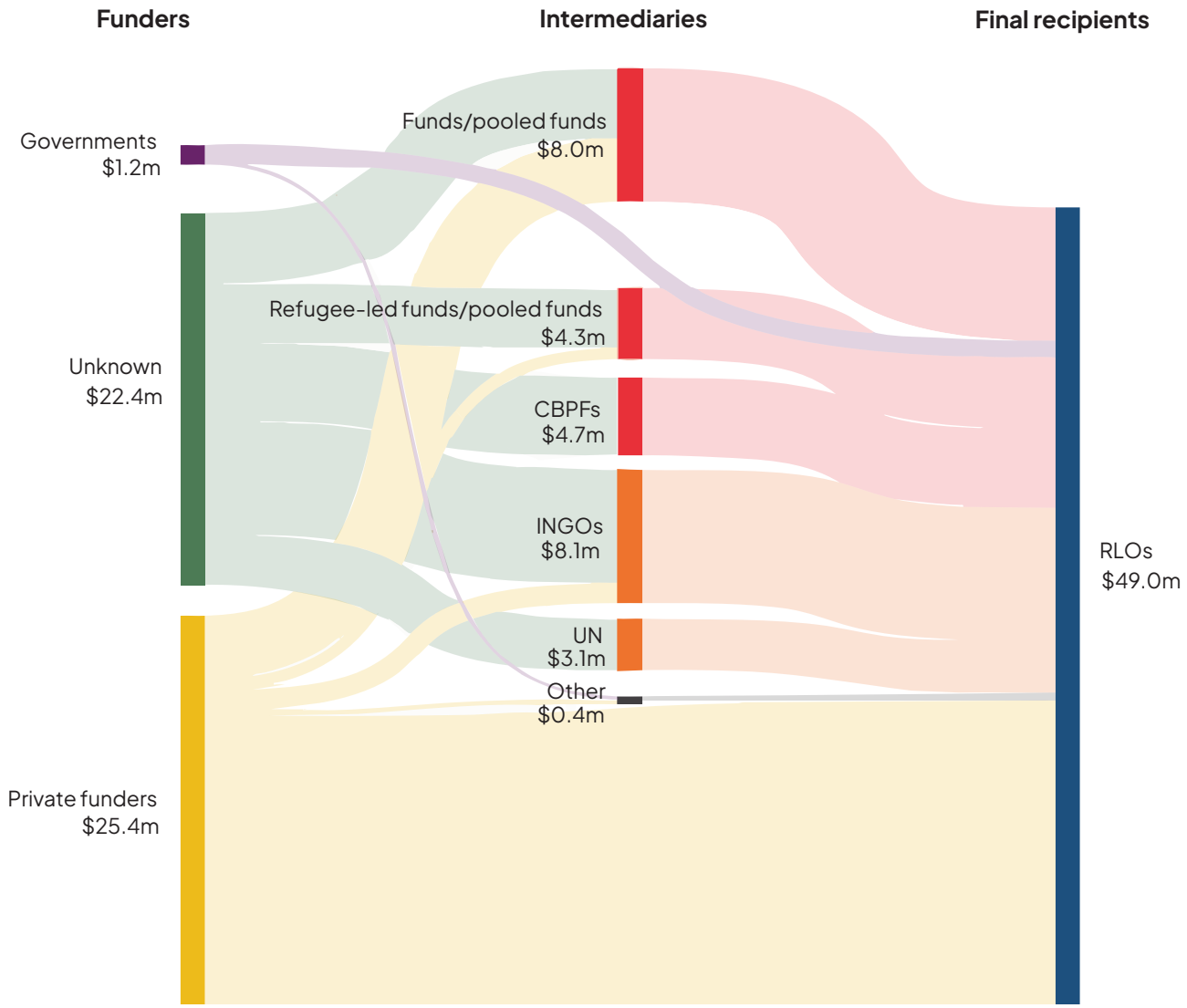
1. RLOs are an 'unproven and risky investment'.
2. RLOs are 'a nice to have, but not essential'.
3. RLOs are 'too difficult to fund'.

These narratives reflect long-standing neocolonial assumptions, structural racism and bias about who holds expertise and who needs capacity-building, as well as a provider–beneficiary binary that positions international actors as the 'protectors' and refugees as the 'protected' (Asylum Access, 2021; Betts et al., 2018: 1; USRAB, 2023). So, while these narratives are not new, they are nevertheless gaining renewed traction as funding pressures mount and commitments to localisation and refugee leadership slip. With this in mind, the chapters that follow provide a much-needed reality check to debunk these narratives and identify the practical steps that all actors can and should take to collectively navigate the key obstacles to funding RLOs.

2 Trackable funding to RLOs in 2022 has been updated to reflect better data availability and updates from key donors. The 2023 paper found that RLOs received $26.4 million – this is updated in this paper to $22.3 million.

3 The data for the calculation for RLOs is based on our dataset to include cases where we have information on the total grant size. Data for comparisons with other organisation types comes from the Financial Tracking Service (FTS) by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) based on 2024 data, which details individual financial flows, and not necessarily a 'total grant'. Therefore, it is likely that the comparison(s) shown from FTS are underestimates.

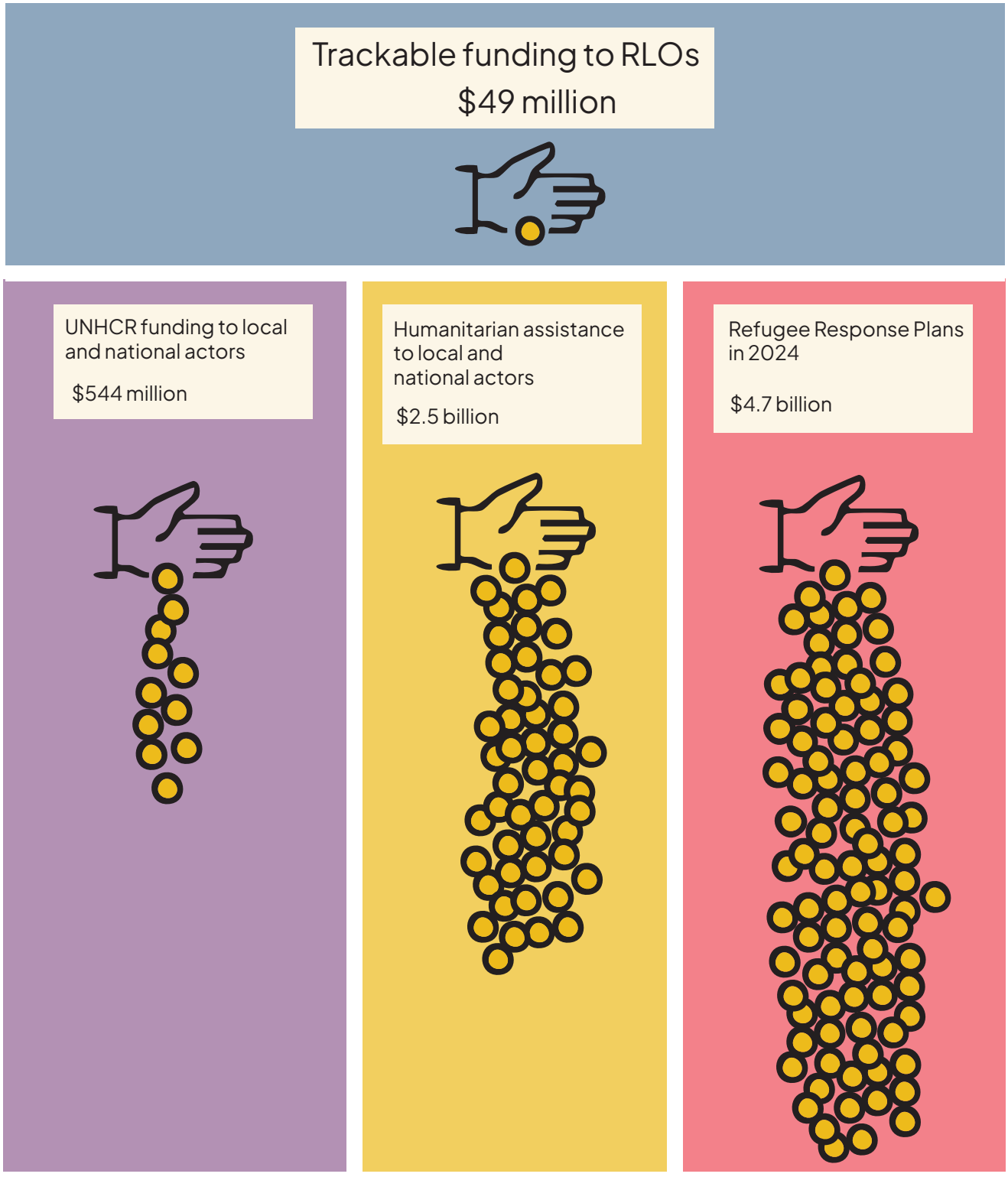
Figure 1 Snapshot of trackable funding to RLOs in 2024



Source: ODI based on 2024 survey data provided directly by donors and intermediaries and data from publicly available sources: OCHA's FTS and IATI d-portal.

Notes: Data is in current prices. 'Unknown' refers to first-level donors, such as governments and private funding, where there is no information on these donors. These unknown donors are inferred through funding reported to us by intermediaries, which they channelled to RLOs, but where the source of the funding for that intermediary is unknown. CBPF = country-based pooled fund; INGO = international non-governmental organisations; UN = United Nations; RLO = refugee-led organisation.

Figure 2 Total funding to RLOs relative to other funding flows and groups in 2024



Source: ODI based on GHA (Pearson et al., 2025), UN partner portal, Refugee Funding Tracker, OCHA's FTS, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Notes: Humanitarian assistance to local and national actors includes NGOs, Red Cross and Red Crescent organisations, and governments. Refugee Response Plan funding in 2024 as of 4 August 2025. Donor countries = OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC).

Box 1 How did we calculate the 2024 snapshot?

In partnership with Basmeh & Zeitooneh, our methodology was designed around the following questions:

1. How much international humanitarian and development funding was provided to RLOs in 2024, and how does this compare to 2022?
2. How have official development assistance (ODA) budget cuts affected donor spending and strategy for RLOs, and what are the immediate and expected implications for RLO fundraising and operations?
3. Why should RLOs be prioritised for funding in the current climate?
4. What steps should donors prioritise in the short and medium term to protect and scale up RLO funding and support for refugee leadership and agency?

The research adopts a mixed-methods approach, which combines multiple quantitative and qualitative data-collection components and, for consistency, builds on the methodology used in the 2022 snapshot.[i] The snapshot calculates the volume of trackable international grant funding that reached RLOs in 2024 directly or through intermediaries.

- **A funding survey** sent to donors (public, private) and intermediaries (UN agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) including INGOs, pooled funds, RLO networks) requesting details of the humanitarian and development funding they provided directly and indirectly to RLOs in 2024.[ii] From the 82 surveys sent out, we received 29 complete datasets.
- **Analysis of publicly available datasets.** We cross-referenced over 800 RLOs with reporting on OCHA's FTS and the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI). This revealed 16 additional funders.
- **Key informant interviews** with 31 public and private funders, RLOs, UN agencies, (I)NGOs, civil society organisations, advocacy groups, academics and researchers.
- **A MENA deep-dive:** 11 focus group discussions and 13 semi-structured interviews with RLOs and refugee communities in Lebanon, Egypt and Syria.
- **A desk review** of existing data, evidence and practice.

For a more detailed methodology, see the complementary annex.

[i] Find the methodology at: https://odi.org/en/publications/the-failure-to-fund-refugee-led-organisations-why-the-current-system-is-not-working-and-the-potential-for-change/.

[ii] The survey was focused on disbursements reaching RLOs or networks during the 2024 calendar year. Funding agreements signed with RLOs but where no funding had been disbursed during the 2024 calendar year were not captured.

2 RLOs are an 'unproven and risky investment'

Reality check | RLOs' ability to deliver impactful and context-specific support at value for their communities sets them apart from other aid actors. Donors must now invest in a stronger and more robust evidence base to build donor confidence and justify larger investments.

Most funders accept the moral arguments for funding RLOs, grounded in the normative principles of localisation, accountability and refugee leadership. But global commitments are not enough to convince risk-averse donors to fund RLOs (see Box 2). The enduring misconception that RLOs are small and informal fringe actors lacking capacity and expertise has helped to perpetuate the assumption that investing in RLOs is riskier than investing in large international organisations. This puts RLOs in a bind:

> How can they convince risk-averse donors that they are capable of managing funds when they are not given funding to manage in the first place and, by extension, the chance to prove their financial expertise and management? (Sturridge et al., 2023: 22)

In an era of efficiency, value for money and prioritisation, a stronger and more robust evidence base that confirms RLOs' impact and value is one part of a collection of steps needed to unlock donor confidence, justify larger investments and address donor risk aversion.

Box 2 Examples of global commitments to localisation and refugee leadership

The Grand Bargain, launched in 2016, includes over 60 donor, UN and NGO signatories who committed to channel more funding and power to local and national actors with additional commitments made by private foundations.

The 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and its Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and the Global Compact on Refugees, recognise the role of refugee leaders as first responders and the importance of meaningful refugee participation.

The multi-stakeholder pledges on 'Advancing Localisation in Displacement and Statelessness Responses' and 'Refugee Participation' for the **2023 Global Refugee Forum** (GRF) recognise RLOs as essential actors and reinforce the principle of refugee leadership.

2.1 RLOs are impactful and cost-effective

RLOs' heterogeneity – in terms of their size, budgets, capacities and staffing (Asylum Access, 2021; Ahmad, 2023) – complicates clear-cut or generalisable comparisons with other actors. Nevertheless,

many respondents recognised that international actors hold a comparative advantage when it comes to international diplomacy, large-scale humanitarian infrastructure, logistical capacity, their ability to influence law and policy reform, and regional and cross-border operational capacity. As articulated by a refugee leader from sub-Saharan Africa, these 'require a level of political access, institutional structure and negotiation power that most RLOs do not have'. On the other hand, many actors recognise RLOs' 'unique' ability to deliver effectively and innovatively for their communities, as well as their long-term support for building resilience and reconstruction.[4] In the words of a global RLO, 'Investing in RLOs is not only about achieving more impact per dollar today, it is also about building durable institutions for tomorrow.' Proximity, flexibility, sustainability and value for money were common findings that encompassed a much wider set of attributes highlighted during interviews (see Box 3). In the words of a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, 'They always make an impact in everything they do.'

Box 3 The ethics of 'cost-effectiveness'

While cost-effectiveness is a compelling argument for funding RLOs in a constrained funding environment, there is an ethical drawback in seeking to run programmes 'cheaply' through RLOs. Not only does this risk instrumentalising RLOs as a convenient cost-saver in a constrained funding environment, but funders need to ask themselves why RLOs are cheaper than international actors, and reflect on their failure to provide flexible funding that includes overheads and core costs. 'RLOs are cost-effective for all the wrong reasons,' observed an INGO. 'If we were to properly equip RLOs, they would not be so cheap,' acknowledged another.

While RLOs are often praised for doing more with less, this efficiency is frequently born of necessity, not choice. Without adequate investment in core costs, staff wellbeing, and institutional growth, cost-effectiveness can become a trap that limits sustainability and reinforces precarity. A South American RLO described not having 'a single donor that includes external audit costs' in their budgets. While RLOs' reliance on local salaries, volunteers and activists drives down the cost to the donor, it implies a personal cost to those who work cheaply, for free and without adequate support and insurances.

RLOs will likely always be cheaper than international organisations. But rather than framing value for money in terms of cost-effectiveness – which can trap RLOs in a cycle of constrained funding – it may be more helpful (and ethical) to focus on sustainability. We should be thinking about cost-effectiveness in the long-run rather than the short term. As put by a refugee leader in Egypt, RLOs aren't seeking to inflate their budgets – they just want to sustain their operations. In the words of an RLO in sub-Saharan Africa, 'When resources are limited, it is more important to fund actors with meaningful lasting results.'

4 For examples of specific studies that address impact, see: Essex-Lettieri (2022); Kara et al. (2022); El Abed et al. (2023).

2.1.1 Proximity

RLOs are often synonymous with the communities they serve. Their intimate knowledge and understanding of the issues they face through direct lived experience affords them an unparalleled level of **trust, legitimacy and knowledge** that sets them apart from other aid actors – and explains why many INGOs and UN agencies engage RLOs to access the community on their behalf (Kara et al., 2022). Proximity also gives RLOs better **access to hard-to-reach and marginalised groups** that many actors overlook or ignore. As the US administration clamps down on diversity, equity and inclusion programming, RLOs' work on gender, human rights, arts and culture, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and asexual (LGBTQIA+) initiatives are a lifeline to many marginalised communities being pushed further underground. Proximity also explains RLOs' **participatory ethic** to programme design and delivery, as evidenced by their support for initiatives (such as the arts, culture, heritage and storytelling) that are important to displaced communities, but that have tended to be de-prioritised by conventional aid actors (Kara et al., 2022). Finally, their proximity makes RLOs more **accountable** to the communities they serve. Refugee leaders tend to be physically present at the local level (rather than consigned to capitals) making them more accessible and therefore accountable to their communities. As one refugee youth told us, 'We feel a deep sense of belonging to this [RLO] centre.'

> This organisation is an important part of the community, and I love that young people from the community are allowed to volunteer. (Syrian refugee in Lebanon)
>
> Everyone knows [head of RLO] and the volunteers personally. There is mutual trust between them and the community. (Syrian refugee in Lebanon)
>
> Unlike large institutions that rely on intermediaries to distribute funds and implement programmes, we operate directly within refugee and host communities, ensuring first-hand engagement with the people we serve. (MENA-based RLO)
>
> We don't impose solutions – we co-create them. We're not parachuting in with predefined agendas – we live and work alongside the people, and that proximity shapes both our approach and our accountability. (MENA-based RLO)

2.1.2 Flexibility

RLOs excel at **adapting** quickly to meet both urgent and evolving needs without losing focus on longer-term community goals, a vital trait in volatile displacement settings. This characteristic was routinely contrasted to 'larger or more traditional organisations that follow rigid templates' or that are more focused on 'policy advocacy and large-scale programme administration'. Others framed RLOs' flexibility in terms of their ability to experiment with **innovative approaches** that are rooted in **local knowledge**, often piloting solutions that are subsequently emulated by others. For example, RLOs in Uganda are pioneering a wide range of innovations, including digital tools, plastic ecobuilding, and artistic events centred around poetry, music and comedy to improve mental health (Kabali and Cabot, 2025).

Meanwhile, RLOs in Lebanon are using technology (location tracking, real-time mapping applications, and mobile data management systems) to streamline their logistics: monitoring aid deliveries, tracking inventory and optimising delivery routes.[5]

> We operate at the direct implementation level, making us more agile and responsive to real-time challenges. (MENA-based RLO)
>
> We adapt quickly to changing needs, and because we maintain direct relationships with both host and refugee communities, we're able to act with nuance and authenticity. That responsiveness isn't just about speed – it's about doing what makes sense on the ground, not just what's on paper. (Syrian RLO)

2.1.3 Sustainability

In the words of a donor, 'RLOs are the **first and last responders**' in their community. While aid initiatives come and go (as evidenced by the closure of many international aid programmes due to funding cuts) RLOs' work stays the course. A similar pattern emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic – when aid actors were pulled back to headquarters, RLOs stepped in as the primary (and often only) responders (Hakiza et al., 2020; Gonzalez Benson et al., 2022). What explains RLOs' sustainability? First is their **values-based ethic** – a sense of putting the community first. 'Despite having very limited resources, they always give more than they receive,' one refugee told us. Second is their **holistic approach**, which – like many local actors – is rarely siloed by sector and spans the full range of 'humanitarian' and 'development' needs (DuBois, 2020). As explained by a refugee advocate, RLOs don't just implement a standalone sexual and gender-based violence project – they combine this with elements of psychosocial support, entrepreneurship and childcare. By combining emergency relief with longer-term support, RLOs take into account refugees' **wellbeing** and **resilience** and, in refugee respondents' own words, their 'whole support system'.

> They don't just stop after giving us a few sessions like many other organisations do. They encouraged us to propose our own initiatives, gave us sessions to improve our skills, and continuously followed up on our progress. (Syrian refugee in Lebanon)
>
> Our presence is consistent, and that consistency has built relationships that no external actor can replicate. (RLO in Lebanon)
>
> We don't just show up once. We stay. And, over time, that presence builds trust and results that are visible, even if they aren't always in graphs and spreadsheets. The transformation is real, and the community is our proof. (Syrian RLO)
>
> RLOs understand that if you only address one piece of the puzzle, you don't solve the problem. (RLO advocate)

5 For more details: https://basmeh-zeitooneh.org/publications/innovating-humanitarian-logistics-leveraging-local-supply-chains/.

2.1.4 Value for money

Like many local actors, RLOs offer value for money (Pincock et al., 2021). Some studies suggest that local actors are 32% more cost-efficient than international organisations (Venton et al., 2022). One private donor marvelled at the difference in funding proposals submitted by an RLO and INGO: 'They do so much with so little'. Most respondents shared this sense of RLOs doing more with less due to:

- **Lower overheads:** RLOs operate with leaner budgets as their salary scales, office costs and support services are significantly slimmer than those of international agencies. In the words of an RLO operating in Egypt: 'Our strength lies in operational efficiency on the ground. We also have a strong grassroots base and a powerful volunteer network that enables us to recruit and mobilise volunteers effectively.' (See also Box 3.)
- **Less waste:** Sub-contracting is expensive, particularly when funding passes along multiples layers of intermediaries before reaching RLOs. To illustrate this point, an RLO described winning a multi-million-dollar grant as part of a consortium with an international agency that absorbed the bulk of the funds whilst leaving most project activities to the RLO.
- **Community infrastructure:** RLOs reduce procurement and start-up costs by leveraging local resources, services and networks. An RLO implementing an education project described saving money by purchasing school uniforms from local tailors rather than using a costlier business supplier.
- **Investing in the community**: RLOs' embeddedness means that staff salaries, procurement and partnerships circulate within their communities to create a multiplier effect that stimulates local markets – an often overlooked financial dynamic. As one respondent highlighted, 'compensation provided to RLOs can be seen as a form of direct assistance to refugee communities'.

2.2 Time to invest in the evidence base

While all respondents shared first-hand examples of the value of investing in RLOs, most recognised the limitations of the evidence base. The data that exists is often limited to project-specific monitoring and evaluation reporting, which lacks the impartiality and consistency needed to make broader claims about RLO impact and is driven by a desire for accountability, rather than learning. Donors have not prioritised investments in robust impact studies and assessments. They care more about internal evaluations than scientific research, observed one MENA-based RLO representative. Indeed, most research has been driven by refugee-led research initiatives, such as the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), RRLI, and Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN). Several RLOs spoke of actively collaborating with academic institutions to 'strengthen evidence-based practices' and as part of a 'commitment to rigorous, long-term evaluation'. But this raises wider questions, voiced by a refugee leader in the Asia Pacific, about why RLOs should have to prove themselves to a higher standard than other aid actors. Shouldn't donors be responsible for investing in evidence-building as part of a commitment to equitable partnership?

2.2.1 Recommendations

All funders (public, private, UN agencies and INGOs) must invest in a stronger and more robust evidence base to build donor confidence and justify larger investments. Here is how:

Provide core funding to RLOs so that they can invest in documenting their impact. How can RLOs be expected to build up organisational capacity and ensure sustainability of their work when the funding they receive does not include overheads to invest in monitoring, evaluation and reporting? 'They are not capacitated because we haven't allowed them to be – they receive short-term funding, so the evidence is not there,' admitted a public donor. For RLOs, this is a frustrating situation, especially when compared with better resourced international organisations. As put by an RLO operating in the Asia Pacific, funding inequities – not a gap in RLO capacity – are at the heart of the problem.

Donors should provide quality and equitable funding that enables RLOs to plan, evaluate and document their work under the same conditions as other humanitarian actors. The issue is not a lack of capacity but a lack of parity. But, if funding were made available, there is also the risk of cornering RLOs into becoming 'mini-NGOs' focused on upward accountability to donors rather than downward accountability to the communities they serve (Mueller-Hirth, 2012; Vuni et al., 2023). An East African refugee leader expressed anger that RLOs remodelled into 'mini-NGOs' – investing in national offices, hiring monitoring and evaluation staff, prioritising reporting – in order to qualify for international funding that was subsequently withdrawn 'without warning'. RLOs must be given the space and freedom to balance documenting their impact to donors with staying focused on community needs (where this is their mandate).

> The ecosystem demands evidence from RLOs and compares it to evidence produced by international organisations. But you can't compare the resources RLOs get with the resources INGOs and UNCHR already have. (Refugee leader from sub-Saharan Africa)
>
> We're not asking for reduced accountability for local actors; we fully accept our responsibilities. But the question is: what are we being held accountable for, and under what conditions? (MENA-based RLO)

Make funding available for research that explores RLO impact through a critical lens that recognises and addresses:

- The challenges of making general claims that accurately reflect the diversity of RLOs' size, experience and programming.
- The unfairness of holding RLOs to a higher standard than the international community. Few international organisations would be willing to open themselves up to the same level of scrutiny, particularly around expenditure.

- The limitations of defining impact based on quantitative parameters that are pre-determined by the international community. Several RLOs noted that monitoring and evaluation reporting templates overlook aspects of impact captured through beneficiary stories and less tangible changes in community dynamics. A more nuanced and qualitative approach to measuring impact is needed that is grounded in the kinds of outcomes that matter to RLOs and their communities (Box 4). To ensure this is the case, refugees should be at the forefront of research that explores RLO impact.

Box 4 Examples of how different RLOs interpret and measure impact

Many RLOs combine more formal reports, quantitative data and technical surveys with a 'deeper approach' to impact that is contextually grounded and reflects 'what truly matters' to their community. Examples included:

- **Regular check-ins and follow-ups with project participants.** As explained by a Syrian refugee leader: 'We might not have the same data systems as larger organisations, but we do track change over time.' Some RLOs carry out pre- and post-intervention surveys to measure shifts in participants' knowledge, confidence and leadership capacity.
- **A focus on qualitative transformations**, such as real-life indicators of empowerment and community integration. The many examples shared by RLOs operating in the MENA included: 'a mother telling us her child feels safe and confident for the first time'; 'a young person who re-engaged in education after dropping out'; and 'improved emotional wellbeing'.
- **Testimonials and individual stories** that showcase how individual perspectives, behaviours and roles have changed after participating in programmes. In the words of a Syrian RLO representative: 'We've always believed in letting the community speak for itself. One of the strongest ways we've shown the impact of our work is through the stories and feedback that come directly from participants.'

3 RLOs are 'a nice to have, but not essential'

Reality check | RLOs play an essential role in the refugee response, and are already stepping in to fill the gaps left by a scaled-back international system. In recognition, donors must scale up and mainstream nascent RLO funding flows and put RLOs front and centre of efforts to localise and reform humanitarian action in displacement settings.

> There's often talk of supporting RLOs, but when reductions happen, organisations close to communities, like ours, are the first to be impacted. (MENA-based RLO)

Despite their unique set of attributes, RLOs are still seen, in the words of an East African refugee leader, as a 'nice to have, but not essential, and are the first to be let go'. Many respondents shared the suspicion and regret that, as funding pressures continue to mount, refugee leaders and the work they stand for are becoming expendable. Like many local actors, RLOs were the first to be let go when funding cuts hit – their position at the end of long funding chains making them vulnerable to international intermediaries looking to safeguard their own finances (ICVA, 2025a). Moreover, in this era of cost-cutting and prioritisation, RLOs are also penalised by the stance taken by the international community to ringfence life-saving assistance over long-term solutions. In the words of an academic, 'the types of services being cut [health, mental health, protection, education and livelihoods] are exactly those services that RLOs are best placed to provide – where they have the greatest pre-existing capacity.'

But RLOs and the services they provide are more essential than ever. By the end of 2024, over 120 million people worldwide were displaced – a 6% increase from the previous year, and a trend that is likely to continue throughout 2025 as conflicts persist in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Palestine, Sudan and Ukraine (UNHCR, 2025a). Moreover, as cash-strapped international organisations scale back their operations, RLOs described being inundated with requests for support just as their own budgets are slashed. 'Requests for support are climbing as other organisations shut down,' explained a Syrian RLO. Another described being 'the only organisation left providing aid in some areas, with a long waiting list and a shrinking budget'. A refugee leader in Egypt was asked to fill the gaps left by a UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) office closure without being given any resources to do so, adding, 'Where are refugees supposed to go?' Similar trends were reported in Colombia, where a surge in referrals from UN agencies has been accompanied by a drop in funding. As their caseload climbs, RLOs need more, not less, funding. The international community cannot afford to sideline RLOs, and must urgently increase flexible, long-term and quality funding to them.

3.1 Public donors and UN agencies must translate rhetoric into tangible funding

> The challenge is getting donors to move beyond symbolic engagement. (Syrian RLO)

Prior to the cuts, there had been growing rhetoric, commitment and (in some cases) funding from public donors. Funding RLOs was no longer seen as a niche endeavour, but rather as a key part of localised humanitarian action, and a route to honouring pledges made at the 2023 GRF (Sturridge et al., 2025). But these signs of progress shouldn't be over-stated. 'Despite all the discourse on locally led action, we know the funding landscape has not changed dramatically,' said a public donor. As put by an academic, while the argument for funding RLOs has not been disproven, the environment in which funding decisions are made has become more constrained. This perspective was echoed by a private donor, who acknowledged that, 'The interest is there, but the funding is not.'

Momentum that had been building is slowing down. The emphasis is firmly on incremental improvements rather than radical reform, with progress limited to a tight circle of public donors. Our research identified minimal public funding totalling $1.2 million to RLOs in 2024. Several new bilateral funding partnerships and frameworks (see Box 5 in Chapter 4) have come on board, but public donors have not gone nearly far enough. Only one public donor (Australia) and two UN agencies (UNHCR and UNICEF) responded to the funding survey despite various global commitments to improve tracking.

3.1.1 Recommendations

Public donors, UN agencies and INGOs must do better. Going forwards, they should:

Unite the complementary agendas of refugee leadership and localisation in order to strengthen the goals and ambitions of both.[6] 'There is "localisation" and then there is "refugee-led" work,' explained an INGO worker, 'they don't talk – it's disconnected.' A 'lot of thinking' has been done 'in parallel', echoed a public donor. Why is this? Several respondents flagged the tendency of local and national actors to disregard or exclude RLOs, as they struggle to see how refugees fit into the humanitarian ecosystem or how refugees' work aligns with their own. A key issue is that the localisation agenda does not present refugees and, by extension RLOs, as key members of civil society, because they continue to be seen as a 'population to whom rather than by whom assistance is provided' (Easton-Calabria, 2022). For their part, many refugee leaders struggle to understand the complex workings of the humanitarian system that was never built to accommodate them and has not adjusted to their needs. The slowness of humanitarian system reform has also contributed to a well-founded scepticism about what partnership with localisation activists can really achieve. But there is scope for common ground, and joint advocacy would elevate shared messaging and learnings – particularly around the need for sustainable solutions in protracted displacement. As argued by an RLO advocate, '[local and national actors] and RLOs alike comment on the lack of funding for what they and their communities really want to do – more early recovery, peacebuilding and livelihoods that are not covered by traditional humanitarian streams.'

6 According to the Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, 'Localisation can be seen as strengthening international investment and respect for the role of local actors, with the goal of reducing costs and increasing the reach of humanitarian action. In a broader sense, it can be viewed as a way of re-conceiving of the humanitarian sector from the bottom up. It recognizes that the overwhelming majority of humanitarian assistance is already provided by local actors.' (Grand Bargain Localisation Workstream, 2021).

To reconcile the two agendas, donors, UN agencies and INGOs should:

- Make partnering with RLOs standard practice in refugee settings. As an incentive, donors should set targets to track the proportion of funding going to RLOs, and require that partners justify any omission of RLOs in their proposals.
- Incorporate RLOs into partnership strategies and localisation instruments.
- Support RLOs to access relevant localisation forums, such as national NGO networks and the Grand Bargain National Reference Groups.

Meaningfully include RLOs in the 'humanitarian reset'.[7] Nearly all respondents agreed that UN agencies involved in the humanitarian reset are not engaging meaningfully, if at all, with refugee leaders and the communities they serve. While similar criticisms have been made by local and national actors (ICVA, 2025b; Kalfan, 2025; Veerapen, 2025), there is a sense that refugee leaders are particularly isolated (Ishimwe and Halakhe, 2025) – in large part because the process is led by OCHA rather than UNHCR. '[RLOs] don't even know this is happening,' explained one INGO. Through robust convening, dialogue and advocacy, public donors should use their power and influence to press UN agencies to do better when it comes to involving all local actors, including RLOs, in the 'reset' discussions. In the words of a refugee leader from South America, 'the UN is accountable to donors, not us – they can push for these changes to happen'.

Weave RLOs into migration policy priorities. The politics of immigration has cemented migration and displacement as ongoing policy priorities, often with protected budgets. There is an opportunity to centre RLOs within 'migration and displacement' programming and budget lines. This approach of aligning RLOs with compatible policy priorities was recommended by one public donor as an effective 'workaround'. Another suggested 'increasing funding to embassies to pass on the money' to RLOs. Those looking to champion RLOs should explore these kinds of funding opportunities. But they should do so in meaningful partnership with RLOs, to avoid refugee leadership being instrumentalised to serve donor priorities. Where alignment exists, it must be principled, not opportunistic.

> A lot of uncertainties remain but it doesn't look like the displacement portfolio will shrink. Displacement will remain a top priority. (Public donor)
>
> We expect more money for the topic of migration, not less. (Public donor)

Channel momentum from the GRF. In spite of its limitations – see Cohere (2024), RRLI (2024a; 2024b), and R-SEAT (2024) – the 2023 GRF was an important catalyst for change among public donors. The act of making 'mega-pledges' or commitments in public – which solidified years of advocacy and grind from refugee leaders – resonated particularly strongly with some government respondents. The GRF was described as 'a wake-up call' and 'catalysing – we said we would do it'. In the words of another public donor, 'It brought so many more stakeholders on board.' The UK's 'Global Compacts

7 In March 2025, the UN Emergency Relief Coordinator launched the humanitarian reset – a reform initiative intended to help reshape the humanitarian system to be more accountable, efficient and inclusive.

on Refugees and Migration Programme' was partly developed to implement UK pledges made at the GRF (FCDO, n.d.). The 2025 GRF Progress Review and the 2027 GRF represent important governmental milestones around which refugee leaders and advocates should proactively hook policy messages and build momentum. To make this possible, UNHCR (as the GRF organiser) must go further to meaningfully include refugees not only in the invitation list, but also in shaping the agenda, which by and large reflects member states' priorities and interests (Hourie, 2025).

3.2 Private donors must continue to set the example for others to follow

Private donors (philanthropies and foundations) continue to lead the way on financing refugee leadership. They were a critical source of funding for RLOs in 2024. The five largest donors captured in our snapshot were all private donors (Figure 3), providing a total of $21.4 million trackable funding between them (out of a total of $25.4 million from private donors), the majority of which was provided directly to RLOs. While private funding in 2024 saw a nearly threefold increase from the $9 million given in 2022, a more fragile picture exists behind these headline figures.

Figure 3 Top 10 donors to RLOs in 2024

Source: ODI Global based on survey data provided directly by donors and intermediaries and data from publicly available sources (UN OCHA's FTS and IATI d-portal).

Notes: EPIM = European Philanthropic Initiative for Migration; OSF = Open Society Foundations. Data is in current prices.

A few large donations distort an otherwise consistent picture. Comparisons of funding made by private donors that gave grants to RLOs in both 2022 and 2024 are largely consistent, with only a modest increase of $0.9 million (from $8.9 million in 2022 to $9.8 million in 2024). Moreover, all private donors were clear that they could not fill current funding shortfalls, with most already working at 'maximum capacity'. The upward trend in private funding that emerges from our data was strongly influenced by a one-off and significant $12 million donation from the Lever for Change foundation.[8] A similar injection occurred in 2021, when the Larsen Lam ICONIQ Impact Award granted $10 million to RRLI. While, at the time, this gave the impression that 'philanthropy was invested', this did not ultimately 'prove to be true beyond that moment', explained an RLO advocate.

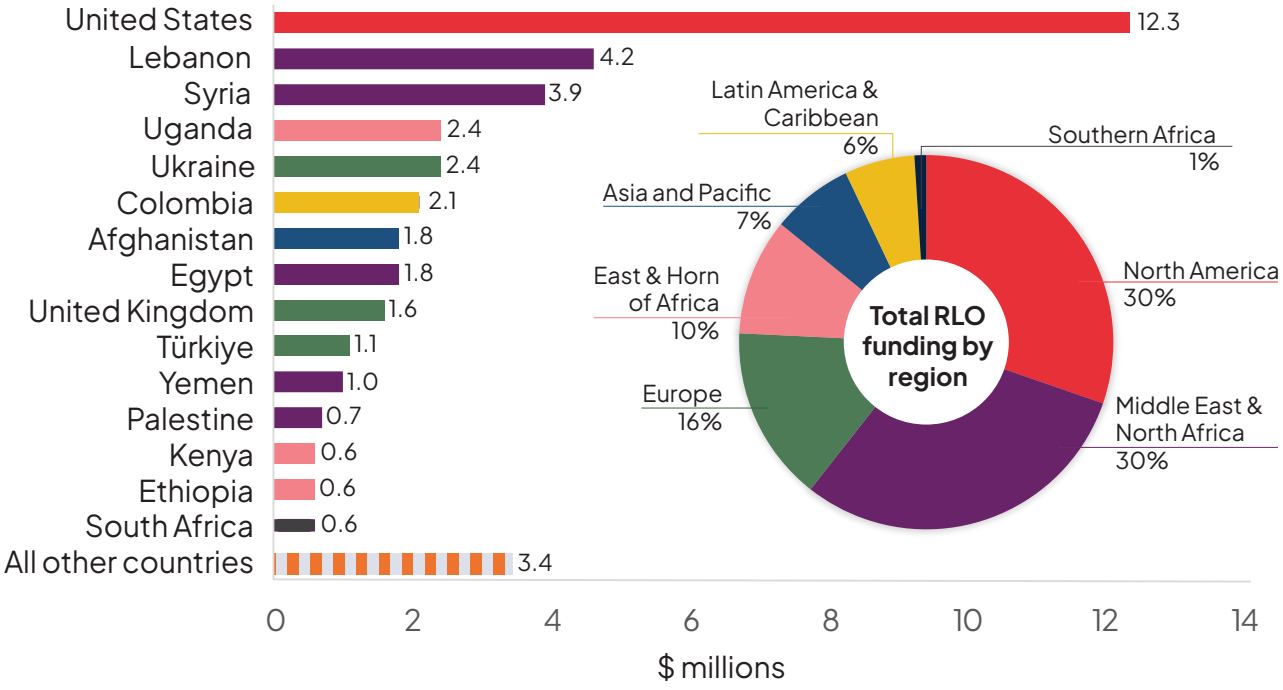
The private donor pool remains small. RLOs' reliance on a handful of donors can give the impression of positive change – but it leaves RLOs vulnerable to the inevitable ebbs and flows of funding streams. Indeed, 2024 saw notable fluctuations in private funding, both upwards and downwards. While Porticus and the Vitol Foundation significantly increased their contributions to RLOs, support from the Open Society Foundations fell away due to a change in institutional priorities. Over the next few years, IKEA Foundation will also be winding down its refugee livelihoods work as it launches a new strategy centred on fighting global warming. Other private donors described undergoing strategic reviews of their own, with little certainty about where future funding strategies will land.

Some geographies are overlooked. The limited pool of private donors is reflected in the geographies they fund. To maximise impact in countries with well-established RLO ecosystems, and build on regional familiarity, private investments tend to focus on the MENA and East Africa regions – with some notable exceptions, such as Colombia, Afghanistan and Ukraine (which contributes to the large proportion of 'European' funding, alongside Türkiye) (Figure 4). Likewise, the significant proportion of funding to the United States (US) largely reflects the one-off Lever for Change donations rather than a longer-term trend. While MENA and East Africa host large numbers of displaced people, other geographies – notably Asia and Pacific and Latin America and Caribbean regions, but especially the West and Central Africa region – have been largely overlooked.

Against this fragile backdrop, private donors cannot afford to step back now. While they can't be expected to match government funding, they must continue to finance RLOs at scale. Their impact is not just in their funding, but also in the example they set for others to emulate and scale up – demonstrating continued proof of concept that RLO investments are safe and impactful.

8 Lever for Change is technically an intermediary funder that facilitates the search for grantees on behalf of a grant-maker, often individual philanthropists. These 2024 contributions were all one-off donations, consisting of six individual grants of $2 million each.

Figure 4 Top recipient countries of funding to RLOs in 2024, and total funding split by region



Source: ODI Global based on survey data provided directly by donors and intermediaries and data from publicly available sources: UN OCHA's FTS and IATI d-portal.

Notes: Data is in current prices. Countries classified into regions as per UNHCR regions with North America additionally separated out. West & Central Africa does not feature as it received only $43,000 or <0.01% of total funding. An additional $8.5m in our dataset is not identifiable to a specific country.

3.2.1 Recommendations

Going forwards, private donors should:

- **Increase allocations to RLOs directly** and, where this is not possible, indirectly via values-based intermediaries, whilst expanding geographic range.
- **Use advocacy and co-funding opportunities to expand the private donor pool** – this will build a more resilient and sustainable funding system.
- **Pursue closer partnerships with public donors and UN agencies** to:
  - mainstream inclusive and participatory approaches to grant-making by sharing practical guidance on successful elements of their approach;
  - advocate for systemic reform to humanitarian financing structures, such as the inclusion of refugee leaders in decision-making bodies that oversee humanitarian and development funding.

> Philanthropy needs to take it to the next level in continuing to grow and widen the circle of funders. They need to firmly support a strategy of advocacy toward UNHCR and government donors. (RLO advocate)

4 RLOs are 'too difficult to fund'

Reality check | Bureaucratic and regulatory challenges exist. But donors can navigate these constraints through existing funding instruments, with some funders already showing how it's done.

Lingering reservations about the 'how' of funding RLOs are holding donors back from scaling up their commitments. Many funders pointed to an 'absence' of funding instruments that enable them to fund RLOs whilst also meeting their own internal compliance standards and capacity constraints. Funding cuts are exacerbating this tension, as there is now added pressure to ensure that available funds are spent as carefully as possible (Obrecht and Pearson, 2025). One INGO worker suggested that donors are increasingly prioritising larger contracts with 'tried-and-tested' consortia to the advantage of international agencies over RLOs.

> Donors are looking for ways to move limited humanitarian funding quickly and via funding mechanisms that are seen to be low risk. (Academic)

4.1 Many funders are already showing how it's done

Our research challenges the assertion that mechanisms for funding RLOs are lacking or absent. Several public and private donors are already funding RLOs either directly through bilateral grants or indirectly through creative funding instruments (see Box 5). The range and diversity of these mechanisms are promising. While there is no magic bullet, donors can successfully navigate the constraints through a tailored combination of funding instruments – provided they have the commitment and resolve to see them through.

Box 5 Ways in which donors can fund RLOs

Direct funding to RLOs: A minority of public donors, for example the UK and Canada, are now providing direct funding to larger and more established RLOs (APNOR and Coalición por Venezuela, respectively).[i] While funding RLOs directly is already common practice among many private donors, the Hilton Foundation has gone a step further – committing at least 50% of its annual 'Refugees Initiative' budget to local organisations that support refugee populations.[ii] Private and public funders should learn from and emulate these kinds of approaches.

Funding calls designed for RLOs: Managing a large number of individual grants can go beyond the capacity of donors with small humanitarian units – making intermediaries or pooled funding mechanisms a more realistic option (see Figure 6). In 2023, the government of the Netherlands launched a subsidy grant that supports migrant- and refugee-led organisations via international intermediaries who, through sustained advocacy, were encouraged to adopt an equitable partnerships approach (Government of the Netherlands, 2023). To reach the next level, these kinds of funding calls should also look to provide direct funding to RLOs or RLO networks.

Third-party partners: Sponsors that receive funding on behalf of RLOs can help bypass the legal and administrative roadblocks (in-country registration, banking restrictions) faced by many RLOs in restrictive regulatory environments. Fiscal sponsorship has been used effectively in Uganda, to provide legal protection to LGBTQIA+ RLOs, and Egypt, to protect unregistered RLOs from government scrutiny (see Al-Mahdi et al. (2024) for more details; Sturridge et al., 2025). RLOs themselves also operate as effective third-party intermediaries, with larger or more established RLOs channelling resources, mentorship and compliance support to smaller and emerging RLOs within their networks.

Equivalency determination: Granting RLOs with a 12-month equivalency status to a US public charity (501c3) opens up funding from US-based donors (see NGOsource, n.d.). Some private donors cover the costs for partners to obtain an equivalency determination or even to establish themselves as 501c3 organisations (Sturridge et al., 2025). However, proposed legal changes in the US could limit this legal determination in coming years.

Inclusive and participatory approaches to grant-making: Some donors are already adopting flexible deadlines and deliverables to reflect changing needs and conditions on the ground; user-friendly portals with low technological requirements; multiple language submissions; proportionate reporting; and due diligence passporting.[iii] All funders should look to scale up these approaches.

[i] Our analysis also revealed direct grants were made to RLOs by France, Kuwait and Switzerland.

[ii] 'Local organisations' is defined first and foremost as RLOs, but also as national and local government entities, national and other local NGOs, and the local private sector.

[iii] Due diligence passporting allows RLOs to circumvent the need for multiple and repetitive compliance processes with numerous donors. For more information, see the Charter for Change Due Diligence Passporting Tool at https://humentum.org/charter-for-change-due-diligence-passporting-tool/.

4.1.1 Recommendations

Building on these promising starting points, we recommend that donors looking to fund RLOs should build on these tried and tested approaches. Moreover, to avoid tokenism and short-termism, they should:

- **Explore and develop their approach in coordination with refugees.** Their experience and familiarity with the challenges of the funding landscape gives them unique insight into mechanisms that protect without disempowering.
- **Pair practical funding approaches with broader policy and legal advocacy** to dismantle the exclusionary regulatory environments (restrictions on registration, banking and compliance) that block many RLOs from receiving funding in the first place. By aligning with local advocacy movements already tackling these challenges, donors can create the long-term enabling conditions that RLOs need to operate independently and sustainably, thereby eliminating the need for creative 'workarounds'.

Those already implementing these approaches should:

- **Scale up their efforts.** These approaches remain nascent and modest, and are often regarded as a standalone or exceptional 'one-offs'. To make them sustainable and scalable, they should be mainstreamed and integrated into wider humanitarian funding channels – moving beyond isolated pilots or token initiatives. In the words of a public donor, 'Programme colleagues should be working with RLOs, rather than just policy advocacy people like us.'
- **Actively share learning and practical tools with other donors** through bilateral meetings, global forums, coordination groups and sector events. Not only would this 'normalise' RLO funding in the eyes of potential funders, but it would also enable successful elements to be scaled up and replicated, and best practice collectively learned.

4.2 Pooled funds hold untapped potential

Pooled funds are clearly a valuable instrument for donors lacking the internal capacity and bureaucratic flexibility to fund RLOs directly or at scale. While still small-scale, our data shows that specialist and pooled funds, including refugee-led funds, could represent an important tool to meaningfully increase funding:[9]

- The amount of funding reaching RLOs through a pooled fund increased from $11.4 million in 2022 to $17.0 million in 2024, of which $4.7 million was through the country-based pooled funds (CBPFs) and $4.3 million was through RLO-led or -managed pooled funds.
- Pooled funds were also more effective at getting funding to RLOs in 2024 – compare $17 million (from pooled funds) with $8.1 million (from INGOs) or $3 million (from UNHCR).
- On average, pooled funds disburse larger amounts of funding than other kinds of intermediaries – the average grant size from a pooled fund to an RLO in 2024 was $106,000 compared to $20,000 channelled via INGOs.

While increasing direct funding to RLOs should remain the ultimate goal, pooled funds play an important role in addressing immediate funding gaps faced by RLOs, particularly those operating in restrictive regulatory environments who may otherwise struggle to qualify for funding. But it is important to recognise the power asymmetries that exist between institutional and local actors – particularly when intermediaries fail to pass on quality and flexible funding or decision-making power, or when they treat local actors as sub-contractors or employees, or exclude local partners from opportunities to engage with donors (Pincock et al., 2020; Gidron et al., 2021; Grand Bargain, 2023).

4.2.1 Country-based pooled funds

The 'humanitarian reset' and Grand Bargain have renewed donor interest in using OCHA-managed CBPFs to increase funding to local and national actors. But several significant limitations emerge from our research:

9 Here we classify pooled funds and specialist funds more broadly to include funds that operate as an intermediary fund, but are not UN or INGOs.

The institutional division of responsibilities between OCHA and UNHCR (whereby OCHA leads humanitarian coordination in countries experiencing conflict or disaster and UNHCR leads in countries hosting refugees) means RLOs' access to CBPFs (which are managed by OCHA, not UNHCR) will be limited to refugee-hosting countries with a Humanitarian Response Plan managed by OCHA (see Box 6). With this in mind, advocates should lean into conversations in the 'humanitarian reset' that acknowledge these limitations and look to end this institutional division.

Onerous and complex application processes mean that many RLOs cannot secure CBPF funding. Moreover, CBPFs tend to offer short-term, project-based and earmarked funding that does not align with agreed principles for effective aid or RLOs' ambition for more equitable and sustainable funding. Some changes have been made to earmark more CBPF funding for local actors. For instance, the endorsement of the 'Exceptional Procedures' in July 2025 – which enables CBPFs to 'under exceptional circumstances, derogate from the minimum standards set in the Guidelines' – is a step in the right direction (OCHA, 2025). But to make CBPFs more accessible to RLOs, OCHA should:

- Emulate and scale up the inclusive and participatory approaches to grant-making (Box 5), in particular simplifying intake and eligibility processing, which is frequently cited as a barrier.
- Adopt a more inclusive approach to priority setting and grant selection;
- Establish RLO sub-targets for CBPFs operating in countries with refugee populations.

Box 6 To what extent do CBPFs work for RLOs?

On one hand, CBPFs have the potential to channel significant funding to RLOs given that they operate in places with large refugee populations (see Figure 5):

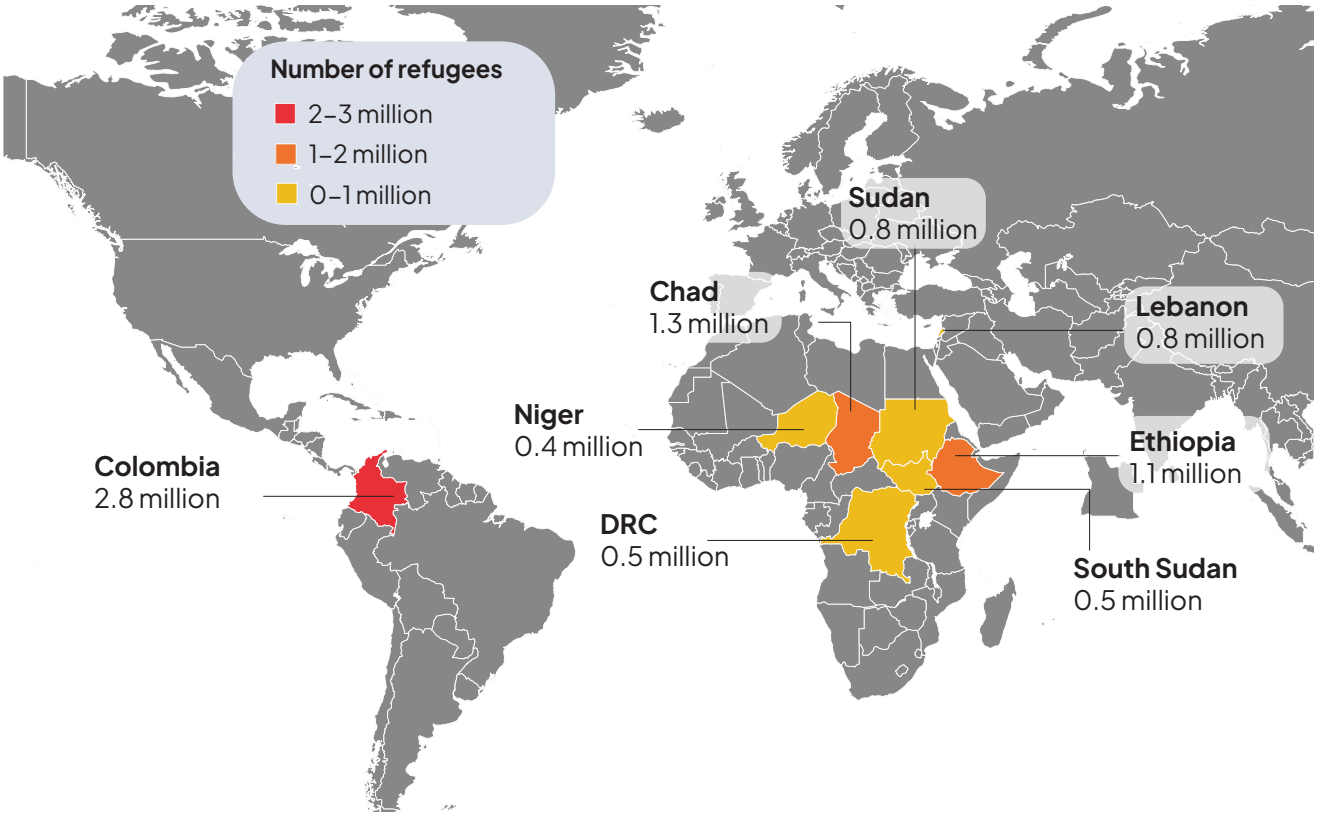
- Six CBPFs gave to RLOs in 2024 with three featuring in the top 10 intermediaries to RLOs: the Syria Cross-Border, Yemen and Lebanon funds (see Figure 7).[i]
- 42% of CBPF allocations in 2024 were to refugee-hosting contexts.[ii]

On the other hand, the opportunities for using CBPFs shouldn't be overstated:

- CBPFs don't exist in many refugee-hosting countries – our analysis shows they are only present in countries hosting 28% of the global refugee population. [iii]
- The presence of CBPFs is no guarantee of funding – few RLOs receive international funding in settings like the Chad Basin, the Sahel and South Sudan where CBPFs exist.

[i] The other three were the Afghanistan, Colombia (as part of the Regional Humanitarian Pooled Fund for Latin America and the Caribbean) and the Occupied Palestinian Territories funds.
[ii] Refugee-hosting contexts are defined as countries with a significant population of refugees, asylum-seekers and 'other people in need of international protection' as defined by UNHCR (see www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/methodology). A significant population is defined as greater than 200,000 people.
[iii] Excludes OECD DAC member countries.

Figure 5 CBPFs in countries with significant refugee populations, 2024



Source: ODI Global based on UNHCR Refugee Statistics and UN OCHA CBPF Data Hub.
Notes: Countries with a CBPF shown. Refugee population includes refugees, asylum-seekers and other people in need of protection as defined by UNHCR. Figures rounded to the nearest 100,000.

4.2.2 UNHCR

The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) is strategically placed to provide funding to RLOs via three main mechanisms:

- A Grant Agreement Framework designed specifically for organisations led by displaced and stateless people (UNHCR, 2025b).
- The Refugee-led Innovation Fund (RLIF), which provides financial resources, mentoring and other expertise to design and deliver new interventions.
- Calls for expressions of interest in its countries of operations which, according to UNHCR, prioritise local experience and presence, along with accountability to communities and community relations, as two of the six core selection criteria.

Overall, UNHCR funding to RLOs increased from $0.3 million provided in 2022 to $3 million in 2024.[10] But despite being the third largest overall intermediary in 2024, UNHCR funding remains conspicuously small, with many arguing that it has not gone far enough, for the following reasons:

- The budget ceilings of the Grant Agreement Framework ($12,000) and RLIF ($45,000) are significantly smaller than grants offered by other RLO-specific funds: RRLI ($200,000), the WPHF Funding Initiative on Forced Displacement ($200,000), and the CRLM ($225,000)(see Figure 6).
- UNHCR increased its number of RLO grantees from 122 (2023) to 286 (2024) – which far exceeds grantees by RRLI (16), the CRLM (14) and WPHF Funding Initiative on Forced Displacement (20). But this also falls well short of demand. Interviews with UNHCR revealed that only 15 RLOs out of 1,800 RLIF applications received funding in 2022. In 2024, the figure became 24 out of 3,500 applications – in fact, a slight drop in the overall conversion rate (0.8% in 2022; 0.4% in 2024).
- UNHCR funding to RLOs amounted to just 0.1% of its total organisational income in 2024, or 0.2% of its expenditure via partners.[11] This compares to 90% of CRLM's income going to RLOs, 71% of RRLI's income and 5% of WPHF's income.

To be more impactful (and to expand the proportion of total organisational income spent on RLOs), UNHCR should significantly increase the grant ceiling and number of RLO grantees of its funding mechanisms.

4.2.3 Pooled funds led by or designed for and with RLOs

While CBPFs are an important piece of the funding puzzle, other pooled funding mechanisms led by or designed specifically for and with RLOs already exist and may offer more practical and effective routes to funding RLOs (Figure 6).

10 While it is possible that some RLOs are included in the $27.4 million of funding allocated to CBOs through regular UNHCR partnership agreements in 2024, it was not possible to confirm this as most legal systems do not recognise 'RLO' as a registration category and UNHCR does not track this information.

11 Calculation based on 'total funds available in 2024' and 'expenditure via partners' as per the UNHCR Global Report 2024 (see www.unhcr.org/publications/global-report-2024).

Figure 6 Examples of funds led by or designed for and with RLOs

Funds led by RLOs

The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI)

The largest global pooled fund led by refugees, who hold all decision-making on allocations and individual grant awards. Originally established as a coalition of six RLOs,[i] RRLI channels multi-year, flexible funding to RLOs globally.

Disbursed since inception (2021):	Disbursed in 2024:	Grant size:
$12.7 million to 21 RLOs	$2.8 million to 16 RLOs	$25,000–200,000

The Refugee Leadership Alliance

An RLO-to-RLO pooled fund that provides core funding directly to RLOs working across the Asia Pacific region. It is managed by APNOR and a Board of Trustees with lived experience.

Disbursed since inception (2021):	Disbursed in 2024:	Grant size:
$665,000 to 35 RLOs	$37,000 to four RLOs	$20,000 on average, with a maximum of $33,000

Funds designed by or for RLOs

The Collective for Refugee Leadership in MENA (CRLM)

Previously the Funders for Refugee Leadership in Lebanon, CRLM is a donor collective that came together to shift power to refugees and strengthen RLOs across the MENA. The CRLM's pooled funding mechanism is administered through Choose Love, and is supported by seven philanthropic donors, RRLI, and Choose Love as a donor and an intermediary.

Disbursed since inception (2020):	Disbursed in 2024:	Grant size:
$4,049,394 to 31 RLOs in Lebanon and Syria	$1,155,894 to 14 RLOs	$20,000–225,000

The WPHF Funding Initiative on Forced Displacement

In partnership with the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development and the Action Network on Forced Displacement, WPHF leads the Funding Initiative on Forced Displacement. This funds local women's rights organisations, as well as organisations led by and working alongside forcibly displaced women and girls.

Disbursed since inception (2021):	Disbursed in 2024:	Grant size:
$6,357,511 to 68 RLOs[ii]	$1,311,692 to 20 RLOs	$2,500–200,000

The Human Mobility Hub

Launched by the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Human Mobility Hub seeks to find solutions to enhance access to legal protection, education and basic services for people on the move, by working with local partners, host communities and people on the move in North Africa. The network is funded through several donors and exclusively funds local CSOs.

Disbursed since inception (2023):	Disbursed in 2024:	Grant size:
$ 1.1 million to 37 RLOs	$0.6 million to 27 RLOs in Egypt and Tunisia	$24,000 on average

[i] Basmeh & Zeitooneh, Refugees and Asylum Seekers Information Centre Indonesia, Refugiados Unidos, St Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS), Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) and Asylum Access.
[ii] An RLO is defined by this fund as a CSO that is led by a displaced person, including a refugee, IDP, returnee or migrant.

Donors should scale up investments in RLO-specific funds for the following reasons:

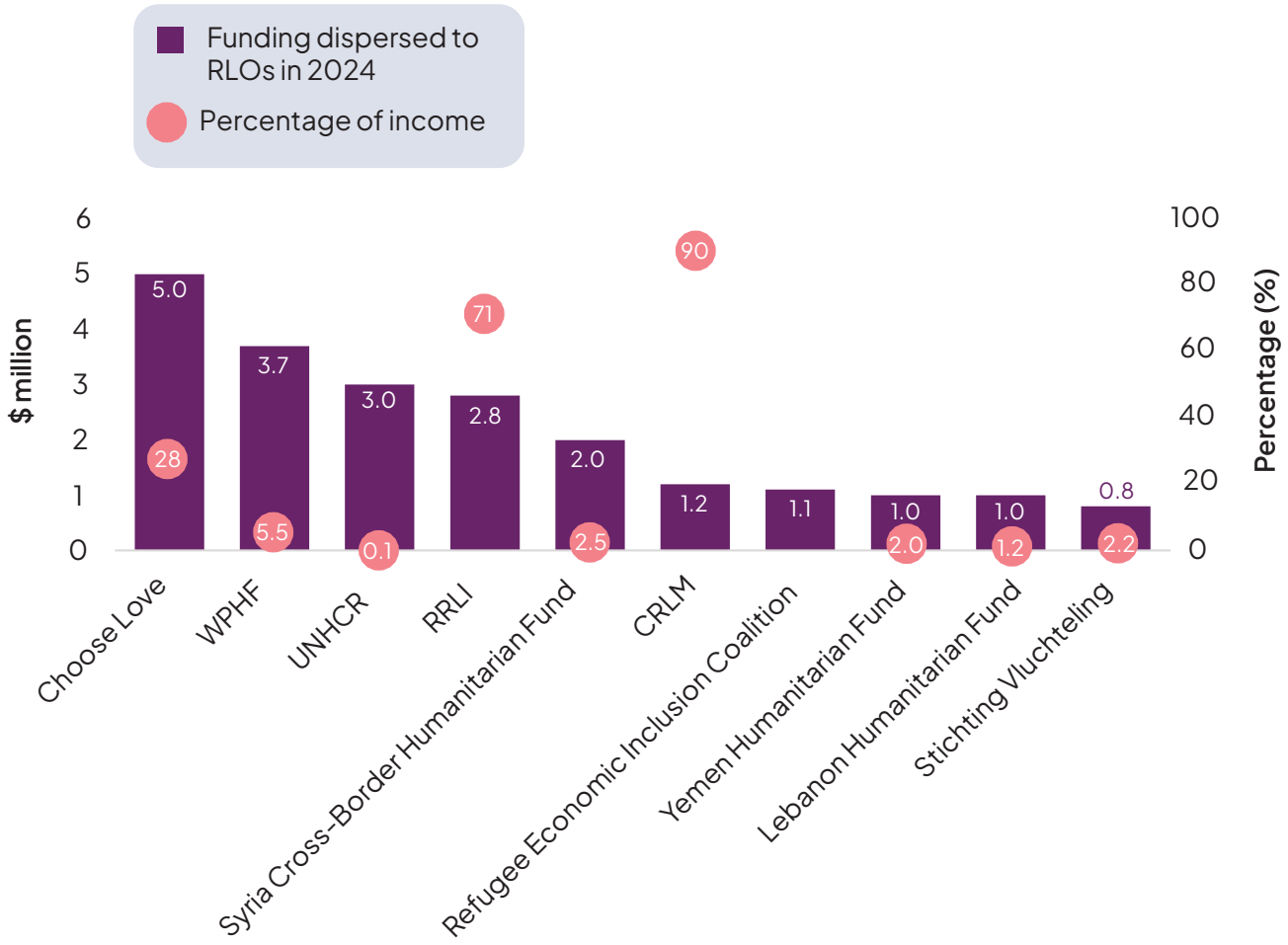
They are already tried and tested, with the infrastructure and capacities in place to absorb significant levels of funding. Thanks to their early lead, private donors have already demonstrated that investments in these types of pooled funds can be made safely and effectively. Now is the time for public donors to step up. Our 2024 snapshot found that 58% of trackable funding reached RLOs through an intermediary, with RLLI, CRLM and WPHF among the top 10 (Figure 7).

They significantly reduce bureaucratic and administrative barriers for both RLOs and donors. Refugee-led pooled funds streamline application and reporting processes, provide translation and compliance support, and distribute funds quickly – allowing RLOs to focus on their work rather than navigating the heavy bureaucratic and administrative hurdles imposed by more traditional donors and CBPFs. In the words of a refugee leader working in Egypt, 'This kind of funding is rare but crucial, especially for RLOs navigating volatility with minimal institutional buffers.'

They channel funds directly and predictably to RLOs. Unlike CBPFs (where donors have little control about where the funding ultimately goes) refugee-led pooled funds are intentionally designed to overcome many of the barriers RLOs face in accessing traditional funding mechanisms. This provides donors with greater transparency, giving them confidence that their resources are reaching RLOs directly, while also supporting more equitable and accountable funding flows.

Refugee-led pooled funds are at a critical turning point. In 2024, funding channelled through them declined, even as their number increased – a troubling sign of fragility at a time when they are most needed. This is mainly due to a sizeable drop in funding through RRLI, the largest pooled fund (from $6.1 million in 2022 to $2.8 million). The decline reflects again how over-reliance on a small pool of private donors can leave RLOs vulnerable to fluctuations, as well as the ongoing struggle to diversify funding sources.

Figure 7 Top 10 intermediary funders to RLOs 2024



Source: ODI Global based on survey data provided directly by donors and intermediaries and data from publicly available sources: UN OCHA's FTS and IATI d-portal and organisational annual reports.
Notes: Data is in current prices. No data available for percentage of income figure for Refugee Economic Inclusion Coalition. Data for total income taken primarily from organisational annual reports. In some cases, such as pooled funds, 'income' refers to contributions to the fund. UNHCR calculation based on 'total funds available in 2024' as per the UNHCR Global Report 2024. Where publicly available information was not available for total income, organisations provided data directly. WPHF = Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund; UNHCR = UN Refugee Agency; RRLI = Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative; CRLM = Collective for Refugee Leadership in MENA.

5 Conclusion: a call for collective action

Debunking the narratives

Narrative 1: RLOs are an 'unproven and risky investment'
Reality check: RLOs' ability to deliver impactful and context-specific support at value for their communities sets them apart from other aid actors. Donors must now invest in a stronger and more robust evidence base to build donor confidence and justify larger investments.

Narrative 2: RLOs are 'a nice to have, but not essential'
Reality check: RLOs play an essential role in the refugee response, and are already stepping in to fill the gaps left by a scaled-back international system. In recognition, donors must scale up and mainstream nascent RLO funding flows and put RLOs front and centre of efforts to localise and reform humanitarian action in displacement settings.

Narrative 3: RLOs are 'too difficult to fund'
Reality check: Bureaucratic and regulatory challenges exist. But donors can navigate these constraints through existing funding instruments, with some funders already showing how it's done.

The impact of the funding cuts on refugee leadership is still playing out. Some respondents saw the cuts as the radical 'shake-up' needed to reposition RLOs as key actors in a reformed and reshaped system. As INGOs and UN agencies scale back their operations and as donors take a closer look at aid effectiveness, there is an opportunity to remake the case for all local and national actors, including RLOs. 'This is a turning point,' suggested a refugee leader from sub-Saharan Africa, and a time to spell out RLOs' comparative value. 'We are at a critical juncture,' said another, explaining that current uncertainty 'creates an opportunity for negotiation, resource sharing and stronger recognition of RLOs' central role'.

Others, however, linked budgetary pressures with growing risk aversion and a doubling down on 'trusted' partners already familiar with international monitoring and reporting practices. Many didn't trust the humanitarian system to make the changes needed – citing a tendency to do 'more of the same' during earlier periods of crisis. Some worried that progress is too slow, with the short window of opportunity for bringing about change being squandered and missed. While nearly all respondents recognised the importance of the current 'moment', many ultimately spoke of being at a fork in the road, where the direction of travel could go either way.

At this critical and precarious juncture, collective action is not only essential – it is a moral imperative. The RLO funding landscape is a porthole into broader questions of refugee leadership, localisation and, by extension, sustainable approaches to protracted displacement. As funding cuts undermine progress

on all these fronts, aid actors have a duty to come together to play different yet complementary roles in sustaining momentum. Everyone has their part to play. 'The challenge,' in the words of a refugee advocate, 'is how the puzzle fits together' – how to ensure that actors play to their comparative strengths while also being willing to make space for others.

The international community should take inspiration from the refugee leaders already advocating for the principles of mutual trust, respect and partnership. Despite feeling let down by the suddenness and magnitude of the funding cuts, most refugee leaders didn't want the international community to step away. 'No one actor can do the work by themselves – it needs a collective effort,' reflected an RLO representative in sub-Saharan Africa. According to another: 'We don't want them to go. We want them to be respectful and ethical. That's it. That is what is missing.' RLOs want to work collectively and collaboratively with the international community, but they want to do this on their own terms – as equal partners not sub-contractors. In the words of a refugee leader in Lebanon, 'We're ready – but we need others to meet us halfway.'

5.1 Summary of recommendations

What are the practical steps that all funders (private, public, UN and INGO) should collectively take to meet refugee leaders 'halfway'? Crucially, the recommendations below should be reinforced by setting specific funding targets (minimum total or proportional spend) and time-bound milestones (for example, the 2027 GRF).

Public donors must translate rhetoric into tangible funding:

- Provide direct funding to RLOs with the capacity to absorb large grants.
- Where this is not possible, emulate and scale up 'tried-and-tested' intermediary funding models in close coordination with refugee leaders (Box 5).
- Invest in pooled funds that are led by or designed with and for RLOs (Figure 6).
- Embed RLOs as central actors and institutional experts within broader policy agendas of 'localisation', the 'humanitarian reset' and 'migration and displacement'.

Private donors must continue to set the example for others to follow:

- Increase amounts allocated to RLOs, including in under-supported geographic areas, while transitioning to more direct, flexible and multi-year funding.
- Expand the pool of private donors through ongoing advocacy and co-funding.
- Pursue closer partnerships with public donors and UN agencies. Capitalise on the GRF to push for systemic reform.

UN agencies must go much further and faster:

- Recognise RLOs as key localisation actors, including in the 'humanitarian reset'.
- Make CBPFs accessible to RLOs by:
  - simplifying application process;
  - streamlining the OCHA/UNHCR institutional silo;
  - setting RLO sub-targets in countries of high displacement;
  - taking a more inclusive approach to priority setting and grant selection.
- Strengthen UNHCR's funding for RLOs by increasing both the grant ceiling and number of RLO recipients of its Grant Agreement and RLIF funding mechanisms.
- Strengthen meaningful refugee participation in shaping the GRF agenda.

INGOs must function as values-based intermediaries:

- Cascade quality funding (flexible, multi-year, overheads) to RLO partners.
- Partner meaningfully with RLOs as standard practice in refugee settings and incorporate them into partnership strategies and localisation instruments.
- Support RLOs to access relevant localisation forums, such as national NGO networks and the Grand Bargain National Reference Groups.

To strengthen the evidence base, all actors should:

- Provide core multi-year funding to RLOs to enable them to resource monitoring and evaluation systems, and document and communicate their impact.
- Invest in participatory research that defines and measures RLO 'impact' from the perspective of RLOs and their communities (Box 4).
- Commit to better tracking and reporting of funding to RLOs to improve transparency and accountability of the funding system as a whole.

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