

# REBALANCING THE SYSTEM

Lessons from funding models  
that enable refugee leadership



**FORCE 4**  
REFUGEES



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March 2026

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy note examines pathways to equitable and localized humanitarian financing in the global refugee response. Developed jointly by the **FORCE4Refugees**,<sup>1</sup> the **Refugee Protection Watch**,<sup>2</sup> the **PASC Triple Nexus Platform**,<sup>3</sup> the **Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative**,<sup>4</sup> and the **NEAR Network**,<sup>5</sup> and released following the **2025 Global Refugee Forum Progress Review**, the note argues that meaningful refugee leadership must be at the centre of humanitarian funding reform and provides concrete evidence that more direct financing to refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and local civil society organizations (CSOs) is both feasible and effective.

With 123.2 million people forcibly displaced worldwide and shrinking humanitarian budgets, the global refugee response system faces a critical juncture. Despite growing international commitments to localization and a decade after the Grand Bargain pledge that 25% of humanitarian funding would go directly to local and national actors, the share remains below 4%. RLOs and local CSOs, which consistently deliver more effective, sustainable, and accountable assistance due to their proximity to affected populations and lived experience of displacement, remain severely underfunded and marginalized. When they do receive funding, it is often limited, short-term, and channelled through multiple intermediaries, diluting both resources and decision-making power.

This note demonstrates that this situation can and must change. We present four case studies of funding models that are already shifting power and resources to RLOs and local actors:

- **FORCE4Refugees** provides flexible, two-year core grants to Syrian RLOs and Turkish CSOs in Türkiye through an equitable intermediary partnership model, enabling partners to design and lead their own projects while joining forces on advocacy and research. The model shows how intermediaries can operate ethically by channelling resources rather than centralizing control and demonstrates that trust in local expertise and long-term holistic partnerships multiply impact and advocacy leverage.
- **Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative** operates the Refugee Leadership Fund, the largest pooled fund led and governed by refugees, providing flexible multi-year

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<sup>1</sup> FORCE4 Refugees (F4R) was established in 2025, bringing together 7 Syrian, Turkish and European organisations to carry out joint research and advocacy to advance refugee protection, localization, and meaningful refugee participation and leadership. Visit its website, available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) is a coalition established in 2019, bringing together 7 Syrian, Lebanese and European organisations to carry out joint research and advocacy on protection issues and living conditions of Syrians and host communities in Lebanon, and on the conditions for safe, voluntary, informed and dignified return to Syria. Visit its website, available [here](#).

<sup>3</sup> The Triple Nexus Platform, coordinated by ALEF and established in 2022, brings together 21 Lebanese CSOs to conduct joint analysis, regular exchanges and advocacy on the humanitarian-development-peace nexus implementation in Lebanon.

<sup>4</sup> The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) is a six-organization-strong global coalition committed to resourcing refugee-led organizations to uplift communities and combat systematic refugee exclusion within refugee response. Visit its website, available [here](#).

<sup>5</sup> The NEAR Network is a movement of 330+ local and national civil society organizations across 44 countries, spanning Africa, Asia, MENA, and Latin America and the Caribbean. It was founded to reinvent aid, positioning local actors as primary decision-makers in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding responses. Visit its website, available [here](#).

grants directly to RLOs across five countries. The model shows that flexible, long-term, non-interventionist funding transforms organizational capacity, while trust-based partnerships and ecosystem approaches redefine accountability as transparency and proximity to communities rather than donor control.

- **Triple Nexus Platform** in Lebanon uses a small pooled fund managed by a local CSO to support pilot projects that operationalize the humanitarian-development-peacebuilding nexus, creating space for experimentation, collective learning, and joint advocacy among RLOs and local CSOs. The model shows that local ownership and contextual knowledge drive sustainability and adaptability, while collaboration through broader networks amplifies effectiveness and strengthens unified advocacy voices.
- **The NEAR Network Change Fund's Displacement Window**, governed by a peer-elected Oversight Body of local actors, channels resources directly to refugee-led and community-based organizations in protracted displacement contexts through simplified, trust-based processes that enable rapid and adaptive programming. The model shows that locally led actors naturally deliver integrated, nexus-based solutions when decision-making authority is genuinely shifted to frontline organizations and community governance structures.

Together, these models offer critical lessons for system-wide reform. They demonstrate that flexible, multi-year, core funding builds organizational capacity and sustainability; that simplified compliance and trust-based processes enhance accountability to communities; that local actors naturally integrate humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding objectives when given decision-making authority; and that peer-led governance ensures resources reach those closest to displacement while maintaining transparency and effectiveness. Importantly, these models show that different approaches – from equitable intermediary partnerships to fully refugee-governed funds – can all advance localization when grounded in genuine power-sharing, respect for local knowledge, and long-term commitment. Finally, the policy note concludes with **actionable recommendations** for UNHCR, donor states, and other humanitarian stakeholders on how to shift resources, decision-making power, and accountability closer to displaced communities.

For donors, we call for: (1) increasing direct, quality, and equitable funding or strengthening RLO-led or RLO-centred intermediary models when direct funding is not feasible; (2) ensuring refugee leadership in global displacement governance through establishing national advisory boards (i.e. U.S. Refugee Advisory Board, German Refugee Advisory Board), committing to funding the participation of at least two refugee participants on all national delegations attending global policy forums, and support for RLO and local CSOs research and advocacy at the national level; and (3) leveraging influence with UNHCR and OCHA to expand the Refugee-Led Innovation Fund and reform Country-Based Pooled Funds to ensure meaningful RLO access and participation.

For UNHCR, we recommend: (1) guaranteeing and facilitating a minimum of 25% refugee participation at the next Global Refugee Forum and releasing transparent guidelines on how RLOs and CSOs can access the event; (2) reforming UNHCR's funding architecture by honoring the 25% Grand Bargain commitment, establishing dedicated budget lines for RLO capacity investment and coordination, and strengthening accountability for the 2025

Localization Guidelines; and (3) expanding and improving funding mechanisms for RLOs by scaling up existing instruments and simplifying access procedures.

As the 2025 funding cuts expose once again that RLOs continue operating even as international actors withdraw, their leadership is essential to rebuilding a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable humanitarian system. The four models presented offer concrete, replicable approaches for the systemic change urgently needed in the refugee response architecture.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

With a record 123.2 million people forcibly displaced worldwide<sup>6</sup> and shrinking humanitarian budgets, the global humanitarian system is facing one of its most critical junctures in decades. Recent funding cuts by traditional donors have not only triggered a major financial crisis but also exposed the need for systemic transformation within the humanitarian sector, one that rethinks not only *what* gets funded but also *how* decisions are made and *whose* voices shape priorities.

In this context, **FORCE4Refugees (F4R), Refugee Protection Watch (RPW), the PASC Triple Nexus Platform (TNP), the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), and the NEAR Network join forces** to advance the conversation on humanitarian financing reform in the global refugee regime, offering concrete examples of good practices in localized funding to refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and refugee-focused local civil society organizations (CSOs). Building on the NGO Statement on Budget and Funding<sup>7</sup> that F4R, RPW, and Relon Uganda presented at UNHCR's 94th Standing Committee, as well as F4R and RPW policy note "Beyond 'Consultation' and 'Implementation': Refugee Leadership and Meaningful Participation in Türkiye, Lebanon and the Global Refugee Regime" (September 2025), we reiterate our collective call for reimagining humanitarian funding as centred on refugee meaningful participation and leadership. Building on our collective advocacy at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) Progress Review, this policy brief shows that funding refugee- and locally led responses is not only feasible but already happening and delivering strong results, despite the limited resources available so far for it.

Ample evidence has already been collected to prove the added value of local humanitarian response.<sup>8</sup> Growing research<sup>9</sup> consistently shows how, within the spectrum of local action, **RLOs in particular often deliver assistance that is more effective, sustainable, equitable, and accountable** than traditional internationally-led aid models. Given their proximity to affected populations and their lived experience of displacement, RLOs often lead in shaping responses when crises strike, influencing both immediate action and longer-term strategies. They are best placed to identify community needs, navigate local dynamics, and guide programming decisions as contexts evolve on the ground with a flexibility that larger, centralised agencies often lack. Because they are embedded within their communities, RLOs and local CSOs are perceived as legitimate and trusted actors. They generate broader local benefits by circulating resources within their own communities and are more accessible and thus accountable to the people they serve. When budget cuts hit, global pandemics disrupt aid operations, or international attention shifts elsewhere,

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<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, 2025, available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> The statement is available [here](#).

<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, the body of knowledge published by the ODI Humanitarian Policy Group Integrated Programme 2017-2019 "Understanding local responses in crises," available [here](#); the in-depth stories collected by The New Humanitarian throughout the years, available [here](#).

<sup>9</sup> Sturridge et al. (2025), *How to finance refugee leadership: navigating a humanitarian system at breaking point*. ODI/HPG Report. Available [here](#); Essex-Lettieri (2022), *Metasynthesis of five impact evaluations of refugee-led organisations*, Diana EL Consulting. Available [here](#); Kara et al. (2022), *Refugee-led organisations in East Africa: Community perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania*, RLRH & LERRN. Available [here](#).

RLOs and local CSOs remain on the ground because, in most cases, they *are* the very communities they serve.<sup>10</sup>

Yet, despite this evidence, **RLOs and local CSOs remain severely underfunded and largely sidelined within the refugee response system.** When they do receive funding, it is often limited, short-term, and channelled through multiple intermediaries, diluting both resources and decision-making power.<sup>11</sup> Aid cuts hit them first and hardest, shrinking their already limited resources.<sup>12</sup> This chronic underfunding not only undermines their impact but also reinforces an inequitable system where those closest to displacement continue to operate at the margins of humanitarian finance.

This situation is even more paradoxical given the growing international commitments to “localize” humanitarian action. Nearly a decade after the Grand Bargain pledge that at least 25% of humanitarian funding would go directly to local and national actors, the share remains below 4%<sup>13</sup>. While governments fall short of their commitments, it is private donors and philanthropies who are increasingly leading efforts to fund RLOs directly.<sup>14</sup> The New York Declaration, the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, 2023 GRF pledges on localization and refugee participation, and, more recently, conversations around the “humanitarian reset” all recognize refugee leaders as essential first responders, placing them at the centre of reform.

**So why do these commitments remain largely rhetorical?** Despite growing consensus on the need to localize humanitarian funding, donors and large institutions remain reluctant to cede control. Persistent perceptions of risk (fears of fund misappropriation, weak financial management, and associated reputational damage) continue to drive a preference for established INGOs.<sup>15</sup> This risk aversion reflects a deeper trust deficit, as donors still equate accountability with control, rather than with transparency or proximity to affected communities. Heavy and increasingly complex bureaucratic and administrative requirements are often designed for well-resourced international organisations, making access nearly impossible for smaller RLOs and CSOs operating with limited staff and institutional capacity.<sup>16</sup> When RLOs do secure funding, it is rarely flexible or long-term enough to build the core systems donors demand. Finally, outdated legal and policy frameworks further block progress. In the EU, for example, Council Regulation 1257/96 still hampers DG ECHO’s direct partnerships with entities based outside the EU/EEA, effectively preventing direct funding to local actors abroad.<sup>17</sup>

Yet, more direct and equitable funding to refugee-led and local organisations is both possible and effective. There is no single model for localising resources, but a range of funding approaches, from participatory grant-making to partnership-based consortia, pooled funds, or direct funding. Whatever the mechanism, we define a funding model as equitable when it increases and simplifies access to resources for local partners; ensures they exercise

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<sup>10</sup> Sturridge et al. (2025).

<sup>11</sup> Sturridge et al. (2023). *The failure to fund refugee-led organisations*. ODI/HPG Report. Available [here](#).

<sup>12</sup> Sturridge et al. (2025)responders.

<sup>13</sup> ALNAP (2025). *Global Humanitarian Assistance 2025*. ALNAP/ODI Report. Available [here](#).

<sup>14</sup> Sturridge et al. (2023); Sturridge et al. (2025).

<sup>15</sup> Ubillus, Huyse & Schulpen (2025), *Rebalancing Power*, ACODEV & NGO Federatie. Available [here](#).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Piron (2025), *Inertia in the EU’s Humanitarian Aid Policy: An Unattainable Localized Funding?*, *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 30(2).

genuine agency over how funds are used and priorities set; and recognises the legitimacy of their own knowledge systems, practices, and approaches.<sup>18</sup>

Encouragingly, examples of good practices already exist. The F4R, RRLI, TNP, and Change Fund models demonstrate that shifting power and resources to refugee-led and local actors is not only possible but already underway. Their experiences provide concrete lessons for donors, UN agencies, and international NGOs to move beyond rhetoric towards genuine change.

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<sup>18</sup> Ubillus, Huyse & Schulpen (2025).

## 2. SHIFTING POWER: FOUR FUNDING MODELS THAT WORK

### 2.1. FORCE4REFUGEES

#### Who we are:

**FORCE4Refugees (F4R)** is an initiative bringing together Syrian, Turkish, and European civil society and RLOs. Founded in 2025 and coordinated by the Belgian NGO 11.11.11, the project brings together four Syrian RLOs and two Turkish CSOs working on displacement in Türkiye, including: Civil Society Enablement Unit (CSEU), Women Now for Development (WND), Olive Branch (OB), Door Beyond War (DBW), Asylum and Migration Research Centre (IGAM), and Support to Life (STL).

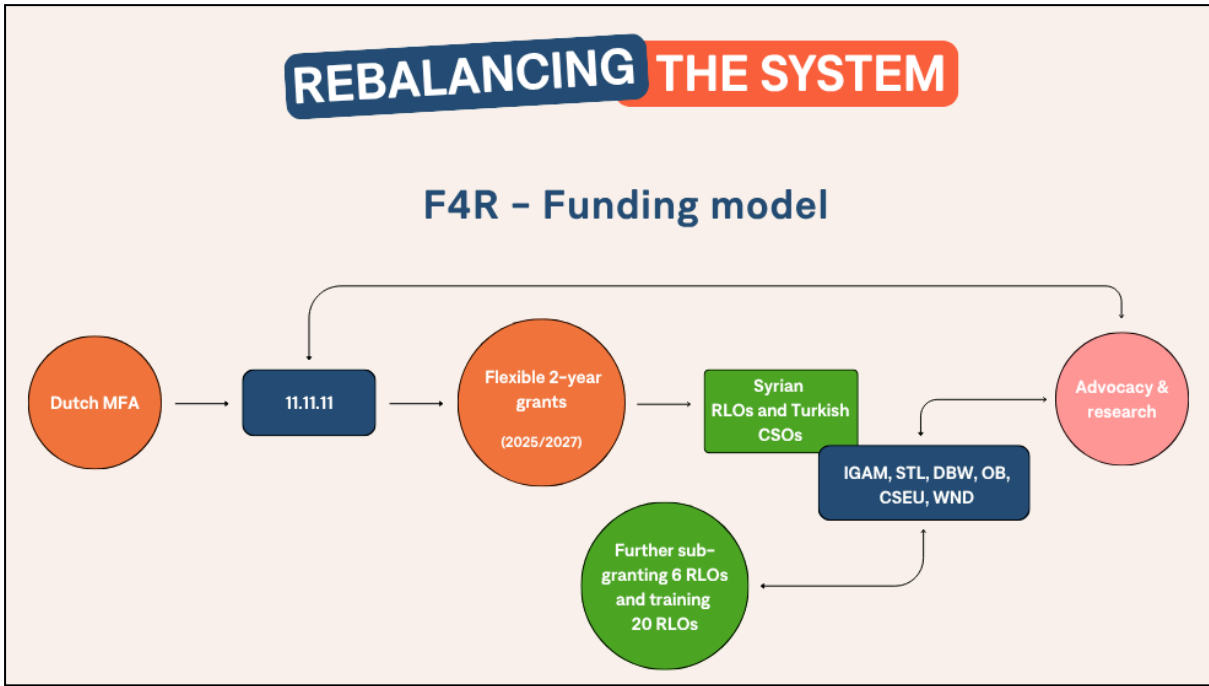
Funded by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs through its Migration and Displacement Grant Programme (2023–2028), F4R aims to strengthen the leadership of refugee-led and local actors in displacement responses in Türkiye and influence policy at local, national, and global levels to ensure refugee voices are heard.

#### What we fund and how:

Under F4R, each partner receives a **flexible two-year grant** to implement a project of its own design, developed and presented to meet the needs of the communities it works with. The core funding grants are disbursed by 11.11.11 and are non-earmarked, allowing partners to decide independently how best to allocate resources across programming and their own institutional capacity strengthening. 11.11.11 manages donor monitoring and reporting, ensuring that administrative burdens are not shifted onto RLO and CSO partners and that they can focus their time and resources on delivering impact within their communities.

Through this model, F4R is funding a variety of interventions, including incubation projects that strengthen smaller or emerging RLOs; direct service provision addressing urgent needs in protection, education, livelihoods, and psychosocial support; and community-based research amplifying the voices and lived experiences of refugees and informing evidence-based advocacy.

Beyond funding interventions, F4R partners work together **on advocacy**. Partners share expertise, carry out joint research, and use evidence-based advocacy to promote a more equitable and inclusive humanitarian space in Türkiye, strengthen refugees' ability to participate meaningfully in national policy processes, and bring refugee leadership and perspectives into global refugee governance policy spaces.



**Our impact:**

F4R is funding six projects led by local and refugee-led organisations across Türkiye, running from 2025 to 2027.

**CSEU** is strengthening the institutional capacities of 6 RLOs in Gaziantep, Hatay, and Şanlıurfa through tailored development plans, training, and small sub-grants for organisational growth and community initiatives, while also facilitating joint advocacy through regular workshops and the co-development of policy briefs. In Gaziantep, **DBW** is training 17 RLOs and three community representatives in advocacy and participatory research, collecting evidence used to advocate for stronger refugee representation at the local level. Notably, this project has led to the first formal cooperation between an RLO and the Gaziantep City Assembly, marking political recognition of refugee-led actors and opening access to municipal networks and resources essential for advancing refugee inclusion in the city. **STL** is working with two Syrian RLOs in Gaziantep and one Afghan RLO in Kayseri. More than 30 representatives of these three partners are being trained to design and implement their own advocacy campaigns, fostering a more inclusive and interconnected refugee civic space to influence national policymaking.

In Ankara, **IGAM** runs social media campaigns that counter misinformation and hate speech against refugees online, promotes refugee inclusion in national decision-making, and provides refugees with accurate information on return conditions in Syria. Since April 2025, its dissemination of Syrian returns figures and Turkish translations of UNHCR’s real-time regional reports has reached over 121,000 Instagram views and 70,000 Twitter impressions, improving access to reliable information among NGOs, partners, and the Turkish Directorate General of Migration Management. In parallel, IGAM is engaging with Turkish policymakers to review Türkiye’s asylum system and identify pathways for reform towards better refugee protection and inclusion.

In Gaziantep, **WND** fosters social cohesion between refugee and host communities. 36 Syrian and Turkish women participate in vocational cooking courses that combine income-generation skills with psychosocial support. Around 300 children take part in school-based protection and integration workshops promoting empathy, teamwork, and inclusion. More broadly, WND also convenes a series of roundtables and panel discussions, bringing together experts, activists, and civil society to produce practical recommendations for gender-responsive and inclusive policies, particularly on women's economic empowerment and child protection. **OB** delivers direct protection services to Syrian refugees, including awareness sessions on legal rights and gender based violence for 500 people, legal assistance for at least 50 people, case management for 80 people, psychosocial support activities for 160 children, and hobby-based mental health and psychosocial support sessions for 160 adults. These services are complemented by evidence-based research and targeted advocacy campaigns.

### Lessons for the system:

**1. Trust local expertise and leadership.** Within F4R, RLOs and CSOs are recognized as equal partners rather than mere implementers. Partners were trusted to identify their own needs and design comprehensive projects through a single, flexible, and simple proposal process – unlike externally defined “capacity-building” packages typical of traditional aid models. Although F4R does not operate a direct funding model, 11.11.11's work shows how intermediary roles can be practiced ethically and equitably: not to centralize control, but to channel resources to local partners who would otherwise be excluded by donors' risk-aversion and compliance funding requirements. This does not replace the need for direct funding but demonstrates how INGOs can help bridge today's structural barriers through equitable partnerships while donors work to reform their funding frameworks.

**2. Local relevance and reach multiply impact.** Because partners are embedded within their communities, interventions are more relevant and accessible. Partners' neighbourhood-level presence, linguistic and cultural fluency, and legitimacy among refugees ensure that services and advocacy efforts are well-targeted and trusted. Locally generated evidence and community-level impact are used to advocate for national policies and donor strategies reform, reinforcing refugee influence on systemic change. A “multiplier effect” is also emerging, with some partners mentoring smaller RLOs through incubator models, multiplying local capacity and influence across Türkiye's refugee response ecosystem. The inclusion of Turkish CSOs expands the F4R reach and advocacy leverage with national institutions and policymakers, an entry point that most international NGOs lack.

**3. Long-term, holistic partnerships matter.** The F4R model goes beyond grant-making: it is a platform for collaboration, solidarity, and shared advocacy. Partners support each other through information and capacity sharing across the whole project management spectrum (project planning, MEAL, reporting, etc.). Together, they define and work towards joint, long-term advocacy goals to advance refugee leadership in national and international policy spaces. This sustained partnership approach connects Syrian RLOs in Türkiye and Turkish CSOs and European civil society, building a strong and transnational base to advocate for meaningful change even when donor funding ends.

## 2.2. RESOURCING REFUGEE LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

### Who we are:

The **Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI)** is a global coalition working to shift power and resources directly to RLOs. Co-founded by six RLOs, including Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z) in Lebanon and Iraq, Refugees and Asylum Seekers Information Center (RAIC) in Indonesia, Refugiados Unidos in Colombia, St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) in Egypt, and Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID) in Uganda, alongside Asylum Access in the USA, RRLI advocates for a refugee response system where those most affected by displacement lead the solutions.

Hosted by Asylum Access and established in 2021, RRLI runs the Refugee Leadership Fund, the first-of-its-kind “fund for refugees by refugees,” and today the largest pooled fund led and governed by refugees.<sup>19</sup> The initiative is financed through a mix of private and public contributions from the Larsen Lam ICONIQ Impact Award, Hilton Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, David Karp Foundation, Porticus Foundation, and Blaustein Foundation. Most of its funds, more than 70%, go directly to RLO grants and awards, placing philanthropic power squarely in refugee hands.

### What we fund and how:

RRLI provides two types of flexible grants designed to meet RLOs where they are in their institutional journey:

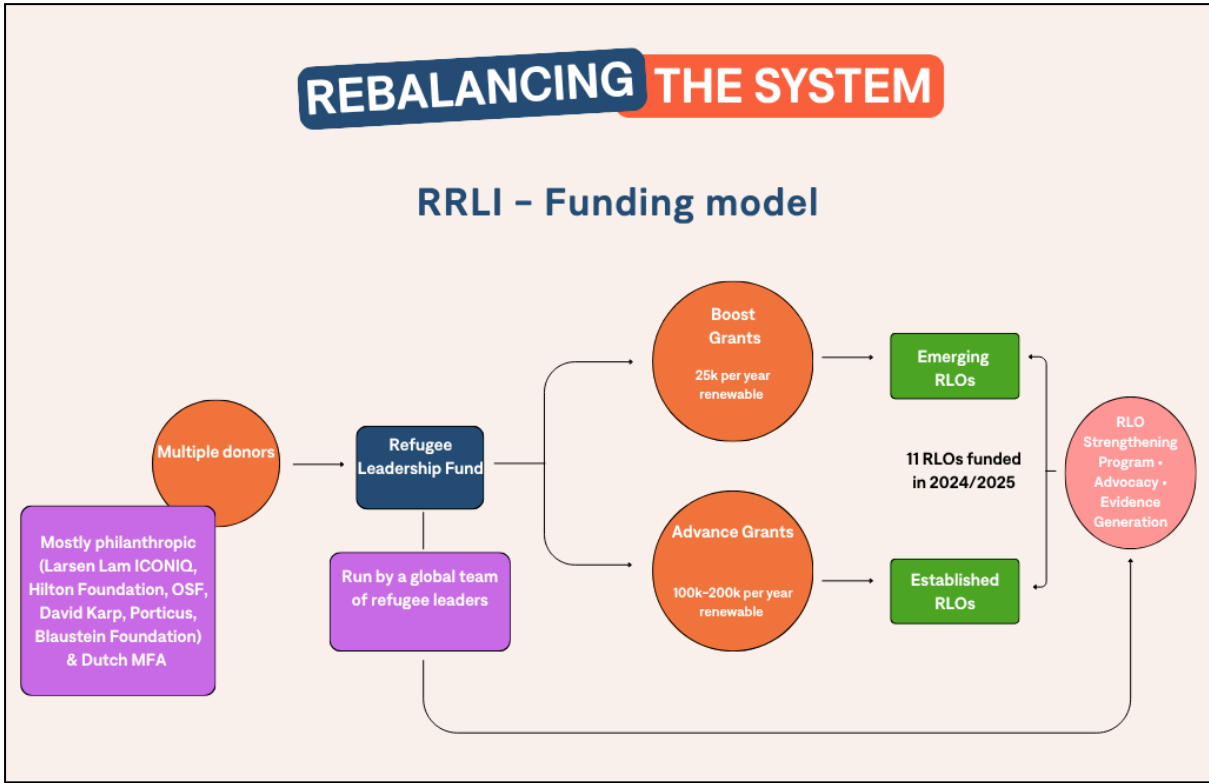
- **Boost Grants** of up to USD 25,000 for one year (renewable), targeting smaller or emerging RLOs seeking to strengthen their internal systems, leadership, and programmatic capacity.
- **Advance Grants** between USD 100,000 and 200,000 for one year (renewable), supporting more established RLOs with established structures and programs ready to scale up their impact.

Applications are submitted through an open, multilingual online portal and can be completed in any language. All applications are reviewed with the same accessibility and transparency standards, ensuring that RLOs without international networks or English fluency can still apply and compete equitably. Both grants are **flexible, core, and multi-year** (when renewed), giving RLOs the autonomy to allocate resources according to their priorities, whether staff salaries, office rent, program implementation, or institutional strengthening.

Beyond funding, RRLI supports each grantee through its **Strengthening RLOs Partnership Program**, which builds networks with donors and decision-makers, supports institutional development, and facilitates learning exchanges among RLOs. Finally, RRLI collects and generates evidence on the impact of funding RLO-led interventions, which is then used to advocate for better refugee meaningful inclusion and leadership in decision-making at local, regional, and global levels.

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<sup>19</sup> Sturridge et al. (2025).



**Our impact:**

Since its establishment in 2021, the Refugee Leadership Fund has disbursed over 12.7 million USD, channelling resources directly to RLOs across Colombia, Egypt, Indonesia, Lebanon, and Uganda. To date, these grants have supported more than 20 RLOs and reached approximately 1.6 million individuals within their communities. Between 2024 and 2025 alone, RRLI reached over 305,000 individuals through grants to 11 organisations, totalling approximately USD 2.78 million.

RRLI-supported RLOs are achieving measurable impact at both community and systems levels. Between 2024 and 2025, **Refugiados Unidos (Colombia)** achieved 10 favourable court rulings and restored refugee status applications, securing fundamental rights and providing a model for strategic legal action. The organization also provided legal aid to 4,502 new clients, protecting them from exploitation and deportation while ensuring access to essential services.

**Tafawol (Egypt)** established the first free or low-cost Physical Therapy Clinic in Greater Cairo for refugee children with disabilities, along with a dedicated Speech Therapy Department for children with language barriers, enabling hundreds of children to access therapy and rehabilitation previously unavailable. **StARS (Egypt)** provided emergency cash grants and dialysis to 4,189 refugees, ensuring urgent access to life-saving treatment and immediate financial support despite rising medical and living costs.

**RAIC (Indonesia)** offered emergency cash support to 623 adults and children, preventing immediate homelessness for families who otherwise had no income or right to work after UNHCR cut allowances. **Makani (Lebanon)** supported 70 refugee women through income generation via crochet and embroidery, reaching 375 people in households, providing dignified wages and promoting gender equality.

**Kandakiaat (Uganda)** trained 50+ refugee women and youth to produce charcoal briquettes, providing affordable fuel for hundreds of households and creating income for producers. **Tomorrow Vijana (Uganda)** distributed 900 fruit trees and seeds to schools and provided inputs, livestock, and startup capital to farming groups, increasing food production, nutrition, and sustainable income within their refugee community. **YARID (Uganda)**, in partnership with Street Child, enabled over 15,000 out-of-school refugee children to regain access to learning, improve literacy and numeracy skills, and transition toward formal schooling.

### Lessons for the system:

**1. Flexible, long-term funding transforms organizations.** RRLI's funding model – multi-year, high-value, and non-interventionist – allowed RLOs to focus on what matters most: the evolving needs of their communities. As a result, several partners, such as Tafawol and Faysel in Egypt and Kandaakiat in Uganda, have expanded from local operations to multi-site organizations, hired specialized staff, and formalized their legal status, key steps toward long-term independence and institutional resilience.

**2. Networks and connections multiply impact.** Equally important, RRLI's ecosystem approach extends beyond grant-making. By facilitating direct connections between RLOs and donors, RRLI strengthens networks that unlock new opportunities. The coalition acts as a bridge, opening pathways for RLOs to access funding streams that were previously out of reach, while fostering partnerships built on mutual respect and shared purpose.

**3. Trust-based partnerships redefine accountability.** RRLI's experience shows that accountability and control are not synonymous. When relationships are grounded in trust, transparency, and continuous dialogue, both RLOs and donors become more responsive and adaptive. Through flexible reporting and learning-centred monitoring, RRLI has demonstrated that trust-based approaches yield stronger accountability to funders and, most importantly, to the communities served.

## **2.3. TRIPLE NEXUS PLATFORM**

### Who we are:

The **Triple Nexus Platform (TNP)** in Lebanon is a collaborative initiative designed to operationalize the “triple nexus” of humanitarian aid, development, and peacebuilding at the local level. The platform is hosted and facilitated by the Lebanese NGO ALEF – Act for Human Rights, within the framework of the “Durable Solutions for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon” program, funded by the Belgian Directorate-General for Development Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid and coordinated by 11.11.11.

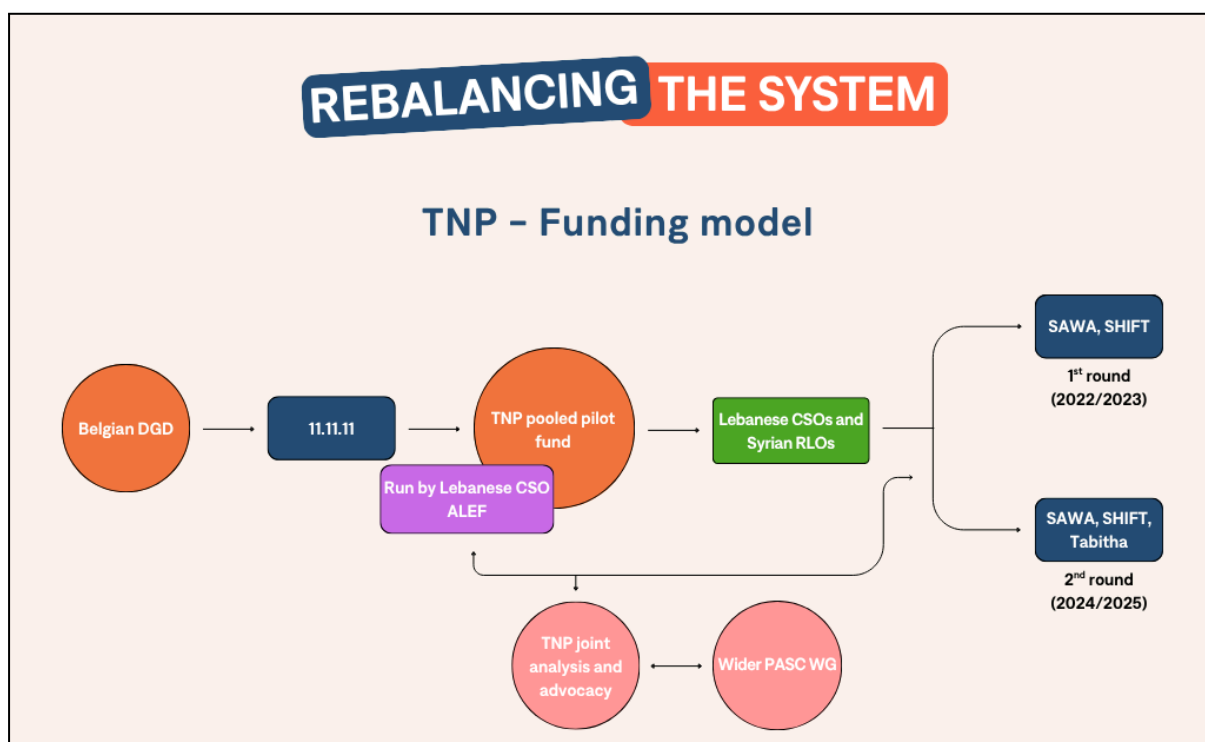
The TNP brings together Syrian RLOs and Lebanese CSOs working across Lebanon, and operates as a small subgroup of the wider PASC Working Group, a voluntary, inter-organizational, informal network of around 31 CSOs that collaborate through joint analysis, reflection, and the documentation of lessons learned and best practices to strengthen local responses to the needs of refugees and host communities.

Within the TNP, ALEF established a small pooled fund to support pilot projects proposed by its members to operationalize the triple nexus, creating a mechanism for practical experimentation while promoting collective learning on localized action.

**What we fund and how:**

Under the TNP, ALEF receives funding from the Belgian government, through the intermediary role of 11.11.11, to manage a **small grant pool for pilot projects** that implement triple nexus approaches. These grants are designed to be flexible, small-scale, and short-term, enabling local organizations to test approaches that link humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding objectives.

Beyond project funding, the TNP provides a platform for capacity strengthening, knowledge exchange, and joint advocacy, including workshops, peer exchanges with experts and international practitioners, and the co-creation of policy recommendations aimed at influencing governments and donors towards a better integration of their humanitarian, development, and peace efforts. Importantly, the pilot projects generate new knowledge that is continuously brought back to the wider TNP platform, serving as a basis to inform collective learning and evidence-based advocacy to strengthen the triple nexus operationalization in Lebanon.



**Our impact:**

Since its establishment, the TNP has funded five pilot projects to operationalize the triple nexus in Lebanon – two projects implemented in 2022-2023 and three ongoing in 2024-2025. A final pilot project will be implemented in 2026.

In the first round, the TNP supported **SAWA for Development and Aid** to establish the Karantina Community Committee in Beirut, creating an elected local committee representing

diverse groups within the Karantina neighborhood. The committee mediated tensions between Lebanese and Syrian residents, inspired local initiatives such as a church offering complimentary meals for children, and fostered the community's interest in expanding the "Our Beautiful Neighbourhood" campaign, which introduced solar streetlights, recycling bins, and street-cleaning efforts to address local security and environmental challenges. **SHIFT – Social Innovation Hub** implemented the IMPACT project, training 17 young content creators (Syrian and Lebanese, aged 19–34) in media production, nonviolent communication, and countering fake news. The participants produced 35 videos across three social media campaigns, which reached over 1.3 million views and 50,000 interactions, significantly exceeding the initial target of 50,000 views, and led to a substantial increase of over 10,000 new followers in SHIFT's social media channels.

The ongoing second round of TNP grants supports three projects. **SAWA** is fostering peacebuilding and economic empowerment in the Bekaa region, involving 30 participants engaged in dialogue sessions and supporting 15 conflict-affected participants with financial capacity-building and sewing training to produce culturally inspired clothing. Cash-for-work support enables participants to sustain livelihoods, while the textiles produced are distributed to neighbouring vulnerable communities, promoting unity and shared heritage. **SHIFT** is promoting social cohesion across six Tripoli neighbourhoods, providing two safe spaces for 40 participants, vocational training, in-kind grants, and access to an e-commerce platform to support new micro-businesses. These initiatives build skills, strengthen livelihoods, and foster collaboration and resilience within the community. **Tabitha** is delivering humanitarian support and peacebuilding initiatives for internally displaced people, returnees, and host communities through its centres in Batroun, Achrafiyeh, and Aley, engaging approximately 450 children and youth in recreational and psychosocial activities and 300 participants in workshops, cultural events, and joint community services, fostering resilience, dignity, and social cohesion.

### Lessons for the system:

**1. Local ownership drives sustainability.** Although TNP funding was short-term and designed for pilot projects, strong local legitimacy has enabled initiatives to continue beyond their initial timelines. For example, SAWA's Karantina Committee remains actively engaged with the neighbourhood and continues fundraising to sustain community-based peacebuilding. This demonstrates that local leadership, accountability, and ownership are essential foundations for long-term impact. Multi-year, predictable financing is, however, still required to reinforce, scale, and support the local leadership and community structures that enable sustainability in the first place.

**2. Contextual knowledge enhances adaptability.** The diverse needs and priorities of different regions in Lebanon and the impact of the war in Gaza, which broke out during the first round of projects' implementation, underlined the importance of adaptive programming. TNP pilot projects demonstrated that contextual grounding (which INGOs often lack) is key to leading tailored, locally informed interventions that can respond to socio-political, security, and community-specific developments on the ground. SHIFT's IMPACT project, for instance, continuously adapted its media messaging based on real-time audience engagement and community discussions, ensuring culturally sensitive and relevant outreach.

**3. Collaboration strengthens effectiveness.** Integration with broader networks, such as the PASC Working Group, amplifies the impact of local CSOs. By pooling expertise, resources, and knowledge, TNP members were able to avoid duplication and working in silos. Coordination helped organizations exchange information continuously and regularly, ensuring advocacy messages were consistent and strategically targeted. Joint engagement and recurrent meetings also enabled TNP members to present a unified voice, enhancing their credibility and impact in advancing rights-based policy recommendations to policymakers and humanitarian coordination platforms, such as UN-led sector working groups.

## 2.4. THE CHANGE FUND

### Who we are:

**NEAR** is a Global South–led network of 330+ local and national civil society organizations across 44 countries, spanning Africa, Asia, MENA, and Latin America and the Caribbean. It was founded to reinvent aid through innovative financing, collective voice, and systems change, positioning local actors as primary decision-makers in humanitarian, development, and peacebuilding responses.

The **Change Fund** is NEAR’s flagship pooled financing mechanism – a peer-led, locally governed model that channels resources directly to frontline organizations. Its **Displacement Window**, established in 2024, supports refugee-led organizations, community groups, and local responders to design and lead responses in protracted displacement contexts, where traditional humanitarian structures have routinely failed to provide long-term, flexible, and equitable funding. The Changed Fund is governed by a regionally representative, a peer-elected, Oversight Body composed entirely of local and national actors who have extensive experience responding to displacement and crisis-affected communities. This governance model reflects NEAR’s commitment to local leadership, community agency, and complementarity with (rather than dependence on) international actors.

The Change Fund is supported by a diverse group of philanthropic and bilateral donors, including the Global Whole Being Fund, Open Society Foundations, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Humanity United, the Irene M. Staehelin Foundation, Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies, Robert Bosch Stiftung, Oxfam, the Vitol Foundation, and Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

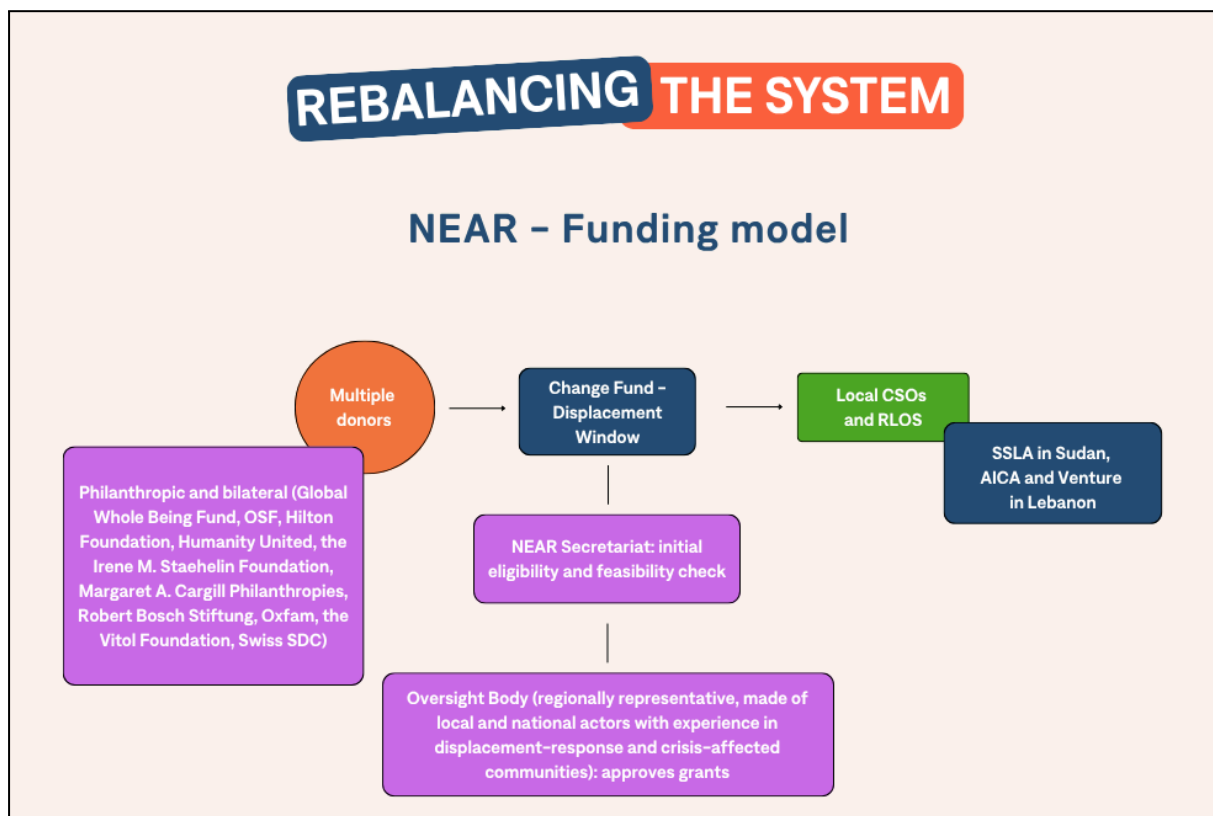
### What we fund and how:

The Change Fund operates through a simplified, trust-based model that channels resources quickly and directly to frontline organizations. Concept notes undergo a light-touch eligibility review by the NEAR Secretariat’s Change Fund team, who review for alignment with priority displacement contexts and feasibility, based on member-led insights and context analysis. These assessments are then synthesized and presented to the Change Fund’s Oversight Body, which is mandated to assess proposals against the Fund’s criteria, determine grant amounts, and approve or reject applications. Eligibility requirements explicitly prioritize organizations that are locally or refugee-led and that directly serve displaced and host

communities, ensuring that funding remains anchored in proximity, contextual knowledge, and community trust.

Funding is intentionally **flexible and adaptive**. Partners are encouraged to adjust activities as contexts shift, whether due to return movements, access challenges, sudden displacement, or community feedback, and the Oversight Body is empowered to approve such adjustments to maintain relevance and responsiveness. Routine adjustments, such as making minor budget reallocations or adapting delivery modalities in response to community feedback, can be made directly by partners. However, substantive changes, including shifts in target population, major revisions to budget allocations, or modifications to core project objectives, require approval from the Oversight Body. This approach ensures that partners retain meaningful flexibility while safeguarding alignment with community priorities and the Displacement Window’s overall intent. Unlike traditional humanitarian funding, which is typically sector-siloed, the Window funds **community-defined, multi-sector interventions**, reflecting the reality that displacement cuts across WASH, protection, livelihoods, social cohesion, youth engagement, maternal health, and early recovery. Direct financing to local and refugee-led actors ensures that resources stay in communities, strengthen local governance, and reinforce long-term resilience.

While the Displacement Window is currently the smallest of the Change Fund’s mechanisms, it is structurally significant: it stress-tests the core governance model in some of the hardest operating environments. Lessons emerging from the Window directly inform how NEAR is expanding peer-led pooled financing into crisis, conflict, and forced displacement contexts more broadly. Importantly, the Displacement Window also offers early insights into how pooled financing for displacement could be re-designed so that frontline and refugee-led organisations hold decision-making authority rather than serving as downstream implementers.



## Our impact:

Early evidence from the Displacement Window shows that when local and refugee-led actors control resources, they design integrated, multi-sector responses that reflect the realities of protracted displacement and adapt quickly to shifting displacement dynamics.

In **South Sudan**, the **South Sudan Localization Lab**, a coalition convened by Amalna South Sudan and composed of multiple community-rooted organizations, has delivered combined WASH, education, livelihoods, governance, and peacebuilding interventions. By restoring water systems, strengthening water-governance structures, and improving hygiene practices in Gorom and Rokon, the Lab has strengthened community access to safe water and reduced exposure to waterborne disease in areas where infrastructure had collapsed. At the same time, SSSL has helped stabilize overstretched schools and supported women's income-generation through business skills and financial literacy pathways that expand income-generation options for those who have long faced structural barriers to economic participation. These gains are reinforced by peacebuilding work that equips community leaders and resource-management groups with conflict-resolution skills and creates spaces for dialogue between refugees, internally displaced people, and host populations.

In **North Lebanon**, the **Alawite Islamic Charity Association's (AICA)** strengthened tailoring and upcycling techniques among women and introduced digital skills training, such as Python programming, for youth from both host and displaced communities. Overall, AICA supported economic participation in an environment where work opportunities have sharply deteriorated. The **Venture Association**, a refugee-led organisation, expanded access to prenatal and postnatal awareness, safe-delivery preparation, and home-based follow-up care, responding directly to the strain on Lebanon's health system and the heightened vulnerabilities of pregnant women in displacement. Venture also rehabilitated safe community spaces for youth and families, restoring essential hubs for learning, connection, and emotional support. Their psychosocial work, including therapeutic art and structured youth engagement, helped strengthen emotional resilience among adolescents facing protracted educational disruption and social isolation. By intentionally designing activities that brought together displaced and host families, Venture reinforced social cohesion and reduced local tensions, showcasing how refugee-led actors bridge divides and create inclusive, community-anchored protection environments.

## Lessons for the system:

### **1. Locally led actors deliver integrated, sustainable, and context-driven solutions.**

Across South Sudan and Lebanon, local and refugee-led partners naturally operationalized the humanitarian–development–peace nexus, designing integrated interventions that combined WASH, livelihoods, maternal health, psychosocial support, youth programming, and conflict mitigation. The South Sudan Localization Lab showed the value of collective leadership, pooling the capacities of multiple grassroots organizations in areas where INGOs have largely withdrawn. Partners' embeddedness in both displaced and host communities allowed them to connect immediate needs to long-term stability, avoid sectoral silos that do not meet the realities of displacement, and strengthen governance structures that will endure beyond the project cycle.

**2. Flexible, trust-based funding strengthens accountability and responsiveness.** By providing adaptable and flexible funding, the Displacement Window enabled partners to adjust activities in real time based on community feedback, shifting displacement patterns, or emerging risks. Local organizations used community governance structures, weekly feedback loops, and informal and formal complaint channels to adjust activities in real time. This contrasts with the rigidity of conventional humanitarian grants.

**3. Meaningful participation requires shifting decision-making authority and not merely inviting consultation.** Across contexts, local governance structures (water committees, school management committees, parent-teacher associations, women's groups, youth spaces) played central roles in shaping priorities and resolving tensions. The Window's use of a peer-led Oversight Body reinforced this shift: local leaders influenced country selection, allocation priorities, and final funding decisions. This underscores a core policy lesson: participation without power reinforces inequity, while participation with decision-making authority improves relevance, cost-efficiency, and community ownership.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The 2025 funding cuts have once again exposed that RLOs are the first affected when crises hit the humanitarian system. Even as international actors scale back or close operations, RLOs continue to operate, often on a volunteer basis, absorbing growing needs with shrinking means. While they continue to face disproportionate scrutiny over their capacity, impact, and risk management, RLOs are the actors that people turn to when all others withdraw. The humanitarian system relies on them far more than it recognizes. RLOs are not waiting to be given a seat at the table; they are already holding the system together, and their leadership is essential to rebuilding a more inclusive, effective, and sustainable response model. For this reason, we present the following recommendations to donor States and UNHCR.

#### 3.1. RECOMMENDATIONS TO DONOR STATES

##### 1. Ensure refugee leadership and meaningful participation in shaping the global displacement agenda.

- Explicitly integrate RLOs into localization instruments and partnership agreements. Make partnering with RLOs standard practice in refugee settings by, for instance, setting targets to track the proportion of funding going to RLOs and/or requiring partners to justify the absence of RLOs in program design or delivery.
- Ensure the inclusion of RLOs and local CSOs leading displacement response in localization global strategic decision-making spaces. Establish a national Refugee Advisory Board (following examples by Canada, the EU, the US, Germany) and appoint and fund the participation of at least two refugee representatives to delegations to major refugee governance forums (Grand Bargain, GRF, GRF Progress Review, UNHCR ExCom, UNHCR Standing Committee, High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, etc.). Facilitate meaningful participation through funded travel, visa sponsorship, interpretation, and technical and legal support.
- Strengthen RLO participation, research, and leadership at the national level in refugee-hosting countries. Influence host-country policies to ensure a conducive civic and protection environment for RLOs as well as local civil society leading responses to displacement. This includes political recognition, safe and meaningful participation in related oversight and decision-making bodies, and the stronger mechanisms within host states to safeguard and uphold protection standards for refugees, RLOs, and CSOs. Fund RLO and local civil society participation in national and international policy consultations, and support refugee and locally-led research and evidence generation to inform policy and programming. Provide technical and legal support to host governments to institutionalize regular, structured dialogue between authorities and refugee and local actors.

## **2. Increase direct, quality, and equitable funding for refugee and locally-led organizations leading displacement response.**

- Reaffirm and operationalize the existing commitment to the 25% direct funding target for local and refugee-led organizations as outlined in the Grand Bargain and Global Compact on Refugees, and report annually on progress toward this goal. Define transparent and accessible mechanisms to track how much money is allocated to RLOs directly or through intermediaries.
- Increase direct funding to RLOs and displacement-focused local CSOs through sustained, core, and flexible grants. Ensure multi-year, core support that strengthens organizational systems, leadership, and sustainability. Expand direct partnerships with established RLOs, building on models already adopted by donors such as Canada, the UK, and private foundations (e.g., Hilton).<sup>20</sup> Create accessible funding opportunities tailored to RLOs and local CSOs leading displacement-response: develop funding calls specifically designed for RLOs with simplified requirements, multilingual applications, proportionate reporting, user-friendly portals, and flexible deadlines.
- When direct funding is not feasible, strengthen RLO-led or RLO-centred intermediary models. Invest in pooled funds and mechanisms led or designed by RLOs (e.g., as in the example of RRLI presented above) or scale up intermediary models implemented through equitable partnerships (e.g., as in the example of F4R presented above). Require all intermediaries to: pass at least 10% overhead to refugee or locally-led implementing partners; demonstrate long-term, trust-based relationships with refugee communities; use community feedback to inform decision-making; allow flexibility to adapt programming even when it departs from initial proposals.
- Recognize and fund the full spectrum of RLO roles and contributions. Ensure funding supports RLOs not only as service providers, but also as watchdogs, advocates, human rights monitors, researchers, and community mobilizers. Value and resource their critical work in accountability, protection monitoring, policy advocacy, and systems change alongside direct assistance.
- Pair funding with broader capacity sharing support, as well as policy and legal advocacy. Provide technical and capacity strengthening where requested by RLOs and displacement-focused local CSOs to ensure effective management and utilization of funds. Support legal and policy reforms in host countries to remove barriers to registration, banking, compliance, and operational access.
- Promote shared learning and scale-up of best practices. Actively share tools, lessons, and successful funding models across donor groups, global forums, and sector events to normalize funding for refugees and local actors and enable wider replication of what works.

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<sup>20</sup> Sturridge et al. (2025).

### **3. Leverage influence with UNHCR and OCHA to expand access, funding, and decision-making power for RLOs.**

- Champion the expansion and full funding of UNHCR financing mechanisms to RLOs. Urge UNHCR to significantly scale up the Refugee-Led Innovation Fund and Grant Agreements, and provide additional financial support to this end.
- Advocate for meaningful RLO access to OCHA's Country-Based Pooled Funds (CBPFs). Encourage OCHA to (1) establish RLO sub-targets in CBPFs in refugee-hosting countries, (2) increase the number and influence of RLO representatives in CBPF advisory and allocation bodies, and (3) ensure that RLO participation is meaningful rather than symbolic, by systematically documenting and publishing how RLO feedback shapes CBPF priorities, policies, and funding decisions, establishing a feedback loop that reinforces accountability to affected communities.

## **3.2. RECOMMENDATIONS TO UNHCR**

### **1. Ensure meaningful refugee and local participation in global governance and policy processes.**

- Transform refugee participation in the GRF, ensuring that refugees help shape the agenda, rather than merely participate in member State-defined priorities. Guarantee a minimum of 25% refugee participation at the next GRF, with refugee representation (and early involvement) on all panels and preparatory processes. Require member states to include at least one refugee and local civil society representatives in their national delegations to the GRF. Release transparent guidelines and information on how RLOs and civil society can obtain delegation status and access the GRF, including the criteria and process for invitations.
- Increase the financial resources dedicated to enabling refugee participation in the GRF and beyond, including funding for preparation, travel, accommodations, and interpretation. Actively remove administrative and legal barriers to participation, including providing visa support and ensuring that refugee representatives and local actors leading displacement response can travel safely and legally.
- Strengthen refugee representation in UNHCR governance structures. Enable direct refugee representation in the UNHCR ExCom or allow members of the Advisory Board of Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless Persons to take part in Standing Committee discussions (including through the reallocation of existing speaking slots).
- Transform the Advisory Board from a purely advisory platform into a representative body with genuine influence on UNHCR's highest-level policy decisions, by holding at least quarterly dialogues between the High Commissioner and the Board and requiring UNHCR to report annually to ExCom on how Board guidance has shaped policy, programming, and strategic direction.
- Establish a system to monitor how refugee participation mechanisms (GRF, the Advisory Board, the Task Team on Engagement with Organizations Led by Displaced and Stateless People, the recent Localization Guidelines) produce tangible changes in policy

and practice. Include this analysis in the High Commissioner's annual report to the UN General Assembly and ensure refugees can self-report on the quality and meaningfulness of their participation and leadership, and not only be evaluated by UNHCR.

- Ensure refugee and local actors' inclusion in the Humanitarian Reset process. Through more intentional convening and dialogue, ensure that RLOs and other local actors are systematically involved in the humanitarian reset discussions. Promote refugee leadership as a core pillar of system reform, not an add-on.

## **2. Reform UNHCR (funding) architecture to better support refugee and locally-led civil society.**

- Honor UNHCR's Grand Bargain commitment to allocate 25% of funding directly to local CSOs and RLOs, and publish disaggregated, transparent data on progress toward this target. Reduce UNHCR management costs, in line with Grand Bargain commitments, to increase the proportion of resources reaching affected populations.
- Establish dedicated budget lines for RLO and local NGO capacity investment, coordination efforts, and refugees' engagement in UNHCR budget and planning processes. Specifically, create a Coordination Budget Line to enable NGOs and RLOs to serve as co-leads in cluster coordination mechanisms. Create a Capacity Investment Budget Line to ensure equitable overhead allocations to all implementing RLOs and local NGOs when funding passes through national or international intermediaries – both for direct agreements and downstream sub-grants.
- Strengthen implementation, monitoring, and accountability of the UNHCR Localization Guidelines published in October 2025. The Guidelines represent a positive step forward by improving the language on equitable partnerships, risk-sharing, and the legitimacy of local NGOs and RLOs. However, they remain operationally weak: they are not binding, not measurable, and not externally accountable. They do not mandate structural reforms, nor do they secure new meaningful channels for increasing access to funds, decision-making power, or representation for refugee-led organizations. UNHCR should establish mechanisms and venues for RLOs and local CSOs to independently assess and report on adherence to the Guidelines, and ensure these inputs meaningfully influence UNHCR's plans and accountability systems. Public reporting on the implementation and impact of the Guidelines should be strengthened at country, regional, and global levels, including the possibility of independent evaluations. Annual reporting to ExCom and the UN General Assembly should include a dedicated section on how the Guidelines are being operationalized in the field, their impact on refugee-led and locally-led organizations, and progress toward localization objectives.

### **3. Expand and improve UNHCR funding mechanisms for RLOs.**

- Scale up the Refugee-Led Innovation Fund (RLIF) and Grant Agreement Framework. Increase both the grant ceilings (currently capped at \$12,000 and \$45,000, respectively) and the number of RLO recipients. UNHCR should substantially expand these mechanisms, given that only 24 out of 35,000 RLIF applicants were funded in 2024 and that funding to RLOs remains extremely low at 0.1% of UNHCR's total organizational income in 2024.<sup>21</sup>
- Simplify grant procedures, reporting formats, and compliance requirements to ensure small and medium-sized RLOs and local NGOs can access and manage UNHCR funding. Introduce additional flexibility in grant terms and documentation requirements, calibrated to organizational size and capacity.
- Increase transparency and usability of the onboarding and accreditation process for RLOs and local NGOs seeking to become UNHCR implementing partners.
- Develop accessible, multilingual guidance and toolkits for RLOs and local NGOs covering financial management, safeguarding, due diligence, and compliance.

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<sup>21</sup> Sturridge et al. (2025).

**FORCE 4  
REFUGEES**



**PASC**  
WORKING GROUP



**REFUGEE  
PROTECTION  
WATCH**