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Refugee voices vs. humanitarian choices: how much can refugee-led organizations redefine power and agency in post-2019 Lebanon?

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Abstract

In the humanitarian landscape, especially post-COVID-19, there has been a notable pivot towards inclusivity and participatory methodologies, emphasizing the pivotal role of refugee-led organizations (RLOs). In Lebanon, amidst persistent economic and political turmoil, RLOs serve as crucial support systems for Syrian and Palestinian refugees within an environment plagued by inconsistent refugee policies and heightened vulnerabilities. Academic discourse underscores the increasing significance of RLOs in humanitarian assistance, yet systemic hurdles such as power differentials and tokenistic inclusion have emerged, constraining their effectiveness and integration within the humanitarian sphere. This study critically examines the application of inclusivity within humanitarian operations, aligned with the principles outlined in the Agenda for Humanity, specifically scrutinizing how prevailing narratives and operational dynamics may marginalize RLOs in Lebanon, thereby impeding their efficacy. It endeavors to evaluate how RLOs can assert themselves as principal stakeholders in humanitarian endeavors, striving for a more equitable and pragmatic approach to power dynamics and strategic planning for refugee communities. Utilizing a qualitative and participatory methodology, this research engages with diverse RLOs in Lebanon, conducting interviews to realistically and practically frame their experiences, obstacles, and contributions within the humanitarian landscape across entrenched and often rigid hierarchies, power dynamics, and tokenism within Lebanon's broader humanitarian landscape.

Keywords Refugee-led, Refugees, Palestinian, Syrian, Agency, Power

Introduction

In the landscape of humanitarian assistance, the concept of empowerment has gained increasing recognition as a fundamental aspect of fostering resilience and sustainable development within displaced communities. Central to this notion is the emergence of refugee-led organizations (RLOs), which serve as powerful vehicles for empowerment by placing agency and autonomy directly into the hands of refugee communities themselves (El-Abed et al 2023; Alrustm and Kallas 2023 2023; Benson et al. 2023). In contrast to traditional approaches that often cast refugees solely as beneficiaries of aid, RLOs represent a paradigm shift towards more participatory and inclusive forms of decision-making and action (Ibid).

At the heart of RLOs lies a profound understanding of the challenges faced by refugees, born from the firsthand experiences of those within the community (Benson et al. 2023). These organizations are not merely responders to crises but proactive agents of change, uniquely positioned to identify and address the nuanced needs of their

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fellow refugees (Ibid). By operating and leading their own initiatives, RLOs empower refugees to assert control over their own destinies, reclaiming their dignity and sense of agency in the process.

However, despite their vital role in facilitating empowerment, RLOs have often been marginalized within the broader humanitarian landscape (Mencutek 2020; Sturridge et al 2023a; Sturridge et al 2023b). In our pursuit of inclusivity, we have too often overlooked the crucial contributions and perspectives offered by these organizations. While RLOs are increasingly viewed as legitimate stakeholders and decision-makers, they have frequently been relegated to the sidelines, viewed primarily as recipients of support rather than active participants in shaping their own futures. Hierarchies within the humanitarian sector, often perpetuated by Western or Global North dominance over funding resources, have significant implications for the efficacy and visibility of RLOs (Sullivan 2022; Caldwell and Sriskandarajah 2023; Banks et al 2024). While these RLOs may be deeply embedded within affected communities and possess firsthand knowledge of their needs, their ability to secure substantial funding and influence decision-making processes is frequently constrained by structural inequalities (Kallas 2023; Sturridge et al 2023b).

The allocation of funding resources tends to favor larger, more established humanitarian entities, many of which are headquartered in Western countries (Ibid). This creates a power dynamic that marginalizes RLOs, despite their potential to offer innovative solutions and foster greater community ownership in humanitarian interventions (Alio et al 2020). Additionally, the criteria set by donors for funding disbursement may not always align with the priorities or approaches of refugee-led initiatives, further limiting their ability to operate autonomously and effectively address the needs of their constituents (Ibid).

This imbalance in resource allocation not only hampers the sustainability and growth of RLOs but also raises questions about the authenticity of refugee participation and agency within the humanitarian landscape (Khan 2024; Kaga 2021). It underscores the need for greater recognition of diverse perspectives and voices within decision-making processes, as well as a shift towards a more equitable distribution of resources that empowers local actors to lead and shape their own responses to crises. In essence, the hegemony of Western or Global North control over funding resources for humanitarian organizations perpetuates hierarchies that inhibit the full realization of refugee-led initiatives' potential impact (Ibid). It highlights broader systemic issues within the humanitarian sector that must be addressed to foster genuine collaboration, empowerment, and effectiveness

in humanitarian action (OCHA 2021; Brooks 2016; Lilly 2023; Kabot 2021).

In Lebanon, a country infamously hosting the highest per capita of refugees in the world in the absence of a unified refugee policy (Janmyr 2017), with contested numbers placing Syrian refugees at 1.5 million (UNHCR 2024), Palestinians a little under 200,000 (UNRWA 2022; Abu Moghli 2022), and other minority refugee groups at a little over 11,000 (UNHCR 2024), conversations on the roles and impact of RLOs remains central amid debates around these groups' inclusion and livelihood prospects in a country that intentionally isolates them. Against this backdrop, as well as the backdrop of Lebanon's ongoing and worsening economic and political crises (Blanc 2023), this paper seeks to explore the extent to which there is transformative potential of RLOs in empowering refugee communities in application. Drawing on insights from the Agenda for Humanity, specifically its call to "be inclusive in decision making," we interrogate the notion of inclusivity within the humanitarian space and unpack the prevailing narratives and realities that marginalize RLOs and in turn restrict their impact. Through a critical examination of their roles, challenges, and contributions, we aim to explore the extent to which RLOs in Lebanon are able to secure their rightful place as key actors in shaping humanitarian responses. By doing so, we aspire to foster a more equitable and effective approach to discussing agency, power dynamics, and how to realistically plan for refugee communities in the country.

Methodology

This research applied a qualitative approach that is participatory, inclusive, and target group sensitive. This method ensured that the study findings were derived from a collective contribution from a wide range of target groups, triangulated and validated, and that gender considerations were integrated into the data collection and analysis methods where relevant. Purposeful sampling, also known as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, was adopted for the identification and selection of informants and participants with the aim of ensuring that they could contribute to the phenomenon of interest.

Interviews were conducted to explore the perspectives and experiences of individuals involved in RLOs operating in Lebanon. A total of 17 informants from these organizations were selected to participate in the study, ensuring representation from a diverse range of positions within various Palestinian and Syrian RLOs operating in the country. These organizations were chosen based on their status as either registered entities or informally operating/unregistered groups, allowing for an inclusive examination of the landscape of refugee-led initiatives in Lebanon. Interviews were conducted in adherence to

ethical principles, guided by the "do no harm" principle. Special attention was paid to ensuring the well-being and safety of participants throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from each informant prior to the interviews, with emphasis placed on voluntary participation and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Confidentiality measures were implemented to safeguard the anonymity of participants, including the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage practices. Additionally, efforts were made to minimize any potential harm or distress that could arise from discussing sensitive topics related to displacement and humanitarian work. Semi-structured interviews were utilized as the primary method of data collection, allowing for flexibility in exploring the experiences and perspectives of informants in depth. Interviews were conducted either in person or remotely, depending on the preferences and logistical constraints of participants. The interview guide was developed based on the research questions and aimed to elicit rich and nuanced responses regarding the roles, challenges, and impact of RLOs within and beyond their respective communities.

The positionality of the authors brings a diverse and enriching perspective to the study. The lead researcher, a non-refugee Lebanese, provides an insider's understanding of the local socio-political landscape and nuances. The second author, a European researcher, offers an external viewpoint, contributing comparative insights and methodological rigor. The corresponding author, a Palestinian with lived experience residing in Lebanon, brings an authentic and nuanced perspective on the refugee experience. This diversity enhances the study's depth, allowing for a comprehensive analysis of the issues. However, the varied backgrounds may also present challenges in fully capturing the lived realities of all refugee groups and ensuring an unbiased interpretation. Despite these limitations, the collaborative approach enriches the study, providing a multifaceted understanding of the complex dynamics at play.

Literature review
RLOs in the literature
In the literature, RLOs are increasingly acknowledged for their pivotal role in the humanitarian sector, demonstrating a profound capacity to address and adapt to the multifaceted challenges faced by refugees and asylum seekers. Their emergence and growing significance reflect a shift towards more inclusive and participatory approaches within the global refugee regime, highlighting the unique advantages these organizations bring to the table (El-Abed et al 2023; Mratschkowski and Breuckmann 2017).

RLOs exhibit diverse forms, sizes, and structures influenced by factors such as the country of operation, involvement of internal and external stakeholders, local policies and regulations, and availability of resources (El-Abed et al 2023; Betts et al 2021; Benson et al. 2023). The organizational structure of RLOs varies from formal to informal initiatives by displaced persons for humanitarian, development, and/or protection services, which are influenced by various policies and conditions (El-Abed et al 2023). Formal RLOs are typically established with a clear organizational structure, leadership hierarchy, and defined goals but remain a rarity in the field. (Najdi et al 2023; Pincock et al 2020). The majority of RLOs can be categorized as more informal and unregistered organizations. These organizations are primarily characterized by their formation around a leader who is adept at mobilizing a community through networking. Unlike the more formal organizations, these informal organizations operate on a more grassroots level, relying on informal networks and community cohesion to function and provide support to their members (Najdi et al 2023; Pincock et al 2020; Benson et al. 2023; Betts et al 2021).

Most RLOs have a flexible structure with a more decentralized leadership, enabling swift responses and leveraging local language, shared experiences, and community networks (Benson et al. 2023; Aburamadan 2022; Betts et al 2021). Adaptability and resilience are shown in responding to the evolving needs of refugees and navigating the changing political landscape (Mratschkowski and Breuckmann 2017). The structure and formation of RLOs are influenced by a variety of factors, including target audience, size, legal status, financial sources, leadership, and the organization's area of activities. This process heavily relies on the leadership of RLOs, and the registration of an organization is influenced by social capital, individual contacts, education, and social status. An entity's legal standing, in turn, affects the kind of money that is accessible and the size of the organization (El-Abed et al 2023; Benson et al. 2023).

Overall, RLOs aim to provide individuals with easy-to-access services, particularly those who face significant barriers to receiving the assistance they require. They have a strong relationship with the community and understand the cultural feel of the area. Their assistance is comprehensive and is completely focused on what the community requires. They provide critical assistance when things get tough, as well as game-changing solutions for a better life (Mratschkowski and Breuckmann 2017; El-Abed et al 2023). Moreover, RLOs possess expertise in effectively maneuvering through various legal, political, and financial challenges that may emerge (Alrustm and Kallas 2023 2023; El-Abed et al 2023).

RLOs utilize advocacy strategies to bring attention to underrepresented community issues, rallying support and influencing policies to address pressing needs

(El-Abed et al 2023). The empowerment achieved through advocacy enables refugees to actively participate in decision-making processes and advocate for themselves and their communities, ultimately improving their ability to voice their interests (Lenette et al 2020; Milner et al 2022). Advocacy groups enable people with refugee experiences to participate in decision-making processes, which can promote self-advocacy. Self-advocacy is standing up for oneself, voicing one's demands, and supporting others when they are mistreated. The notion is crucial for helping people become independent and feel like oneself, enabling individuals to speak up with confidence in a variety of situations (Atkinson 2002; Seithel 2004). In the context of refugee advocacy, self-representation and participation are critical components that empower refugees, especially young people, to voice their concerns and advocate for their rights (Lenette et al 2020; Betts et al 2021; Milner et al 2022).

Post-2019, the international community began to recognize the value of RLOs due to their unique awareness, local connections, and contextual knowledge, offering advantages over traditional international organizations during the crisis and leading to a growing involvement of refugees participation in international debates and policymaking such as the Global Refugee Network (El-Abed et al 2023; Benson et al. 2023; Milner et al 2022). Despite the increasing development of RLOs, they still encounter numerous challenges and have not reached full establishment. The global refugee regime consists of diverse stakeholders with varying interests and levels of influence. These power dynamics can present obstacles within the larger political and social environment in which RLOs function. Inclusive participation in dialogs and decision-making processes needs to be prioritized.

Tokenism and limitations of RLOs
Tokenism is broadly understood as the practice of making only a symbolic effort to be inclusive to minorities, especially by recruiting a small number of people from underrepresented groups, to give the appearance of equality within a predominantly majority group. In the context of refugees, this means involving them in decision-making processes or policy platforms in a superficial manner that does not genuinely consider their input or grant them meaningful influence (Rother and Steinhilper 2019; Bahram 2020). Tokenism, in the context of RLOs, can be seen as a phenomenon where international actors may superficially engage with or acknowledge RLOs to meet the inclusion or participation criteria without providing substantial support or recognition (Pincock et al 2021). Furthermore, immigrant RLOs may sometimes be invited to participate in initiatives or events as a form of symbolic representation rather than being genuinely included or

supported and ultimately being used as a "token minority" to showcase diversity or inclusivity without receiving substantial resources or recognition as legitimate contributors within the human services sector (Pincock et al 2021; Kirsch et al 2023). Tokenism not only undermines the integrity of inclusion efforts but also imposes significant limitations on the operational and strategic capacities of RLOs. Limitations of RLOs are fundamentally related to challenges in securing funding, issues of perception, administrative complexities, and isolation. RLOs encounter significant obstacles in securing funding and financial support, attributed to their precarious regulatory status, discrimination in funding allocation, and a lack of formal recognition by international actors (Sturridge et al 2023b; Pincock et al 2021; Rother and Steinhilper 2019). This issue is further highlighted by the temporary and unpredictable nature of support, which challenges the ability of RLOs to maintain their advocacy efforts and represent refugee voices effectively in policy platforms (Bahram 2020). Donors often view RLOs as beneficiaries rather than capable partners in co-creating solutions which poses a serious barrier for RLOs.

The lack of a clear policy framework for collaborating with RLOs exacerbates this problem by limiting their recognition and weakening their negotiating position in the humanitarian sector (Sturridge et al 2023b; Pincock et al 2021). RLOs are at risk of being tokenized or favored as "favorite refugees" by policymakers and officials. This risk of tokenization and the potential of being sought out by officials as "favorite refugees" might seriously undermine their agency and reduce the capacity to effectively advocate for true refugee inclusion (Bahram 2020; Pincock et al 2021). Additionally, RLOs face structural and administrative challenges such as complex submission requirements, limited access to funding information, and language barriers. The competition with larger international organizations fosters mistrust and can lead to perceptions of unfairness. The competitive environment disproportionately affects smaller RLOs, limiting their access to critical resources and opportunities for assistance (Sturridge et al 2023b; Pincock et al 2021). RLOs frequently feel isolated as a result of disparity in location and a lack of networking opportunities, which limits collaboration and resource sharing. This isolation is exacerbated by the difficulties in bridging physical, informational, communicational, and cultural gaps with donors, which impact their visibility and relationship-building efforts (Bahram 2020; Sturridge et al 2023b; Pincock et al 2021).

Tokenism significantly impacts the agency and effectiveness of RLOs in a way which limits their capacity to genuinely represent and advocate for refugee interests (Bahram 2020). This undermines the autonomy of RLOs

and diminishes their credibility and influence in policy-making and humanitarian efforts as well as restricting their potential to drive meaningful change (Bahram 2020; Pincock et al 2021). However, RLOs are not passive recipients in the humanitarian landscape, but rather proactive agents of change, having developed strong strategies to overcome tokenism and assert their agency and effectiveness. By leveraging their own networks and community integration, RLOs establish themselves as vital providers of social protection, bypassing traditional humanitarian governance structures (Pincock et al 2021; Sturridge et al 2023b). While obstacles such as limited funding may hinder the operations of RLOs, they can compensate for it through their cultural competency, shared language, and community integration.

This unique advantage allows RLOs to operate as grassroots initiatives supported by the refugee community, enhancing their agency and effectiveness within their communities (Sturridge et al 2023b). RLOs take strategic measures to strengthen their influence and counter tokenism. By prioritizing the establishment of meaningful participation to ensure effective engagement, advocating for genuine representation that includes diverse refugee voices, and forming strategic alliances that enable direct self-representation, RLOs are actively dismantling the barriers of tokenism and amplifying their impact in the humanitarian sector. RLOs also raise awareness about the negative effects of tokenism and facilitate critical community dialogs to ensure that their advocacy is genuine and effective (Bahram 2020).

Theoretical framework

The analysis of this study is framed against Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman 2000). This theory is rooted in social work and community psychology and provides a comprehensive lens through which to understand the processes and dynamics involved in fostering empowerment within marginalized populations (Ibid). Empowerment theory offers a comprehensive framework for understanding the multifaceted processes involved in fostering empowerment within marginalized populations, particularly within the context of RLOs. This theoretical lens underscores several key components that are instrumental in empowering refugee communities.

Firstly, this theory emphasizes the significance of recognizing and enhancing the power and agency of individuals and communities (Ibid). RLOs serve as vital platforms through which refugees can assert their agency, reclaim control over their lives, and actively participate in decision-making processes that directly affect them. Furthermore, this theory highlights the importance of resource mobilization in facilitating empowerment (Ibid). RLOs often play a pivotal role in mobilizing resources—both

tangible and intangible—within refugee communities. Whether through providing access to essential services, advocating for rights and entitlements, or fostering social support networks, analyzing the resource mobilization efforts of RLOs can provide valuable insights into their effectiveness in empowering refugees.

Additionally, Empowerment Theory underscores the significance of participatory approaches in promoting empowerment (Perkins and Zimmerman 1995). RLOs are characterized by their participatory nature, involving refugees in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and initiatives. By examining the extent to which RLOs engage in participatory processes, we can gain a deeper understanding of their capacity to empower refugee communities. Finally, this theory recognizes the need for addressing structural barriers and inequalities to achieve lasting empowerment (Ibid). RLOs often advocate for systemic changes and challenge oppressive structures that perpetuate marginalization and exclusion. By analyzing the advocacy and policy efforts of RLOs, we can illuminate their role in promoting structural change and advancing the rights and interests of refugees.

This theory provides a valuable framework for comprehensively analyzing the mechanisms through which RLOs empower refugee communities. By exploring power dynamics, resource mobilization, participatory processes, and efforts towards structural change, we can gain insights into the transformative potential of RLOs in fostering resilience and agency among displaced populations. By employing Empowerment Theory as a theoretical framework, the paper can systematically analyze the mechanisms through which RLOs empower refugee communities and contribute to their resilience and well-being realistically and in application. Additionally, this framework can inform discussions around the challenges and limitations faced by RLOs in their efforts to promote empowerment, as well as opportunities for enhancing their impact in the humanitarian landscape.

The role of RLOs in complementing and challenging traditional humanitarian approaches in Lebanon

Traditional humanitarian responses, often led by international organizations and NGOs, have historically encountered limitations in effectively addressing the diverse needs of refugee communities (Coppi 2018; Lough et al 2022; Khaled 2021). These approaches, marked by top-down decision-making and bureaucratic structures, frequently fail to fully engage refugees as active participants in shaping their own destinies (Ibid). Consequently, gaps in service provision and protection persist, particularly in complex and volatile environments such as conflict zones and public health crises like COVID-19 (Balqis-Ali et al 2021; Basterra 2023). In contrast, RLOs emerge

as dynamic entities that complement and challenge conventional humanitarian paradigms (Sturridge et al 2023a; Acker 2023). RLOs thrive in adversity, operating where traditional actors may struggle to reach. Whether navigating through armed conflict or responding to global health emergencies, RLOs demonstrate remarkable adaptability and resilience, ensuring that vital support and protection continue to reach vulnerable populations (Ibid).

One of the primary shortcomings of traditional collective action lies in its inability to establish equitable responsibility-sharing policies for refugees on a global and regional scale. RLOs offer a transformative alternative, empowering refugees as agents of change within their communities. Through the formation of local organizations and networks, refugees mobilize collective action to advocate for their rights, combat corruption, and address systemic injustices. In doing so, they enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of humanitarian efforts, fostering a more sustainable approach to refugee support (Aburamadan 2022; Cordoba Montoya 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the invaluable contributions of RLOs in mitigating the impacts of crises on refugee populations. While international agencies and NGOs have traditionally favored partnerships with established entities, the pandemic has highlighted the unique strengths of RLOs in bridging gaps and delivering essential services (Betts et al 2021). This newfound recognition underscores the imperative for increased collaboration and support for RLOs, ensuring their continued resilience and impact beyond the immediate crisis response (El-Abed et al 2023; Benson et al. 2023).

Amidst the challenges of displacement and uncertainty, refugees exhibit remarkable resilience and resourcefulness in forming and sustaining RLOs. Faced with protracted displacement and inadequate support systems, refugees harness their inherent drive for independence and stability to cultivate community-based solutions. These grassroots initiatives not only address immediate needs but also foster a sense of empowerment and self-determination among refugee populations, challenging narratives of victimhood and dependency (Roother and Steinhilper 2019; Türk et al 2016). Central to the Agenda for Humanity is the principle of leaving no one behind, underscoring the moral imperative to prioritize the needs of the most marginalized and vulnerable populations. In this context, the role of RLOs assumes paramount importance, as they are deeply embedded within the communities they serve and possess invaluable insights into local dynamics and needs. Integrating RLOs into the humanitarian system is therefore not merely advantageous but essential, necessitating the provision of adequate resources, support, and recognition to amplify

their impact and uphold humanitarian commitments on a global scale (Sturridge et al. 2023a, 2023b; Pincock et al 2021; Cordoba Montoya 2017).

In Lebanon, both Palestinian and Syrian refugees contend with daunting challenges stemming from limited access to resources, social services, and legal protections. In this context, RLOs have emerged as indispensable actors, providing crucial protection and assistance to their respective communities (Najdi et al 2023; El-Abed et al 2023). Established entities which have been operating for several years demonstrate remarkable effectiveness in addressing the distinct needs of Palestinian and Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Sharif 2017; Najdi et al 2023; Mourtada 2023). During the COVID-19 pandemic, RLOs in Lebanon have played a pivotal role in bridging gaps left by international organizations and NGOs, ensuring the continuity of services and extending material support to refugees who have lost their means of livelihood. These organizations have mobilized to address deficiencies in healthcare, education, and protection, while also disseminating essential information about the virus in languages accessible to refugees, thus heightening awareness and preventing misinformation (El-Abed et al 2023).

Moreover, RLOs have been at the forefront of advocating for meaningful participation in decision-making processes that directly impact their communities. By empowering refugees and amplifying their voices in policy discussions and program design, RLOs challenge the traditional provider-beneficiary dynamic, advocating for a more inclusive and transformative humanitarian response framework (Najdi et al 2023; Lenette et al 2020; Milner et al 2022). In Lebanon specifically, the advocacy efforts of RLOs have catalyzed a significant shift in the dynamics of humanitarian aid provision. Beyond merely filling service gaps, these organizations ensure that interventions are culturally sensitive, accessible, and aligned with the diverse needs of the refugee population (El-Abed et al 2023; Sukkari 2023).

Furthermore, RLOs in Lebanon transcend their immediate humanitarian roles, influencing broader sociopolitical issues and challenging conventional narratives of refugees as passive recipients. By engaging with local communities and fostering a sense of ownership and agency, RLOs exemplify the autonomy and resilience of displaced populations, offering a valuable lesson for global humanitarian practices (El-Abed et al 2023; Sukkari 2023). However, challenges persist within the RLO landscape in Lebanon. Political affiliations often intersect with humanitarian work, complicating efforts to maintain impartiality and neutrality. Additionally, the proliferation of RLOs and the fragmentation of the refugee population lead to duplication of efforts and inefficient resource allocation. Despite these challenges,

RLOs remain critical in filling the gaps left by UNRWA and UNHCR, particularly in the absence of effective state support (Sharif 2017; Najdi et al 2023; Mourtada 2023).

Despite these challenges, RLOs in Lebanon continue to navigate complex geopolitical and socio-cultural landscapes, driven by a sense of purpose and commitment to their communities. Women-led initiatives are particularly prevalent among Palestinian RLOs, while Syrian RLOs tend to be more youth-led, reflecting underlying political and generational dynamics.

Findings and analysis

Unpacking findings against the backdrop of Lebanon's post-2019 era requires an overview of its ongoing intersectional and complex political and economic crises. The country has faced a severe economic downturn marked by hyperinflation, currency devaluation, and widespread poverty (Hashim et al. 2022). The political landscape is equally turbulent, characterized by a prolonged political vacuum due to the inability to form a stable government, which has paralyzed decision-making and effective governance (Ibid). The catastrophic Beirut port explosion in August 2020 further compounded these issues, causing massive destruction, loss of life, and deepening public distrust in the government due to its perceived negligence and corruption (Ibid).

Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has strained an already fragile healthcare system, exacerbating the socioeconomic hardships faced by the population (Bajis et al 2023). These compounded crises have significantly impacted both local and refugee communities, altering the operational capacities and strategic priorities of RLOs. In this volatile environment, they navigate the challenges posed by Lebanon's instability, demonstrating adaptability while bridging local and international efforts. Examining how these organizations function amidst Lebanon's political vacuum, economic collapse, and public health crisis provides valuable insights into their leadership, advocacy roles, and the broader implications for power dynamics and visibility within the refugee and host communities.

Critical localism, funding, and recognition

RLOs embody critical localism, operating within the heart of the communities they serve, and offering invaluable insights into the specific needs, cultural nuances, and dynamics of displaced populations (Pincock et al 2020). However, despite their inherent advantages, these organizations face several challenges and limitations within the broader humanitarian aid system. While RLOs possess a deep understanding of local contexts, they often lack the resources and capacity to address complex humanitarian needs comprehensively (Ibid). Operating on modest

budgets and relying heavily on volunteer efforts, these organizations struggle to scale up their operations or sustain long-term programs (Sturridge 2023b). Limited access to funding, technical expertise, and institutional support further exacerbates these challenges, hindering their ability to deliver effective aid (Ibid). As the head of a Palestinian RLO in Lebanon explains:

> *[...] of course we know what we want, and more importantly, what we need. But tell me how I can make that happen when our budgets are so small, when we are volunteer-run, when we have such a high turnover of people because we cannot compensate them for their time and energy. Give me UNHCR's budget, give me UNRWA's budget, I can make things happen and also make sure that they are more connected to people's voices. It is not so much that we are not seen, because this is changing. It is mostly that we are under-resourced, and more importantly made to feel like any money or resources no matter how scarce, is a privilege we need to be grateful for. (Interview, 2023).*

Whether RLOs, movements, or representative committees, these entities frequently encounter skepticism, restriction, and lack of recognition and enablement from larger, more established actors within the humanitarian sector (Harley and Hobbs 2020). Despite their grassroots connections and firsthand experience, they may struggle to gain credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of donors, governments, and international humanitarian organizations that often, according to a team member at a Syrian-led RLO in Lebanon "give us [RLOs] a seat at the decision-making table in order to tick some fake participatory box" (Interview, 2023). This lack of recognition not only undermines their ability to access funding and resources but also marginalizes their voices in decision-making processes, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and dependency masked by broader forms of tokenism and a false sense of agency (Brown and Donini 2014). As one respondent from a Syrian RLO shares:

> *[...] while we do get a little money here and there, and we do feel an overall sense of achievement and visibility when we do, there remains a major lack in understanding among larger actors around what true representation really looks like. They make us feel as though us being there is an achievement of theirs, or a form of charity. Even when we are at the table, we feel excluded. Even when we do get a chance to speak, no one is taking notes, no one is engaging with what we say. It's not just RLOs and not just Syrians. Look at the UNHCR specialized committees for other groups. It's been more than ten*

years since some of them were established. We are all in the same reality of being made to 'feel' like we have agency, as though to make us feel better about ourselves. But dare we ask for too much? Then we are unreasonable and difficult to work with. (Interview, 2023).

An important "way around" funding limitations and challenges to true and effective participation is understood by RLOs to mean that they lack effective coordination and collaboration between RLOs and other stakeholders—as respondents insist that this is essential for maximizing impact, avoiding duplication of efforts, as well as the unnecessary strain and spread of already-limited financial resources. As one respondent from a Palestinian RLO affirms:

[...] we are well-aware that we could be more organized. We definitely should be able to talk. But what the humanitarian space does not understand is that this can be challenging for many reasons – the most important of which is the competition over limited financial resources allocated to RLOs. If we collaborated more, that would mean we would pull in funding more, and that we could help and support more members from our community. We need to show more of a structured, organized and united front. We know this, but it is easier said than done. And this impacts everything, including our ability to really serve as a block that is accounted for. (Interview, 2023).

Along these lines, differing priorities, communication barriers, and power dynamics often impede meaningful partnerships between the RLOs themselves—often reflective of the complexities within refugee communities that are either not understood to larger humanitarian actors or quite simply intentionally overlooked due to the complexity of engaging with refugee groups in all their diversity. A community leader and Syrian RLO senior member explains:

[...] it is not that we all as Syrians have the same priorities. I bet the humanitarian space wishes we did though, right? They wonder why all Syrian RLOs and movements don't collaborate with each other, don't become one larger entity, or don't negotiate together. The truth of the matter is, we are a diverse and complex population across belief systems, political views, socioeconomic standings, cultural practices and priorities. The assumption that there is no conflict of interest, disagreement, diversity of opinion/ideology or competition over resources between Syrian RLOs in Lebanon, would be as naive as to assume that all Lebanese people agree on their priorities, needs

and interests. Do you see how ridiculous that sounds to us? Do you see how absolutely detached the 'big' humanitarian actors are? (Interview, 2023).

As such, RLOs find themselves sidelined or undervalued in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, limiting their influence and ability to contribute to broader strategic initiatives due to what the humanitarian space perceives as a lack of "clear, unified, and comprehensive vision and messaging." (Interview, 2023).

RLOs in Lebanon and beyond face the delicate task of balancing local priorities and global humanitarian agendas. While their proximity to affected communities allows for greater responsiveness to immediate needs and cultural sensitivities, they remain at a crossroad when it comes to navigating external expectations, donor requirements, and broader humanitarian frameworks. This balancing act requires strategic decision-making and advocacy efforts to ensure that local voices are heard and respected within the broader aid system—a balance this study found is still central to the internal conflict of RLOs as rejecting broader "colonial" and "Western" approaches that international humanitarian organizations perceivably adopt in their responses. As one Syrian community member explains:

[...] the thing is we don't agree with them, the international humanitarian organizations and UN agencies. Our very existence is because we don't agree with them; it is to challenge them and their top down and 'one size fits all' approaches. But then we find that in rejecting them entirely, we are also shooting ourselves in the foot. We know we need to compromise, but as I told you, when we compromise we are compromised, no? We end up agreeing to things that go against our beliefs in order to ensure we get funding, we get invited to a meeting, we get access to larger humanitarian entities. But then what? Are we still refugee-led? Or are we being led? You tell me. You tell me who has the power here. (Interview, 2023).

One of the most pressing challenges faced by RLOs in Lebanon remains the difficulty in accessing sustainable funding streams. "Many of us operate on shoestring budgets, relying on random donations, grants, and volunteer efforts to sustain our activities," a respondent from a Palestinian RLO shares, "[...] securing long-term funding commitments is particularly challenging, as we often lack the institutional capacity and track record required to compete with larger, more established actors for funding opportunities." (Interview, 2023). The unpredictable nature of funding exacerbates financial insecurity, hindering the ability of RLOs to plan and implement impactful

programs, and more importantly reliably strategize and make commitments to the communities they intend to serve. This has not only undermined the credibility and legitimacy of these organizations but has also perpetuated a cycle of dependency on external aid providers and their conditions. A Syrian respondent elaborates:

> *[...] our funding is not secure, and thus we are not secure. We cannot be reliable, and we cannot move to a stage where we compete for larger funds with organizations that have a more secure track record. And when you are not secure, an evident power dynamic is there, one where you are certainly not on an equal footing, and one where your 'agency' – whatever that means in this case – is not really yours you know? If we are bouncing around from one small grant to the next, we are at the mercy of larger humanitarian organizations. And their money comes with a facade of agency, but more so with conditions because they are more powerful. While they could give us the power, they prefer to retain it. It's almost as though they want us to live in an illusion that we control our own destiny, while in fact they are the puppet masters. I know I sound dramatic, but it's how we feel. (Interview, 2023).*

Without adequate recognition, RLOs in Lebanon face an uphill battle in advocating for their priorities, accessing resources, and influencing broader humanitarian policies and strategies. Importantly, they find themselves at the center of a power struggle and resistance from traditional aid actors, co-option, and tokenism. Donor priorities and funding criteria often dictate the focus and scope of programming, leaving little room for flexibility or responsiveness to local needs (Alrustm and Kallas 2023 2023). Moreover, the pressure to conform to donor expectations may compromise the autonomy and independence of refugee-led organizations, undermining their ability to advocate for the interests of their communities effectively (Ibid). This dependency perpetuates unequal power dynamics within the humanitarian aid system, constraining the agency and impact of RLOs. As a board member of a Palestinian-led RLO elaborates:

> *[...] as I'm sure you've learned, funding remains an issue for us. Funding is the main component necessary when it comes to exercising agency and making a true shift in the power dynamics within the humanitarian system. As I'm sure my colleagues in the space have told you, we unfortunately find yourselves at the center of being pleasers – just so that we can appeal to the donors and have a seat at the table. We end up, at times, needing to compromise so much that we feel like we are there to*

> *tick a box, or even more dangerously, to once again make UN agencies and humanitarian actors look sympathetic, 'woke' and participatory. It's frustrating and pathetic to think about. Sometimes, we feel like convenient vessels for them to be able to implement their agendas through a 'fake' RLO lens. (Interview, 2023).*

Limited access to funding and resources hampers the capacity-building and organizational development efforts of RLOs (Mencutek 2020; Kallas 2023). Without adequate support for training, staff development, and infrastructure, the members of these organizations describe an ongoing and compounded struggle to strengthen their institutional capacity and sustainability. More importantly, they describe an inability to "[...] make promises to the community, and serve as their [the community's] lifeline or support system" (Interview, 2023). High staff turnover rates, lack of formal governance structures, and limited access to technical expertise further impede organizational growth and effectiveness according to testimonies—a matter exponentially linked to the lack of a steady funding flow first, and a lack of inclusion and celebration within the broader humanitarian space second. As a result, respondents share that this plays out in an inability to scale up their operations, expand reach, and navigate complex and evolving humanitarian contexts despite their lived intersectional knowledge and experiences as members of the communities they serve (Alio et al 2020; Betts et al 2021). The same board member shares:

> *[...] the thing is that the humanitarian landscape affecting us is also evolving. As Palestinians, our lives and livelihoods are at risk every day. Add the layer of post 2019-Lebanon to this and imagine how challenging it is to adapt. When a crisis like the economic crisis in Lebanon hits, or COVID-19 hits, or the Beirut Port explosion hits, larger humanitarian actors receive increases in funding automatically. They scale up their operations automatically. They increase their staff capacity automatically. You would think that this would trickle down to us, or that they would seek us out as RLOs more, but this is not the case. If anything, during the times where we need to exercise our agency the most, and where power needs to be given back to us, we are sidelined – basically told we do not have the 'expertise' or 'advanced knowledge' to navigate the complexities of an escalating crisis. How hypocritical is this? How do you not see right through the humanitarian space when this happens? How do they not see all the valuable work we did during COVID-19? Imagine what we could do with more resources. (Interview, 2023).*

Political contestation of localization

While localization emphasizes the importance of empowering local actors, including RLOs in decision-making processes, resource allocation, and program implementation, its implementation faces significant barriers, particularly in the realm of political contestation enshrined in power dynamics and resistance from traditional aid actors (Milner 2021; Monforte and Maestri 2023; Milner and Wojnarowicz 2017). Traditional actors, including UN agencies, international NGOs, and donor agencies, not only wield significant power and influence within the humanitarian system but even more so are tainted by territoriality around their mandates and positioning within the broader humanitarian skeleton. As such, they may perceive localization as a threat to their authority, funding streams, and established practices. Resistance from these actors can manifest in various forms, such as reluctance to cede control and skepticism about the capacity of local actors such as RLOs. Often enough, these concerns are framed under *concerns* around these local actors' accountability, professionalism, and expertise. A founding member of a Syrian RLO explains:

> *[...] It's as though they are afraid to let us in because we could expose them – expose the fact that they are really so incredibly detached from the communities they serve. Even more dangerously maybe, expose the fact that the humanitarian system – especially the UN – does not intend on moving us out of the dire circumstances we are in, but rather contain us while we are there. They make us feel like it's their turf, and that they do not really want us taking away from their funding, their operations. It's as though they don't want to share. But why? If you want real access and input in your programming, we are the answer. If you want superficial access to tick some boxes, then that is a different story. (Interview, 2023).*

Beyond resistance from traditional humanitarian actors, RLOs fall in many cases, at the center of government interference and regulation—not just when it comes to refugee management (or mismanagement), but beyond that to how refugees mobilize, legitimize, and communicate their lived experiences and needs. In Lebanon, a country with no unified refugee policy, and one that has been strategically ambiguous to the refugee question for years, Syrians and Palestinians are isolated from every aspect of civic, economic, and political life (Nassar and Stel 2019; Stel 2020; Stel 2021). While Lebanon insists on maintaining this form of ambiguity when it comes to refugee management, it still plays an essential role in shaping the operating environment for humanitarian actors, including RLOs. Along these lines, Lebanon has long-viewed any form of integration or localization initiatives from within the refugee community with suspicion, particularly when they perceive them as undermining government authority or challenging propagated narratives or public sentiments. As such, testimonials highlight the fact that Lebanon has imposed restrictive regulations, bureaucratic hurdles, or even outright bans on RLOs, limiting their ability to operate effectively and independently. On this point, a founding member of a self-described "informal" refugee support group and organization elaborates:

> *[...] the Lebanese government does not want us here, obviously. We are never made to feel welcome. If we cannot join the labor force, open a bank account, join a union or have any rights, I think it's obvious that any attempt from us to get organized or mobilize for our rights is perceived as a threat to Lebanese society and its 'security.' As such, we cannot register a humanitarian organization easily, and even if the opportunity presents itself, and administrative offices actually head to our request, we need Lebanese people on board, and they also leverage us and have their own sets of asks. It's a complicated web in Lebanon when it comes to registration, and while it is easy to set up an NGO, it is an entirely different story when it comes to an RLO. Any form of legitimacy for us is resisted, and any form of participation in our own fate is perceived as dangerous to the Lebanese government. (Interview, 2023).*

In contexts marked by political instability, conflict, or fragility such as Lebanon, localization efforts face multiple barriers (Pincock et al 2020). Power struggles, insecurity, and shifting political alliances, sentiments, and agendas can disrupt partnerships and impede the ability of RLOs to operate safely and effectively. For Syrian and Palestinian RLOs, being perceived as politically partisan or aligned with certain factions exposes them to risks of harassment, deliberate targeting, or violence from the host community and local political movements. A member of a North Lebanon-based Syrian RLO shares that their premises were "targeted by the local political community" during the period where Syrian elections were held, and local Syrian groups had been parading in the streets with political banners and posters. He shares:

> *[...] when the Syrian elections were taking place a while ago, and Syrians were going across the country to vote in vans, and were holding political rallies in many regions, our premises, despite the fact that we are a humanitarian entity, were ransacked and looted. We were told it was because locals thought we were a 'political' entity that supported the regime*

[...] during the peak of anti-Syrian movements across the country just a couple years ago and until recently, our premises were also targeted by locals who told us to 'go home' – accusing us of being spies and traitors based on what their local and national political leaders had been telling them. (Interview, 2023).

Intersectionality, positionality, and power dynamics

In Lebanon, the complex web of structural inequality, intersectionality, and identity politics forms the backdrop against which RLOs navigate their roles within Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities and the broader humanitarian sector (Scala 2022; Salloukh 2016). These intertwined factors shape the lived experiences of refugees and significantly influence the advocacy efforts and positionality of RLOs within Lebanon's humanitarian landscape. Lebanon's political, economic, and social structures perpetuate systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect marginalized communities, including refugees (Ibid). Discriminatory policies and practices, such as restrictive labor laws and limited access to essential services, exacerbate the vulnerabilities of refugees, amplifying their marginalization and disenfranchisement (Kikano et al 2021; Hanafi et al 2012). Structural inequality not only limits refugees' opportunities for socioeconomic advancement but also shapes power dynamics within the humanitarian sector, influencing the resources available to RLOs and their capacity to address the diverse needs of their constituencies. According to respondents, this power dynamic is "well-known and exploited" within the humanitarian space. As a Syrian member of well-established RLO shares:

[...] the humanitarian landscape is well aware of how isolated we are as refugees from Lebanese society, and how limited our options are. Lebanese local NGOs know this too of course. It is because of the structural and systemic inequality we endure, as well as our isolation and lack of integration, that I believe they think giving us 'something is better than nothing' in a twisted way. Because we are once again so cut off, we are made to feel like we should be grateful for any type of agency or support we receive – even if esthetic or ineffective. Humanitarian actors feel like the little agency and power they give us is 'very generous' of them. You see, when you are at the bottom of the barrel, you are already looked down upon so much that attempts to gain credibility and negotiate equally are out of reach. Even when you are at the table, you are made to feel like a charity case. (Interview, 2023).

Refugee communities in Lebanon are characterized by intersecting identities shaped by factors such as gender, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status, and displacement status (Linn 2020; Diab et al 2024; Allouche 2017). Intersectionality emphasizes the interconnected nature of these identities and recognizes that individuals experience privilege and oppression differently based on the intersections of their identities (Taha 2019; Motalebi and Martin-Shields 2023). For RLOs, understanding the intersecting dimensions of identity is crucial for effectively advocating for the diverse needs and priorities of their constituencies (Ibid). However, navigating these complexities presents challenges as RLOs strive to ensure inclusivity and address the intersecting forms of discrimination faced by different groups within refugee communities. While well-aware of the need to be more representative and inclusive of refugee sub-groups, Palestinian and Syrian RLOs in Lebanon share what they describe as an overall inability to account for diversity within the community with the limited resources they have—a matter that renders them:

[...] inclusive in the sense that we do not leave anyone out intentionally, but unfortunately, in many cases, not inclusive in the sense that we can account for diversity within the community intentionally and strategically. (Interview, 2023).

Moreover, intersectional identities of RLO members and leaders significantly influence their positionality within the humanitarian space, as findings point to the fact that RLOs led by perceivably "marginalized" individuals from within the community often struggle to access resources and opportunities compared to larger, more established RLOs. To this point, positionality influences questions of representation and accountability within RLOs, as leaders and decision-makers may be drawn from specific segments of the refugee population, potentially excluding marginalized voices or perpetuating hierarchies of power within RLOs themselves. In parallel to intersectional identities, identity politics was highlighted as playing a central role in shaping social movements and advocacy efforts within refugee communities in Lebanon (Najdi et al 2023). While RLOs were found to mobilize around shared identities and experiences, utilizing collective identities as a basis for organizing and advocating for their rights, identity politics was found to be divisive, as competing interests and agendas within refugee communities emerge based on divergent identities and experiences. While negotiating these tensions requires RLOs to engage in nuanced and inclusive approaches that recognize the multiplicity of identities and prioritize solidarity and collective action, RLOs across the country framed this as a "major challenge" that hinders RLOs' ability to

negotiate with larger humanitarian actors "as a block." A Palestinian participant from Syria who is active in a local RLO elaborates:

[...] We are diverse. You know this. Even if we are one population, we have our own sets of challenges internally and our differences. While we are diverse and complex, as you know, the humanitarian space lumps us all together as one homogenous group. By doing so, they assume that every RLO is capable of representing every Palestinian – or that Palestinian RLOs all have the same mission and vision. Just look at us as Palestinians from Lebanon and Palestinians from Syria. We clash all the time. We cannot agree. When we express this to larger humanitarian actors, this is framed as an inconvenience to them – and they have the power. I'm not saying that they necessarily don't understand how diverse we are, I'm just saying that it messes up their box ticking, their checklists, and their rigid templates for what 'participatory approaches' through RLOs look like. Add gender dimensions to this, ability dimensions or age, and you are in an entirely bigger mess when it comes to the question of representativeness of RLOs. (Interview, 2023).

Against this backdrop, RLOs in Lebanon operate within contexts of dependency and patronage, where their access to resources, partnerships, and support is contingent upon relationships with more powerful actors operating across the humanitarian space in the country. Dependency relationships were found to continue to undermine the autonomy and self-determination of Palestinian and Syrian RLOs, as they continue to be compelled to align their agendas and activities with the priorities of donor-funded projects and their expectations. As such, according to testimonies, RLOs in Lebanon navigate complex insider-outsider dynamics within both the refugee communities they serve and the humanitarian sector. A founding member of a Syrian RLO intricately describes this balance:

[...] As insiders, we possess intimate knowledge of community dynamics, cultural norms, and localized needs. However, we may also be perceived as outsiders by traditional humanitarian actors, particularly if we lack formal credentials or institutional affiliations. Negotiating insider-outsider dynamics requires us [RLOs] to strike a delicate balance between asserting our expertise and building alliances with external partners, while also maintaining our credibility and legitimacy within the communities we serve. The thing is that we try to do all of this, while also maintaining a sense of agency and integ-

rity as much as possible. It's tough. In many cases, it's conflicting. For many members of the communities we serve we are perceived as traitors if we comply too much with what the broader humanitarian space wants, or if we partner with larger actors they do not particularly trust or like. (Interview, 2023).

Discussion and concluding remarks

Amidst Lebanon's severe economic and political crises, this research aimed to investigate the true impact, role, and agency of RLOs in empowering refugee communities within Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities. While this paper examines the broader humanitarian space's adherence to the inclusivity principles advocated by the Agenda for Humanity, an in-depth qualitative analysis of how RLOs tackle prevailing narratives and institutional obstacles finds that power dynamics within the humanitarian space, as well as the tokenization of RLOs, continue to undermine their initiatives and ultimately limit their influence and power in the humanitarian sector. The capacity of RLOs in Lebanon to emerge as transformative agents within this challenging context remains contested. Along these lines, their potential to foster a more equitable and efficient framework in light of restrictions on their agency and power remains an unrealistic expectation amid more conventional humanitarian actors' refusal to move beyond an *aesthetic* participatory approach, to one that is *truly* participatory and inclusive.

Importantly, discussing the work of RLOs in Lebanon, it is crucial to recognize that refugees are not a homogenous group. The diverse backgrounds, experiences, and socio-economic statuses of refugees significantly influence the nature and focus of different RLOs. This diversity necessitates a nuanced understanding of the representativeness of RLOs, as they may cater to varied needs and priorities within the refugee population. Acknowledging these differences allows for a more accurate and comprehensive analysis of the effectiveness and inclusivity of RLOs, ensuring that the unique voices and challenges of all refugee sub-groups are adequately represented and addressed in both local and international efforts.

The discourse surrounding localization initiatives within the realm of humanitarian aid in Lebanon remains fraught with complexities regarding the genuine empowerment of RLOs on one hand, and how this feeds into the political sensitivities of empowering the perceivably *controversial* and disenfranchised Palestinian and Syrian communities they serve on the other. Our main contention revolves around the peril of co-optation or superficial inclusion of RLOs in decision-making processes, which undermines the fundamental principles of localization and perpetuates unequal power dynamics. This

tokenistic approach continues to fail to address the political, sectarian, and demographic undertones of the exclusion and marginalization of refugees themselves by the state, while also failing to address the flawed approaches of established and traditional larger humanitarian actors. Delving deeper into the instrumental role of RLOs, particularly in the context of empowering refugee communities in Lebanon, delivering context-specific support, and bridging gaps in traditional humanitarian responses, reveals a nuanced understanding of their significance. Drawing upon the cases of Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon, the effectiveness and impact of RLOs in addressing the unique challenges faced by refugee populations in localized contexts become apparent.

To empower RLOs in Lebanon, it remains essential to provide comprehensive support and resources. This includes funding aimed at enhancing their organizational proficiency, project management, advocacy, and community mobilization. Additionally, fostering a collaborative environment is crucial and is achieved by facilitating networking opportunities where RLOs can exchange best practices, lessons learned, and resources. Genuine inclusion in decision-making processes is paramount; thus, advocating for the representation of RLOs in decision-making forums at various levels concerning humanitarian response and refugee issues is imperative—particularly in Lebanon, where RLOs serve as one of the only—if not only—form of refugee organization, mobilization, and participation amid a system that purposely isolates them. Ensuring their meaningful involvement in the design, implementation, and evaluation of programs and policies affecting displaced populations is vital.

An important dimension that merits further exploration is the role of RLOs in Lebanon that are registered as Lebanese entities but operate at a macro level. These organizations, often led by "highly educated, well-connected, and affluent refugees," play a significant role in shaping the visibility, connections, and power dynamics within the refugee community. The support these RLOs receive from the international community underscores their influence and the critical function they serve in bridging local and international efforts. Including this aspect in the analysis would provide a more nuanced understanding of the organizational landscape and the intricate interplay of power and influence among different stakeholders.

Moreover, establishing collaborative partnerships between RLOs, international organizations, local NGOs, and government agencies is essential for leveraging resources and expertise in addressing the needs of displaced populations effectively. This collaboration should be facilitated through dialog and coordination mechanisms to enhance communication and collaboration among all stakeholders involved in humanitarian response efforts. Promoting accountability and transparency is key to ensuring the efficient utilization of resources allocated for localization efforts, with a focus on outcomes benefiting displaced populations. This entails establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms and fostering transparency in decision-making processes and resource allocation to build trust and accountability among stakeholders, including refugees and host communities.

While RLOs demonstrate considerable efficacy, especially in emergencies and conflict situations, their effectiveness remains paralyzed and hindered. Factors such as financial constraints, dependency on international organizations, and navigating complex state dynamics pose significant obstacles to the autonomy and agency of RLOs. Post-2019, financial limitations have further weakened the capacity of RLOs to operate independently, thus compromising their ability to respond effectively to the needs of refugees. Despite these challenges, there remains a reservoir of knowledge at the community level which underscores the importance of grassroots engagement and community empowerment. Beyond this, and despite the conditional nature of services and communication, local communities are keenly aware of the influence wielded by international organizations and the limitations faced by RLOs in achieving self-sustainability. This awareness empowers locals to advocate for greater agency, fostering stronger engagement with RLOs as equal stakeholders in the humanitarian landscape.

Declarations

Competing interests
The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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