



## **An Open Letter to UNHCR: Five Ways to Foster Refugee Leadership and Localization**

**To: Filippo Grande, High Commissioner of UNHCR**

**From: The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI)**

**Dear Mr. Filippo Grandi,**

As you know, a [growing body of research](#) confirms what we as leaders of refugee-led organizations know from experience: people from affected communities and other proximate actors are well-positioned to respond to community needs in an accountable, legitimate, transparent, effective, and impactful manner. Based on its plethora of recent commitments, it would appear that UNHCR agrees with and intends to act on this research.

We would like to highlight that these commitments have not translated into practical actions. In our own experience and the experiences of our peer refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and other local actors that we work with, collaboration with UNHCR remains challenging, highly complex and/or non-existent. UNHCR's partnership guidelines, which stipulate the requirements for and approaches to securing a partnership (or funding relationship) with UNHCR, still have not been meaningfully amended to promote access by those of us with lived experience. As a result, proximate actors, especially RLOs, remain excluded from funding streams, strategy development and decision-making processes. The most recent example of the disconnect between UNHCR's commitments and actions is the lack of timely support given to refugee leaders who were not able to obtain their visas to travel to Geneva for the Annual UNHCR-NGO Consultations, a space for communicating needs, interests and proposals for refugee responses all over the world.

At the [Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative \(RRLI\)](#), we recognize that UNHCR's power and influence over responses to refugee situations are extraordinary. Not only does UNHCR remain one of the world's largest refugee response donors and policymakers, but UNHCR also plays an essential role in influencing other institutions of power. If UNHCR does not support the effort to shift power and resources from international actors to local actors with lived experience and our allies, it cannot be done

easily, or possibly at all. Therefore, we seek to work with you to hold UNHCR accountable to its mandate and stated commitments to realize localization and refugee leadership, and to ensure your partnerships are ethical, respectful and truly accountable to people of forced displacement by taking the following actions.

### **1. Include people of forced displacement in decision-making with dignity and trust.**

Over the years, RLOs and refugee leaders have been intentionally excluded from UNHCR meetings, discussions and decision-making processes. When refugee leaders do manage to gain access to these spaces, many report being disrespected and feeling dehumanized. Refugee leaders have shared concerns about how UNHCR staff, including at the national and regional levels, have expressed discomfort about discussing refugee-related matters with people who have experienced forced displacement. For example, in Egypt in 2017, two senior staff of St. Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS), a member of the RRLI coalition, were not allowed to join a meeting with UNHCR because they were refugees and UNHCR staff believed it would create a conflict of interest.

Several other partners from different locations around the world have also confidentially shared with RRLI members that UNHCR has limited, or attempted to limit, the employment of refugees within local refugee response organizations. They have justified this by stating that refugee involvement poses a risk of "fraudulent" behavior or "unfair" outcomes. This discriminatory stance hinders the employment of refugees and prevents the experiences of forcibly displaced people from informing initiatives, projects and programs for our communities. It has been our observation that in many countries UNHCR hires refugees exclusively or primarily as interpreters and limits their participation through often tokenistic "consultations" instead of capitalizing on their leadership skills and deep connections to their communities in designing projects and programs.

We urge UNHCR to evaluate how they treat us, as people of forced displacement, and reflect on these learnings. UNHCR should bring structural changes inside the organisation, including but not limited to re-examining its leadership, governance and recruitment practices, and should also embody a trauma-informed approach when engaging with individuals and groups that have experienced forced displacement.

### **2. Build equitable partnerships that meaningfully shift power.**

As outlined in [Asylum Access' position paper on equitable partnerships](#), UNHCR should build partnerships with RLOs that include RLOs as equal partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects. Equitable partnerships can be a tool to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion, particularly when the partnership

ways of working embody values of anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion; ensure co-design and co-leadership with RLOs and our local allies at all stages of collaboration; promote visibility of local actors and their work to actors who can be influential in continuing to fund local actors' work; and build trust through transparency with local partners, especially RLOs. These values are not only the foundation of equitable partnerships but are also key factors in helping UNHCR overcome the other challenges mentioned in this letter.

We urge UNHCR to put people of forced displacement at the center of their work and build partnerships that are based on the aforementioned values. As a first step, it is important for UNHCR to be open to learning and humbly reconsider its partnership policies and values. Training and learning on anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion, cultural intelligence, white dominant professional culture, colonialism and neocolonialism in the refugee response sector, and implicit bias are foundational to building the internal knowledge necessary for equitable partnerships with RLOs and other local actors.

### **3. Provide adequate, accessible, unrestricted and sustainable funding.**

While we are encouraged by UNHCR's increased motivation to partner with RLOs, we remain concerned that the amounts distributed are grossly insufficient for initiatives, groups and organizations led by people of forced displacement -- or anyone. For example, ["UNHCR's Grant Agreement for Persons of Concern \(PoC\)-led Organizations"](#) provides up to USD 4,000 per grant/project and up to USD 12,000 in total funding over multiple years. This amount of funding falls far below what RLOs require to implement impactful and sustainable projects and programs in their communities. Such low amounts of funding fail to increase the participation of RLOs in the refugee response sector, and in fact, could lead to further exclusion of RLOs: specifically, we are concerned that when these underfunded efforts inevitably do not demonstrate profound impact, they will be used to signal that investment in RLOs, in general, is ineffective.

We urge UNHCR to increase the amount of funding given to RLOs significantly, to a minimum of 25K annually for newer, smaller organizations who still need to grow their systems and a minimum of 100-200K annually for larger organizations with the potential to scale their impact. UNHCR should also ensure those funds are multi-year and can be allocated to core costs in addition to project expenses. Core funding (or funding that can be used in any manner deemed important by the organization) enables organizations to quickly and efficiently respond to needs as they arise within their communities. Core funding also promotes sustainability, as it permits organizations to prioritize expenses such as salaries, rent, and utilities if those expenses are more important for the organization's needs. Furthermore, multi-year funding gives RLOs a runway to build

rapport with other donors, collect information that helps demonstrate impact, and develop systems that support sustainable funding pipelines. We recommend that UNHCR enshrines these adjustments in their partnership guidelines, and amend sections that make it difficult for RLOs to access pre-existing funding opportunities.

#### **4. Re-design funding requirements around impact and people rather than compliance.**

Many RLOs have expressed concerns regarding the application requirements to access the limited amounts of funding available to them through UNHCR. In [UNHCR's Grant Agreement for Persons of Concern \(PoC\)-led Organizations](#), the "PoC-partner legal status for eligibility" requirement automatically excludes many RLOs that provide valuable services to their community but whose legal status does not match UNHCR's requirements.

Additionally, RLOs have reported a large bureaucratic burden associated with applying for and reporting on funding from UNHCR, even for the small grants of USD 4000. Many RLOs are thus excluded from funding because they do not have the time and resources to write long, complex applications and produce the documentation required by the application process. UNHCR should simplify application processes and documentation and compliance requirements to allow for ease of access by RLOs.

While designing our own RLO-to-RLO Fund, we specifically simplified our requirements and procedures to not exclude any RLOs because of their personal legal status or organizational legal designation, while also streamlining the application process as much as possible to lighten the burden on RLOs. The result has been uplifting: RRL's RLO-to-RLO fund will distribute over 2.7 million USD to 15 extraordinary RLOs this July.

We urge UNHCR to ensure accessibility of funding opportunities by removing legal status requirements from eligibility, allowing RLOs to apply in a language of their choosing, and minimizing other administrative requirements. In addition, UNHCR should proactively communicate with RLOs about other, more significant forms of funding that they have equal access to, such as through awards or implementing partnerships.

#### **5. Reconsider the definition of a refugee-led organization (RLO).**

Definitions are important: when we define who is and who is not a member of a particular group, the result can exclude certain individuals, initiatives and groups from projects, programs and policies. As such, a definition of an RLO should be simple and open to interpretation to promote broad access by refugee-led initiatives to the benefits associated with the definition. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the current terminology of "POC-led" (Persons of Concern-led) used by UNHCR can contribute to

othering. While this term is ingrained in UNHCR's lexicon, we suggest that this terminology be reconsidered as UNHCR attempts to engage people who have experienced forced displacement as equal and active partners. It is our observation that no person of forced displacement refers to themselves or their organizations as 'POC' or 'POC-led.' We too personally find the term belittling and dehumanizing.

At RRLI, we define an RLO as *"any formal or informal initiative/organization that is founded and run by people of forced displacement background and/or any formal or informal initiative/organization where people of forced displacement are in major leadership positions and able to influence the work of the organization."* When we talk about the people who run RLOs, we use "persons/people of forced displacement" instead of the word "refugee" because we believe this terminology is more humane and inclusive as we seek to include all who self-identify as such, without regard to legal status, politically constructed borders, or specifics of the displacement experience. Importantly, this terminology acknowledges that we are people first and that our experience of forced displacement is not the only thing that defines us. As such, we urge UNHCR to broaden its definition of refugee-led organization and end the usage of the term POC-led.

Ultimately, UNHCR's policies and practices outlined above continue to harm and traumatize people of forced displacement, even after UNHCR has committed to uplifting the organizations and initiatives that people of forced displacement lead. UNHCR has the capacity, resources and expertise to overcome these gaps, and we at RRLI are keen to further engage with you and the whole of UNHCR so we can achieve our shared mission of creating dignified solutions for people of forced displacement.

We are ready to collaborate at your convenience.

Signed,

**The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative**

[info@refugeeslead.org](mailto:info@refugeeslead.org)