



Financing **Refugee Youth** Leadership

Insights from Practice and
Recommendations for Donors

Executive summary

This report provides insights and practical recommendations for investing in Refugee Youth-Led Organizations (RYLOs) and why it is important and necessary. It highlights what RYLOs are, the role they play in communities and challenges they face in accessing funding. The report builds on GRYNs programmatic experience in providing flexible funding to informal or formal groups led by refugee youths aged 18 to 30. The report contains a series of key learnings and provides practical tested recommendations to donors on how they can collaboratively work with and provide funding to refugee youths leading change in their respective communities. It is also a resource to young people and other relevant actors looking to support work with, by and for young people.

Key messages in the report include:

Why Investing in Refugee Youth Leadership is necessary and important

(See section 3)

RYLOs frequently fill critical gaps where services are limited or unavailable

Refugee youth are experts in their own communities

Refugee youth-led organisations are frequently able to overcome structural barriers

Refugee youths consistently step up as first and last responders in humanitarian response.

Refugee youth-led organisations organise and work in ways that differ from larger international and national NGOs

What works: Approaches to Supporting Collaboration with Refugee Youth-Led Organisations

(See Section 4 and 5)

Partnering with Youth-Focused Networks and Intermediary Organisations

Piloting and Building Expertise Through Partnerships with Refugee Youth-Led Organisations

Starting Small and Use a “Phased” Approach to Funding Progression

Trust-Based Philanthropy to Support Sustained Youth-Led Impact

Strengthening Internal Advocacy and Board Engagement

Exchanging Best Practices Across the Donor Ecosystem

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Acronyms

DRC	Danish Refugee Council
GBV	Gender Based Violence
GRF	Global Refugee Forum
GRYN	Global Refugee Youth Network
GYAF	GRYN Youth Action Fund
IASC	Inter-Agency Standing Committee
ILO	International Labour Organization
INGO	International Non Governmental Organisations
MEAL	Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MHPSS	Mental health and psychosocial support
NGO	Non Governmental Organisations
NRC	Norwegian Refugee Council
PSEA	Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse
PSS	Psychosocial support
RLO	Refugee Led Organisation
RYLO	Refugee Youth Led Organisation
RYWLO	Refugee Young Woman-led Organisation
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
WRC	Women's Refugee Commission

About the Global Refugee Youth Network

The [Global Refugee Youth Network](#) is a youth-led organization, primarily led by young people with lived experience of forced displacement, that is hosted at the [Women's Refugee Commission \(WRC\)](#) and was founded in 2018. GRYN supports refugee youth-led organizations, whether registered or not, and refugee youth to develop their capacity, empower themselves, lead initiatives to respond to their communities needs, and advocate for the changes they feel are essential for refugee youth development. Our main focus is 1) Strengthening refugee youth leadership and refugee youth-led organizations (RYLOs), 2) Advancing refugee youth-led policy advocacy, and 3) documenting evidence through youth action research.

Since 2022, the Global Refugee Youth Network has invested over \$300,000 in flexible funding to more than 150 refugee youth-led organizations impacting more than 30,000 refugees and members of host communities. These projects were implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The projects covered different thematic areas including education, self-reliance, livelihood, gender equality, sports, climate change, and mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS), among others. GRYN has supported approximately 300 refugee leaders to be able to engage in advocacy spaces at the global, regional and local levels, thereby amplifying meaningful youth¹ participation and inclusion.

GRYN AT A GLANCE



**Leadership and
RYLO support**



**Policy
advocacy**



**Youth action
research**

KEY IMPACT



\$300,000

Flexible funding
invested since 2022



150+

Refugee youth-led
organizations supported



30,000+

Refugees and host
community members reached



300

Refugee leaders supported
in advocacy spaces

These achievements have been made possible through our partnership with the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), which has provided administrative and financial systems and structures to support our work.

GRYN has maintained its autonomy and independence in all decision making processes for our programs.

About the Danish Refugee Council

Founded in 1956, Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is Denmark's largest, and a leading international NGO and one of the few with a specific expertise in forced displacement. DRC protects, advocates, and builds sustainable futures for refugees and other displacement-affected people and communities².

¹ For the purpose of this report, the words youth, and young people, explicitly refer to refugee youths.

² DRC Danish Refugee Council, "About Us," accessed February 23, 2026, <https://drc.ngo/about-us/>.

Insights from Practice

1.0 Introduction

This report offers donors insight into why investing in Refugee Youth Led Organizations (RYLOs) - informal or formal **community based organizations created and led by refugee youths between the ages of 18 and 30** - is effective and important and provides ideas on practical pathways to do so, such as strategic partnerships with INGOs that can serve as intermediaries. The report draws on GRYN's expertise and experience in partnering with organizations such as the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), Women's Refugee Commission (WRC), the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Porticus, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), among others, in order to provide funds, technical assistance, and capacity building to community based RYLOs. It presents tested, low-risk funding mechanisms that donors can adopt or adapt to advance localisation goals. These mechanisms demonstrate that when donors have the right partners and tools, they can support locally based RYLOs to deliver measurable, community-driven impact.

It is also intended to serve as a resource to help RYLOs understand the funding environment so they can better access support for their initiatives. It seeks to explain how different organizations structure partnerships and disperse funds, the challenges of reporting and compliance requirements, and the potential benefits of working with intermediary organizations. It highlights the importance of RYLOs' work at the community level, addresses some of the systemic challenges that they face, and suggests approaches to surmount those difficulties.

This report is divided into five parts: i) Background describing its development; ii) Findings: key learnings about financing RYLOs; iii) GRYN's funding model and mini case-studies of partnerships; iv) Recommendations on approaches to use when funding RYLOs.

2.0 Background

This report is based on work completed through a partnership between the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) and the Global Refugee Youth Network (GRYN) to increase the meaningful participation of displacement affected young people in policy processes. The partnership i) supported the "Shift the Power Fund", which provided funding to community-based RYLOs; ii) provided support to RYLOs to develop and use advocacy skills; iii) facilitated structured consultations with RYLOs and other actors about funding; and iv) enabled the development of a policy guidance for donors³ on how they can provide funding to RYLOs. The policy guide was launched at the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) Progress Review in December 2025. This longer report compliments the [policy guide](#) and provides an in-depth discussion of the issues raised in the guide.

2.1 Methodology: Grounded in Refugee Youth Voices

GRYN used a mixed methods approach that included documentation of the "Shift the Power" grant making process and learning, and case studies that document GRYN's approach to partnership and work with intermediaries, as well as semi-structured interviews, surveys, and consultations with refugee youth leaders and grant makers. Refugee youth leaders were selected based on their experience applying for grants and implementing projects in their communities while other key informants were selected based on their experience working with and/or funding RYLOs directly or through intermediaries. All interviews were conducted virtually with informed consent and participants were briefed about their participation and how information gathered would be used. The findings of this report will safeguard participants' confidentiality.



³ For the purpose of this report, the word donor has been used to refer to donors, philanthropies, International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOS), National Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOS) and other organisations that fund/make grants.

Overview of funding proposals received by GRYN since the launch of the GRYN Youth Action Fund (GYAF)

Table 1

Year	Number of Applications	Total amount requested (USD)	Amount Funded (USD)	Number of funded projects
2022	122	577,250	64,000	22
2023	153	456,940.88	155,538	78
2024	93	658,607	64,500	29
2025	185	1,806,294.33	41,500	21
Total	553	3,499,092.21	325,538	150



2.2 Findings from The Shift Power Fund

Learnings and considerations from the GYAF grant making process

A Many refugee youths implementing projects in their community are not aware of the financial constraints and barriers that donors face to be able to get funds to them.

C Local communities rely on RYLO support and when this support fails to reach them, it creates negative perception about the youth groups involved and erodes trust.

B Flexible funding plays a key role in reaching and empowering young people despite their realities.

D Local governments in some refugee hosting countries still have policies in place that restrict refugee's access to key financial services, which undermines refugee youth leadership.

GRYN and DRC designed the Shift the Power Fund to provide small grants of ~\$1500 to both registered and non-registered RYLOs. Most of the applications were from displacement affected young people in refugee hosting regions, camps or countries. The highest number of applications were from Uganda and Kenya. This high number can be attributed in part to GRYN's wider network in East Africa. (See *Annex 2.3 for more information*).

The Refugee-Led Research Series Research Report⁴ on RLOs in East Africa, attributes the high number of applications from Uganda and Kenya to the RYLO leaders ability to access humanitarian networks in those countries, and it states that having access to such networks also plays a role in the success of RLOs. Refugee youth respondents confirmed that with limited access or lack thereof to advocacy spaces (humanitarian networks), determines whether they are able to reach funders and donors or not. Despite the compelling and meaningful proposals received, funding could only cover ten youth-led projects. (See *Annex 2.3 for more information*).

Case in Point: *Bangladesh*

GRYN was able to disburse funding to nine of the ten RYLOs on time. In the case of Arakan Youth for Change, a RYLO based in *Bangladesh*, **GRYN experienced extensive delays in transferring funds due to in-country legal and policy restrictions that limit refugees' ability to access financial services.**



Arakan's situation is not isolated; restrictive measures imposed on refugees in Bangladesh have made it very difficult for local refugee-led community based groups to access funding to support their initiatives. Through donor learning circles, GRYN has discovered that numerous other organizations are also facing difficulties when trying to support refugee youth in Bangladesh. Due to the delays in processing funding for Arakan Youth for Change, GRYN selected four additional informal RYLOs to receive funding during the project timeframe and later leveraged funding from other sources to cover the grant planned for Arakan Youth for Change. GRYN was finally able to transfer funds to this RYLO in 2026. This case highlights the importance of GRYN's principle: **'meet RYLOs where they are,'** a principle that GRYN uses to ensure that young people do not miss out on opportunities.

4 Getachew, A., Gitahi, M., Kara, A., Ramazani, U. (2022). 'Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa: Community Perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania.' Refugee-Led Research Series, Research Report (1), September 2022.



Innovation Talent Academy (ITA) during its OPEN MIC activity in Kyegera, Uganda, creating a safe space for young refugees to share their experiences through poems, songs, drama, and storytelling, while promoting mental wellbeing, healing, and community support.

3.0 Key learnings about funding for RYLOs

What RYLOs are and what they are not

Refugee Youth Led Organizations (RYLOs) are informal or formal community based **organizations created and led by refugee youths between the ages of 18 and 30**. The distinction between formal and informal is that formal RYLOs are registered while informal RYLOs are not registered. Registration is an important distinction because when registered, RYLOs are recognized as organizations or associations, have a legal personality, can enter into contracts and partnerships, and open bank accounts. Refugee youth led organisations (RYLOs) are different from Refugee Led organisations (RLOs); each play distinct and complementary roles within the refugee leadership ecosystems and should not be viewed as competing actors even though both are led by people affected by displacement.

“One of the biggest challenges we face is the lack of recognition. As a refugee youth-led organisation, we are often overlooked due to limited access to influential networks, adult-centric structures, and the perception that we are too young or not professional enough. This limits our ability to participate in decision-making spaces or secure direct funding.”

-Refugee youth respondent

3.1 RYLOs and the Challenges They Face

Many RYLOs are informal, in part because they often face challenges in trying to register. In many countries refugees are not able to register an association or organization due to their immigration status and documentation. Thus, in order to register they would have to involve a member of the host community, which would detract from their goal of being a refugee youth-led organization, and undermine the autonomy and leadership of refugee youth in managing the organisation and decision-making processes. This difficulty that many RYLOs have to register poses a challenge, as informal organizations that are **not registered** are **not eligible for partnerships** or to apply for funding, in most cases.

Whether they are registered or not, most RYLOs are excellent at involving young people in community action, but lack the administrative capacity and skills to prepare proposals, or meet the donors' compliance standards. As a result they often don't meet donor requirements to even apply for funding and they struggle to put together funding proposals. When they are funded, they are usually gravely underfunded⁵ and there is often a mismatch between the funding they receive and the funding they need to sustain activities and build their capacity. (See table 1)

⁵ Sturridge, Caitlin; Fran Girling-Morris; Alexandra Spencer; Andhira Kara; and Carina Chicet. 2023. The Failure to Fund Refugee-Led Organisations: Why the Current System Is Not Working, and the Potential for Change. HPG Report. London: Overseas Development Institute, https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/HPG_report_funding_to_RLOs_final.pdf

Due to difficulty registering and thus their often informal nature, RYLOs are frequently overlooked as ideal partners because of concerns about their legitimacy as organizations⁶. Additionally refugee youth capacity to receive and administer funding is questioned because the applicants (refugee youths) are often very young.

This lack of recognition disproportionately affects young refugee women leaders and refugee youth leaders living with disabilities. RYLOs **led by young women are often by-passed and lack access to funding and capacity building**, further marginalizing them. Young refugee women often have strong leadership capacity, but are unseen, under-represented and under-resourced. This ties back to the distinction earlier mentioned on formal vs informal as organisations led by women are even more likely to be informal, this informality coupled with other gendered challenges means that WLO always remain stuck in the 'self help' stage as seen by (Getachew et al., 2022).

These findings align closely with the analysis presented in this report which likewise demonstrates that both refugee leadership and youth leadership are independently overlooked. For refugee youth, this is intensified and they face multiple challenges to be recognized. Evidence from refugee-led research shows that refugee leadership has long existed within displaced communities, yet remains largely unrecognised by formal humanitarian and development systems (Getachew et al., 2022)⁷.

Meeting Refugee Youth Where They Are

Localisation efforts to recognise refugee-led organisations (RLOs) represent an important step forward. However, we found that this recognition has not yet been fully extended to refugee youth-led organisations. While both face challenges, youth-led groups often face additional barriers within funding systems, meaning that broader commitments to refugee leadership do not always translate into meaningful support for youth-led initiatives.

Refugee **youth-led organisations and networks require time and sustained support to develop the financial systems needed** to manage larger volumes of funding effectively. Building these capacities is a gradual process and should be recognised as such within direct funding approaches to RYLOs. Meeting young people where they are is not a one-time commitment, but a continuous process that involves recognising their leadership and equipping them to respond to community needs in ways that are empowering and sustainable. Rather than viewing the time required for financial system development as a constraint, donors and grant-making organisations can approach this as a strategic investment with long-term, sustainable returns. Young people consulted put great emphasis on capacity strengthening particularly in financial management and reporting, stating that this can enable them to receive, manage, and account for funds over time, while strengthening their organisational resilience and impact.

Organisations led by young people often work closely with groups that are frequently left out of formal programming, including young women, adolescents, people with disabilities, and other marginalized populations. Failure to invest in RYLOs therefore carries a significant risk: that the needs of these groups remain unmet. When localisation does not intentionally include refugee youth-led organisations, it risks reproducing the same exclusion it aims to address, therefore undermining both equity and impact.

As earlier noted, *RYLOs are often not legally registered*, reflecting both their grassroots nature and the contexts in which they operate. While formalisation can be valuable and appropriate for some organisations, this analysis finds that current funding structures frequently compel many

6 Evan Easton-Calabria, Shai Naidas, and Rahildaris Antonieta Marchena Herrera, "Refugee Youth-Led Organisations: The Under-Explored Impact and Potential," Innocenti – Global Office of Research and Foresight (UNICEF), December 14, 2023, <https://www.unicef.org/innocenti/stories/refugee-youth-led-organisations>

7 Getachew, A., Gitahi, M., Kara, A., and Ramazani, U. (2022). Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa: Community Perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania. Refugee-Led Research Series, Research Report No. 1, September 2022.



RYLOs to pursue legal registration primarily to meet donor requirements and not because they want to. This dynamic risks prioritising compliance over community relevance. Many RYLOs are formed in a spirit of community engagement and a desire to address a specific challenge that arises in communities which often motivates young people to converge, contribute and address the specific challenge. In this regard many may not have administrative capacity to register or it may be very complicated for refugees to register in some locations. **Registration may be a distraction from their primary focus of addressing the challenge in their community; yet if they could access more resources they could address the challenge more effectively.** In some contexts registration is a limitation and in fact undermines its purpose. For example, in many applications for funding received by GRYN we noted that while some RYLOs were able to register their organizations, they were not able to open bank accounts linked to their organizations. This poses a challenge and legitimacy issue for donors in funding applications when the leaders of formal RYLO leaders provide their personal bank accounts instead of organisational bank accounts.

Supporting RYLOs should therefore allow for multiple organisational pathways, rather than requiring formalisation as a precondition for recognition or funding. As another refugee youth noted, “These challenges can be addressed by creating more inclusive funding ecosystems that value lived experience; simplifying application and reporting processes; and **building long-term partnerships based on trust, not just compliance.** Donors should actively seek to connect with refugee-led youth organisations, rather than waiting for us to find them.”



Rise Together, a Refugee Youth Led Organization in Uganda, implementing a tree planting activity as part of the Shift Power Fund from DRC. Rise together believes that tree planting activities help strengthen climate resilience, promote community participation, and encourage youth leadership in environmental protection.

3.2 Why Investing in Refugee Youth Leadership is necessary and important

RYLOs frequently fill critical gaps where services are limited or unavailable, thereby improving access to services and promoting community-based protection. With formal systems overstretched, funding RYLOs is a significant investment opportunity that donors can not afford to pass up. Refugee youth are ready, willing, and well-situated to address emergency needs in their communities.

Refugee youth are experts in their own communities, with lived experience that enables a nuanced understanding of the challenges and priorities shaping everyday life in displacement. As members of the communities they serve, refugee youth leaders are often able to respond more directly to immediate needs and provide support in ways that are accessible and dignified. Displaced communities trust their interventions, and this matters for donors and practitioners alike, as it aligns with a shared goal of reaching people most in need through approaches that respect agency and do not further marginalise affected populations. Refugee youth respondents indicated that communities often found it easier to approach them compared to larger humanitarian actors and/or organisations, not due to a lack of willingness on the part of NGOs, but because formal systems and standard operating procedures can limit opportunities for direct community engagement.

One refugee youth shared that

“Our presence in the settlement is continuous, not project-based or seasonal”

and another noted that,

“....(we are) complementary, not competitive. We do not aim to replace the role of national NGOs or INGOs. Instead, we complement their efforts by offering local insight, community access, and a platform for meaningful refugee participation.”

Refugee youth-led organisations are frequently able to overcome structural barriers through proximity and flexible modes of engagement. The data we collected show that refugee youth leaders consistently prioritise ensuring that community members are able to access the support they need. Several refugee youth respondents we talked to shared that:

“Our organization is different from NGOs and INGOs, we would say, in a few loops. We are so accessible to our immediate community that we become the first and quick responders to critical issues taking place in our community.”

Another also mentioned that,

“We also do understand not only what they say in words, but also the perspective from which they tell and see their stories. Their stories are often relatable due to our organic past experiences and are often shared with a lot of openness. We believe we ask the right questions of our community more and better. Some say it’s about collecting data, but we say it’s about dignity and fighting for identity and belonging.”

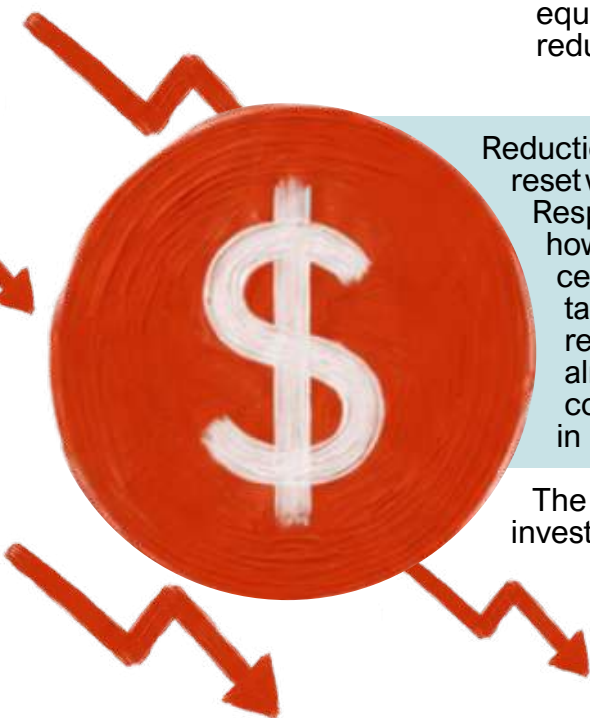
Despite facing multiple challenges and social barriers as a result of displacement, **refugee youths consistently step up as first and last responders in humanitarian response.** RYLOs and refugee youths are not just beneficiaries of humanitarian aid, they are uniquely placed to support humanitarian interventions. They are key actors in preventing, preparing for, responding to, and supporting recovery from disaster, conflict, forced displacement, and other humanitarian crises. GRYN’s experience with RYLOs demonstrates that when refugee youths are resourced, they deliver.

Refugee youth-led organisations consistently described organising and working in ways that differ from larger international and national NGOs. Across reflections we gathered, youth leaders frequently emphasised characteristics such as a localised approach, agility, flexibility, and a strong focus on addressing immediate community needs. While some respondents noted that RYLOs and NGOs ultimately engage in similar types of work, they highlighted that the most significant differences emerge in relation to funding. Youth leaders repeatedly emphasised that, unlike larger organisations, RYLOs are often severely underfunded or not funded at all, despite responding to comparable community needs. Several respondents described the lack of funding as the defining distinction between youth-led organisations and larger actors, noting that when resources are available, they are primarily directed toward meeting community needs rather than organisational overheads. Young people also highlighted that their time, labour, and expertise are frequently uncompensated, in contrast to staff within larger organisations who are paid for similar work.

“Our leadership is voluntary. From the director to the rest of the members, [we all] work voluntarily for the support of the children.”

Despite these challenges, the refugee youth-led organisations engaged in this study demonstrated a strong commitment to the sustainability of the projects they implemented. Many respondents described intentionally designing initiatives that provide community members with pathways forward, whether through creative outlets such as art, livelihood-focused programmes, or linkages to other organisations able to offer more specialised, individualised support.

These approaches reflect a focus on longer-term outcomes rather than short-term assistance. The findings suggest that investing in refugee youth leadership contributes to the development of safer, more self-reliant communities, where individuals are better equipped to access resources and identify their own solutions, reducing reliance on ongoing external aid.



Reductions in external aid following funding cuts and the humanitarian reset were **widely acknowledged by the young people consulted.**

Respondents consistently highlighted funding cuts and described how many international NGOs and INGOs have scaled back or ceased programmes as a result. These reductions have had tangible consequences at the community level, with several respondents noting that the withdrawal of services has left already vulnerable communities facing increasingly critical conditions and heightened risks, underscoring existing gaps in support.

The Humanitarian Reset presents an opportunity for donors to invest in and actively engage with RYLOs to achieve localisation

3.3 Bridging the Gap Between Funding Systems and Refugee Youth-Led Organisations

Common barriers identified include

1 Registration requirements

Many RYLOs cannot register their organizations due to refugee legal status or prohibitive bureaucratic processes, making them ineligible for many grants.

2 Financial compliance systems

Donor regulations often require fund recipients to demonstrate established accounting systems, bank accounts, and experience with financial management and audits. All of which most refugee youth groups typically lack.

3 Risk management

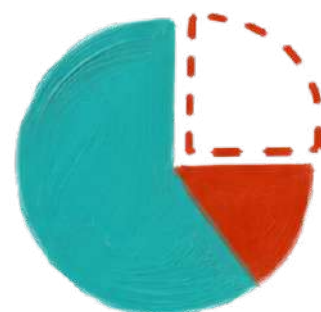
Public accountability standards, especially for government donors, and UN agencies demand transparency, documentation and risk mitigation standards that informal groups cannot always meet.

4 Institutional mandates

UN agencies and many INGOs operate with standard operating procedures, online partnership platforms, and partnership guidelines that favour large, registered partners and limit sub-contracting to smaller organizations.

5 Exclusion from advocacy spaces

the exclusion of refugee youth from advocacy spaces undermines efforts to advance inclusive localisation



Donor Constraints in Supporting RYLOs

Despite strong commitments to localisation, **donors face legitimate structural constraints that can limit their ability to fund refugee youth-led organisations (RYLOs) directly.** Both donors and refugee youth leaders consulted for this study noted that these challenges largely stem from compliance and risk-management systems, rather than from a lack of interest or willingness to support youth-led initiatives. The international donor system operates within complex regulatory and accountability frameworks that present significant barriers for many RYLOs. While refugee youth-led organisations bring agility and deep contextual expertise, they continue to encounter systemic obstacles that restrict access to direct and sustained funding. These barriers are commonly rooted in traditional, risk-averse funding practices within the humanitarian and development sectors.

Many donors, foundations, and international **partners operate within eligibility and compliance frameworks designed to manage financial, legal, and reputational risk.** While these requirements serve important accountability purposes, they often present significant barriers for RYLOs, particularly those that are newly established. Youth leaders consistently noted that eligibility thresholds are difficult to meet in refugee contexts, for instance, demonstrating prior management of relatively 'high' budgets ranging from USD 45,000 to 50,000, multiple years of operational history, or formal registration and certification. These challenges are compounded by structural barriers related to legal status and documentation which are often outside the control of refugee youth-led groups. As a result, existing risk and compliance frameworks can have the unintended effect of limiting RYLOs' access to direct funding, discouraging youth-led initiatives despite their capacity to respond to urgent community needs.

The humanitarian sector's **strong emphasis on donor accountability, combined with the regulatory constraints of refugee-hosting governments, continues to limit the flow of power and resources** to informal and community-based structures. Donor financial and reporting requirements are often designed for formal organisations and can be difficult to adapt to the realities of informal refugee youth-led groups, creating significant barriers to flexible and direct funding. In several contexts, including Bangladesh and Jordan, regulatory restrictions on financial transfers into refugee camps further constrain the ability to support community-led initiatives. As a result, despite widespread recognition of the complex challenges facing refugee youth, funding approaches have remained largely risk-averse and centralised, limiting opportunities for direct resourcing of refugee-led responses and reinforcing top-down modes of engagement.

Intermediated funding models have emerged as one mechanism to address these challenges and have enabled some degree of direct resourcing for refugee-led initiatives. However, partnerships through intermediaries can involve significant administrative and operational costs, which may reduce the proportion of funding reaching communities and limit the overall efficiency of these arrangements. Additionally, organizations may prefer to work directly with NGOs or community based organisations as part of their effort to advance localisation, and thus be adverse to working through intermediaries; however they may not fully understand the challenges of partnering with RYLOs and RLOs.

Across these challenges, a recurring theme from the data we collected was also the inaccessibility of advocacy and decision-making spaces for refugee youth. Many respondents expressed a strong willingness and desire to participate in advocacy forums and contribute to discussions that shape policies, funding priorities, and responses affecting their communities, yet noted that they were often unable to access these spaces in practice. Barriers cited included limited invitations, lack of formal recognition, resource constraints, and requirements that privilege established actors. As a result, refugee youth are frequently excluded from the very platforms where decisions about localisation, funding frameworks, and risk management are made. This exclusion reinforces the structural challenges identified throughout this report, as systems continue to be designed without the meaningful input of refugee youth, despite their lived expertise and readiness to engage.



TRS Fitness Club during its StrongHER project in the Tongogara refugee community in Zimbabwe, creating a safe and supportive space for girls and women to participate in inclusive fitness and wellness activities.

Recommendations for Donors

4.0 GRYN's Funding Model: A Tested Approach

Since 2022, GRYN has developed and tested a youth centered funding mechanism, known as the GRYN Youth Action Fund (GYAF), that enables donors to support both registered and unregistered RYLOs safely, efficiently, with accountability, and at scale. We believe that it is essential for RYLOs to not only be recipients of assistance but also to take the lead, be independent, and actively address the needs important to their communities.

GRYN's funding model has been made possible through an innovative partnership with the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC). WRC has technically functioned as an intermediary and a fiduciary agent in that it has signed contracts with funding organizations, administered those funds and transferred funds to RYLOs. Although the partnerships with funders are officially held under WRC, GRYN has always taken the lead in setting and driving its organizational and programmatic objectives. GRYN is committed to reaching out to RYLOs and meeting them where they are and has worked with WRC to co-design a system for selecting and administering small grant funded RYLO projects. WRC has provided technical assistance and capacity building on an ongoing basis that has enabled GRYN to take increasing responsibility for its fund raising, RYLO grant making processes, reporting, and financial management as its own organization capacity has evolved. A member of the GRYN leadership sits on the board of WRC, which helps to balance power between the two organizations.

The key to the success of this arrangement has been the quality and intentionality of the partnership and its emphasis on mutual learning and respect. Many actors shy away from using intermediaries to provide funds to community-based groups for good reasons. However, intermediary organizations - often INGOs can play a critical and important role when structured well and in a mutually beneficial way. The partnership between GRYN and WRC has enabled GRYN to reach hard to reach RYLOs and informal groups, ensuring that impact is localised and communities receive services they need through the activities that RYLOs implement.

How the GRYN Youth Action Fund Works

1 Accessible proposal workshops

GRYN launches calls for proposals and conducts accessible (virtual) workshops that support refugee youth to refine project ideas and understand the application process.

2 Adaptive due diligence

GRYN conducts interviews, capacity assessments, and background checks tailored to the realities of youth-led groups.

3 Contracting and tranche-based fund transfers

GRYN transfers funds to RYLOs in two installments, paired with clear deliverables based on the RYLO's workplan. Financial oversight is provided through GRYN and our intermediary partner, the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC).

4 Ongoing support and mentorship

GRYN provides training on documentation, reporting, project management, safeguarding (including PSEA), communications, and advocacy. This support is continuous and RYLOs can access this support even after the funding period ends.

5 Peer-learning and networking

Leveraging its extended network of RYLOs, GRYN organises mini-workshops and community of practice sessions to strengthen refugee youths' leadership and collaboration.

6 Reporting

GRYN provides guidance and skill-building workshops for RYLOs on documentation and reporting, and compiles documentation of outcomes and impact for donors.

5.0 What works: Approaches to Supporting Collaboration with Refugee Youth-Led Organisations

The approaches outlined in this section are informed directly by consultations with refugee youth leaders and are intended to be implemented in alignment with the *Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Working with and for Young People in Humanitarian and Protracted Crises*.



Approach One

Partner with Youth-Focused Networks and Intermediary Organisations

Donors can facilitate more effective engagement with refugee youth-led organisations by partnering with established youth-focused networks and intermediary organisations that have built trust and contextual understanding with RYLOs. Given the administrative burden associated with directly funding multiple small and emerging organisations, intermediary models can offer a practical and scalable solution. This can be supported through flexible financial arrangements, including deliverable-based contracts or adaptable reporting requirements. For example, the International Labour Organization (ILO) provided funding to the Global Refugee Youth Network (GRYN) through the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC) as an intermediary under a deliverable-based contract. This partnership enabled the in-person participation of refugee youth leaders at the ECOSOC Youth Forum in New York in April, demonstrating how intermediary models can facilitate meaningful youth engagement while meeting donor accountability requirements.



Approach Two

Pilot and Build Expertise Through Partnerships with Refugee Youth-Led Organisations

Donors can strengthen their engagement with refugee youth-led organisations (RYLOs) by piloting funding approaches in partnership with refugee youth, youth networks, and intermediary organisations, with the aim of building shared expertise on supporting youth-led solutions. Working directly with RYLOs provides valuable opportunities to better understand the priorities, capacities, and operating realities of refugee youth, while simultaneously supporting the development of



Approach Three

Start Small and Use a "Phased" Approach to Funding Progression

Donors can adopt a phased approach to funding that enables refugee youth-led organisations to progressively build the systems and experience required to manage larger grants. Most of the accountability mechanisms are presumed to reduce this risk but there are other ways to reduce risk such as this approach. This model has been tested by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), beginning with group cash transfers of up to USD 5,000 and gradually progressing to flexible mini-grants of up to USD 25,000. Over time, this approach has supported refugee youth-led organisations to strengthen their financial management and reporting capacities, ultimately enabling them to apply independently for larger global funding opportunities.



Approach Four

Trust-Based Philanthropy to Support Sustained Youth-Led Impact

Trust-based philanthropy offers an alternative funding approach that has proven effective for supporting community-led initiatives, including refugee youth-led organisations. This model relies on in-depth knowledge of partners, often built through pre-existing relationships and thorough due diligence, and emphasises mutual accountability rather than rigid compliance.



Approach Five

Strengthen Internal Advocacy and Board Engagement

Donors can advance support for refugee youth-led organisations by strengthening internal advocacy and engagement at the board and senior leadership levels. Aligning governance structures with programmatic priorities on refugee youth agency requires intentional learning and dialogue. Learning conversations between board members, external partners, and individuals with lived experience can help deepen understanding of refugee youth-led approaches, their value, and the rationale for more direct and flexible funding. Such



Approach Six

Exchange Best Practices Across the Donor Ecosystem

Engagement across the donor ecosystem to exchange best practices can play a critical role in strengthening support for refugee youth-led organisations. Donors and partners with experience funding youth-led or locally led initiatives can share lessons learned on effective models, risk management, and partnership approaches. Collective learning can help normalise innovative approaches and accelerate progress toward more inclusive funding systems.

In addition to the approaches mentioned above, GRYN recommends that these approaches be implemented (where possible) together with approaches documented in the *Report and Recommendations for Localising GBV prevention and response with refugee young women*. This report highlights other key considerations that actors should consider when intending to partner with informal young women led RYLOs. While the approaches in this report are gender sensitive to young women and adolescent girls, they ensure that partnerships formed consider the needs of these groups and create safe spaces for them to engage meaningfully. buy-in, and enable donor institutions to adapt funding strategies in ways that are responsive to refugee youth leadership.

6.0 Call to action

The approaches proposed in this report are in itself the recommendations that we have for donors and other actors willing to partner and fund formal and informal RYLOs.



1 Partner with Youth-Focused Networks and Intermediary Organisations



2 Pilot and Build Expertise Through Partnerships with Refugee Youth-Led Organisations



3 Start Small and Use a “Phased” Approach to Funding Progression



4 Trust-Based Philanthropy to Support Sustained Youth-Led Impact



5 Strengthen Internal Advocacy and Board Engagement



6 Exchange Best Practices Across the Donor Ecosystem

Over the years, GRYN has observed how RYLOs remain consistent in their programming for communities and responding to community needs. Even after the aftermath and shocks of the funding cuts and the humanitarian reset, refugee youth leaders have found innovative ways to respond to immediate issues and needs in their communities demonstrating the critical role they play with and/or without funding.

The work RYLOs do is often not motivated by the funding component, but by seeing that the people living in the same communities as they are have access to basic needs and services that improve the quality of life in their communities despite the hurdles. This is not different from what other donors and humanitarian actors do, RYLOs may not have offices, some may not be as educated, others often operate in local languages with no knowledge of official working languages, but they get the work done.

This report is a call to action to decision makers and budget holders of relevant organisations and institutions to acknowledge RYLOs, refugee youth leaders and the work they do. This can be done by **reaching and meeting them where they are**, directly or through intermediaries where it is not possible to reach them directly. As demonstrated throughout the report, only a few young leaders are able to leave communities and access advocacy spaces, humanitarian networks and other services that would help equip and qualify them for funding. For this reason the words **reach and meet** is deliberate, because this has been the most efficient and effective way that GRYN has used over the years to create the impact we see today.

This section gives an overview of projects that were designed and implemented by young people as part of the Shift Power Fund.

“For organizations supporting refugee youth, we recommend listening to and amplifying youth voices. Provide resources and guidance, but also give space for young people to lead and learn. Be flexible and adaptable – every community is unique. Invest in youth-led initiatives and watch them drive positive change.”

—Ajax Makindye



Nurture Aid Initiative for Rohingya

The Nurture Aid Initiative for Rohingya (NAIR) addressed gender-based violence (GBV) and child marriage within the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. The project was designed as a youth-led, community-based prevention initiative, recognizing the critical role that young people and local leaders play in safeguarding the rights and well-being of women and children in displaced communities. Key components of the project included capacity-building workshops aimed at enhancing knowledge and skills of the refugee community on GBV prevention and child protection.



Tertiary Refugee Student Network (TRSN)

TRSN Latin America (LATAM) in Mexico designed and implemented a project to increase access to higher education for refugee youth in Mexico by addressing the lack of information, preparation, and resources that prevent them from entering public universities. Public universities in Mexico are often free or low-cost, making them the most viable option for refugee youths to study without depending on the few scholarships available. Through a structured mentorship and tutoring program, the project offered personalized guidance, academic preparation for entrance exams, and basic English lessons.

Annex 2.3 Project summaries of RYLOs selected under Shift Power Fund



Innovation Talent Academy (ITA)

Innovation Talent Academy (ITA) in Kyaka ii refugee settlement in Uganda developed a project to address the post-traumatic stress disorder, stigma associated with mental health challenges and limited access to mental health, and other services for youth in their community. The ITA project fostered dialogues and creative expression to raise awareness and reduce stigma about mental health challenges and brought mental health professionals and community leaders to mentor refugee youth, and provide guidance and necessary support for mental health.



Rise Together

The Rise Together project in the Palabek Refugee Settlement in Uganda aimed to encourage sustainable management of natural resources, lessen the dependence on firewood, and empower environmental clubs in schools and communities to take an active role in conservation efforts for both refugee and host communities in Palabek Refugee Settlement. The project tackled environmental issues stemming from deforestation, poor waste management, and a lack of awareness about climate change by providing environmental education, launching tree planting initiatives, and providing clean energy-saving cooking stoves.



Tujenge Wote Pamoja

The Tujenge Wote Pamoja project in Kampala, Uganda empowered displaced youth to reclaim civic space through creative advocacy. The project focused on strengthening the capacity of youth leaders in Kampala through training in creative activism, digital storytelling, civic space and advocacy, enabling them to effectively engage in civic processes and humanitarian policy.



African Youth for Community Empowerment (AYCE)

The African Youth for Community Empowerment (AYCE) in Rhino Camp, Uganda designed a project to empower refugee youth and school dropouts with practical vocational skills, mentorship, and life skills. Many youth in Rhino community face barriers to education and employment due to displacement, poverty, and lack of opportunities. This project provided a safe space for refugees to rebuild confidence, gain employable skills, and promote positive changes.



Rise Labs

Rise labs in Nakivale Settlement, Uganda worked to reduce undiagnosed diabetes cases and improve long-term health outcomes in the community. This project was designed to increase awareness, early detection, and self-management of diabetes among refugees through community-centered campaigns, medical outreaches, offering free blood sugar screenings, distributing educational materials, blood monitoring glucometers, and training both patients and caregivers on basic diabetes care and prevention. This project brought services closer to the people using relevant and culturally appropriate health education.



Umoja people with Disabilities

Umoja people with Disabilities in Malawi helps young people living with disabilities to improve their living conditions by providing aid services, support, protection, and carrying out social advocacy for their benefit. This group hopes to grow and be a pillar in the refugee community whereby persons with disabilities in Malawi, especially the adolescents and girls will be able to build a strong disability movement as a factor of change and inclusion.



TRS Fitness Club

TRS Fitness Club in the Tongogara refugee community in Zimbabwe empowers girls and women to lead healthier, more confident lives through inclusive fitness and wellness opportunities. The project (StrongHer) seeks to challenge cultural and religious norms that limit female participation in physical activity by providing a safe, respectful, and supportive environment. StrongHER promotes physical health, mental well-being, and self-confidence through tailored fitness sessions, health education, and community engagement. By creating a space where women feel seen, supported, and strong, the project aims to foster long-term behavioral change and gender equity in community health.

Arakan Youth Coalition

The The Arakan Youth Coalition (AYC) project in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh aims to enhance educational opportunities and promote peaceful coexistence by equipping youth with essential knowledge, conflict resolution skills, and a sense of shared responsibility for building a more inclusive and harmonious society. The Arakan Youth Coalition (AYC) implemented a community-based initiative that promotes access to education and peacebuilding among conflict-affected youth in the region. Through informal learning sessions, awareness workshops, and dialogue forums, the project empowers young people with knowledge, skills, and a platform to foster mutual understanding, tolerance, and non-violence in their communities.



The 4 additional informal RYLOs selected to receive additional funding as a result of delays included



La Ligue des Jeunes de l'Association des Femmes Réfugiées et Migrantes au Maroc (LJ) AFRMM

The Youth League in Morocco developed the project “Resilience” to provide young refugees with the resources and tools they need to aspire to a happier and more fulfilling life through an awareness day. The project provided young people with lifeskills, useful advice and information to strengthen their resilience and be able to face life’s challenges.



Ajax Makindye Soccer Academy

Ajax Makindye organized soccer events to promote youth development, and foster teamwork and friendship.



Alpha TechVerse

Alpha TechVerse designed an advocacy campaign in Dzaleka Camp to raise awareness among refugee youth, parents, and community leaders about the importance of digital literacy and equal access to technology, especially for girls. The project used creative media, storytelling, interviews, and poetry to advocate for increased community support and commitment to tech education. Activities included media campaigns, interactive workshops, and digital storytelling that challenge stigma and build community buy-in for digital inclusion.



Kakuma Social Agri-Ventures

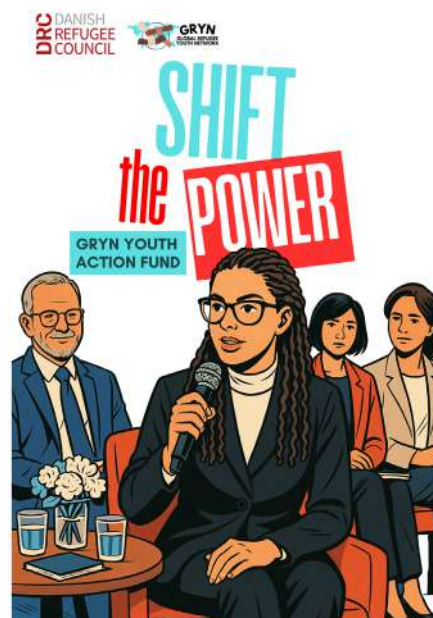
Kakuma Social Agri-Ventures held additional workshops for young people aged 15–24 that reinforced a practical understanding of climate-smart agriculture through participatory learning, demonstrations, and open dialogue. The project reached a diverse group of youth participants who gained practical knowledge on climate change adaptation, sustainable farming methods, water-efficient irrigation, soil conservation, and responsible use of local resources

Case Studies of GRYN partnerships and the role of WRC as an intermediary

This section provides an overview of four partnerships between WRC, GRYN and other partners. These partnerships demonstrate different ways donors can collaborate to invest and finance refugee youth leadership.

1. The Global Refugee Youth Network and the Danish Refugee Council (DRC)

In 2025 DRC partnered with GRYN to launch the “*Shift the Power Funding Mechanism*”, a program to support meaningful participation of displacement-affected young people in policy processes. This partnership included the following five deliverables: a) launching and managing a call for proposals, including inviting RYLOs to propose advocacy activities; b) managing selection and transfer of funds to eleven RYLOs and transferring funds to them; c) providing ongoing capacity building, coaching and mentoring to RYLOs; and) producing, together with RYLOs, a curated list of video resources that empower refugee youth in advocacy efforts; and e) documenting pathways for donors to support refugee youth leadership.



2. The Global Refugee Youth Network and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF)

From December 2022 to date UNICEF has partnered with GRYN as part of the PROSPECTS Partnership that has been funded by the Netherlands. Through this partnership UNICEF has supported a series of three program documents totalling almost \$300,000. The partnership has supported program activities and deliverables, including providing funding and capacity building to refugee youth led organisations to run projects in their communities, and facilitating global advocacy for youth refugee and RYLO leaders at local, regional and global levels.

Refugee youth led initiatives funded under this partnership demonstrated key strengths typical of RYLOs, especially how they are able to respond to immediate and intimate needs of communities that may otherwise be overlooked by other humanitarian actors.



For instance **Life Savers**, a project implemented in Amman, Jordan equipped the community with first aid skills to ensure refugees in Amman are able to cater to life threatening situations themselves before professional medical aid can arrive. The leadership team of this group is made of medical students doctors who have selflessly devoted themselves to transfer skills to their community.

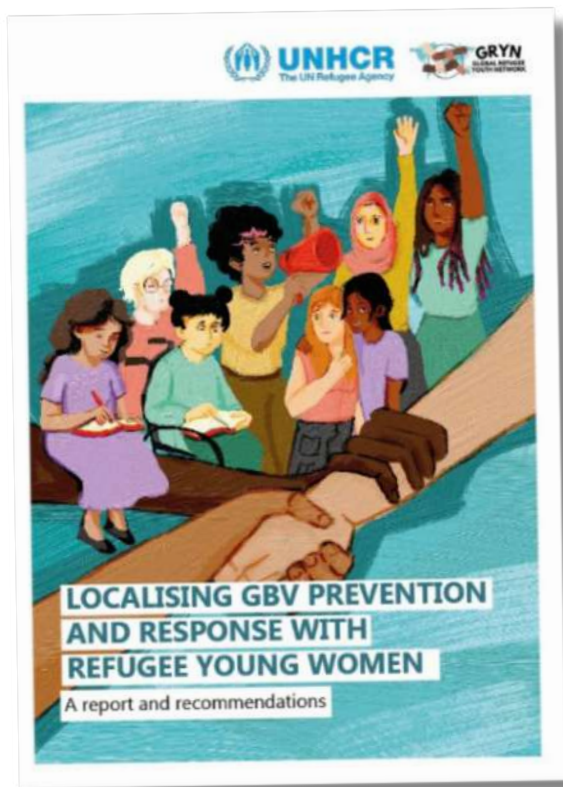
GRYNs partnership with UNICEF has evolved over the years and has included other deliverables other than transfer of funds to RYLOs. Recognising GRYNs unique positioning in the advocacy space and rich experiences of the leadership team, UNICEF recently renewed their partnership with GRYN to adapt the Youth Advocacy Guide to reflect refugee youth realities. This adaptation will guarantee that young refugee advocates, especially young women and refugees living with disabilities, 1) see themselves as leaders, 2) find ways to join advocacy spaces and 3) equip them with the skills to articulate their issues of concern to the right audience.

3. The Global Refugee Youth Network and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

In 2024, GRYN applied for the localisation funds from the Global Gender Based Violence (GBV) unit under UNHCR. With technical support from WRC, we were able to secure funding to document how to localize GBV prevention and response with refugee young women. This partnership did not involve providing funds to other RYLOs, but recognised that GRYN is also a refugee young woman-led organisation (RYWLO) with a unique position in accessing refugee communities and therefore making us the right partners for this work.

GRYN worked with RYLOs to identify young women leaders who could coordinate with GRYN, invite refugee adolescent girls, ensure appropriate safeguarding and facilitate the sessions in person in the RYLO's physical space. The consultations used a hybrid format. GRYN worked with seven RYLOs to organize four regional consultations to account for language and time differences. This included two consultations in English for three RYLOs in East Africa and MENA; one consultation in French/Arabic for a RYLO in Morocco; and one consultation in Spanish for a RYLO in Ecuador. In total, consultations involved in-person sessions organized with seven RYLOs for a total of approximately 60 girls in seven countries, (Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Jordan, Ecuador, and Morocco). The GRYN team designed the exercises and session plans, and joined virtually to guide and facilitate the sessions. GRYN and young women leaders used English, Arabic, French, Spanish, Swahili, and other local languages as needed to facilitate the sessions and help the girls to communicate and feel safe.

GRYN authored the report, and produced other companion tools that young refugee women can use to work with refugee adolescents girls to prevent and respond to GBV. The report and tools will be published on GRYN's website.



4. The Global Refugee Youth Network and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

In response to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine, NRC contracted GRYN in 2023 to transfer funds to informal refugee youth-led organizations who had fled to Romania and Moldova. Nineteen refugee youth led groups were funded and approximately \$60,000 invested in refugee youth leadership. This collaboration was timely, at a time when Ukrainians refugees were navigating a new environment and in need of life changing services. These projects designed and led by young people brought hope and helped the communities to rebuild their lives in their new environment.

For instance, one youth initiative called ***Interpretation service*** implemented in Timisoara Romania, facilitated 106 interpretation instances, ensuring that Ukrainian refugees could effectively communicate with Romanian specialists, particularly in healthcare. In addition to interpretation services, this RYLO organized a Humanitarian Aid event that provided food packages to 189 Ukrainians, addressing their basic needs during a challenging time. The leadership team, composed of three women and one young man.

NRC has continued to demonstrate its dedication to refugee youth leadership in many ways. In 2024, NRC again partnered with GRYN to launch the Digniti youth project that invested in nine refugee youth led initiatives in Kampala, Uganda. These projects were implemented from February 2024 to December 2024 after which a study was conducted to investigate the social impact of this project. The study was done by one of NRC global Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability and Learning (MEAL) who was independent, with no prior engagement in the Digniti project. Findings, documented in an internal learning paper, found that there was a 2.2 dollar return on every 1 dollar invested in the Digniti project.

In 2025, NRC again financed GRYN to strengthen collective learning on life skills, and psychosocial support (PSS) for displaced youth while building GRYN's technical expertise and advocacy role. Partnerships like this have sustained leadership roles within GRYN and advanced refugee youth led policy advocacy at local, regional and global level.

Through this partnership, one refugee youth was supported to physically attend the One Young Word (OYW) summit in Munich, Germany in November 2025. This genuinely reflects meaningful participation, with refugee youth actively involved in shaping narratives.

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