

# When displaced persons lead research: experience from East Africa

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**Four displaced researchers who are leading a study on refugee-led organisations in East Africa discuss the benefits and challenges associated with being an ‘insider’ researcher.**

Refugee researchers are typically included in research projects as assistants and data collectors rather than core or lead researchers. This can lead to exploitation and power imbalances between insider and outsider researchers in individual research projects and in the field of forced migration research.

We use the term ‘insider researcher’ to refer to any researcher who has lived experience of displacement, including refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs, stateless persons and other groups that have been forcibly displaced or live in exile, whether they are still displaced or have resettled. We

use ‘outsider researcher’ for any researcher who does not have lived experience of displacement, whether they are based in Global North or Global South universities and research institutions. Our study is on the nature and impact of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) in East Africa led by displaced insider researchers from start to finish.<sup>1</sup> We explore the benefits and challenges associated with being an insider researcher and make the case for the need to support refugee-led research.

### Benefits of being insider researchers

RLOs are an understudied topic in forced migration studies. Our initial desk review highlighted that there is limited available information about RLOs and the forms that they take in East Africa, especially in Tanzania and Ethiopia.<sup>2</sup> Our intimate knowledge of the refugee communities in the locations of the study was a clear benefit in helping us identify RLOs of diverse sizes and levels of influence when designing the study. We have strong insights into the social setting of the refugee community because of our lived experience as displaced persons. Some of us also have personal experience working or volunteering with RLOs. Many RLOs in our communities do not have an online presence, but we knew from experience that some of these smaller, less-resourced RLOs have a significant impact on individual refugees and refugee communities. Being familiar with the role of smaller RLOs convinced us of the need to include RLOs of different sizes and to examine in depth their impact on the refugee community.

Being insider researchers also created a feeling of ease between us and refugee participants. Refugee and RLO participants in our study felt more comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives with us. In contrast to outsider researchers, our shared background helped to create a good connection between us and the participants as the participants often mentioned that they were talking to peers. We hypothesise that this is due to their belief that we understand the potential repercussions of breaking their confidentiality as we would face the same problems if our own confidentiality

was broken. Furthermore, participants are more likely to believe that we will work hard to make sure their inputs are heard by stakeholders, including donors, international NGOs and government institutions, because we share the same challenges. Participants expect more honesty from us than from outsider researchers, as we are part of the community and have also experienced being interviewed and never being informed of the outcomes of the research.

### Varied experience

Our team consists of four researchers with varied experiences of displacement and with different backgrounds. The lead researchers in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania still live in the country where they experienced displacement. In Uganda, the lead researcher is a Kenyan refugee in Nakivale refugee settlement. In Kenya, the lead researcher is a Sudanese refugee who has lived in both camp and urban settings, making it easier for her to relate to participants from both these settings. In Tanzania, the lead researcher is a former refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo based in Dar-es-Salaam.

By contrast, the Ethiopian lead researcher is a former refugee who has returned to Addis Ababa. Researchers who are still in the countries where they experienced or are experiencing displacement tended to be seen as peers by participants but the Ethiopian lead researcher was considered an outsider by refugees being hosted in Ethiopia because they did not share a nationality or language. As the researcher shared his experience as a refugee, however, participants saw him as someone who is both insider and outsider.

The gender of team members also had an impact on how we designed and conducted the study. With regard to diversity, women refugee lead researchers more deliberately looked for RLOs initiated by women, as they more easily identified with the challenges women RLO leaders faced, and such RLOs tend to be less visible than those led by men.

### Challenges of being refugee researchers

We have faced several challenges that are specific to being insider researchers

and to our dual identity as displaced persons and professional researchers.

With regard to relations with participants, one challenge is that participants often assume that we understand all their difficulties and therefore sometimes omit information from the interviews. For instance, participants often make comments such as “you know what I mean”, which suggests that some information has been left unsaid. We often have to probe further to ensure we understand the full picture. Likewise, there is a risk that we may be biased and assume that, given our shared experiences, participants’ perspectives and opinions are the same as ours.

One of the most critical challenges we face is being recognised legitimate researchers by stakeholders such as international NGOs, UN agencies and government officials, despite having delivered a presentation at the side event on meaningful refugee participation at the 2021 UNHCR High-Level Official Meeting. While we have better access to the refugee community than outsider researchers, we struggle to secure interviews with local humanitarian stakeholders and often have to rely on non-refugee colleagues for introductions.

### Conclusion

What makes our study different is that it is conducted by ‘us’, people with displaced backgrounds, from the start to the end: from developing research questions and methodology, to data collection and analysis, to report writing. Our study offers us an opportunity to enhance our research skills through supervision and mentorship from a pool of experienced non-refugee and refugee researchers. It also demonstrates that, given the right resources and support, refugee researchers can lead studies and contribute to knowledge production in the field of forced migration, thanks to our unique positionality.

Creating spaces for refugees to lead research, rather than just undertake fieldwork, will require adjustments within humanitarian research and academia and is beyond the control of individual researchers. To disrupt current patterns of exploitation

and power imbalances between insider and outsider researchers, we recommend that:

- Donors should fund refugee-led research in topics identified by refugee researchers in consultation with community members.
- International NGOs should consider refugee researchers as legitimate researchers and make themselves available to support research processes (such as in organising interviews and securing research permits).
- Outsider researchers should support refugee researchers through mentorship and in accessing research opportunities, particularly in spaces where power imbalances remain.

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1. The RLO study is led by Carleton University through the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and in partnership with the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) at the University of Oxford. In East Africa, LERRN and RSC are also collaborating with the Dadaab Response Association (DRA), which leads a case-study in the Dadaab refugee camps as part of the RLO study. The study is supported, in part, by the Open Society Foundations and the International Development Research Centre.

2. One exception is Betts A, Easton-Calabria E and Pincock K (2020) *The Global Governed?* which provided important information about the nature of RLOs in Uganda and Kenya.  
[bit.ly/global-governed](https://bit.ly/global-governed)

