

## Rhetorical commitments and funding realities in Dadaab, Kenya

Rachel Silver, Mark Okello Oyat, HaEun Kim and Sahra Mohamed Ismail

**In this article, we draw on our diverse experiences as a transnational research team affiliated with the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees Project to reflect on how current funding practices continue to constrain refugee-led research in Dadaab, Kenya.**

Over the past five years, Northern institutions have committed in increasingly visible ways to support refugee-led research. Private foundations work to cultivate refugee scholars through flexible academic programming and fellowships.<sup>1</sup> Bilateral institutions use targeted funding calls to amplify the voices of refugee- and IDP-led organisations and to support research capacity at Southern institutions. Universities have launched transnational networks to spotlight and support research by refugees.<sup>2</sup> These initiatives seek to correct historic inequities in forced migration studies, where a problematic politics of representation has been widely acknowledged. They reflect a broader push to localise knowledge production, giving power and resources to refugee actors rather than to international institutions.

In our experience, however, such efforts can be impeded by various barriers. We are four Canada- and Kenya-based scholars who came together in the context of the Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER) project. Two of us (Oyat and Ismail) are refugee graduates of the BHER programme living in Kenya, and two of us (Silver and Kim) are Canada-based employees of York University.

BHER is a consortium of universities and NGOs that aims to foster more expansive and gender-equitable higher education opportunities for refugees. In 2018, in response to student requests and in an effort to foster local knowledge production, BHER began to offer graduate programming to eligible candidates in the Dadaab refugee camps in Kenya. As of July 2022, 18 men and 10 women have completed a research-intensive York University Master of Education (MEd) degree based entirely in the camps.

Through their scholarship, BHER graduate students and alumni help to mitigate representation gaps within education and forced migration studies. Since 2019 they have published 15 single- and co-authored articles in peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes. They have presented at multiple international conferences and universities, including UNHCR's Global Refugee Forum.<sup>3</sup> In 2020, five MEd graduates, including co-authors Oyat and Ismail, jointly established the Dadaab Response Association (DRA), the first refugee-led organisation (RLO) in Dadaab which works to produce high-quality research reflecting local interests. As a registered community-based organisation in Kenya, DRA works with other institutions and individuals, including co-authors Silver and Kim, on diverse projects related to education research and practice.

These are huge strides. Yet significant barriers remain to equity in knowledge production and, more specifically, to the meaningful transfer of resources from North to South.

### **Blocked from full participation**

Funding calls from bilateral institutions to support refugee-led initiatives signal a commitment to diversify partners and projects. Yet the structure of applications explicitly and/or implicitly results in a continued reliance on Northern institutions as primary contractors and Northern researchers as Principal Investigators (PIs). As a result, funding remains channelled towards, and funnelled through, larger international organisations, rather than refugee-led ones.

A recent funding call for proposals from the Government of Canada, for instance, focused on refugee education in Sub-Saharan

Africa. The call was ground-breaking in framing quality schooling as best achieved through building the capacity of, and making grants to, RLOs. The grants had stringent requirements, however, including for the primary contractor to be Canadian and to have the demonstrated institutional capacity to manage large sums of money (up to CAD \$40 million<sup>4</sup> over five years). This eliminated many potential candidates, leaving a small field of mostly established international NGOs eligible to apply. In our experience, these organisations tend to develop their proposals at their headquarters, soliciting RLO participation to bolster an application rather than to direct and shape it.

There are very real constraints to redirecting bilateral funding away from international organisations. However, by requiring a particular kind of primary contractor, otherwise transformative calls become subject to the usual shortcomings of North/South research partnerships: misaligned expectations and goals between partners; neo-colonial assumptions around who holds expertise and who needs capacity building; disproportionate Northern influence; inequitable, transnational division of roles; and, of course, deeply uneven access to funding.

As a research team, we have encountered some of these challenges when applying for funding. The four co-authors designed a qualitative project to explore obstacles to the localisation of knowledge production in Dadaab. Refugee scholars, however, could not be on the application as Co-PIs without a university affiliation. Nor could they receive funding for research activities as official project collaborators. To be paid through the grant, Oyat and Ismail would need to be hired as consultants or as research assistants. Both of these titles relegate the scholars, and their RLO, to secondary positions. We were left to decide whether we should submit a project proposal that was equitable in name but not in resource allocation, or one that maintained a hierarchical arrangement in titles but allowed more flexibility in the transfer of funds – an impossible choice if meaningful reciprocal engagement is the goal.

Programming or research grants that directly fund RLOs can mitigate these kinds of problems. These opportunities, though usually smaller in scale, are crucial for RLOs to gain experience as primary contractors and thus become more likely to succeed in larger grant applications. When DRA members identified a highly relevant, bilaterally funded opportunity for which they met all requirements, they were unable to register on the organisation's portal due to technological challenges and therefore unable to submit a full application. Refugee scholars need reliable internet, sufficient data bundles, electricity and the technology to access portals that are not always easy to navigate, even in other settings. High barriers to entry such as the Canadian Common Curriculum Vitae (CV), which is required for Canada's federally funded research proposals and takes hours of uninterrupted connectivity to complete, or the US Data Universal Number System and System for Award Management, render scholars and their organisations in remote or resource-scarce environments systematically disadvantaged. For these reasons, and despite an increasing rhetorical commitment to localisation among funders, the DRA remains most often in a subcontracting position. Oyat, Ismail, and their peers in Dadaab are regularly solicited to participate in large grants applications yet become nominal or even invisible in project and grant management once funding is awarded. This marginalisation becomes particularly poignant in grants awarded on the basis of partnership with grassroots organisations.

Feelings of mistrust and marginalisation manifest most clearly in decisions around project finances. We have observed that funds are most frequently directed around or through, rather than to, RLOs. This is justified by risk aversion and concerns about capacity, but it impedes the ability of RLOs to act as primary contractors and limits their ability to grow. Local groups may indeed face capacity challenges, but project funds can be successfully managed even while an organisation receives capacity support.<sup>5</sup>

DRA was recently invited to partner in an international research collaboration

on refugee experiences in the region. Due to eligibility requirements, however, the organisation could not receive funds directly. To avoid bureaucratic red tape, the primary contractor decided to hire individual DRA members as consultants rather than broker an organisational agreement. This decision rendered refugee scholars unable to collectively bargain around issues of workload and finances. It left DRA both ineligible for overhead payments and equipment, and unable to feature the project on its institutional resumé despite its members having conducted the research.

The choice to hire refugee scholars as consultants is but one of several budgetary strategies that can hinder the long-term capacity of an RLO. Another is the reimbursement model. Grants with reimbursement funding models – rather than advancing funding to an organisation for project activities – exclude RLOs almost by default. RLOs cannot spend what they do not have, nor can they afford to wait weeks or months for repayment.

These kinds of strategies do not necessarily reflect malintent. They may emerge in response to pressing timelines, strict accountability systems, and a genuine desire to pay refugee researchers. Both Silver and Kim have been involved in projects in which such strategies have been deployed. We (Silver and Kim) are implicated in the decisions that we critique. Yet these decisions can damage feelings of trust on the part of refugee organisations. As DRA members, we (Oyat and Ismail) often feel like beneficiaries or research assistants, rather than organisational partners.

### Recommendations for practice

Given the barriers that continue to impede the meaningful transfer of resources for research in refugee and forced migration studies, we offer the following suggestions, primarily towards funding institutions:

- Pair direct research or programmatic funding to RLOs with tailored, long-term opportunities to build organisational

capacity in order to increase RLO eligibility to be primary contractors in the future.<sup>6</sup>

- Revisit eligibility requirements for primary contractor or PI positions, particularly if localisation is a desired outcome. This might include redefining what is ‘acceptable experience’. Funders might also invite local organisations to audit their calls for proposals to see if they are unnecessarily onerous.
- Include a requirement that a percentage of funding for project operational costs be allocated to subcontracting RLOs as a capital investment.
- Use advancement rather than reimbursement budget models whenever possible. Flexible funding opportunities also foster more locally responsive programming and increase local organisations’ capacity to succeed.
- Ensure that RLOs, especially those involved in projects as subcontractors, have direct opportunities to engage with funders and direct access to project documents related to their work (such as budget reports, monitoring and evaluation findings, etc.).
- Offer organisational development opportunities to RLOs, tailored to their specific needs.
- Ensure funding applications have flexible deadlines, user-friendly portals and low technological requirements whenever possible.

Allowing local, refugee-led, and other non-traditional institutions, as well as individuals, to serve as primary contractors and PIs on major grants will take time and resources but it will also produce better, more inclusive research. For now, as a group of scholars with diverse geographic, institutional and socio-political positionalities, we proceed with care. We work to navigate structural constraints and troubling inequities with open communication, critical self-reflection

and, as much as possible, inclusive budgeting practices. This is insufficient, but it is a start.

**Rachel Silver** *resilver@edu.yorku.ca*

Assistant Professor, York University & Co-Director,  
Borderless Higher Education for Refugees (BHER)

**Mark Okello Oyat**

*mark01oyat@gmail.com @OkelloOyat*

Co-Director, Dadaab Response Association (DRA)

**HaEun Kim** *haeunkim@yorku.ca*

*@BorderlessEdu*

Project Administrator, BHER

**Sahra Mohamed Ismail** *nadarbuuni@gmail.com*

*@SahraMohamed*

Co-Director, DRA

1. [bit.ly/research-fellowships](https://bit.ly/research-fellowships) ;  
[bit.ly/mastercard-scholars-program](https://bit.ly/mastercard-scholars-program)
2. [bit.ly/refugee-economies-rlrh](https://bit.ly/refugee-economies-rlrh)
3. For the full catalogue of research output by BHER graduate students, see: [www.bher.org/research](http://www.bher.org/research)
4. Approximately US\$31 million
5. See Usen (2019) 'Localisation: we are frustrated, not stupid!', *Forced Migration Review* issue 60. [bit.ly/localisation-usen](https://bit.ly/localisation-usen)
6. See UNHCR (2020) 'Refugee-Led Innovation Fund Concept Note' [bit.ly/refugee-led-innovation](https://bit.ly/refugee-led-innovation)

