

COHERE

www.wearecohere.org

Impact Highlights

2021-2023



TRANSFER POWER
TRANSFORM COMMUNITIES

At Cohere we want to see a world in which individuals, communities and leaders in contexts affected by forced displacement work towards aligned and integrated visions for change.

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises some of Cohere's key achievements and lessons learnt partnering with refugee-led organisations (RLOs) from 2021 to 2023. It emphasises the direct impact of our equitable partnership model on refugee-led response to humanitarian crises over the course of three years, and highlights the indirect outcomes achieved by the refugee-led organisations we partner with at the individual and community level. These are aligned to our areas of effective change which include; coordination, capacity strengthening, funding and advocacy, as well as sharing learnings and achievements of additional initiatives including Reframe and our own internal learning journey.

PARTNERSHIPS

Building equitable partnerships with refugee-led organisations is the foundation of our work, and alongside the increase of partnerships there has been deliberate efforts to ensure improvements in the quality of partnerships by piloting and testing innovative equitable partnership models. These models are rooted in trust, collaboration, innovation and shared visions. This has become central to our work over the last seven years and we are committed to document our journey and learnings as an organisation to demonstrate better practices.

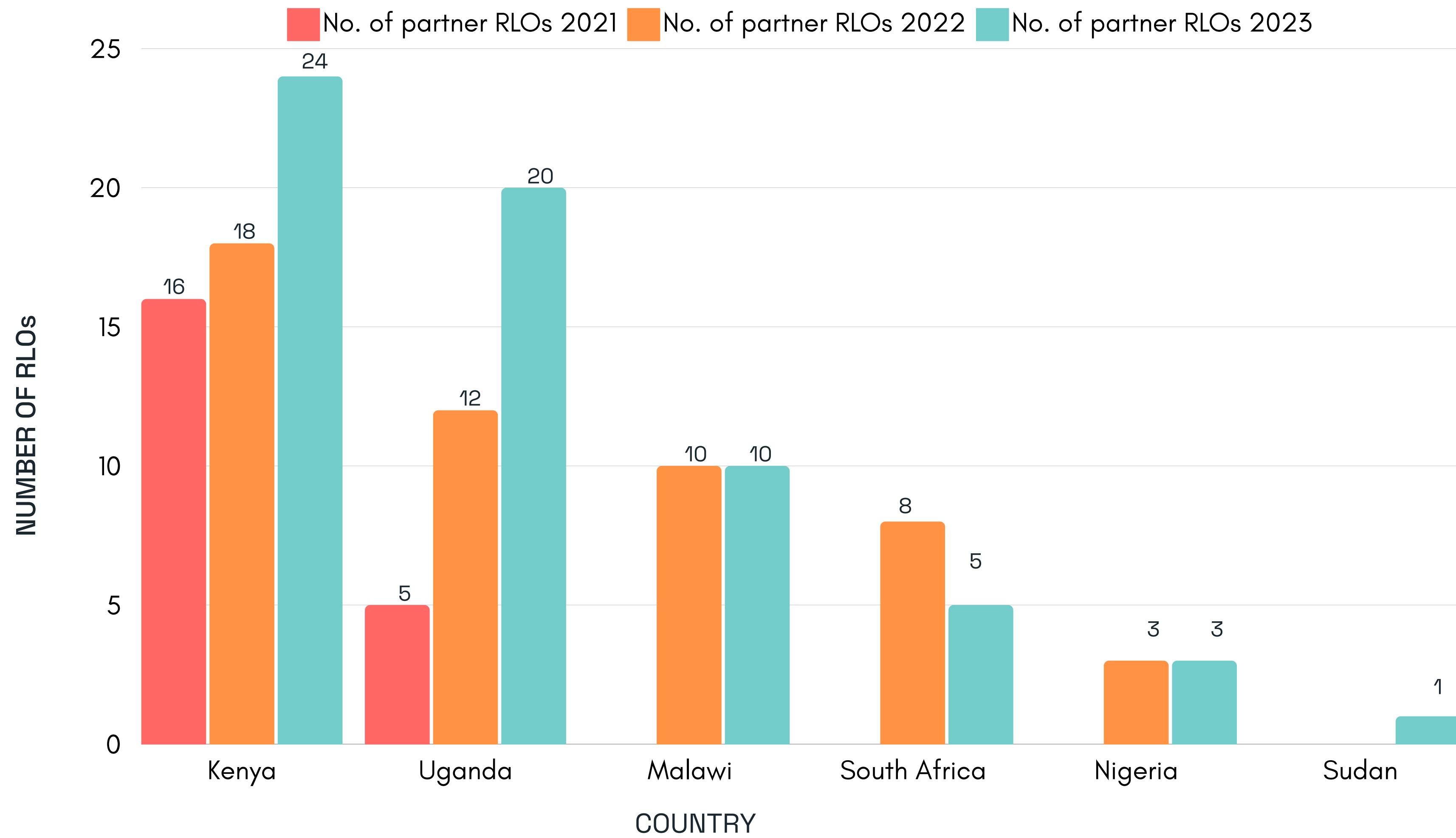
Over the past three years, Cohere has increased its direct partnerships with refugee-led organisations across Africa;

2021: 21 partners

2022: 51 partners

2023: 63 partners





WHAT ARE EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS?

Partnerships where systems, processes and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion. This presupposes the necessity of resourcing partnerships with time and money, institutionalised in human resources processes (recruitment, interviews, induction), reinforced through ongoing internal training and communities of practice, and built into Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) processes. AA. [See also below “participatory approach”]

Story of Change: YIDA Youth Initiative

YIDA Youth Initiative is a refugee-led organisation that focuses on Early Child Development in Kyaka II Refugee Settlement in Southwest Uganda. They have built a primary school and an early education childhood centre (ECD) in the settlement, to create a safe space for over 700 refugee children annually. Cohere has been in partnership with YIDA since 2021. Cohere first supported YIDA to develop and strengthen its financial management, governance and procurement systems, through ongoing capacity sharing sessions. Cohere has linked YIDA to flexible funding from Open Society Foundation and Global Wholebeing fund to support its educational activities.

OUTCOMES FOR INDIVIDUALS & COMMUNITIES

During the period 2021 to 2023, Cohere conducted an annual meaningful reach survey to assess the impact of Cohere's interventions and the work of RLOs in their communities. The impact of the work of RLOs in Africa has been evaluated over the three years of partnerships by Cohere as well as by other actors with whom we have collaborated and interacted, such as the Refugee Led Research Hub, RRLI, IPA and ODI. Findings from these evaluations have demonstrated outcomes for individuals and communities from refugee-led interventions as well as the impact of their work in terms of reforming the sector and instigating systems change.

WHAT IS MEANINGFUL REACH?

The impact reach of our RLO partners as a cohort is described as the “meaningful reach” reported by our partners. This has been captured by providing monitoring, evaluation and learning support to our partners over a three year period and then relying on them to communicate the results and reach they see as meaningful. This is important because it defers the power to define what is deemed “success” to the communities that are themselves experiencing these changes. Results frameworks are this way are not solely based on external paradigms of normative ethics. It is essential that the interventions are meaningful to the communities they are serving. Cohere is committed to centering our work on the community’s needs and this includes how we measure impact.



MEANINGFUL REACH

Cohere's RLO partners directly reached 74,373 community members in 2023, 55,738 community members in 2022 and 24,479 community members in 2021. On average, each refugee-led organisation is directly reaching nearly 1,100 community members each year through their tailored programmes. These communities are in both urban areas and rural settlements, and are often on the frontline of disasters and emergencies in the Eastern African region.

These refugee-led interventions respond to essential needs and providing services spanning: education, food security and livelihoods, protection, water sanitation and hygiene, health and nutrition, shelter and non-food items, climate resilience and adaptation.

Refugee-led organisations across the region adapt their work to the changing needs of their communities, and their context, and continue to demonstrate how their responses are more efficient and effective than other humanitarian interventions. A localised response is able to achieve appropriate and sustainable interventions that an international response cannot. In emergency response this is particularly critical, and with ever-growing numbers of emergencies, and displaced populations, worldwide it must be recognised and supported.

Year	Number of RLOs	Community members reached	Average Reach
2023	63	74,373	1,181
2022	51	55,738	1,093
2021	21	24,479	1,166

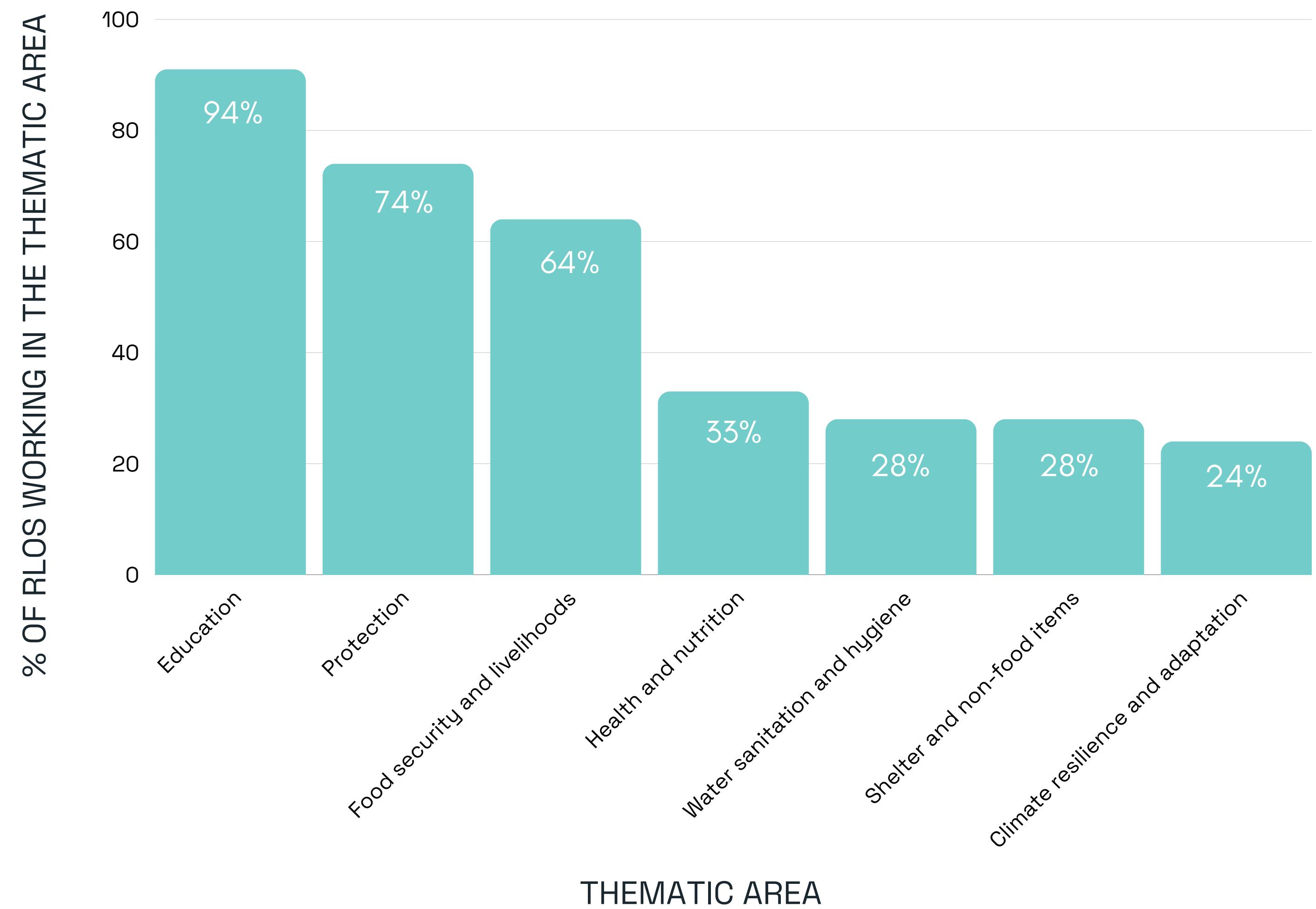
Story of change: I CAN SOUTH SUDAN

In 2023, I CAN SOUTH SUDAN, a refugee-led organisation that we have been partnering with in Uganda since 2020 extended their work to South Sudan to respond to the mass displacement caused by the Sudan War. They began working in Gorom Refugee Camp in June 2023 where large numbers of refugees were arriving from Sudan in desperate need of support. They began delivering basic provisions, including tents, food supplies and clothes, as well as delivering recreational activities for children. Supported by donors including Cohere and Choose Love, they have been able to provide this critical support to 253 refugees in the camp. I CAN SOUTH SUDAN is just one of three organisations running interventions in the camp. They have been able to grow their work to respond to one of the world's biggest displacement crises, and we as their donors have been able to fund frontline response directly and efficiently.



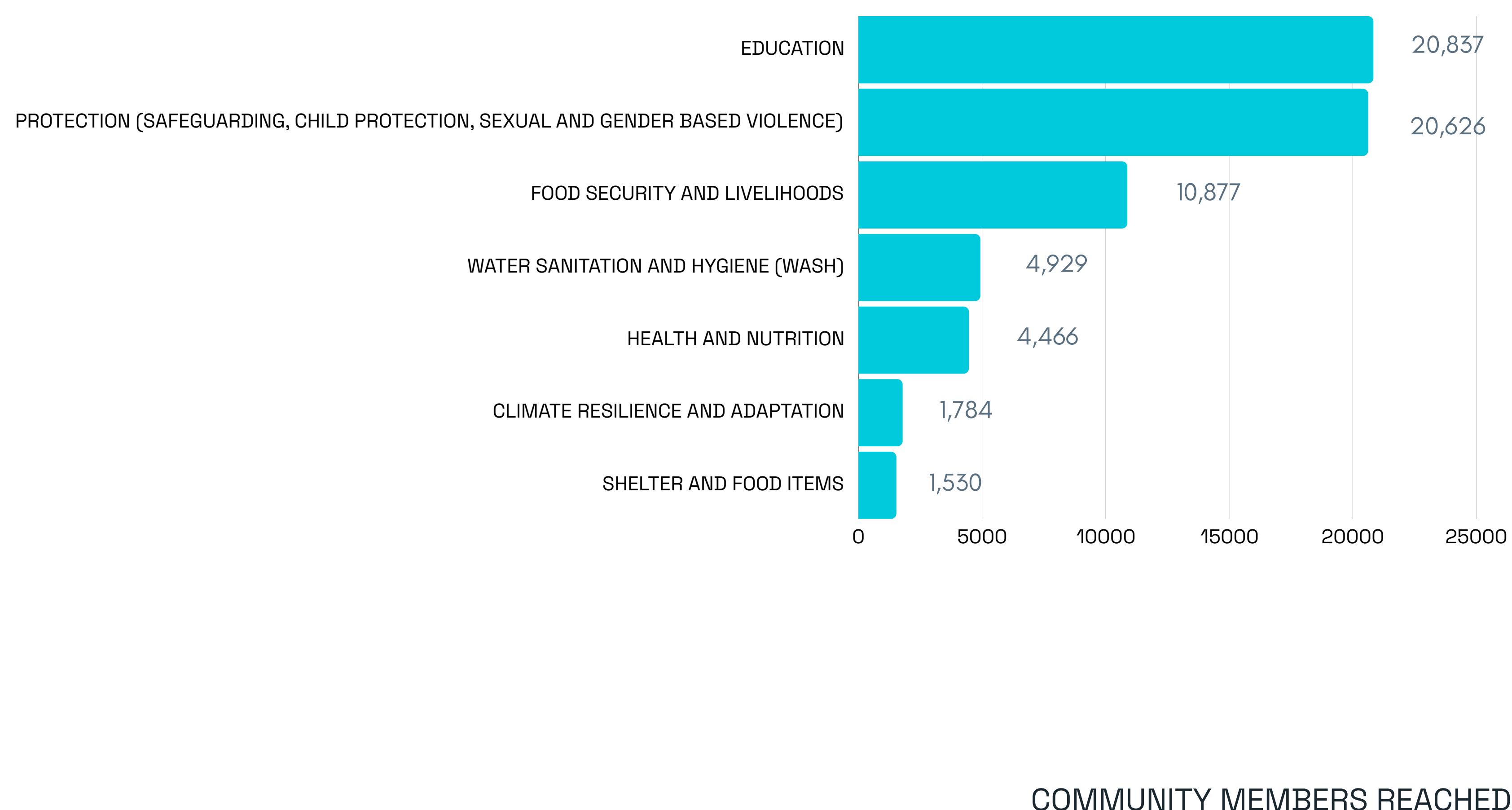
OUTCOMES FOR INDIVIDUALS & COMMUNITIES

figure 4: Distribution of RLOs across different thematic areas in 2023



Refugee-led organisations implemented key activities under the thematic areas in 2023 as summarised in figure 4. Most of our RLOs have an integral approach to the areas which they work across and often work on more than one thematic area.

figure 5: Community members supported under each theme



OUTCOMES FOR INDIVIDUALS & COMMUNITIES

Revenues in 2023

The total revenue generated by Cohere RLO partners in 2023 was USD 2,783,119, adding to USD 1,402,963 in 2022 and USD 391,423 in 2021. During this period Cohere transferred 1,252,196 USD to our RLO partners showing that funds from Cohere made up a proportion of 27% of all the funding our partners received. The average revenue generated by our RLO partners was close to 50,000 USD in 2023. With a total reach of 74,373 community members in 2023, this means it costs about 37 dollars to reach one community member.

The total revenue for the period was

Average revenue	51539
Median	19898
Mode	50000
Standard Deviation	807412
Range	404548
Minimum	303
Maximum	404848
Sum	2783120
Number of RLOs	54*

*These were the organisations that reported their revenues for 2023

FUNDING

Reflections and considerations

Grant giving

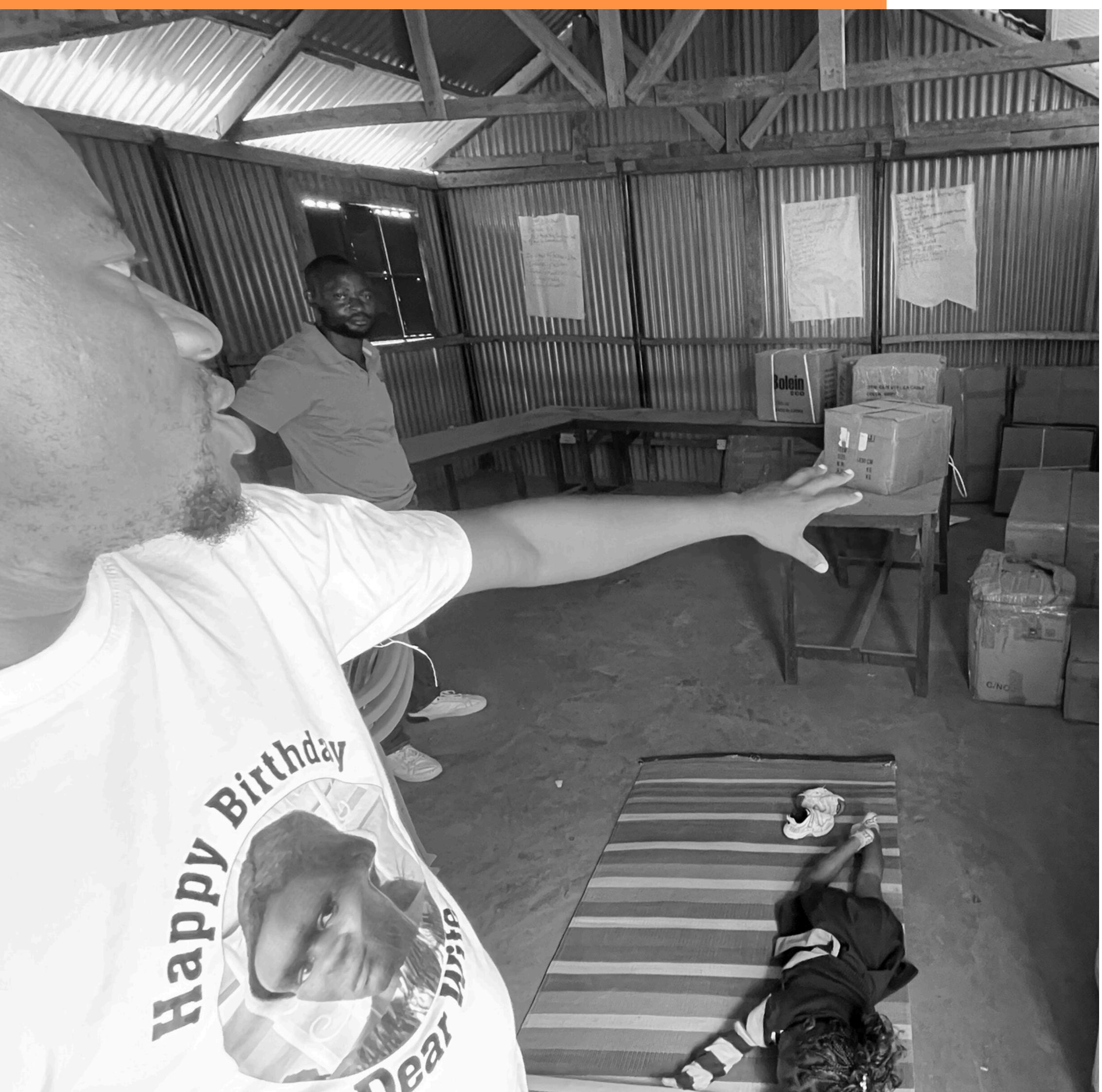
Since 2021 our grant agreements have moved increasingly towards unrestricted funding with flexible reporting requirements. We know that if refugees are to actually lead the transformation they want to see in their communities this flexibility is essential, and requires shifts away from traditional funding models. Over the last three years we have experimented with alternative methods of funding, and worked with donors to realise their potential.

In early 2021, Cohere launched a call for proposals for partnership across Kenya and Uganda. A total of 153 applications were submitted and 19 RLOs were selected and funded as new partners. Cohere has not launched a public call for proposals since then based on some key lessons drawn from the proposal process.

From this process we have drawn some recommendations:

- Success rate vs investment of time - the downside of proposal calls is that, in our case, only 13% are successful in their applications. This means that 87% of applicants are expending time and resources completing applications for opportunities they will not access, detracting from the time and energy they would be putting into their community programmes.
- Rejection has a negative impact on team morale
- Bias towards applicants - however well designed they are proposals always favour applicants more familiar with the process, even if familiarity does not confer merit in terms of the work they are doing on the ground.
- Building relationships on the ground > compelling proposals - At Cohere we put value on how inclusive refugee leaders are in representing the visions for change their communities want to see - we recognise that integrated community visions are about what all community members need and want, not just the leaders. There is no substitute for building trust-based human relationships on the ground in terms of understanding and experiencing community dynamics. This strengthens the partnerships, and makes them more equitable from the beginning benefiting the donor and the RLO.
- The benefits of having community members on your team - having full time employees who are themselves from the community, enables a deeper understanding of these dynamics and brings forward committed visionary leaders. At Cohere, our Refugee Advisory Panel also equips us with invaluable insights and guidance when it comes to decision-making.
- Playing a creative role by working with organisations that demonstrate systems change - While funding for RLOs continues to be scarce it is important that funding decisions are strategic. RLOs that are doing work that is shifting narratives should be supported so that the ecosystem as a whole can grow and more funding overall can be leveraged for the refugee-led response.

This process of selecting grant recipients taught us to make decisions and refine processes that ensure more effective and dignified ways of working. This is a continuous process of refinement which we continue to learn from. We hope that our learning opportunities can demonstrate best practices for other organisations within the sector.



Reporting

Over the last three years, we modelled various reporting and accountability mechanisms, with the goal of ensuring that RLOs are accountable to funders and more importantly are accountable to their communities. Whilst funds can be unrestricted they should still be accounted for. Detailed financial reporting can promote this and is improved with flexibility on timelines and refugee-led budgeting process.

For impact reporting, we migrated our process to a structure with minimal requirements, asking RLOs to report stories of change through their Reframe profiles. These stories enable RLOs to share a wide spread of data in an engaging way, with the assumption that human stories are as, if not more, important and relevant for RLOs as statistical data.

Thematic responses from RLOs

For refugee leaders to play a meaningful and mainstream role in the global refugee response it will be vital for some RLOs to be recognised as experts in a specific field and they intend to demonstrate this using data and evidence.

Some RLOs are keen to align themselves with thematic areas of response, such as education, livelihoods and climate resilience. This gives them more meaningful access to thematic working groups which can offer focused experience and opportunities for a more central role. RLOs can then apply for and access thematically ring-fenced funding. Encouraging RLOs towards these opportunities will open up access to funding that it will otherwise be impossible for them to access. It is therefore important to take a nuanced perspective on what is “restrictive” funding as compared to funding that is ring-fenced while still aligning with the vision for change as held by RLOs and refugee communities. Cohere’s approach is to support refugee leaders in accessing the funding they need to achieve their goals, while shining a light on where power sits or should sit in that flow of funding so that the planning and the achievements can truly be community driven and owned.

An example of this kind of funding mechanism would be “Education Cannot Wait”. This is a fund that has mobilised \$1.6 Billion for Education in Emergencies, and RLOs have received funding from this source as downstream partners of larger iNGOs. The establishment of Education Cannot Wait has been largely hailed as a success in allocating funding to the crucial gaps in education in emergency contexts. However, for better or worse, funds from this source will always be ring-fenced towards education or the wrap-around services that support education and cannot therefore be described as “unrestricted”

Grant sizes

Nuance is also vital when considering appropriate grant sizes. There are negative examples of RLOs being provided small grants that could be a threat to the “do no harm” principle. Small, one-off grants that are highly restrictive can have consequences such as high administrative burdens and a waste of RLO personnel time, threaten funding sustainability due to new on-going costs, create stress and anxiety for leaders, and promote a focus on short term deliverables at the expense of longer term investments and opportunities.

An appropriate or inappropriate size of a grant will vary depending on the location’s economy and purchasing power parity, on the age of the organisation and their funding management systems, and most importantly on the conditions of funding. It is hard to argue that an entirely unrestricted grant or gift would be inappropriate, no matter its size. A core tenet of the non-profit sector is that typically anyone with even \$10 should be able to make a donation without feeling it is too small, provided they don’t expect high conditionality. Cohere’s concern with advocating for minimum grant sizes is that it might deter donors with smaller amounts of funding from giving, in case they are met with reproach for the amount of funding they are able to provide.

Cohere has provided relatively small grants, of less than \$5000 in some cases, but the following considerations have given us confidence in their legitimacy:

- Unrestricted grants and not time-bound - the funds do not need to be spent if investing them for the future is the most strategic decision.
- Options to invest in ideas that will lead to sustainability for the organisation - such as investing in leadership talent or cost saving measures such as vehicles or property.
- Continuing a long term funding partnership, with repeat funding often coming within a 12 month period, and extending over several years. In addition, we always discuss the multiple ways in which Cohere can connect RLOs to other direct funding opportunities.

Our RLO partners have also documented that in almost every case, a small grant from Cohere helped them to leverage a larger funding opportunity from another donor, with detail on specific causality.

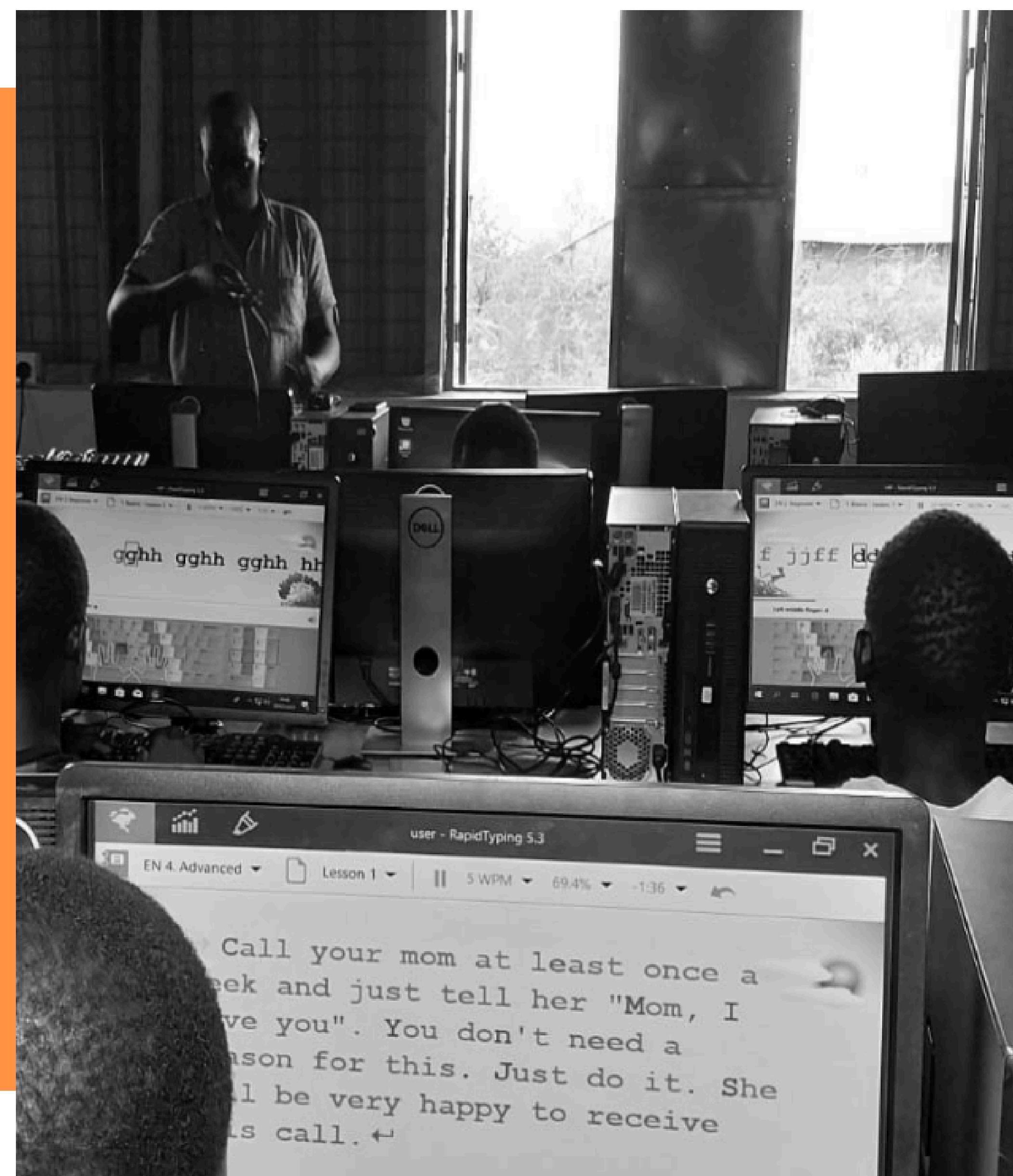
CAPACITY STRENGTHENING COURSE

Cohere is dedicated to working with RLOs to improve their organisational structures and accountability. Our open source, 21 module Capacity Strengthening and Sharing Course (CSSC) has been delivered to, and by, groups across the continent. It was designed to support RLOs in governance issues as well as topics related to leadership, strategy, inclusion, accountability to communities, risk management and resource mobilisation. Over the three year period, Cohere delivered the course to 60 RLOs directly and has been adapting the course towards a more RLO centred approach, infusing continuous in-person mentorship for RLOs and organising webinars on topical capacity areas. In parallel to this, we have created more flexible forms of capacity strengthening such as access to one-on-one mentoring and coaching. This has been boosted by our presence on the ground (in camps and settlements across Kenya and Uganda) as we are able to provide on-going face to face support and has been a crucial element in promoting equal partnerships, as our partners genuinely see us as peers who can help them connect to growth opportunities as opposed to being donors per se.

“The course played a key role for KI4BLI because through it we understood our strengths; we reflected on our community’s needs; and we were able to define our vision and mission clearly. It helped us to build our strategy, create policies and refine our programmes. We learnt partnership negotiation, proposal writing, and financial management, which has helped us through due diligence processes and the management of contracts. The course is part of our success.”

Samwell Ninja, Founder and CEO, KI4BLI

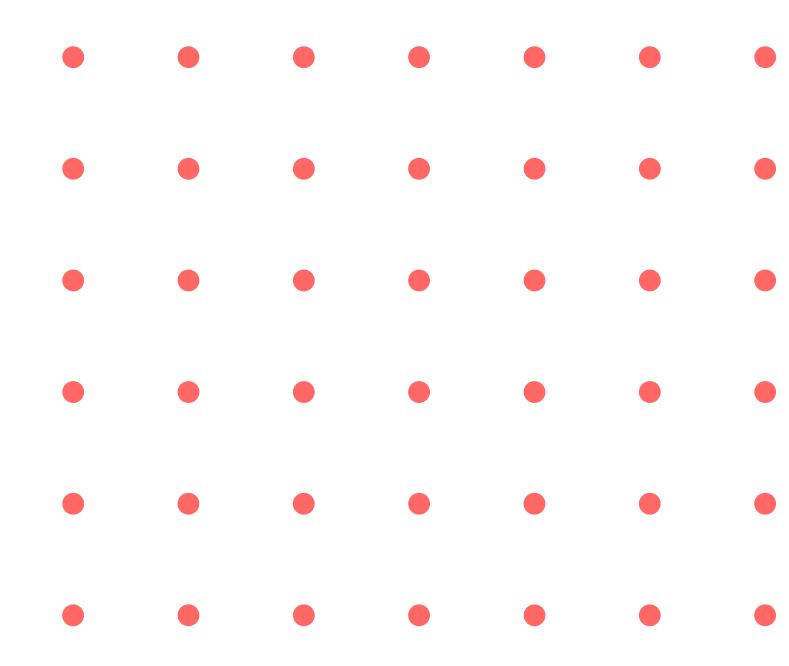
KI4BLI is an refugee-led organisation based in Kakuma, that now counts HIAS, Global Wellbeing Fund and COHERE amongst its donors. They support 800 community members and have an annual budget of £40,000 per year.



Development of the capacity assessment tool

Capacity strengthening has continued to be a key pillar for organisational growth amongst our RLO partners. Cohere developed an organisational capacity assessment (OCA) tool developed on the basis of the capacity sharing course and with feedback from the RLO partners to continuously track the progress made in capacity. The RLO partners that have been assessed through the OCA have demonstrated ownership of the capacity improvement process. The feedback from the results of the OCA conducted in 2023 served as a baseline and provided insights into the specific areas of learning that the RLOs should focus on. The OCA was administered to 42 organisations across 7 key compliance areas that included: Governance, Mission and Vision, Monitoring and Evaluation, Fraud, Safeguarding, Risk Management and Financial Management.

In 2023, our concept of capacity strengthening shifted focus to include capacity strengthening for donors. By sharing examples of best practice we have been able to advise donors on how they too could change their approaches to partnering with RLOs in a way that shifted power to RLOs while not compromising on their fiduciary responsibilities. We were able to do this by modelling an approach to due diligence that was more participatory and formative, and as such more owned by the RLOs themselves. As such, the dynamic approach we had been modelling in due diligence became central to our capacity strengthening approach as RLOs became more engaged in the process and donors became interested in simplifying due diligence. This remains a focus for our work as we continue to refine these practices and demonstrate transformations.



If your organisation would be interested in discussing this further with our team, then you can email r.njiri@wearecohere.org

COORDINATION

In 2021 Cohere had insufficient clarity as to how to support RLOs in the area of coordination. We have seen that there is an undervalued role of aggregation initiatives in the sector such as refugee-led consortia, coalitions, local-level networks, refugee led research groups, and refugee led thematic working groups. Although there are many good examples of these aggregation initiatives there is a need for more awareness of and support for their emergence.

In 2023, out of the 58 RLO partners who participated in the Cohere annual meaningful reach survey, 48 RLOs (83%) reported to be affiliated with a network and 31 RLOs (53%) belong to a coalition or consortium.

figure 2: Is your organisation part of a network?

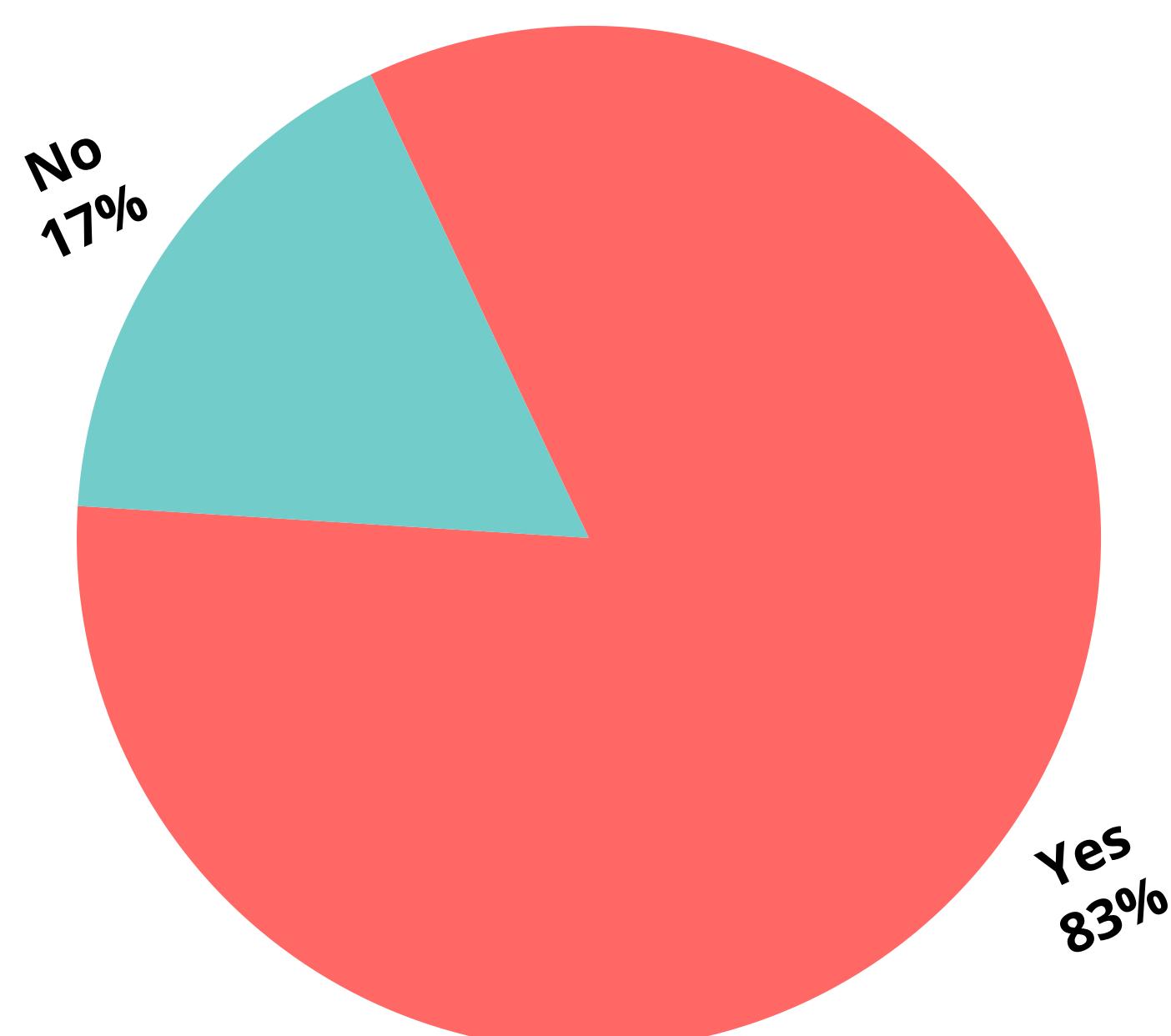
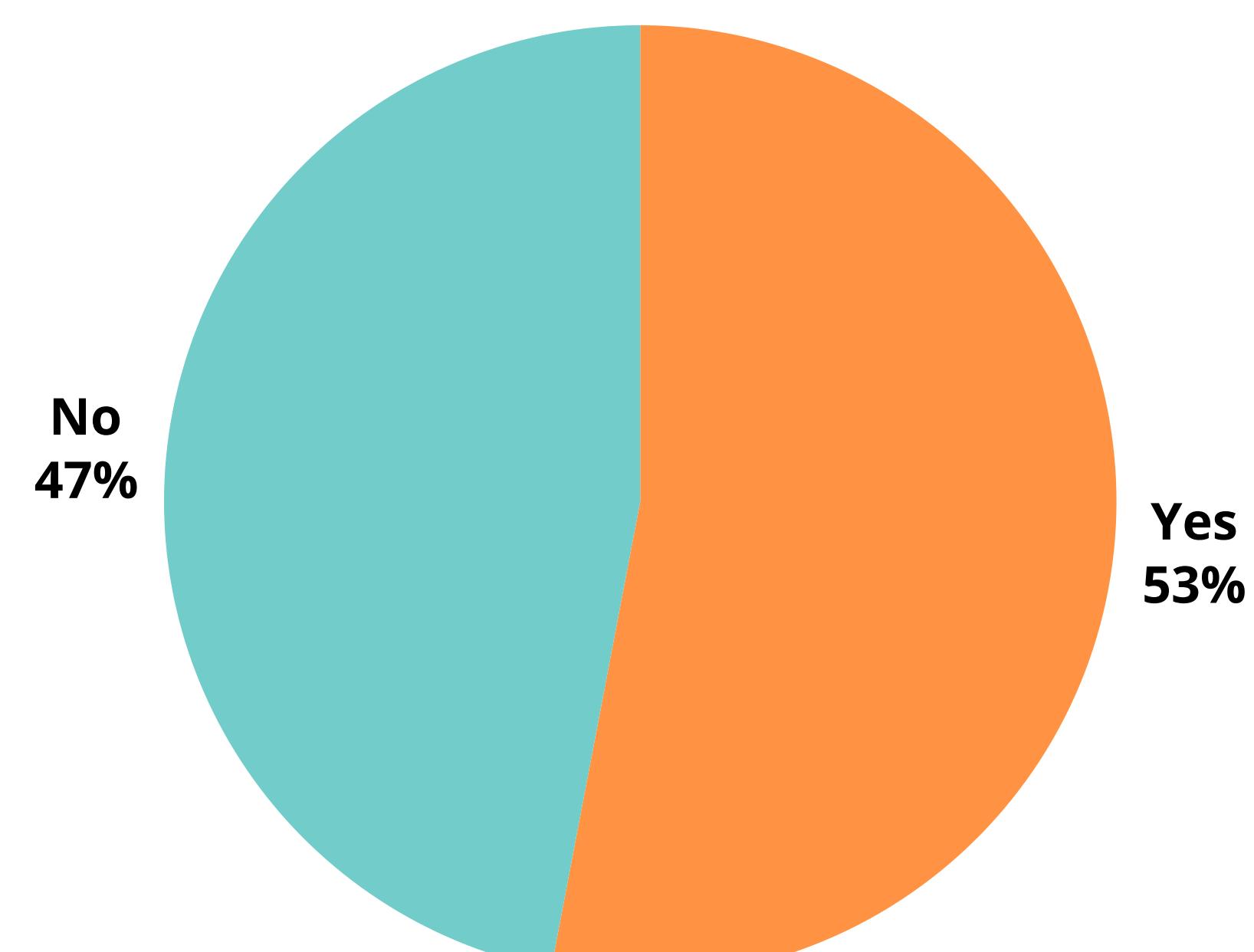
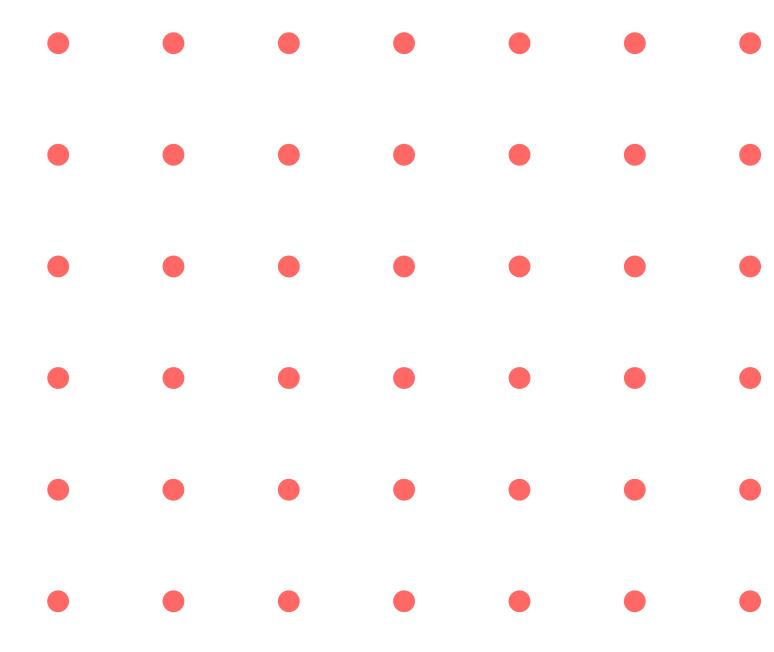


figure 3: Is your organisation part of a consortium?



Why is there an increasing number of aggregation initiatives?

- Ever increasing number of RLOs around the world
- RLOs consistently demonstrating local responses are more relevant, rapid, adaptable, sustainable and greater accountability to local communities
- Only a small number of donors explicitly committed to providing funding to RLOs (22 identified by ODI in 2023). Donors have been working with intermediaries such as Cohere and an evolving network of refugee led intermediaries.
- The existing cohort of intermediaries do not have the scope to effectively connect a wide enough range of refugee led initiatives to funding or other actors in the sector.



“A refugee response that is led by people affected by forced displacement is the most effective and appropriate means of achieving change. The current system is under extreme threat, and with numbers of forcibly displaced people increasing every year, the response to refugee crises will fail unless new approaches are tested and scaled. Aggregation initiatives offer an example of a new approach - through a network, a refugee led approach can be scaled while still maintaining the vital characteristics of a nuanced localised response.”

(Edmund Page, CEO & Founder of Cohere)

Read our most recent blog for further reflections on [The Need and Opportunity for Refugee Led Aggregation Initiatives](#).

As an example of an alternative structure of aggregation, Cohere has partnered with the Grassroot Leadership Organizations, headquartered in Kampala.

The Grassroot Leadership Organisations (GLOs) was founded in 2021 by 13 member RLOs. They make up a legally registered consortium focused on fundraising and supporting across no specific thematic sector or geographical area.

GLOs' main goals include fundraising to assist member organisations, ensuring accountability through a dedicated team of data collectors, and encouraging inclusive participation in planning, implementing, and reporting community initiatives. GLOs promote knowledge sharing among members especially in financial matters, and fostering extensive networks.

Current GLOs members, such as Bondeko Refugee Livelihoods Centre, Refugee Parliamentarians for Peace, and Haslife, engage in collaborative learning, sharing implementation strategies. Through this joint effort, GLOs aim to enhance efficiency for both donors and recipients by consolidating funds and facilitating a smooth flow of support to grassroots organisations. This means that donors can support diverse and specialised projects based on local expertise with a reduced administrative burden and cost.

ADVOCACY

In 2021, advocacy was one of the four pillars of our work. Our scaling initiative for the department was to support refugee-led advocacy initiatives that had more specific targets and objectives. At the local level this included RLOs working on reducing regulatory barriers to their work, and at the international level this included efforts to ensure refugee leaders had a presence in key international forums.

In 2022, our advocacy work began to adapt in response to depressing indicators within the sector that funds to RLOs and other local actors were by some metrics reducing rather than increasing. The Global Humanitarian Assistance report, for example, detailed a reduction in humanitarian funding received by local actors from 4.1% to 2.1% globally between 2020 and 2022. A major multilateral institution reported to us that within East Africa the amount of their funding that they had transferred directly to RLOs had reduced from 0.2% of their total funds spent to 0.1%. This coincided with us joining forces with Urban Refugees at the end of 2021 - an organisation that had been doing effective work in advocacy highlighting and addressing the pervasive barriers preventing the shift of power within the humanitarian response towards refugee leaders. In line with this, we adapted our advocacy strategy to include wider attempts to address entrenched barriers to the meaningful participation and leadership of refugees in the refugee response.

Report on Barriers to Meaningful Participation of Refugees in the Refugee Response

In January 2023, we launched a report “Addressing five barriers to implementing “Meaningful Refugee Participation” in the refugee response”. The report addresses the challenges hindering “Meaningful Refugee Participation” in the humanitarian decision-making process, focusing on pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum. Conducted between May and December 2022, the study draws on testimonies from fifteen pledge-making NGOs and Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs) across seven regions. The report aimed to provide a platform for these organisations to share challenges in fulfilling their pledges and propose practical solutions.

The report underscores the need for a shared conceptual framework, transparent selection criteria, inclusive organisational cultures, legal advocacy, and a sector-wide shift in power dynamics to achieve meaningful refugee participation. It recommends practical steps for organisations embarking on internal learning journeys, such as adopting diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices, fostering inclusive governance, and advocating for policy changes to dismantle existing barriers. The report serves as a comprehensive guide, offering valuable insights and proposing actionable solutions for organisations committed to ensuring meaningful refugee participation in humanitarian decision-making.

Read the report [here](#) and watch our [video series](#) that details practical solutions in response to the reports findings.

SHIFTING POWER – Cohere’s Internal Learning Journey

Initiated in 2021, Cohere embarked upon a thorough and structured journey to shift power internally. A comprehensive 2022-2026 strategy was developed, outlining reform areas within the organisation along with detailed implementation strategies, leading to multiple initiatives:

- Refugee Advisory Panel Establishment
- Recruitment of Governance and Inclusion Officer
- Recruitment of five colleagues to our team with lived experience of forced displacement
- Highlighting challenges in Refugee Representation
- Prioritisation of internal DEI Conversations

Insights and taking action to shift power within Cohere

In a crucial phase of our journey towards shifting power Cohere enlisted decolonisation and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) specialists, to undertake an overhaul of Cohere’s internal systems, policies, and approaches. This was complemented with insightful one-to-one interviews and focus group discussions involving key staff, Board members, and Advisory Board members, offering valuable insights into Cohere’s internal dynamics. The specialists then formulated recommendations for Cohere, and presented them to the staff, leadership team, and Board, marking a pivotal shift from analysis to actionable insights, guiding strategic planning aligned with power-shifting objectives.

The ongoing third phase involves Cohere’s team delving into the recommendations, using them to formulate and implement plans for change. This collaborative effort ensures that the specialists’ insights are translated into tangible steps, contributing to Cohere’s overarching strategy for power-shifting.

Collective learning

Whilst we take on our own learning journey as an organisation, we also believe in the value of collective learning. With this in mind, Cohere designed a series of interactive workshops, with the guidance and support of experts (many of whom have personally experienced forced displacement) that launched at the end 2023. This five-session Interactive Workshop Series was run over the course of six months with each session being co-organised with experts on topics that can support and share learnings, experiences, and better practices.

All sessions are available to watch at this [link](#).

The interactive workshop series is a concrete example of our commitment to externalise our experiences in shifting power to refugee leadership and engage in sector-wide dialogue. This work is carried across our Communications, Prospecting (partnerships), Advocacy and MEAL departments through activities like online campaigns promoting the work carried out by RLOs as first responders to displacement crises; one-on-one conversations with donors who have moved towards a model of funding that is more flexible and community led; advocacy campaigns around representation of refugees at the highest levels of decision making; research and evidence generation taking on questions of shifting power and decolonisation.

Cohere has made significant strides to address the barriers to meaningful refugee participation that was outlined in our 2022 report, and our work continues.



Cohere continued to develop and promote the [Reframe](#) platform that has enhanced RLO engagement in terms of access to funding, learning content, networking opportunities, amongst other benefits. Reframe had 393 RLOs spread in 27 Countries across the world at the end of 2023. There were 2 support partners onboarded on Reframe aimed at decentralising the platform towards more refugee leadership.

Reframe has offered us further clarity on our role in coordination and elevating systems change innovations. Firstly, Reframe acts as a portal for raising awareness about hundreds of refugee-led initiatives including aggregation initiatives such as consortia, coalitions and networks. Secondly, Reframe offers aggregation initiatives as a chance to profile their unique role in changing systems.

As an example, Reframe's education collective change profile brings together RLOs working towards shared indicators of change in delivering formal primary education. Between the five RLOs profiled on the page, 2000 Children are being supported through formal education. By working towards shared established indicators of change, in this case school enrolment numbers, RLOs are able to shift the narrative on the effectiveness of a refugee led response in a mainstream sector such as education, which in turn is leading to more recognition of RLOs as being mainstream responders as opposed to local responders acting on the periphery of the core response.

Go to [Reframe](#) to find out more.

For more information about Cohere's work, please visit www.wearecohere.org
or reach out to our team on info@wearecohere.org