

REFUGEE-LED ORGANISATIONS (RLOS) IN EUROPE:

POLICY CONTRIBUTIONS, OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

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1. BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

In 2018 the number of refugees around the world reached its highest in human history (68.5 million people).¹ The so-called 'refugee crisis in Europe' and policy solutions following therefrom have been major topics of political debate all around the world and in particular in the European Union (EU).

Faced with an increasing number of asylum seekers and refugees since early 2015, the EU has been struggling to receive additional commitments from EU Member States (MS) in respect of sharing responsibility for refugees, as well as support to reform refugee policies, sharing responsibilities equally between EU MS and helping to solve issues on asylum and refugee integration in Europe.

In addition to EU MS, other stakeholders around Europe, such as national and international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), donors, private organisations and grass root community organisations including Refugee Community Organisations (RCOs), are encouraged to take part in supporting refugee integration in Europe. Researchers, activists and practitioners are working hard to find policy and practical solutions to refugee issues. In particular, these different stakeholders are contributing their knowledge to policy solutions for the reform of EU asylum and refugee policies, especially the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) for more "solidarity", "fairness" "orderly reception and processing of asylum seekers" and practical solutions to the implementation of the policies on the ground.²

In addition to stakeholders and actors at the policy level, Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs) RCOs and individual refugee and migration experts have recently attracted more attention from local governments and civil society as being important stakeholders in refugee integration both at the policy and practical level as well as on the grass roots and local community level. RCOs have been mentioned as very important players on the grassroots level for the implementation of emergency services for refugees such as reception, housing, cultural, health support and even integration of newcomers to the labor market.³

The term RCOs has been more commonly used for communities consisting primarily of people with a refugee background. This research uses a more specific term, RLOs which indicates organisations that are either entirely established, directed and led by refugees or have refugees in positions of decision making or directing the corresponding organisations. The term RCOs in this paper is used for refugee communities that are active in refugee service provision but are not necessarily officially registered as an organisation. The term RLO, however, refers to those who are officially registered as non-profit organisations.

The question raised by refugee supporting Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and RLOs is that if RLOs positively contribute to finding policy and practical solutions to refugee issues, why are they not practically involved in the development, evaluation and discussion of asylum and integration policies/practices at the EU level? What are the major challenges that they face and how can they be solved? What are the barriers for the EU to reach out or involve RLOs in asylum and refugee policy making?

This paper attempts to find out the answers to the aforementioned questions by interviewing different stakeholders, namely policy makers and RLO representatives from different EU MS. Answering the above questions is all the more crucial since a literature review carried out for this research demonstrates that there is a scarcity of information available on the topic. RLOs have hardly been researched as supporters of refugee policy reforms in Europe or elsewhere.

1. UNHCR (2019) Figures at a Glance: <https://www.unhcr.org/figures-at-a-glance.html>
2. J. Brekke, 'Stuck in Transit : Secondary Migration of Asylum Seekers in Europe, National Differences, and the Dublin Regulation' (2014) 28(2) Journal of Refugee Studies.
3. P.A. Jones, 'Refugee Community Organisations working in partnership: The quest for recognition' (2010) PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham; R. Zetter & M. Pearl 'The minority within the minority: Refugee community-based organisations in the UK and the impact of restrictionism on asylum-seekers' (2000) 26(4) Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, 675–697; D. Williams, 'A bridge to life in the UK: Refugee-led community organisations and their role in integration' (2018).

This research has the potential to assist EU policy makers of migration and refugee matters, donors and stakeholders to better understand the role of RLOs as possible contributors to both policy and practice at the European as well as national level. The research also helps to identify the challenges RLOs face and the potential solutions and strategies from the view points of RLO leaders, policymakers and practitioners.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

This research aims to find out if RLOs could be potential contributors to refugee policy reforms such as the recently attempted CEAS reform at the EU level and to identify the underlying opportunities and challenges. The research attempts to find answers to the following questions:

- » Why, so far, are RLOs not involved in asylum and integration policies/practices at the EU level? What opinions do experts, policy makers and practitioners hold on it? What do refugee/migrant led organisations think about it?
- » What are the opportunities and challenges in this regard? What are the suggested solutions/strategies to address the challenges?

3. METHODOLOGY

The ‘purposive sampling method’ is used to interview different stakeholders including policy makers and specialists from international refugee organisations, the European Commission (EC), representatives of European NGOs, refugee advocates and RLOs from seven countries: Germany, France, Sweden, Greece, Ireland, Italy and the UK. (see Table 1 below).

The reason behind the choice of this method is to identify and focus on actors who are already involved and experienced in both practical and policy making or policy advocacy at both the national and European level; organisations which are cognisant of current policies on refugees, policy reform, challenges and potential solutions. The stakeholders interviewed are very diverse in terms of services they provide, in terms of experiences that they have, their background and geographical locations. Some of the RLOs interviewed have considerable experience in refugee advocacy, refugee rights, women and unaccompanied minor refugee rights, others have been present as advocates at the national and even sometimes at the European level whereas some have been present only at the local and grassroots level.

Table 1: Interviewed Stakeholders

Type	Number of interviews
Policy makers from the EU Commission	2
Representative of the European Policy Center in Brussels	1
International refugee organisations	2
Donor organisation	1
RLOs (in Germany, Italy, Ireland, Greece, Sweden, France and the UK)	7
British Refugee Council	1
Individual experts and activists	2
Total	16

Source: Author

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

The following review of the literature shows that RCOs have been researched in some parts of Europe, such as the UK, for many years. The literature, however, rarely mentions RLOs as being active in refugee rights

advocacy at a level beyond their own local communities. The literature assessed demonstrates some of the problems RCOs are facing, the suggested solutions and some questions that have been raised for further discussion and examination.

RCOs are “...self-determining groups of refugees organised around a particular identity”⁴ The type of services that they provide to the community includes: immediate support after their arrival to the host countries; basic daily life support; social and cultural support; advocacy at the local level; language training; housing and employment services to each other and to those seeking asylum.⁵

The existence of RCOs originates from the presence of refugees in different regions and countries around the globe. The presence of refugees in Europe stems from the mid 19th century. In the UK, it is stated that RCOs existed for a considerable amount of time. For instance, Ethiopian, Somali, Tamil and Vietnamese communities existed since the 1980s.⁶ Other EU MS have also been major hosting countries to refugees, third country nationals, displaced persons and migrants. For instance, Germany has been hosting millions of Turkish nationals and other Eastern European populations during the past half-century. Research on these communities remains sparse, however.

The literature reviewed shows that the UK is the country with the largest amount of research completed on the topic of refugee integration, refugee communities and their role in the integration of refugees to host societies. The existing research has mostly focused on refugee communities, their integration in the host communities, the immediate challenges they face and the opportunities for integration.⁷ However, studies seldom focus on the role and impact of refugees’/ refugee communities as policy contributors to asylum and refugee policy discussions in their hosting countries.

4.1. WHAT DO RLOS AND RCOS IN THE EU DO?

There are hundreds of RCOs or RLOs in EU MS which are considered by local governments and other SCOs as being major actors in the integration of refugees in the host communities. However, they have mostly been present in the local communities as actors providing urgent operational services, and not as actors in decision making and formal and policy processes, neither at the local nor national level.

Based on findings from Lukes & Juan⁸ the RCOs in the UK mostly provide informal and emergency services, for instance, finding accommodation for newcomers, providing cultural advice and language facilities and organising cultural and sport events. They primarily represent themselves and their communities at the very local level.

In addition to the basic services mentioned above, some RCOs have also supported refugees in social and job market integration. For instance, Holgate, Keles, Pollert, & Kumarappen⁹ describe the role of Kurdish community organisations as major supporters of refugees by responding to work and employment related issues of refugees in London.

Ehrkamp and Leitner state that in Germany, the RCOs have played an important role in standing for immigrants’ rights by “creating space for citizenship and democracy” at both the national as well as the European level. In cooperation with German NGOs, the community organisations have acted critically against

4. P.A. Jones, 'Refugee Community Organisations working in partnership: The quest for recognition' (2010) PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. J. Crisp, T. Morris, H. Refstie, 'Displacement in urban areas new challenges' (2012) 36(1) *Disasters*, 36(I dmc), 23–42; T. S. Carter & J. Osborne, 'Housing and neighbourhood challenges of refugee resettlement in declining inner City neighbourhoods: A Winnipeg case study' (2009) 7(3) *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies* 308–327; A.A. Abdelkerim & M. Grace, 'Challenges to Employment in Newly Emerging African Communities in Australia: A Review of the Literature' (2012) 65(1) *Australian Social Work* 104–119.

8. S. Lukes & Y.S. Juan, 'The potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy' (2009) Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

9. J. Holgate, J. Keles, A. Pollert & L. Kumarappen, 'Workplace Problems Among Kurdish Workers in London: Experiences of an “Invisible” Community and the Role of Community Organisations as Support Networks' (2012) 38(4) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 595–612.

the restrictive immigration policies and have often stood against xenophobia and racism towards immigrants.¹⁰

4.2. WHAT CHALLENGES DO RLOS AND RCOS FACE?

As newly established organisations in the host countries, RLOs face several challenges which make their activities more difficult and their objectives more challenging to fulfill. For instance, they face language barriers, are unaccustomed to the rules and regulations of the host country, are less familiar with their work environment, have less access to funding in comparison with similar organisations that are founded by persons other than refugees, in other words 'mainstream organisations'.

Some further challenges have been pointed out by several researchers. For instance, problems of access to funding is mentioned as major problem for the RCOs in Europe at both the local and EU level. Language and information barriers, lower technical competencies in comparison with the well established mainstream organisations, lack of professional capacity, lack of fundraising skills and lack of donors being interested in their activities have been listed as some of the major challenges which RLOs face.¹¹

Financial issues have been mentioned as a major challenge for RCOs in the UK for instance, Griffiths, Sigona, & Zetter¹² points out the "consistent struggle to access funding" by different RCOs in London. They find out that the annual funding of the RCOs interviewed are between 10,000 to 20,000 pounds which is insufficient compared to the considerable demand that they have for their services.

In addition to the challenges mentioned above, RCOs in the UK complain of being "perceived as less as partner and more as sub-contractors" by other agencies.¹³ Furthermore, language barriers, an absence of information and unfamiliarity with the system has led the mainstream organisations to view them as being less capable of completing tasks. They are consequently labelled or feel 'unheard' with little involvement in civic life.¹⁴

"It remains true, however, that most, even those that are organised by people with many years of political and social influence in their home countries (or internationally), struggle to secure real influence on decisions and processes in the UK".¹⁵

What is important to impart from the above is how RLOs are affected by the challenges which RCOs face and how they finally cope with them. The challenges have caused RCOs in the UK to either limit their operations and organisations or even cease their activities. For instance, Williams¹⁶ is concerned about the decline in the number and capacity of RCOs in the UK in recent years. The study reports that some RCOs have discontinued their webpages, some have changed to other social media, such as Facebook, and some cease to be active. Such reduction or discontinuation of activities for some RCOs has been due to the decrease in their income and for others, no income at all in recent years.

Bearing in mind the important role of RLOs as integration service providers on the one hand, and the demand for their contribution on the policy level on the other, the aforementioned points raises questions as to the possible ways to address the challenges refugee organisations are facing? In particular, what should RLOs and the EU institutions in public policy making do to address them? Who and what could help them address these issues?

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10. P. Ehrkamp & H. Leitner, 'Beyond National Citizenship: Turkish Immigrants and the (RE)Construction of Citizenship in Germany' (2013) 24(2) *Urban Geography*, 127–146.
 11. D. Williams, 'A bridge to life in the UK: Refugee-led community organisations and their role in integration' (2018); S. Lukes & Y.S. Juan, 'The potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy' (2009) Joseph Rowntree Foundation; P. Córdoba Montoya, 'Refugee-Led Organizations and the Obstacles They Face: A Comparative Study of Syria Bright Future and the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh' (2017) Master's Thesis, Duquesne University, 85.
 12. R. Zetter & M. Pearl 'The minority within the minority: Refugee community-based organisations in the UK and the impact of restrictionism on asylum-seekers' (2000) 26(4) *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 675–697.
 13. Ibid.
 14. P.A. Jones, 'Refugee Community Organisations working in partnership: The quest for recognition' (2010) PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham.
 15. S. Lukes & Y.S. Juan, 'The potential of migrant and refugee community organisations to influence policy' (2009) Joseph Rowntree Foundation.
 16. D. Williams, 'A bridge to life in the UK: Refugee-led community organisations and their role in integration' (2018).

4.3. HOW DO RLOS OVERCOME BARRIERS?

Keeping the above-mentioned challenges in mind, the research focuses on the question of how to overcome the barriers depending on the context and activities the organisations are working on.

The potential solutions and strategies suggested by literature include, but are not limited to, training and capacity building for RLO staff members, employment of more competitive-driven and qualified refugee and migrant persons to positions of direction or management in their organisations and more interaction with public and private mainstream organisations in the host societies.¹⁷

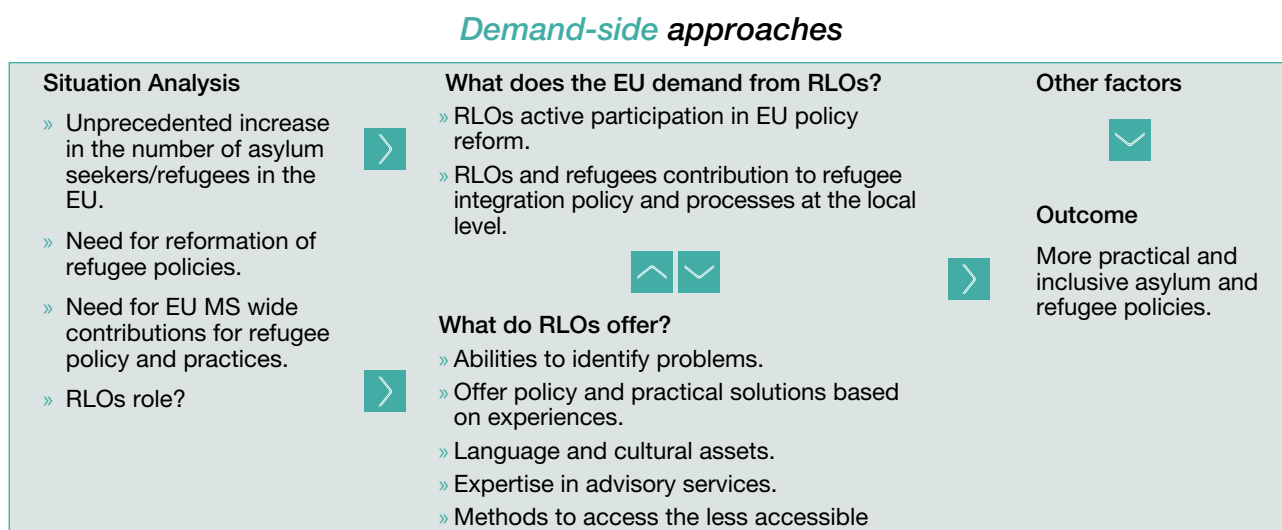
Furthermore, cooperation and coordination with non refugee-led or mainstream organisations in the area and region as well as absorption of volunteer experts through cooperation and interaction with mainstream organisations are also suggested as key solutions. For instance, P.A. Jones¹⁸ suggests collaboration of RCOs with other organisations as a way forward. He mentions the example of RCOs ability to influence health sector policies in a South London project where the RCOs were linked to health authorities. Such collaboration gives RCOs and other organisations the chance to learn from each other, provide services more effectively and efficiently and earn more credibility.

The following section of this paper attempts to show the result of how RLOs could be more active and influential at the policy and decision-making level in the EU.

5. RESULTS

The summary of results from the interviews concerning involvement of RLOs in the process of refugee and asylum policy and practices in the EU is shown in Diagram 1.

Diagram 1. Analysis of RLOs' Contribution: the Demand and Supply-Side Approaches



Supply-side approaches

Source: Authors

The diagram summarises the results of this research from two different aspects. First, the demand side approach, which shows what the EU demands from RLOs at the regional and local levels. Second, the supply side approach, which shows what refugee-led organisations could offer, namely the comparative advantage that RLOs have over the mainstream organisations in respect of the services that they offer for refugees.

17. P. Córdoba Montoya, 'Refugee-Led Organizations and the Obstacles They Face: A Comparative Study of Syria Bright Future and the Bhutanese Community Association of Pittsburgh' (2017) Master's Thesis, Duquesne University, 85.

18. P.A. Jones, 'Refugee Community Organisations working in partnership: The quest for recognition' (2010) PhD Thesis, University of Birmingham.

Included in the diagram is also some background information, reasons behind the necessity for refugee policy reform in the EU and the need for further stakeholder commitments and contributions. Ultimately, and in the longer term, the combination of the demand and supply side approaches is expected to result in more practical and efficient refugee policies and integration practices for both the EU and its MS. There are, of course, other factors the situation of asylum in Europe and the number of people who claim asylum that are not taken into consideration in this process but could, nonetheless, directly or indirectly affect the outcome.

5.1. DEMAND-SIDE APPROACHES

The demand-side approach illustrates the potential of RLOs in Europe and explores the possibilities of how they could best contribute to the reception and integration of refugees in the EU both at the policy and practical level.

The results show that RLOs are required to contribute at both the EU and MS level which is explained in further detail as follows:

5.1.1. EU LEVEL

RLOs at the EU level could most effectively contribute to the ongoing reform of asylum and refugee policies in Europe. For instance, the CEAS¹⁹, as its name implies “is a set of common standards agreed by member states to help treat the asylum seekers equally (Article 77 para 2 TFEU). It includes, asylum procedures, reception conditions, qualification, Dublin regulations and EURODAC regulations”.²⁰

A policy maker from the EC states that the EC does consider the role of RLOs as necessary for their ongoing CEAS policy reform in Brussels.

“Refugees, in general, including RLOs, are affected by all CEAS policies and their contribution is valid to all the reformations on the table. We suggest the RLOs to take part in our public policy consultations, give their inputs, suggest for separate meetings on specific policy reforms if needed and the EC will, of course, be happy to receive their inputs.”

Interview# 004 Policy maker, EC, Brussels

“The Commission does welcome the policy solutions and policy contributions of RLOs in Europe. We, so far, do not have the specific policy solutions on CEAS from any RLO in Europe but we do consult the European refugee organisations who are working on migration and refugee policies.”

Interview# 004 Policy maker, EC, Brussel

Data shows that the lack of presence and contributions from refugees at a policy level is felt and understood by the organisations in charge of policy reform.

“We do feel the necessity of consulting the refugee policy reforms with the RLOs but there is specifically no such organisation or umbrella organisation in Brussels to whom we could refer to for the consultations. But instead we do consult with the ECRE that is considered as an umbrella organisation for refugees in the EU”.

Interview# 005 Policy maker, EC, Brussels

“We do see it as a problem that there are no active RLOs at the EU level who could contribute to solve the

19. European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs, “CEAS”:
a. Asylum procedures directive contains rules and standards for asylum procedures as well as provisions regarding legal protections, legal advice and legal representations.
b. Reception conditions directive sets standards for accommodation, meals, employment opportunities and healthcare provided to asylum applicants.
c. Qualification directive sets out common standards for the recognition of asylum applicants as refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and grants them specific rights, such as rights to residence, work or education.
d. Dublin regulations defines the criteria for determining the Member State responsible for processing an asylum application.
e. Eurodac regulations forms the legal basis for a central fingerprint database which allows to enter and compare the fingerprints of asylum seekers and irregular migrants in order to determine via which member state they have entered the EU”, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/asylum_en.

20. European Migration Network, German National Contact Point for the European Migration Network, Annual Policy Report, 2017.

policy issues. They could most effectively contribute to it because they are those who are either directly affected or indirectly through their families and relatives. We consider their contribution very important and try to reach them out. For instance, on the Complementary Pathways Debate we did have individual refugees who have come through the scholarship programs designed for the vulnerable refugees. They did talk about the positive points, the challenges and opportunities for improvements that definitely help us see how the policies work and how they could be reformed to be implemented most effectively.

Trainings are needed for those interested in the policy level. As a suggestion, probably the UNHCR together with European Asylum Support Office could identify refugees and RLOs who could be potential contributors to the policies. They could be trained to learn the necessary technical skills to get ready and contribute later.”

Interview# 008 Policy maker EPC, Brussels

“Inclusion of RLOs as part of the public debate on refugee policies, as part of public funding and as part of public and policy decision making is for the good of all. We are aware of the big umbrella refugee organisations at EU level who are designing new policies for better refugee inclusion at various hierarchies from operational to the decision-making level. For instance, our organisation has new policies for recruiting both staff and board members to be with refugee or migrant background. We also promote to add or encourage more refugee organisations as our partner organisations”.

Interview# 003 Policy maker NGO, Brussels

The above quotes show that there is a demand and interest for RLOs to be active at the Brussels level, specifically as policy experts or umbrella organisations that EU institutions responsible for devising public policies and specifically migration and refugee policies could consult.

Based on the results from the interviews with stakeholders at different policy and practical levels, the author assumes that there is currently no particular issue for EU public policy making institutions to include RLOs in the policy and decision-making process at EU or national MS level. However, there is a clearly an issue in respect of the practical inclusion of refugee representatives (either intentionally or unintentionally); RLOs are left out of the policy making cycle in Europe.

Data shows that there is currently a demand as well as a willingness to include RLOs in the policy making cycle from both the RLOs perspective and the corresponding perspective of European institutions in charge of refugee policy making. Nonetheless, the main issues are either a lack of awareness on the part of EU institutions as to existing RLO capacities or a lack of necessary technical capacity for policy contribution on the part of RLOs. Both parties, however, agree on the necessity for additional time, additional resources and technical capacity building of RLOs for an improved contribution to policy making.

5.1.2. MS LEVEL

Refugee and migrant individuals as well as community organisations are considered as important supporters of newcomers by both refugees and the hosting communities at the local and national level. However, they are mostly active at the practical, emergency and immediate service providing levels rather than at the decision making or advocacy levels. Additional examples have been previously listed in the literature review section.

Refugee policy specialists and activists believe that MS do require RLOs to be at the policy and decision-making level in their corresponding organisations. This could be for different humanitarian, social and political reasons.

It is crystal clear that RLOs are newcomers and they need some time to get to know the social and political structure of their hosting countries and then the EU and get active at the policy level. It takes some time to get organised and active at policy level but the population of refugees currently and after family reunification will be a considerable number of the EU population and they will constitute a huge lobby at the national and EU level.

Interview# 003 Policy maker NGO, Brussels

The UK home office is somehow interested to connect with the RCOs and know about them more and involve

them in the local and national policy and decision making.

There is an initiative of the British Refugee Council to build a forum to connect the RLOs with the policy makers. Our objective is to connect and inform the policy makers about RLOs capacities and RLOs about the policies and their own capacities and potentials for active participation in the policy and decision making and in the practices.

Interview# 006 NGO representative, London

“In Germany, there is a huge incentive and plan for integration of refugees into the host societies but there needs to be an approach on the inclusion of RLOs in the policy making too. My definition of RLO is not an organisation of one nationality or single ethnic group but very multicultural, international and diversified and rich in terms of culture, language diversification.”

Interview# 003 Policy maker NGO, Brussels

In Germany, there are several communities of self-organised refugees that are helping the community members but are neither registered as independent active organisations nor are they active at the policy or decision-making level.

5.2. SUPPLY-SIDE APPROACHES

The supply-side approach focuses on what the RLOs could offer to best contribute to the integration of refugees in Europe both at the policy and practical level. The focus mainly refers to the comparative advantage that RLOs have in respect of the services they offer as compared to the mainstream organisations working on refugee services in Europe.

“Refugees have a new perspective, a hell of an expertise, knowledge and skills of the countries of origin, countries of transition and host countries that other mainstream organisations never think about. RLOs are unfortunately experts, they have experienced the painful process and they know and can suggest the best solutions to the problems they have experienced”.

Interview# 003 Policy maker NGO, Brussels

“There are hundreds of RLOs in the UK, they mostly help the person right in front of them. They have a lot to say both at the practice and policy level. But they rarely have a chance to do so. Because they lack capacity, human and financial resources”.

Interview# 002 British Refugee Council, UK

The majority of interviewees representing RLOs in the seven European countries emphasise their expertise and the experiences that make them exclusively important in offering policy and practical strategies and solutions. Furthermore, abilities in identifying problems, language and cultural assets, expertise in advisory services and methods to access the less accessible members of the society.

RLOs do not indicate any specific part of the CEAS to take part in but they rather note the importance of their roles at all levels of CEAS reform. RLOs believe that the CEAS constitutes a total sum of rules and regulations for refugees. Thus, refugee representatives could take part in its improvement like other similar organisations advocating for other public policy reforms. However, there are some aspects, such as reform of reception conditions and asylum procedures where RLOs emphasise their contribution when compared with their potential contribution to the improvement of the qualification directive, for example.

5.3. MAJOR CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

Refugees and migrants are not new to Europe but the RLOs contributing to the policy or decision-making level is a new topic that is scarcely discussed or researched. Some of the major challenges that have emerged out of the interviews with refugee and migrant organisations in different countries around Europe and the suggested solutions to them are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Major Challenges and Suggested Solutions

Main challenges/problems	Suggested solutions/strategies
RLOs lack policy expertise for certain policy reform	Capacity building programs are necessary for individual refugees and RLOs on asylum and refugee policies and procedures
Lack of active RLOs at policy level	Establishment of RLOs and/or partnerships with other stakeholders working on asylum and migration policies at the EU and national level
Lack of financial accessibility for RLOs in Europe	Financial support for RLOs through specific consideration of quotas for the RLOs in the implementation of the integration funds at both EU and MS level
Lack of policy dialogues between European policy makers and civil society organisations (CSOs) in general and more specifically between policy making organisations and the RLOs	More policy dialogues and closer cooperation among these organisations would result in better solutions for the future
Lack of incentives for political integration of refugees/RLOs and low expectations from them in terms of decision making and leadership	Political integration of RLOs and individual refugees should be considered a priority and the capacity of RLOs should be taken into consideration
Underestimation of RLOs as stakeholders at policy level based on prior assumptions that RLOs are less capable	Refugees and RLOs being active at policy level should be considered as reliable stakeholders by the institutions making public policies at both the national and EU level.

Source: Author

The main challenge that is pointed out by almost every RLO interviewee and some of the policy makers is the financial barriers that the refugee organisations are facing. Some feel themselves to be discriminated against in comparison with the rest of the mainstream organisations.

“It is very difficult for us to get funding for implementation of planned integration projects. We have, for instance, applied for the AMIF (the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) planned by European Commission (EC) for seven years from 2014-2020) funds of the EC, in group of five RLOs but our application got rejected because the fund is in huge amounts and they think we are not capable of implementing the planned projects”.

Interview# 005 President of RLO, Greece

“Financial barrier is not that there is no funding available, there is a lot of money, more money invested than ever in the EU history on migration and refugee integration. The problem is in the allocation of funds. There is a lack of trust towards refugee leading organisations capacity to implement the funding properly”.

Interview# 0012 President of RLO, Ireland

It is worth distinguishing between institutional funders such as the EU and private foundations funding refugee integration and related topics. The above-mentioned quotes from interviewees demonstrates the problems encountered by actors in respect of projects funded by institutional European funders. However, an interview with a private donor organisation tells a different story. The interviewee of the organisation talks of the interest in the allocation of funds for the empowerment of RLOs in Europe as well as their active role in the policy debates and policy reform discussions on migration and refugee related topics.

“As a donor organisation, we are interested in the inclusion of RLOs as direct implementers of funds and their role in the policy debates is of course very important to us. In addition to that we organise roundtables and policy debates on the migration and refugee topics where we do consider to have the RLO representatives on the table and hear their voice”.

Interview# 007 Donor Organisation, Germany

This issue is mentioned by different RLO representatives and they emphasise the importance of inclusion of RLOs in public funding allocations. There are suggestions that a quota is established for funds to go to RLOs. The RLO representative below believes that there is a willingness and a strong incentive amongst RLOs for the inclusion of refugees and suggest to establish a quote for funding to go to RLOs. There are complaints of doing their services voluntarily.

“Over 90% of our activities are run voluntarily and our leading staff members and almost everyone has another job to run their daily life but do the organisations tasks beside their main job. The government or donors highly value our services but they should also consider this and try to empower the RLOs to remain more effective service providers to the societies”.

Interview# 004 RLO Representative, Germany

Another key challenge that is brought up by the majority of interviewees is the lack of policy dialogue between national institutions establishing public policies and civil societies in general and more specifically the gap between policy conversations with NGOs doing advocacy on refugee issues. It is foreseen that the challenge is solved by more dialogues, policy discussions and cooperation amongst the different stakeholders.

Another major problem is that RLOs believe that the policy makers primarily consider policies as fixed pre-structured rules in which refugees and RLOs are considered as absolute consumers not the fixers, the reformers, the updaters and the improvers.

The representative of the RLO in Greece states that there are several individual refugees who are in key policy and decision-making positions in different countries around the world. However, in Europe it is still something which is uncommon or rather surprising to the mainstream. For instance:

“When a refugee is assigned to a leading or decision-making position in a country, that makes the news headlines around the world, do you know why? Because there is no expectation from a refugee or someone with the migrant background to be capable of occupying a position just like anyone else”.

Interview# 005 President of RLO, Greece

The representative of the RLO in Italy believes that there is a need for RLOs to be active and take part in defending the rights of refugees and migrants in the EU. He believes that there are policies where there is a “clear violation of human rights of refugees in the EU.” He gives further examples:

“The Dublin regulation is a clear violation of fundamental rights. (no right to choose where to ask for asylum and family reunification). We call to drop the Dublin regulation. Additionally, limiting access to asylum and push back policies; EU deal to block refugees before they arrive to Europe; Turkey, Libya, Sudan and Niger. Furthermore, detention and deportation to countries with high risk of persecution, where human rights are not granted”.

Interview# 005 RLO Representative, Italy

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to find out the potential contribution of RLOs in the domain of asylum and refugee policy reform in Europe and the possible opportunities and challenges that exist in this regard.

For the purpose of this research, the semi-structured interviews are conducted with policy makers and specialists, the EC, representatives of international refugee organisations, representatives of European NGOs, refugee advocates and RLOs from seven European countries including Germany, Greece, Italy, Ireland, France, Sweden and the UK.

The research has found out that refugee policy makers in Europe do think that there is a necessity for RLOs to contribute at the policy making level, specifically to refugee, asylum and integration policies and practical refugee related policy reform in Europe. The interviewees believe that the RLOs and individual migrant and refugee experts have the potential to add additional value to the European refugee policy reform. For

instance, the on-going CEAS reform is mentioned and specifically, improvements to the Dublin regulation, complementary pathways and integration/inclusion policy and practices at the EU MS levels are mentioned as examples of where refugees are in a better position compared to other mainstream organisations and have the expertise to contribute.

Furthermore, the donor organisation interviewed shows a high level of interest in the inclusion of refugees and RLOs in the allocation of funds as well as the implementation of refugee serving projects in Europe. There are also the examples of budget allocation being conditional on refugees/RLOs making up part of the project implementing team, for instance by the EPIM (European Program for Integration and Migration).²¹

However, the data suggests that there is a need to improve refugee related policies in Europe. There are some requirements to be met by both policy makers and refugee organisations in Europe. For instance, it is necessary to have more interactions between policy makers and CSOs in general and especially with RLOs and policy makers. This is essential in order for the respective actors to get to know each other better, find out the capacities and capabilities of RLOs and their potential contributions to the policy reforms and include them more practically in the policy debates in Europe. The research findings show that policy makers, on the one hand, lack the necessary information about the existing capacities of RLOs and, on the other hand, believe that the RLOs with existing capacities are relatively small organisations and, therefore, can not help them during policy negotiations as much as the bigger established mainstream organisations. However, they do believe in the importance of potential contributions of refugees towards specific policies, such as integration and inclusion.

RLOs, in addition to their practical role at the grass root community level, are the potential asylum and integration policy contributors in the future of Europe but they do require the necessary expertise on the topic. Therefore, there is a necessity to empower refugees and RLOs through capacity building programs specialising in refugee and asylum law and policies in Europe. They also require financial support to take part in the implementation of integration funds in their hosting countries.

In sum, the following points are suggested to enable RLOs to contribute to asylum and refugee policy reforms in the EU:

- » The research has found that policy makers at the European institutions in asylum, refugee and migration policy do appreciate the necessity or demand for RLOs and count on the potential added value or policy contributions of RLOs in the ongoing and future refugee related policy reforms in the EU.
- » Most of the interviewed RLOs in the seven European countries show an interest and willingness to be active in policy and decision making at the national and Brussels level. They have the impression that they (as the authentic refugee voice) are left absent from the European policy discussions and request to be recognised, supported and involved in the current and future refugee policy debates and discussions.
- » European institutions in public policy making should, therefore, recognise and practically involve refugee and migrant organisations at the policy and decision-making level in order to give them the opportunity to contribute to the ongoing and future asylum and refugee policy reforms.
- » The interviews from both parties, European migration and refugee policy makers and the representatives of European RLOs, show that there is a considerable gap and a lack of interaction and policy dialogue between European migration and refugee policy makers and refugee CSOs in general and more specifically with the RLOs. There is a necessity to increase the possibilities of more interactions between policy making organisations and refugee-led CSOs.
- » There is a need to invest in capacity building programs and initiatives for the inclusion of RLOs in policy debates at both European and MS levels.
- » Refugee and migrant organisations are required to obtain the technical policy skills and gain the necessary tools to enable them to provide active and effective policy contributions.
- » Cooperation, partnership and collaboration with other stakeholders at the policy level in the communities, at the MS level, and at the European level are suggested as being an important empowerment strategy for RLOs to get involved in policy decision making.

21. European Program for Integration and Migration, 'Rethinking Inclusion', available at: <https://www.socialchallenges.eu/en-US/city/68/Challenges/1093>.

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APPENDIX

Abbreviations:

AMIF	Asylum Migration and Integration Fund
CEAS	Common European Asylum System
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
EC	European Commission
ECRE	European Council on Refugees and Exiles
EMN	European Migration Network
EP	European Parliament
EPIM	European Program for Integration and Migration
EU	European Union
GFR	Greek Forum of Refugees
MS	Member State
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
RCO	Refugee Community Organisation
RLO	Refugee-Led Organisation
UK	United Kingdom
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



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