

# Let refugees lead

By: Obi Anyadike (Host)

*Adapted by Fishtank Staff*

- 1 **Obi Anyadike:** Today on What's Unsaid, ***Let refugees lead***.
- 2 Humanitarian organisations often push an image of refugees as passive victims in need of help.
- 3 **Cate Blanchett:** Biting, bitter cold temperatures are putting refugees in danger. How will they endure the harsh winter months? Many fled their homes with little more than the clothes on their backs. Will you join me and support UNHCR's winter relief efforts?
- 4 **Anyadike:** But refugees themselves say they have a voice and need to be listened to - not ignored or patronised. My guest today says it's time refugee led organisations, or RLOs, were in the driving seat.
- 5 **Jean Marie Ishimwe:** The next revolution, or the next way to make sure that responses are most effective is when the 'big brothers': the UNHCR, governments, and INGOs, see refugees as an equal stakeholder within finding the solutions for refugees, and for a matter of fact with refugees.
- 6 **Anyadike:** This is What's Unsaid, a biweekly podcast by The New Humanitarian, where we explore open secrets and uncomfortable conversations around the world's conflicts and disasters. My name is Obi Anyadike, staff editor at The New Humanitarian.
- 7 On today's episode: ***Let refugees lead***.
- 8 With us today is Jean Marie Ishimwe. He's the East African regional lead for R-SEAT, or Refugees Seeking Equal Access to the Table, a refugee-led organisation focused on refugee participation and inclusion. Ishimwe, thanks for joining us.
- 9 **Ishimwe:** Thank you Obi, for having me.
- 10 **Anyadike:** Okay, so let's get to it. You've lived as a refugee in Kenya for two decades. What does it mean to you now to work with organisations that are led by refugees?
- 11 **Ishimwe:** Yes, I have been a refugee here for the last 20 years. Unfortunately, I wasn't recognized as a refugee - or my family for that matter - wasn't recognized as a refugee. And so, for over 20 years, you live in a life where hope is away. But also, you're not assured of what the future holds, apart from what you're able to do as yourself. And so for me, working with RLOs is not something about work, it's about the passion. It's about the needs that I have, both seen as important for refugees, as compared to how other organisations look at those needs for

refugees. In fact, they say that you only know how a shoe pinches you, if you're wearing it. This has been the inspiration for me, just the fact that I've lived this life. The challenges that I've faced, and the fact that now we are at the level where we are saying that 'nothing for us, without us,' means really refugees being at the seat at the table, and being able to lead a life just like any other human. So for me, working with refugee-led organisations has been very inspirational to see that refugees, not only want to survive, but want to thrive as well. They want to be solutions enablers. They want to create solutions, and they don't want to be seen as usual to be recipients of aid, or passive beneficiaries of programs.

- 12 **Anyadike:** Let's talk about that issue about perceptions, how refugees themselves are seen. How do you think that mainstream refugee organisations view refugees?
- 13 **Ishimwe:** I remember when we were starting our advocacy in Kenya, it was very difficult to be in spaces where the so-called 'big brothers' were - UNHCR, and other big organisations - because you are seen as a refugee, and so you can only access services, but you cannot decide on how services will come to you. This is the problem that we are having, that the organisations that are mandated to work for refugees, have not themselves put refugees at the centre of their programming and the work that they do for refugees. And so, my perception, the way I see myself is different from how I see some organisations see me, or see other refugee led organisations, because they see themselves as big brothers, they see themselves as the owners of the systems, whereas the refugees themselves are the ones who are actually the right holders. So the unfortunate [fact] is that supporting refugees consciously have been neglecting the voices of refugees to drive their solutions, to drive programming to them that is more effective.
- 14 **Anyadike:** Just on the nuts and bolts of it, how is an RLO typically formed? I mean, who in the community decides or thinks we have an issue, let's try and solve it? How does it work? How do you mobilise people within the community around an idea, and who normally leads that process within the community?
- 15 **Ishimwe:** It's people in the community. It's refugees who are very passionate about certain challenges. So, it could be that it is me, Jean Marie from a certain nationality as a refugee in our community, sees a challenge, for example, on the difficulty of refugees to access jobs, or employment because of documentation. So, first thing is that you need to know how do you register. And the simplest way for many refugees, they are only able to register as community based organisations - CBOs. And so they are refugee led, because they are led by those refugees who have seen a problem and they want to respond to that, but they're only sometimes, unfortunately, limited to community based organisations, because of the many other requirements that they will need to provide.
- 16 **Anyadike:** Let's talk about the impact of Covid on the perception of RLOs by other organisations, because that seems to have been something of a game changer?

- 17 **Ishimwe:** Yeah. So, during Covid, many organisations that support refugees were forced to close down. But refugee led initiatives, then got a bigger profile at this time, because organisations that ordinarily were supporting refugees closed down. Their policy says that they cannot operate in situations like that. But then who are left in the community? It is the refugee-led organisations. It's the local organisations. During Covid, it raised the profile of RLOs. Not to say that they're starting now, but it's actually brought to light that they were invisible, and then now they're becoming visible to the actual work that they're doing in the community.
- 18 **Anyadike:** Ishimwe, give us an example of your two favourite projects that RLOs are running, just so we can kind of visualise the range of work that gets done by RLOs?
- 19 **Ishimwe:** Yeah, so Yarid in Uganda started quite early before 2020. They have an interesting program called the job placement program. They support refugees on job readiness, interviewing skills, and then they're able to place refugees into jobs. Because for a long time, refugees had challenges to be able to actually competitively go into job interviews. You go to Kenya, for example, in Dadaab, there is an organisation that's known as Desert Freelancing that's led by a Somali refugee. Initially, getting jobs on programs like Upwork for refugees as online freelancing was very difficult. But this group of refugees built within Upwork, and then now are able to access jobs as a collective, and offer to refugees. So, there are many works that RLO's are doing. The reason why some of their works are not visible as much is because for many RLOs, they unfortunately have to do this work with either zero budget, and they have to fundraise this from their own members, or they have little budgets to actually even cater for their salaries, for other overheads. And so, they're only able to directly support their communities with the little they have.

*[Paragraphs 20–39 have been omitted. [Read or listen to the full podcast episode.](#)]*