



Transforming Refugee Response: RefugePoint's Impacts

Vol. 5: Pioneering a New Approach to Supporting Self-Reliance for Urban Refugees

Quick summary: *RefugePoint has developed a unique, holistic approach to serving urban refugees and facilitating their self-reliance, which is contributing to positive impacts for refugees while also changing mindsets in the humanitarian sector. RefugePoint's experiences with this approach are influencing the policies and practices of the field and contributing to growing momentum around self-reliance programming for refugees globally.*

Description of the systems change

Through its Urban Refugee Protection Programme (URPP) in Nairobi, RefugePoint has pioneered a new form of holistic support for urban refugees aimed at increasing their self-reliance, which is creating positive impacts for refugee clients while also contributing to changing mindsets about refugee response. As defined by the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI), self-reliance is “the social and economic ability of an individual, a household or a community to meet its essential needs in a sustainable manner.”² To enhance refugees’ self-reliance, the URPP provides a needs-based mix of services that can include food items, rent and school fees support, essential household goods, medical care, counseling services, business skills training, and business grants, with coordination and follow-up by dedicated case managers. The program focuses on refugee households facing extreme vulnerabilities, mainly women, children, the LGBTIQ+ community, those with unmet medical needs, and survivors of violence. The URPP provides stabilization services to a core caseload of about 1,500 refugees and Kenyan nationals each year. The self-reliance approach is premised on the reality that refugees often remain indefinitely in the countries that first host them. The URPP demonstrates what is possible beyond a “care and maintenance” model of refugee aid. More than 8,000 clients have received some assistance through the URPP, and a recent external evaluation found that 91% of former clients who responded reported an improvement in their quality of life attributable to the program.³

ABOUT THIS SERIES

RefugePoint partners with refugees to access life-changing solutions and transforms how the world supports them. This series showcases examples of how RefugePoint contributes to systems change, which we understand as changing one or more of the factors that keep existing refugee response systems from serving refugees adequately and equitably. These factors include policies, practices, resources, relationships between actors, distributions of power, and mindsets (beliefs and ideologies).¹ This brief presents the results of an externally-led, participatory evaluation that draws on extensive interviews with RefugePoint partners, colleagues, and other stakeholders, participatory sense-making activities with RefugePoint staff, and document review. The brief summarizes what has changed, why change was needed, how change came about, RefugePoint's unique role, and the relevance of the change for refugees.

¹ Kania, J., Kramer, J., & Senge, P. (2018). “[The water of systems change.](#)”

² RefugePoint. (2025). “[Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative.](#)”

³ 60 Decibels. (2024). [RefugePoint Impact Performance Report](#), p. 10.



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In addition to being a direct service program, the URPP is also, in part, a demonstration project meant to inform global refugee response models. As described in more depth in the brief “**Launching a Global Movement to Advance Refugee Self-Reliance**” in this series, the mindset shift from a short-term “care and maintenance” goal to a longer-term, holistic self-reliance approach is gaining momentum in the humanitarian sector. To cite one example, the RSRI, co-founded in 2017 by RefugePoint and the Women’s Refugee Commission (WRC) to promote self-reliance, now counts over 550 individuals representing over 250 organizations as participants, as of the time of writing. RefugePoint was also among the partners that spearheaded efforts for self-reliance to be included as one of the four objectives of the landmark Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) in 2018, and that drove the creation of the Economic Inclusion and Social Protection (EISP) Pledge at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). This pledge, which seeks “to advance the self-reliance of refugees” as one of its goals, has attracted 268 pledges from governments, multilateral institutions, civil society groups, and other partners that have collectively pledged over \$1 billion as of the time of writing.⁴ All of these examples point to the growing recognition and uptake of self-reliance programming for refugees, which RefugePoint’s work in the URPP has helped advance.

Why change was needed

The model of holistic services for urban refugees in the URPP contrasts with the prevailing refugee response system in which fragmented, short-term services are delivered by multiple agencies, with a focus on refugees living in camps. Refugees often have to approach multiple service providers, both state and non-state, for their documentation, medical, nutritional, and other needs. In doing so, they often face bureaucratic and language barriers at multiple departments and agencies at once. In such an environment, refugees face an even greater struggle to live independently and build the lives they want. Refugees are also increasingly leaving or bypassing camps for cities, with an estimated 60

percent of the world’s refugees and 80 percent of internally displaced people residing in urban areas.⁵ Although this trend is well-established, relatively few services are available and accessible to urban refugees in Nairobi, Kenya.

Levers of change

Levers of change are relatively small changes that actors such as RefugePoint can make that can bring about a bigger change in the overall system.⁶ The evaluation identified the following as the most important levers used by RefugePoint to help bring about a change in the system.

Highlighting unmet needs: The dual motivations for the creation of RefugePoint in 2005, known then as Mapendo International, were to help vulnerable refugees access resettlement and to ensure that HIV+ refugees in Nairobi survived until resettlement.⁷ The program was established to respond to the most pressing needs of refugees, which evolved into a holistic, self-reliance program. An early step was to establish a health clinic to provide basic services to urban refugees. Programming expanded in the following years, as the agency became more aware of the diverse needs of their clients, whether they were preparing for resettlement or trying to build new lives in Kenya.

Through local outreach activities and alongside other actors such as Danish Refugee Council (DRC), HIAS, and the Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK), among others, RefugePoint began to lobby for increased attention by NGOs, local and national government, and donors to the vulnerabilities facing urban refugees and the interdependency of so many of their challenges. The organization also brought attention to the often camp-centric and siloed nature of refugee services.

Testing out new ideas: RefugePoint took stock of the holistic needs of refugees and built out its support program from the original health clinic to provide one-stop counseling services, food, and other household items, and innovative financing schemes in a caseworker-managed, refugee-centered model. Through direct engagement with refugees in Kenya and partnerships with other agencies, the organization has redefined what refugee response can look like for urban refugees facing extreme vulnerabilities and has created a demonstration project to inform and influence global practice. “*In 2005 when RefugePoint was established, there was no support for urban refugees. The assumption was that if you are in Nairobi you can take care of yourself. So it all started with healthcare and then we broadened our services to more holistic approaches to improving health outcomes.*” (RefugePoint staff)

4 UNHCR-Global Compact on Refugees. (2025). [Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Economic Inclusion and Social Protection](#).

5 UNHCR. (2020). [World Cities Day: Cities Lead the Way in Protecting Forcibly Displaced Against Impact of COVID-19](#).

6 Meadows, D. (2015). “[Leverage Points—Places to Intervene in a System](#).”

7 Slaughter, A. (2019). [Fostering Refugee Self-Reliance: A Case Study of an Agency’s Approach in Nairobi](#). *Journal of Refugee Studies*. 33. (1).

RefugePoint's unique private funding model is a key enabler of this approach, providing flexibility for the agency to innovate and invest in services that are most needed. In this effort, the organization still stands alone in Nairobi: an external evaluation conducted for RefugePoint showed that 77% of former clients surveyed said they accessed critical services such as healthcare, education support, and business grants through RefugePoint for the first time.⁸

Evidence-based advocacy: RefugePoint also uses evidence-based influencing both in its work in Kenya and in sharing the approach it has developed globally to push for changes to the status quo in refugee support. Key to this has been measuring the progress of its clients toward self-reliance with a tailor-made evaluation tool: the Self-Reliance Index.⁹ The evidence gained from this measurement tool strengthened both program refinements and advocacy for the holistic approach to supporting refugee self-reliance. Further, by conducting research and analysis with UNHCR on different dimensions of refugees' needs, RefugePoint also uses its experience to influence how influential actors think about and conduct their work globally.

RefugePoint's unique contributions

What unique role did RefugePoint play in pulling the levers that helped bring about this change? Drawing on a typology of roles actors can play in advocacy work, the evaluation found that RefugePoint served as the **sole actor** "calling for the change"¹⁰ and pioneering its one-stop-shop holistic service model for refugees facing extreme vulnerabilities in Nairobi.

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Jacob Bonyo, RefugePoint



Umutoni, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, celebrates her successful business venture outside of RefugePoint's offices in Nairobi, Kenya. Umutoni undertook business training through the Livelihoods program and received a grant to expand her business.

Photo by Diana Karua

While hardly the first humanitarian actor to point out the shortcomings of siloed, short-term refugee support, RefugePoint was one of the first to turn that critique into action in the urban setting of Nairobi, Kenya. As a staff member of a partner organization put it: “*Humanitarian space is siloed and very focused and many orgs don't make the linkages across different needs the way RefugePoint does.*” Through this work, RefugePoint has also drawn attention to the reality that most refugees will settle in the country to which they have fled. This is why the organization invests in holistic services to assist households and individuals on multiple fronts to be able to provide for their own basic needs in Kenya, which can take as long as two years or more. The need for this approach was summed up as follows by a RefugePoint staff member: “*[Resettlement and other third country solution] processes take so long and benefit so few refugees so the point of the URPP is that they can support themselves, integrate in the community. It's not only about income, it's about how connected they are to the community and their access to services.*”

One of the main challenges with maintaining the unique, holistic self-reliance approach that participants spoke about was how to sustain or expand such a resource-intensive, long-term program that takes over a year to see impacts. “*Everybody wants quick results and holistic self-reliance programming is not quick. Most*

⁸ 60 Decibels. (2024). [RefugePoint Impact Performance Report](#), p. 7.

⁹ Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative. (2025). “[Self-Reliance Index](#).”

¹⁰ Coe, J., & Schlagen, R. (2019). “[No Royal Road. Finding and Following the Natural Pathways in Advocacy Evaluation](#).” Center for Evaluation Innovation.

funding is less than three years which is the threshold to see results for those refugees facing the most extreme vulnerabilities.” (Jacob Bonyo, RefugePoint) Additionally, many donors want to see large numbers of beneficiaries and the intensive, holistic model limits the numbers that RefugePoint can reach. A former RefugePoint staff member spoke about the widespread need for programming like the URPP in urban hubs in Africa and beyond but questioned whether RefugePoint could expand without compromising on the quality of the service delivered. *“If they [RefugePoint] wanted to expand, I’d be worried about quality and impact as they are the only ones who do what they do. They are in a niche space. One way to scale is to share the models with others.” (Belinda Muya, former RefugePoint staff)*

Relevance for refugees

The new approach to facilitating self-reliance for refugees that RefugePoint has developed in Nairobi

addresses some of the most pressing needs facing urban refugees. A recent external evaluation revealed that 91% of clients reported an improvement in their quality of life following the services they received from the program.¹¹ The holistic and tailored approach of the URPP helps refugees who live outside of camps to locally integrate and develop the stability, confidence and skills required to move on with their lives in their new country. Self-reliance programming, as realized in the URPP, enables refugees to better “capitalize” on opportunities that present themselves and advance along the “continuum of achieving a longer-term solution”¹² in the country they have sought safety in. The self-reliance approach is gaining traction globally, with more international NGOs and governments recognizing self-reliance’s impact and integrating it into their own policies and programming, as described in more detail in the brief **“Launching a Global Movement to Advance Refugee Self-Reliance.”**

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Attribution

Ciara Aucoin Delloue and Walaa Abu Zaiter of [Key Aid Consulting](#) conducted and authored this evaluation. Patrick Guyer and Amy Slaughter served as editors and convenors of the evaluation.



¹¹ 60 Decibels. (2024). [RefugePoint Impact Performance Report](#), p. 10.

¹² Slaughter, A. (2019). [Fostering Refugee Self-reliance: A Case Study of an Agency's Approach in Nairobi](#). Journal of Refugee Studies. 33. (1), p. 111