



# Transforming Refugee Response: RefugePoint's Impacts

## Vol. 6: Launching a Global Movement to Advance Refugee Self-Reliance

**Quick summary:** *RefugePoint used the learning from its direct services in Nairobi, Kenya, to envision, catalyze, build and influence a global movement to advance refugee self-reliance. By convening partners and stakeholders, engaging in evidence-based advocacy, and leveraging private funding, RefugePoint has sown the seeds for a growing global movement, now led by the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative, that is transforming refugee response.*

### Description of the systems change

RefugePoint has catalyzed, built, and influenced a global movement to advance refugee self-reliance, leveraging learning and evidence from its direct service work with urban refugees. This work is changing the refugee response system in three key ways: shifting mindsets about how refugee support in host-country solutions could be best designed; creating new relationships between actors in a global movement to promote self-reliance; and changing practices of some of those actors in the support they provide, either as implementers, funders or both. A pioneer in advancing refugee self-reliance, RefugePoint co-founded the Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative (RSRI) in 2016, together with the Women's Refugee Commission (WRC). With its three foci of evidence-based learning, programming, and advocacy, the RSRI aims to "transform the way the world responds to refugees and other forcibly displaced populations, creating a future where the journey from displacement to self-reliance is accelerated and marked by dignity, opportunity, and inclusion."<sup>2</sup> By combining unilateral efforts and joint efforts with partners in the RSRI, RefugePoint spearheaded several system change wins, such as the creation and uptake of the Self-Reliance Index (SRI), lobbying to include self-reliance in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), and driving the creation of the Economic Inclusion and Social Protection (EISP) Pledge at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). The SRI has been downloaded more than 2,000 times, and 62 agencies in 32 countries have used it to assess over 20,000 households. The RSRI has attracted the participation of more than 550 individuals representing over 250 organizations since its inception. The EISP

### 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).<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> Kania, J., Kramer, J., & Senge, P. (2018). "[The water of systems change.](#)"

<sup>2</sup> Refugee Self-Reliance Initiative. (2025). "[Who We Are.](#)"

pledge was the largest by far at 2023's GRF, comprising 268 organizations that collectively pledged over \$1 billion.<sup>3</sup>

## Why change was needed

The 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol explicitly noted the responsibilities of states to provide asylum and protect refugees and included a list of provisions intended to support their “welfare” (rations, housing, education, labor rights, and social security). Most states, however, do not (and some cannot) fulfill all of these obligations. Rather, states interpret the meaning of protection for refugees, who qualifies, and under what conditions, often with highly discriminatory policies. In addition, refugee response is often outsourced to UN agencies and NGOs. Further, the typical framing of refugees’ needs in host countries is short-term in nature, with the assumption that refugees will eventually return home. As a result, most global humanitarian programming is built on a short-term model of ‘care and maintenance,’ whereby, under certain circumstances, organizations provide refugees with the basic means to survive but not the elements needed to lead dignified lives. It is widely recognized that this approach is not fit-for-purpose in today’s context of surging displacement, protracted conflicts, insufficient aid funds, and few solutions available in the near term. With these grim prospects, refugees both need and want the opportunity to stabilize their lives and take care of themselves and their families.

## 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.<sup>4</sup> The evaluation identified the following as the most important levers used by RefugePoint to help bring about a change in the system.

**Convening partners and stakeholders:** Since its early years, RefugePoint has focused on building the collective capacities and action of the field at large. To that end, it has collaborated with and convened numerous humanitarian organizations to share tools, knowledge, and best practices to increase the uptake of programming and policies that enable self-reliance. Engaging with the Solutions Alliance starting in 2014, convening a high-level workshop at Harvard in 2015 focused on solutions and a global action plan,<sup>5</sup> and participating in a Zolberg Institute experts convening in 2017,<sup>6</sup> RefugePoint saw collaboration as the route to broad global impact and meaningful change. These efforts preceded the development of the Global



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UNHCR representative

Compact on Refugees and arguably influenced the way in which self-reliance appeared in that document. These efforts also accelerated when RefugePoint committed private funding and staffing to create the Self-Reliance Community of Practice with WRC in 2016 and formally launched the RSRI in 2018.

In the years since its creation, the RSRI has attracted the participation of more than 250 organizations in its work.<sup>7</sup> It has been credited for building a trusted community of practice that serves as the first-ever convening space for stakeholders focused on self-reliance for refugees in host countries. Bringing together partners like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the U.S. State Department, IRC, NRC, DRC, Mercy Corps, and many more, RefugePoint and the RSRI work to get the most prominent and diverse voices together. *“I think that the initiative is very successful in bringing different profiles and organizations around the table”.* (Solenne Delga, DRC) Partners and stakeholders described the RSRI as evolving into an influential actor filling a critical gap in the field and forging stronger links in existing networks. *“We take a lot and learn a lot from our partners, the work with RefugePoint [and the RSRI] being a key example. With them we’re learning how to measure different aspects of refugee resilience.”* (UNHCR representative) Partners also described the RSRI as a turning point for the global momentum behind refugee self-reliance, for advocacy towards evidence-based programming, and for drumming up support for related global pledges. *“The RSRI was instrumental in galvanizing support for those [GCR] pledges.”* (Partner organization staff)

Partners spoke of the extensive work that RefugePoint and WRC continually engage in behind the scenes to influence policymakers during and between formal convenings. As described in an article on catalyzing

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR-Global Compact on Refugees. (2025). [Multi-stakeholder Pledge: Economic Inclusion and Social Protection](#).

<sup>4</sup> Meadows, D. (2015). [“Leverage points—places to intervene in a system.”](#)

<sup>5</sup> RefugePoint co-hosted, with UNHCR, the workshop [“Advancing Solutions for Refugees and IDPs: New Partners, New Measures”](#) in 2015.

<sup>6</sup> RefugePoint provided recommendations for self-reliance inclusion in the Global Compact on Refugees through the [Zolberg Institute convening](#) in 2017.

<sup>7</sup> These 250 organisations are considered RSRI's community of practice. Please see details [here](#).



Dieudonne poses for a photo with his family outside their home. RefugePoint provided a grant to Dieudonne and his wife to purchase this “boda boda” (motorbike) so he could start a business as a motorcyclist.

Photo by Chris Jensen

social change,<sup>8</sup> “Catalysts usually stay out of the public eye, working in subtle ways to augment the efforts of other actors as they push toward a goal. (If they were to seek the spotlight, stakeholders might view them as competitors, and they would lose their influence.) Sometimes, their unseen efforts go unrealized.” This is

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Solenne Delga, DRC

an apt description of RefugePoint’s and WRC’s tactic to promote a collective identity and an agenda for the RSRI to advance the field and not just their own institutions, as described by partners interviewed. “*They are not promoting their own organization or themselves, it is rather the idea of the initiative itself, they have a vision to go beyond measurement for measurement’s sake and to use the data for wider strategic and systemic change. They also constantly ask existential questions, very often they ask us and are open to our responses to the question: ‘Are we doing the right thing in the right way?’*” (Solenne Delga, DRC)

**Testing out new ideas:** With the input of more than 45 practitioners, academics, and funders, RefugePoint and WRC created the Self Reliance Index (SRI), the first-ever global tool for measuring the progress of refugee households toward self-reliance. They use this tool to more objectively measure and track progress towards households’ self-reliance and to tailor the programs that organizations administer in response. It was piloted in various locations and officially launched globally in 2020. By 2024, 69 organizations in 33 countries had used the SRI.<sup>9</sup> To increase uptake of the tool, the RSRI provides technical support, training, and feedback to organizations, fostering peer learning and strengthening the refugee response sector more broadly. An open-source, online dashboard collates anonymized data from consenting users. Early results have enabled trends analysis to inform specific advocacy efforts for funding, policy, and program improvements.

8 Hussein, T., Plummer, M., & Breen, B. (2018). “[How Field Catalysts Galvanize Social Change.](#)” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 16(1), 48-54.

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

**Leveraging private funding:** In building and launching the RSRI, thanks to a largely private funding model, RefugePoint and WRC had the flexibility to act on the gaps and opportunities they saw before donors took an interest in it. This included funding convenings and workshops where ideas could be tested and debated, and, crucially, funding the staffing and infrastructure necessary for building the initiative. As the RSRI Co-Founder from WRC noted: *“It’s really hard to get funding for that important networking and behind the scenes work.”* (Dale Buscher, former WRC staff) Through its private funding, RefugePoint provided the initial (and substantial ongoing) support for the RSRI, later joined by government and other philanthropic donors.

## 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,<sup>10</sup> the evaluation found that RefugePoint’s role in building and supporting a global movement for self-reliance can be summarized as a **seed sower**, defined as an “actor that initiated the campaign and sowed the seeds, which then took a life of their own. This makes their fingerprints on the final result difficult to see (but in a good way because of the momentum it generated).”<sup>11</sup> With respect to creating the RSRI specifically, both WRC and RefugePoint functioned as “primary actor[s]”, the actors that “coordinated the approach, corraling and organizing others.”<sup>12</sup> In building a global movement, partners and stakeholders described how, through the RSRI, RefugePoint exercised an ability to convene conversations that challenged and reoriented the field. For instance, it has pushed for a broader conception of self-reliance to include social protection aspects and holistic, interdependent needs. *“A lot of people [in the refugee response sector] are tied to livelihoods and we appreciate the expansion beyond this.”* (Partner organization staff). RefugePoint prioritizes gathering organizations that do not typically come together, such as operational actors, policymakers, funders, and academic advisors, through both private and public channels.

As mentioned above, RefugePoint’s private funding model enabled it to test new ideas and not be limited to pre-existing paradigms. The funding model helped the organisation get out ahead of where the field was at and lead on this topic, effectively creating momentum around self-reliance for funders to eventually support. It enabled RefugePoint to position itself as an ‘honest broker’ among operational partners, including



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refugee-led organizations. *“We were able to effectively collaborate with others because we weren’t constantly going after government or UN funding, which could put us in competition with our collaborators.”* (Amy Slaughter, RefugePoint)

Finally, partners recognized that a unique contribution of RefugePoint was that it had been implementing an innovative self-reliance program for refugees in Nairobi for many years and had derived a lot of learning from it. In the words of Dale Buscher, it was the strength of RefugePoint’s data and its experience that helped it build trust as a partner. *“RefugePoint had some real learning to build on – they had a history with clients and good data to back it. That’s exactly what we wanted to build on.”* (Dale Buscher, former WRC staff)

## Relevance for refugees

As of mid-2024, over 120 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide, with over 43 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate.<sup>13</sup> Conflict in Sudan, Myanmar, Gaza, and elsewhere continues to drive displacement, while the climate crisis exacerbates the humanitarian impact. Repatriation opportunities and places for resettlement and other third country solutions are insufficient, leaving the vast majority of refugees in the countries where they first arrive. The levels of displacement and political pressures in receiving and host countries complicate the search for durable solutions. RefugePoint’s work with partners to put and maintain refugee self-reliance on the global agenda is changing the framing of refugee response, and how impact in refugee programming is measured, contributing to more opportunities for refugees to become self-reliant. As a result, the work of RefugePoint and its partners is contributing to shifts in mindsets, relationships, and practices among organizations active in humanitarian response.

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

11 Ibid, p.30

12 Ibid.

13 UNHCR. (2024). [“Mid-Year Trends Report.”](#)

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