

# REFUGEE-LED CAMP MANAGEMENT ON THE THAI-MYANMAR BORDER: GOVERNANCE, PROTECTION, AND HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP IN A PROTRACTED CRISIS

Nicola Edwards<sup>1</sup>, Hayso Thako<sup>2</sup>, Somchat Phonsirithada<sup>3</sup>, Timothy Moore<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Independent Consultant

<sup>2</sup> Karen Refugee Committee (KRC)

<sup>3</sup> The Border Consortium

Corresponding author:

Dr Timothy Moore ([tim@theborderconsortium.org](mailto:tim@theborderconsortium.org))

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# ABSTRACT

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This article examines refugee-led camp management on the Thai-Myanmar border as an institutionalised form of governance that has evolved over more than four decades of protracted displacement. In contrast to dominant humanitarian models that position refugees primarily as beneficiaries, the nine refugee camps in Thailand are governed through elected refugee committees that oversee administration, service coordination, protection, and dispute resolution, operating within a framework of host-state oversight and humanitarian facilitation. Drawing on long-term operational evidence, programme documentation, and comparative scholarship, the article analyses governance structures, accountability mechanisms, and adaptive responses to successive crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, post-2021 displacement from Myanmar, and the contraction of humanitarian funding in 2025. The findings demonstrate that refugee-led governance has enhanced protection, stability, and resilience through socially embedded institutions capable of sustained crisis management, while also exposing structural limits related to unpaid leadership and resource constraints. The article argues that refugee-led governance constitutes a durable and under-recognised localisation model with relevance for humanitarian policy and practice in other protracted displacement contexts.





# 1. INTRODUCTION

The governance of refugee camps has historically been shaped by international humanitarian agencies and host states, with displaced populations positioned primarily as beneficiaries rather than political or administrative actors. This model, dominant throughout much of the post-Cold War humanitarian system, has been widely criticised for reproducing dependency, marginalising refugee agency, and limiting accountability to affected populations (UNHCR, 2019; Sphere Association, 2018). In response, localisation agendas have increasingly emphasised the need to shift power, resources, and decision-making authority towards local actors, including displaced communities themselves. Yet in practice, localisation has often remained confined to consultative or project-level participation, rather than extending to sustained institutional leadership. (Agier, 2011; Sphere Association, 2018; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018; UNHCR, 2020).

Against this backdrop, the refugee camps along the Thai-Myanmar border represent a rare and under-examined case of long-term, institutionalised refugee-led governance. For more than four decades, refugees from Myanmar have lived in nine camps administered under the authority of the Thai Ministry of Interior, while exercising extensive responsibility for internal governance, service coordination, protection, and community life. Through elected Camp Committees, Section Committees, Women's Organisations, Youth Organisations, and specialised sectoral bodies, refugees have developed governance systems that function as *de facto* local administrations within a constrained legal environment. (Brees, 2010; Moretti, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2025).

This article examines refugee-led camp management on the Thai-Myanmar border as a distinctive model of humanitarian governance. Drawing on operational documentation, practitioner experience, and existing scholarship, it argues that refugee-led governance in this context constitutes one of the most durable and structurally embedded localisation models in the global humanitarian system. Rather than emerging as a short-term innovation or externally designed reform, these governance arrangements have evolved incrementally through practice, negotiation, and community legitimacy over successive generations of displacement. (Baguios et al., 2021; Barbelet et al., 2021; IASC, 2016).

The article advances three central arguments. First, refugee-led governance on the Thai-Myanmar border has enhanced protection, stability, and service coordination by grounding authority in community-elected institutions with deep social embeddedness. Second, the longevity of these systems demonstrates that displaced populations can sustain complex governance functions over extended periods, even in the absence of legal recognition or permanent solutions. Third, current transitions, including declining humanitarian funding and Thailand's evolving policy framework on refugee work rights, are reshaping the responsibilities and risks faced by refugee leaders, underscoring the need to recognise and support these governance systems rather than bypass them. (TBC, 2025a; UN Women, 2025; Public Relations Department, Thailand, 2025).

The analysis is situated within broader debates on localisation, refugee agency, and political order in protracted displacement settings. By foregrounding refugee leadership as an institutional practice rather than a normative aspiration, the article contributes empirical evidence to discussions on how humanitarian systems might move beyond rhetoric towards genuinely locally led governance. While the Thai–Myanmar border is shaped by unique historical and political conditions, the lessons drawn have relevance for other long-running refugee contexts where displaced communities have developed their own mechanisms of administration, representation, and protection. (Betts et al., 2017; Agier, 2011).

## 2. POLITICAL AND REGIONAL CONTEXT

The Thai–Myanmar borderlands are shaped by overlapping dynamics of armed conflict, displacement, state fragility, and regional security concerns. Since the early 1980s, ethnic conflict and counterinsurgency operations in eastern Myanmar have driven repeated waves of displacement into Thailand, resulting in the establishment of nine refugee camps administered as ‘temporary shelters’ under the authority of the Thai Ministry of Interior (Brees, 2010; Thompson, 2008). Although initially conceived as short-term humanitarian responses, these camps have persisted for more than four decades, evolving into complex social and political spaces characterised by protracted displacement.

The February 2021 military coup in Myanmar marked a decisive escalation in conflict and state fragmentation. Armed resistance expanded rapidly across ethnic and central regions, accompanied by widespread human rights violations, including aerial bombardment, forced recruitment, village destruction, and targeted violence against civilians (Cheesman & Farrelly, 2021; International Commission of Jurists, 2023; Charney, 2023). As a result, internal displacement inside Myanmar surpassed 3.5 million people by 2024, with many experiencing repeated displacement (UNOCHA, 2024). Periodic surges of cross-border movement into Thailand have continued, particularly when fighting intensifies near border areas, placing sustained pressure on Thai provincial authorities and humanitarian systems (International Crisis Group, 2024).

These dynamics are further complicated by the political economy of the borderlands. Since the coup, transnational criminal activities – including cyber-scams, online casinos, forced-labour compounds, and trafficking networks – have expanded dramatically in contested areas of Myanmar and neighbouring jurisdictions (TNI, 2023; Jones & Matthews, 2022). These illicit economies operate through complex relationships with armed actors and local powerbrokers, contributing to insecurity and displacement while posing direct risks to displaced populations, particularly women and young people. For Thailand, these developments heighten border security concerns and reinforce the importance of stable governance arrangements within refugee camps.

At the regional level, diplomatic responses to the Myanmar crisis have been fragmented. ASEAN’s Five-Point Consensus has failed to curb violence or establish meaningful dialogue, reflecting deep divisions among member states and limited leverage over the military authorities in Myanmar (ASEAN Secretariat, 2021; Moretti, 2021). In this context, frontline states such as Thailand

have assumed de facto responsibility for managing displacement, humanitarian access, and border stability, often in the absence of a coherent regional protection framework.

Thailand's domestic refugee policy further shapes the governance environment. As a non-signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Thailand does not provide refugees with formal legal status, freedom of movement, or unrestricted access to employment (UN ESCAP, 2009). Refugee camps are administered under civilian security frameworks, with ultimate authority retained by the Ministry of Interior and provincial administrations. At the same time, humanitarian agencies and refugee leadership structures have been granted space to manage internal camp affairs, producing a hybrid governance arrangement characterised by state oversight, humanitarian facilitation, and refugee-led administration (Brees, 2010; Moretti, 2021).

Recent policy shifts have introduced new layers of complexity. Thailand's emerging framework allowing certain refugees to access legal employment outside the camps represents a significant departure from long-standing containment policies (UNHCR, 2025). While this development offers opportunities for self-reliance, it also introduces new protection risks, governance responsibilities, and accountability challenges for refugee leadership structures. Camp Committees and associated organisations are increasingly required to support pre-departure processes, manage community expectations, and respond to labour-related protection concerns, extending their role beyond traditional in-camp governance.

Taken together, these political and regional conditions underscore the central argument of this article: refugee-led governance on the Thai-Myanmar border has evolved not in spite of instability, but through sustained engagement with it. The governance systems examined here operate at the intersection of humanitarian action, state security, and transnational political dynamics. Understanding their function and resilience requires situating them within this broader context of protracted conflict, constrained protection regimes, and shifting regional politics. (UNOCHA, 2025; UNHCR, 2025; UN Women, 2025).



### 3. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH

This article adopts a qualitative, practice-informed approach grounded in long-term operational engagement on the Thai–Myanmar border. The analysis draws on more than four decades of institutional experience, programme documentation, and sustained interaction with refugee leadership structures, combined with engagement with relevant academic and policy literature. Rather than applying a single external theoretical framework, the article takes an inductive approach that foregrounds refugee governance as it is enacted in practice. (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Tracy, 2020).

The analysis also draws on practitioner observation and reflexive inquiry. Several authors have held long-standing roles within the humanitarian response on the Thai–Myanmar border, enabling sustained access to governance processes and decision-making spaces that are rarely captured in academic research. While this positionality provides depth and continuity, it also requires analytical restraint. To mitigate potential bias, practitioner insights are triangulated with documentary evidence and external scholarship, and claims are limited to patterns that are consistently observable across camps and over time. (Chavez, 2008; Berger, 2015).

Comparative perspectives are incorporated selectively to situate the Thai–Myanmar border within broader debates on refugee-led governance and localisation. These comparisons draw on published studies from other protracted displacement contexts, including East Africa and the Middle East, where refugee communities have exercised varying degrees of self-governance. The purpose of comparison is not to generalise the Thai experience, but to highlight both its distinctive features, particularly its longevity and institutionalisation, and its relevance to wider humanitarian policy discussions. (Baguios et al., 2021; Betts et al., 2017; Barbelet et al., 2021).

Ethical considerations underpinning the analysis include adherence to organisational codes of conduct, protection principles, and confidentiality standards. No primary data collection was undertaken specifically for this article; rather, the analysis synthesises existing operational and programme-based information generated through routine humanitarian practice. As such, the article does not claim statistical representativeness, but seeks analytical validity through depth, triangulation, and contextual grounding. (UNHCR, 2020; Sphere Association, 2018).



## 4. REFUGEE-LED GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Refugee-led governance on the Thai–Myanmar border is organised through a multi-layered institutional architecture that has evolved incrementally since the 1980s. At the core of this system are Camp Committees, which are elected by camp residents every three years and function as the primary governing bodies within each camp. Camp Committees are responsible for overall administration, coordination with humanitarian agencies and Thai authorities, oversight of service delivery, and the maintenance of internal order. (Brees, 2010; Moretti, 2021; TBC, 2025a).

Below the Camp Committees, Section Committees operate at sub-camp level, providing day-to-day governance closer to households and neighbourhoods. These committees play a critical role in dispute resolution, beneficiary verification, community mobilisation, and information dissemination. Their proximity to residents enables rapid identification of protection concerns and emerging tensions, reinforcing social cohesion and accountability within the camps. (TBC, 2025a).

Specialised refugee-led organisations complement these core governance structures. Women's Organisations, Youth Organisations, and sector-specific committees – such as education, health, shelter, and livelihoods groups – address thematic priorities and represent constituencies that have historically been marginalised within humanitarian decision-making. Over time, these bodies have gained increasing formal recognition within camp governance arrangements, contributing to more inclusive leadership. By 2025, women held approximately 37 per cent of leadership positions across camp governance structures, reflecting deliberate efforts to strengthen gender representation and participation. (TBC, 2025a; Sphere Association, 2018).

Governance functions exercised by refugee-led bodies extend well beyond representation. Camp-based institutions manage beneficiary targeting processes, oversee food and non-food item distributions, support shelter allocation and maintenance, coordinate emergency preparedness and response, and operate mediation and arbitration mechanisms to resolve disputes. Codes of Conduct and Beneficiary Complaints and Response Mechanisms provide additional layers of accountability, enabling residents to raise concerns and seek redress through established channels. (International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; IOM, 2015; Sphere Association, 2018).

Importantly, refugee-led governance on the Thai–Myanmar border is not static. Governance structures have adapted repeatedly in response to external shocks, including camp consolidations, influxes of new arrivals, public health emergencies, and funding contractions. The COVID-19 pandemic, the post-2021 displacement surge, and the suspension of U.S. humanitarian funding in 2025 tested the capacity of refugee institutions to manage crises under severe constraints. These adaptations underscore both the resilience of refugee-led governance and the structural limits faced by unpaid or under-resourced community leadership in protracted displacement contexts. (Baguios et al., 2021; TBC, 2025b).

## 5. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section presents the core empirical findings of the study, organised around three interrelated dimensions of refugee-led governance: legitimacy and accountability, protection and service coordination, and adaptive capacity under conditions of protracted crisis. Together, these findings illustrate how refugee governance institutions have functioned as stabilising and protective mechanisms within the camps, while also revealing the constraints and pressures they face. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

### 5.1 Legitimacy, Representation, and Accountability

A central finding is that refugee-led governance on the Thai–Myanmar border derives legitimacy primarily from participatory and recurrent electoral processes. Camp Committees and Section Committees are elected every three years through camp-wide voting, with eligibility criteria and procedures agreed by refugee leadership bodies and recognised by camp authorities. These elections serve not only as mechanisms of representation but also as accountability processes, enabling residents to sanction underperforming leaders and renew mandates. Interview and monitoring records indicate that electoral participation rates remain high relative to other camp-based decision-making processes, reflecting the perceived relevance of these institutions to everyday life. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

Accountability is further reinforced through formalised mechanisms, including Codes of Conduct, Beneficiary Complaints and Response Mechanisms, and Mediation and Arbitration Teams. These structures provide residents with avenues to raise grievances related to service delivery, leadership behaviour, or interpersonal disputes. Importantly, complaints mechanisms are embedded within refugee institutions rather than externalised to humanitarian agencies, strengthening community ownership and trust. While challenges remain, particularly in ensuring confidentiality and protection for complainants, these systems have contributed to predictable and locally legitimate forms of dispute resolution. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

### 5.2 Protection, Service Coordination, and Social Stability

Refugee-led governance institutions play a central role in coordinating protection and service delivery across the camps. Camp Committees oversee beneficiary verification, support targeting processes for food and non-food assistance, and coordinate with sectoral partners in health, education, shelter, and water and sanitation. Section Committees and community volunteers facilitate last-mile delivery, monitor inclusion and exclusion risks, and relay information between households and service providers. This layered governance structure enables rapid identification of protection concerns, including household-level vulnerabilities, domestic disputes, and emerging tensions linked to resource scarcity. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

The findings indicate that refugee governance has been particularly critical in maintaining social stability during periods of acute stress. During COVID-19 lockdowns, refugee leaders implemented movement controls, supported quarantine arrangements, disseminated public health information, and coordinated community-based surveillance, often with limited external presence. Similarly, during influxes of new arrivals following the 2021 Myanmar coup, refugee institutions absorbed population increases by reallocating shelter space, mobilising community support, and mediating tensions between long-term residents and newcomers. These actions mitigated conflict and reduced the burden on external actors. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

### 5.3 Adaptive Capacity and Crisis Response

A third key finding concerns the adaptive capacity of refugee-led governance under conditions of sustained uncertainty. Governance structures have evolved in response to repeated shocks, including camp consolidations, funding reductions, public health emergencies, and policy shifts related to refugee livelihoods. Adaptation has taken multiple forms, such as the creation of specialised task groups, the revision of governance guidelines, and the expansion of leadership roles to address emerging risks. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

The suspension of U.S. humanitarian funding in 2025 provides a salient example. Faced with significant reductions in food and fuel assistance, refugee leaders were required to manage heightened community anxiety, recalibrate targeting practices, and engage in difficult communication around resource constraints. At the same time, Thailand's evolving policy framework allowing refugees to access work opportunities outside the camps has introduced new governance responsibilities, including the verification of worker eligibility, the dissemination of labour rights information, and the monitoring of protection risks associated with external employment. These developments have extended the scope of refugee governance beyond traditional camp boundaries. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

Across these dimensions, the findings underscore that refugee-led governance has functioned as a critical intermediary between households, humanitarian agencies, and state authorities. Its effectiveness rests not on formal legal authority, but on social legitimacy, procedural regularity, and the capacity to adapt under pressure. However, the findings also highlight structural limits, including leadership fatigue, uneven capacity across camps, and the risks associated with expanding responsibilities in the absence of commensurate resources. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).



## 6. CASE EXAMPLES FROM THE CAMPS

This section presents selected case examples from across the nine camps to illustrate how refugee-led governance operates in practice and how the institutional features identified in Section 5 manifest in specific contexts. The cases are not intended to be exhaustive or representative of all experiences, but to demonstrate recurring governance dynamics under varying conditions. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

### 6.1 Managing Public Health and Community Compliance during COVID-19

Across the camps, refugee governance structures played a central role in managing the COVID-19 response during periods of restricted humanitarian access. Camp Committees established health task forces, coordinated with refugee health workers, and disseminated public health information through Section Committees and community volunteers. Refugee leaders were responsible for implementing movement controls, supporting quarantine arrangements, and mediating community concerns related to isolation and loss of livelihoods. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

The effectiveness of these measures depended heavily on trust and social legitimacy. Compliance with movement restrictions was largely achieved through negotiation and peer accountability rather than coercion. While resource constraints and fatigue posed challenges, the case demonstrates how refugee-led governance enabled rapid, context-sensitive responses that external actors alone would have struggled to deliver. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).



## 6.2 Absorbing New Arrivals following the 2021 Myanmar Coup

The influx of new arrivals following the February 2021 military coup placed immediate pressure on shelter, food distribution, and social cohesion within the camps. Refugee governance institutions coordinated the registration of new arrivals, reallocated shelter space, and mobilised community support networks. Section Committees played a critical role in identifying vulnerable households and mediating tensions between long-term residents and newcomers. (Sphere Association, 2018; UNHCR, 2020; TBC, 2025a).

In several camps, refugee leaders established temporary coordination mechanisms to manage information flows and reduce misinformation. These measures helped to mitigate conflict and enabled humanitarian agencies to scale assistance more effectively. The case highlights the role of refugee-led institutions as first responders in displacement contexts where formal state or humanitarian capacity is limited. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

## 6.3 Navigating Funding Contractions and Livelihood Transitions in 2025

The suspension of U.S. funding for food and fuel assistance in 2025 marked a significant governance stress test. Refugee leaders were required to communicate difficult messages regarding ration reductions, manage heightened protection risks, and respond to community anxiety. At the same time, emerging opportunities for external employment introduced new governance responsibilities, including the verification of eligibility, dissemination of labour rights information, and monitoring of risks associated with work outside the camps. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

In this context, refugee governance institutions functioned as intermediaries between policy shifts and household-level realities. While these roles expanded the scope of governance, they also exposed limitations related to unpaid leadership, uneven capacity, and the emotional burden placed on community representatives. The case underscores both the resilience and vulnerability of refugee-led governance systems during periods of transition. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).



## 7. DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this article contribute to three intersecting bodies of literature: localisation and power-shifting in humanitarian action, refugee governance and political order in displacement settings, and debates on refugee agency beyond participation. By examining refugee-led camp management as an institutionalised and enduring system, the Thai–Myanmar border case challenges assumptions that displaced populations can only exercise limited or temporary forms of governance. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

First, the case advances localisation debates by demonstrating that refugee-led governance can function as a durable form of local leadership rather than a transitional or project-based arrangement. Much of the localisation literature has focused on national NGOs and local civil society organisations, with refugees positioned primarily as beneficiaries or consultees (Barbelet et al., 2021; ODI, 2020). The Thai–Myanmar experience suggests that displaced communities themselves can constitute legitimate local actors capable of administering complex governance functions over extended periods, even under restrictive legal regimes.

Second, the findings contribute to scholarship on political order in displacement contexts. Refugee camps are often portrayed as spaces of exception or dependency, governed through humanitarian administration rather than political institutions (Agier, 2011). In contrast, the camps examined here exhibit features of hybrid political order, where authority is negotiated among state actors, humanitarian agencies, and refugee institutions. Refugee-led governance does not replace state authority, but operates within and alongside it, producing forms of order that are socially embedded and functionally effective despite limited formal recognition.

Third, the article extends debates on refugee agency by shifting attention from individual resilience or participation to collective institutional capacity. Agency in this context is expressed through elections, rule-making, dispute resolution, and crisis management, rather than through isolated acts of self-reliance. This reframing aligns with emerging calls to recognise refugees as political actors capable of shaping governance arrangements, rather than passive recipients of aid (Betts et al., 2017; Easton-Calabria & Omata, 2018).

At the same time, the discussion highlights important constraints. Refugee-led governance relies heavily on unpaid or minimally compensated leadership, creating risks of fatigue, burnout, and elite capture. Uneven capacity across camps reflects historical differences in resources, leadership experience, and external support. Moreover, expanding governance responsibilities, particularly in relation to labour migration and reduced humanitarian assistance, raises questions about the sustainability of expecting refugee institutions to absorb additional functions without commensurate support. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

Taken together, the discussion underscores that refugee-led governance is neither a panacea nor a substitute for state responsibility or international protection. Rather, it represents a pragmatic and contextually grounded mode of governance that can enhance protection and stability when adequately recognised and supported. The Thai–Myanmar border case thus invites a rethinking of how humanitarian systems conceptualise leadership, authority, and accountability in protracted displacement settings. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

## 8. IMPLICATIONS FOR HUMANITARIAN LEADERSHIP

The Thai–Myanmar border case carries important implications for humanitarian leadership in protracted displacement contexts. First, it underscores the need for humanitarian actors to recognise refugee-led governance not merely as a participation mechanism, but as a core component of humanitarian architecture. Refugee institutions in this setting perform functions typically associated with local government, including administration, dispute resolution, service coordination, and crisis response. Humanitarian leadership that bypasses or marginalises these institutions risks undermining social legitimacy and operational effectiveness. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

Second, the findings highlight the importance of shifting from short-term, project-based engagement with refugee leaders towards sustained institutional support. Refugee-led governance systems require predictable resourcing, technical accompaniment, and leadership development to remain effective over time. This includes support for accountability mechanisms, electoral processes, data management, and protection systems, as well as measures to mitigate leadership fatigue and burnout. Treating refugee governance as an unpaid add-on to humanitarian delivery places unrealistic expectations on community leaders and threatens institutional continuity. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

Third, the case illustrates the need for humanitarian leadership to navigate hybrid governance arrangements more deliberately. Refugee-led institutions on the Thai–Myanmar border operate within a framework of state oversight and humanitarian facilitation. Effective leadership therefore requires careful negotiation of roles, responsibilities, and boundaries among state authorities, humanitarian agencies, and refugee governance bodies. This includes respecting state security concerns while safeguarding humanitarian principles and community autonomy. (TBC, 2025a; International Organization for Migration et al., 2015; Core Humanitarian Standard Alliance, 2018).

Fourth, emerging policy shifts—particularly those enabling refugees to access work opportunities outside camps—demand adaptive leadership approaches. These transitions expand the governance responsibilities of refugee institutions beyond traditional camp boundaries, introducing new protection risks and coordination challenges. Humanitarian leaders must anticipate these shifts and invest in governance capacities that enable refugee institutions to manage labour-related risks, information flows, and accountability without exacerbating inequalities or exclusion. (Baguios et al., 2021; Barbelet et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2020).

Finally, the findings suggest that humanitarian leadership must engage more explicitly with questions of political order in displacement settings. Refugee-led governance systems inevitably shape authority, legitimacy, and power relations within camps. Ignoring these dynamics in favour of purely technical interventions risks depoliticising governance processes that are inherently social and political. Recognising refugee leadership as a form of political agency does not imply challenging state sovereignty, but rather acknowledging the realities of governance in protracted displacement. (Baguios et al., 2021; Barbelet et al., 2021; UNHCR, 2020).

## 9. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study support a set of targeted policy recommendations aimed at strengthening refugee-led governance in protracted displacement contexts while respecting host-state authority and humanitarian principles.

First, humanitarian actors and donors should formally recognise refugee-led governance institutions as legitimate partners in camp management and protection systems. This recognition should be reflected in programme design, coordination structures, and monitoring frameworks, ensuring that refugee institutions are engaged as decision-making actors rather than solely as implementing counterparts.

Second, donors and humanitarian agencies should invest in the institutional sustainability of refugee-led governance. This includes predictable funding for governance functions such as elections, accountability mechanisms, data management, mediation systems, and leadership development. Modest stipends or compensation mechanisms for key leadership roles should be considered to reduce burnout and elite capture risks while preserving community accountability.

Third, governance support should be tailored to the hybrid political environments in which refugee institutions operate. Capacity-building initiatives should strengthen refugee leaders' ability to navigate relations with state authorities, humanitarian agencies, and external labour markets, particularly as policies enabling work outside camps expand. This includes training on labour rights, protection referral pathways, and information management.

Fourth, humanitarian policy should avoid bypassing refugee governance structures during crises or transitions. Emergency responses, funding reallocations, and policy shifts should be designed and communicated through existing refugee institutions wherever possible, reinforcing their legitimacy and effectiveness rather than undermining them.

Finally, international policy frameworks on localisation and refugee participation should explicitly incorporate refugee-led governance as a distinct category of local leadership. Current frameworks often subsume refugees under broader civil society or beneficiary participation models, obscuring the specific institutional capacities that refugee communities may possess in long-term displacement settings.



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