



**MOVING MINDS**  
ALLIANCE

# **PARTNERING FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD IN CRISES**

An Ethical Framework for Building Equitable Partnerships  
with Refugee- and Locally-Led Organisations and Communities

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Group photo from the Moving Minds Alliance 2024 Annual Meeting in Nairobi, reflecting a diverse ecosystem of local- and refugee-led organisations, INGOs, philanthropic partners, regional networks, and UN agencies.

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# INTRODUCTION

## An Ethical Framework for Building Equitable Partnerships with Refugee- and Locally-Led Organisations and Communities

At the heart of the Moving Minds Alliance's strategy is a fundamental belief: the well-being of young children in crises depends on the strength of the ecosystems that surround them. Central to these ecosystems are families, communities, and refugee-led and locally-led organisations (RLOs/LLOs), who are often the first to respond and the last to leave.

This guide is a practical expression of our commitment to building equitable partnerships that strengthen local ecosystems, amplify advocacy from the local to the global level, and promote funding that reaches the frontlines. We recognise RLOs and LLOs not as implementers, but as co-architects of sustainable solutions. Their lived experience, resilience, and leadership are critical assets in any effective crisis response. Our role is to follow their lead, reinforce their strengths, and help address and reduce barriers, particularly those within our influence, and support their leadership not only in delivering activities but also in informing and shaping decisions.

Developed by the Moving Minds Alliance, this Ethical Guide outlines core principles and commitments for collaboration between refugee-led and locally-led organisations and communities, and international organisations, UN agencies, NGOs, donors, and governments, as equal partners. It emphasises meaningful partnerships with organisations led by forcibly displaced persons, stateless persons, and caregiver groups, to facilitate capacity-sharing and strengthen engagement that improves quality, impact, reach, and sustainability.

The commitments set out in this guide go beyond participation. They focus on:



- Key features include trust-building, deep listening, equitable collaboration, continuous feedback, cultural relevance, and accountability in Early Childhood Development (ECD) services for young children affected by crisis and displacement.

## PART 1:

### What We Can Learn: Expertise from RLOs and LLOs

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It is essential to plan for mutual learning and co-creation, moving beyond one-way training. International humanitarian actors can significantly benefit from the unique expertise and lived experience of crisis-affected children, their caregivers, and the local organisations that represent them. Key areas of expertise include:



**Designing Culturally Grounded ECD Models:** Expertise in creating low-cost, effective, and culturally resonant early learning, play, and psychosocial support activities that work in low-resource and emergency settings.

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**Reaching the Most Marginalised Children and Caregivers:** Proven strategies for identifying, building trust with, and engaging hard-to-reach families, including those who are internally displaced, stateless, or fearful of formal systems.

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**Child and Caregiver-Centred Advocacy:** The ability to articulate the most pressing protection, education, and service gaps from a direct, lived perspective. This includes ethical storytelling and insights into policy barriers that are often invisible to outsiders.

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**Navigating Local Systems and Building Community Trust:** Deep understanding of how to work with informal community structures, local authorities, and health and education systems to integrate and protect services for children.

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**Contextualising Child Protection and Safeguarding:** Knowledge of local customs, power dynamics, and risks to children is critical for designing protection systems (like Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) and Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression, and Sex Characteristics (SOGIESC)-inclusive support that are truly safe, trusted, and effective.

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**Parenting and Caregiving under Traumatic Stress:** Expertise in local parenting practices and the unique challenges of providing nurturing care, managing stress, and supporting children's well-being in the context of prolonged crisis and displacement.

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**Innovative, Low-Resource Communication and Outreach:** Effective methods for communicating vital information about children's services through trusted community channels and networks that are accessible to all.

## PART 2:

### Core Ethical Principles for Equitable Partnership

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This section outlines the non-negotiable principles that guide how the Moving Minds Alliance and its partners, including international organisations, UN agencies, NGOs, donors, and governments, build relationships and share power. These principles reflect our collective strategy to strengthen the entire ecosystem from the ground up.

#### A. IN PARTNERSHIP WITH RLOS AND LLOS:

##### 1) Equal Dignity and Respect: We Start by Listening

We recognise RLOs and LLOs as experts in their contexts, whose lived experience carries equal value as learned and technical expertise. Their lived experience is a form of knowledge that technical manuals cannot replicate and fully capture. This means we involve them before proposals are written and decisions are finalised. We publicly acknowledge their leadership, knowledge of the context, lived experience, and compensate them fairly for their time, efforts, and insights. Central to this approach is actively listening to refugee voices, not as a consultation formality, but as essential guidance that shapes priorities, strategies, and implementation. Their perspectives illuminate barriers and solutions that external actors often miss, ensuring our work remains grounded, relevant, and accountable to the communities it seeks to serve.

##### 2) Transparency and Mutual Accountability: We are Accountable to the Ecosystem

Trust is the currency of partnership. We practice transparency about our goals, decision-making processes, funding sources, and limitations. We are accountable, first and foremost, to the affected communities represented by these organisations, while also ensuring upward and horizontal accountability to donors and partners. This means sharing full project budgets, assessment reports, key decisions and learning outcomes and creating clear, accessible channels for continuous two-way feedback, joint reflection, and problem-solving. Consistent transparency helps build trust, balance power, and transform commitments into tangible action.

##### 3) Flexible and Equitable Resources: We Champion Local Funding and Financing

A true partnership means actively working to address and reduce the barriers that prevent RLOs and LLOs from accessing funding directly, particularly barriers within our influence. We aim to advocate for and provide multi-year, unrestricted, flexible core funding, as well as other innovative financing mechanisms such as concessional loans, impact investments, insurance, and other mechanisms that foster longer-term resilience and sustainable development. We simplify complex application and due diligence processes and ensure sub-grants include a fair share of indirect costs to help local organisations not just survive but thrive.

#### 4) **Capacity Sharing: We Build on Existing Strengths**

We move away from a deficit-based mindset that focuses only on what local partners lack. Instead, we embrace “capacity sharing,” the understanding that every organisation has unique strengths and gaps. Our role is to support, complement and strengthen existing local capacities rather than duplicate or dominate them. This includes investing in training our own staff to partner with humility and respect, while valuing and enhancing their existing knowledge and expertise. We also support locally defined capacity-strengthening efforts based on partners' expressed needs, ensuring that the process is participatory and rooted in local priorities, and within the limits of our means and available resources.

#### 5) **Do No Harm and Conflict Sensitivity: We Protect the Ecosystem**

We acknowledge that even our best intentions can cause unintended harm. Therefore, we commit to adopting a preventive, context-aware, and risk-informed approach. We are committed to a continuous process of identifying, mitigating, and monitoring risks in collaboration with local partners through joint context analysis and regular updates of contingency plans.

The safety and well-being of community members and partners must always come first and underpin every decision and action we take. In line with the International Rescue Committee (IRC) safeguarding and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA) standards, and as the Moving Minds Alliance is hosted within IRC, we adhere to the organisation's zero-tolerance policy, codes of conduct, and reporting mechanisms, as set out in the IRC Safeguarding and PSEA Policy (2020) as well as the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability.

## B. **IN DIRECT ENGAGEMENT WITH CHILDREN AND CAREGIVERS:**

### **Child Safety and Well-being First**



The priority is the child's physical and emotional safety. We therefore implement and enforce robust child safeguarding policies for all staff and volunteers, create child-friendly spaces that are secure and predictable, and ensure teams are trained in trauma-sensitive approaches and psychological first aid.

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### **Dignity and Agency of the Child**



We treat every child as a rights-holder with their own voice and evolving capacities. We use age-appropriate methods (play, art, conversation) to listen to children. We respect their choices and opinions, and design programmes that allow them to participate meaningfully and influence decisions that affect their lives, rather than being passive recipients of support.



### Partnership with Caregivers

We recognise parents and caregivers as experts on their children. We involve caregivers in programme design, decision-making, and feedback processes, and support approaches that strengthen their existing skills and resilience. We engage caregivers as collaborators, not beneficiaries.



### Do No Harm and Conflict Sensitivity

We ensure that interventions do not inadvertently increase risks or tensions by conducting ongoing context and risk analysis. We remain attentive to how aid may affect power dynamics, gender relations, and community conflicts, and we adapt programmes as needed to mitigate any identified risks.



### Confidentiality and Informed Consent

We protect the privacy and autonomy of children and families by clearly explaining activities, obtaining informed consent, storing personal data securely, and never sharing information or images without explicit permission. Consent must always be voluntary, transparent, and free from any impact on access to services.

## What are common capacity-sharing needs for partners supporting children affected by forced displacement and crisis?

Local and refugee-led organisations, as well as international partners, supporting children affected by forced displacement and crisis (including refugees, IDPs, returnees, and stateless children) often require targeted support in areas that enable child-sensitive and sustainable interventions. Based on field evidence<sup>1</sup> and practitioner input, common capacity-strengthening needs include:

- 1. Child-Centred Programme Design and Management:** Skills in designing and managing safe, inclusive, and play-based early childhood development (ECD) programmes and child-friendly spaces in low-resource and emergency settings. This includes adapting interventions to diverse needs, including those of children with



Capacity-sharing is a collaborative, two-way engagement that involves learning together, sharing knowledge, and co-creating solutions across local/ national/ regional/ international partners. It acknowledges and appreciates the experience, agency, and capacities of local and national partners, including organisations led by forcibly displaced or stateless persons, and seeks to build on all stakeholders' capacities to achieve common objectives. In doing so, it will enhance the relevance, flexibility and impact of international programmes by making them better linked to- and more

<sup>1</sup>UNICEF (2021) [Predictive Analytics for Children: An assessment of ethical considerations, risks, and benefits](#)

2. **Child Protection and Safeguarding:** Training in the implementation of robust child safeguarding policies, psychological first aid, and trauma-informed, culturally sensitive, and gender-sensitive protection measures to ensure the physical and emotional safety of children across all activities.
3. **Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability, and Learning (MEAL) with a Child-Focus:** How to develop and apply child-friendly data collection tools to monitor developmental progress and well-being outcomes, in line with ethical standards, informed consent, and children's participation. Safe data management and balanced accountability to children, communities, and donors ensure that information is used for learning and programme improvement, not merely administrative reporting.
4. **Caregiver and Community Engagement:** Strategies for meaningfully involving parents and primary caregivers, especially women, in programme design, decision-making, and advocacy, while providing them with support in responsive caregiving and stress management. Meaningful caregiver engagement is a cornerstone for building trust and ensuring lasting community resilience.
5. **Advocacy and Policy Engagement:** Skills to advocate for the inclusion of displaced and crisis-affected children in national education, health, and protection systems. This includes leveraging local evidence and storytelling to influence policies and funding decisions at local, national, and international levels. Evidence-based advocacy ensures that the voices of children and families are not only heard but also drive the decisions that shape their lives.
6. **Dedicated Support for Capacity Sharing:** This includes grants, technical assistance, and mentorship to enable partners to develop robust systems, strengthen leadership skills, and achieve long-term sustainability. This ensures they are not only implementers of projects, but equal partners poised to influence, innovate, and thrive independently.

## PART 3:

### Our Practical Pathway: From Engagement to Ecosystem Impact

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This section provides a step-by-step approach for implementing the principles above, focusing on how to work with RLOs and LLOs to better serve children and caregivers.

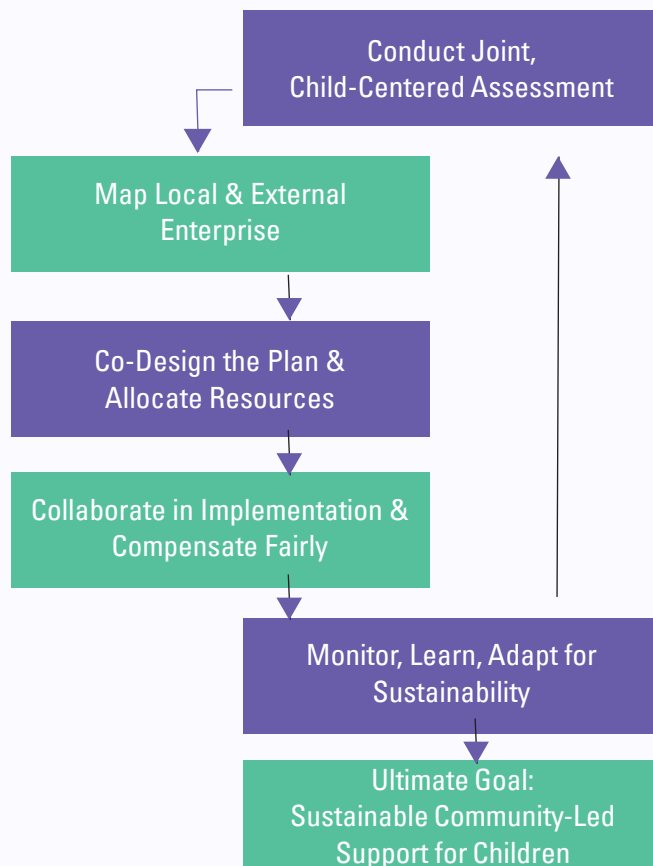
#### The Essential Foundation: Real Relationships

The following steps will only work if they are built on a foundation of genuine, sustained partnership. This means we have already taken the time to map out and build trust with RLOs and LLOs, children, and main caregivers, seeing them as long-term leaders, not just short-term contractors.

#### The Capacity-Sharing Cycle

The success of the steps outlined in this guide depends entirely on having a genuine community engagement strategy in place. This means partners must have already worked to inclusively map and identify refugee-led and locally-led organisations, established partnerships based on sustained equity, not just short-term projects and created ways to ensure their meaningful participation in decisions. Without this deeper commitment, capacity-sharing can become a superficial exercise that fails to connect with the real leadership, wisdom, and lived experience within displaced communities. For more detailed guidance on building this foundation, please refer to the UNHCR tipsheet on capacity-sharing with organisations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons<sup>2</sup>.

#### The Capacity-Sharing Cycle for Early Childhood Development in Crisis



### **Step 1: Jointly Assess Capacity and Needs with Children, Caregivers, and Local Groups**

- Adapted from the INEE Minimum Standards and community-based child protection frameworks, which promote inclusive, participatory, and context-specific assessments.
- Start by agreeing on what “capacity” means in each context. For children and caregivers, it may include emotional, social, educational, and practical skills, not just organisational or technical abilities.
- Map the existing strengths and knowledge that children, caregivers, and community groups already have and want to build on (such as parenting skills under stress, child-friendly learning practices, or peer support networks).
- Identify together the areas where they feel they need support or learning, making sure the process is led by their priorities, not outside assumptions.
- Focus on context-specific priorities that make the greatest difference for children and families.
- Use inclusive and participatory methods to listen and learn:
  - Hold focus groups with parents, youth, and community volunteers; use child-friendly tools to hear directly from children where appropriate.
  - Involve facilitators chosen and trusted by the community.
  - Make sure groups representing different identities (gender, disability, minority status, etc.) are included from the start.
  - Choose safe spaces and protect confidentiality, especially when discussing sensitive issues.
  - Actively minimise power imbalances by creating a welcoming environment where community voices are respected.
- Treat the needs assessment as a two-way learning process, through which community groups gain insight into organisational processes, while staff develop a deeper

### **Step 2: Map Training Offers and Identify Key Capacity-Sharing Partners**

- List and promote existing training opportunities at local, national, and online levels that are relevant to children and caregivers. Highlight what is practical, low-cost, and accessible in crisis settings.
- Seek out the expertise of local organisations led by or representing displaced children and families. Invite them to share their knowledge as equal partners or co-trainers.
- Co-develop training content with these groups so that it fits the realities of displacement and crisis, and not just “refugee” contexts.
- Coordinate with government, NGOs, and international agencies to reduce overlap, fill gaps, and make sure learning opportunities complement one another.
- Ensure that training opportunities are sustainable and inclusive, providing pathways for trainees to apply and share their learning within their own communities.

### Step 3: Co-Design a Capacity-Sharing Plan that Reflects Children and Caregivers' Realities

- Work together to create a clear plan with shared objectives, timelines, and roles. Where needed, plan for multi-year collaboration.
- Ensure resources, financial, human, and technical, are set aside to make the plan realistic. For example, reserve part of every grant to strengthen local organisations supporting children and caregivers.
- Go beyond one-off workshops: include mentoring, peer exchanges, shadowing, and training-of-trainers to build lasting skills.
- Make sure organisations led by or representing displaced children and families are involved in every stage of programming, from assessments to planning, implementation, evaluation and sustainability.
- Include a simple monitoring and evaluation framework to measure progress and review it regularly with community partners.



#### Tools and methods to consider:

- Joint learning plans: Co-created roadmap of learning goals and shared responsibilities.
- Twinning or buddy system: Pair individuals across organisations for mentorship and technical exchange
- Co-led training sessions: organisations led by displaced and stateless people co-design and co-facilitate training.
- Flexible funding: Support organisations led by displaced and stateless people to define their own learning priorities.
- Reflection spaces: Mutual learning from lived experience and knowledge of context.

- Be transparent about priorities, limitations, and expectations so everyone knows what is possible.
- Ensure the plan embodies true partnership, where capacity sharing becomes a two-way process built on trust, equity, and shared accountability among all actors.

### Step 4: Collaborate in the implementation of the capacity-sharing plan

Remove barriers to participation by covering travel, childcare, translation, or internet costs so community groups can attend and lead learning activities.

- Create opportunities for real collaboration: joint workshops, knowledge exchanges, and staff “buddy” systems linking your team with local leaders.
- Support the well-being of RLO and LLO teams and staff with lived experience.

How can you mitigate barriers to participation in capacity-sharing initiatives?

- Select an appropriate time and location.
- Create a safe protection environment for all actors (enable youth, women, and

- Recognise and fairly compensate the time and expertise of community organisations, parents, or youth leaders when they provide training or facilitation.
- Understand that many local groups operate with little or no funding, which affects their availability. Develop fair, transparent mechanisms for payment and support.
- Share ownership of training activities and decision-making to ensure equal partnership.
- Implementation should be viewed not merely as delivery, but as a shared learning journey that builds mutual respect, long-term trust, and sustainable local leadership

LGBTIQ+ individuals to express their needs and concerns privately and have their choices and preferences respected).

- Ensure inclusive participation for all, including access to interpretation and physical space (as well as cyberspace).
- Employ adaptable facilities (in-person, online) to expand the reach.
- Pay refugee, IDP or stateless persons/ local leaders/elders fair and transparent money to support livelihoods to reinforce the idea that their output is just as important as your staff on paid positions.

### **Step 5: Monitor, Learn, Adapt, for sustainability**

- Use simple pre- and post-activity tools (including child-friendly methods) to see how knowledge and skills have grown. Ensure that these tools are developmentally appropriate and aligned with children's different ages, abilities, and milestones.
- Hold regular check-ins with children, caregivers, and local groups to get feedback. Use participatory monitoring so they can assess progress themselves.
- Track impact using indicators agreed upon in the plan.
- Document successes, challenges, and lessons learned, including children's and parents' voices, to improve future efforts.
- Adapt the plan as you learn.
- Encourage continued learning by setting up regular info sessions, communities of practice, or online spaces for exchange.
- Support local organisations to build long-term partnerships, access funding and sustainable financing mechanisms and scale their programmes. Advocate internally so these groups, especially those representing children and caregivers affected by crises, have a real voice in decisions.
- Ensure sustainability by transforming learning into a living, community-led process, one that is owned, driven, and continuously renewed by the children, caregivers, and local groups it was designed to serve.

## CAPACITY-SHARING CYCLE TABLE

STEP	DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES IN THE STEP	HOW CAPACITY WILL BE SHARED IN THE STEP
Conduct joint child-centred assessment with children, caregivers, and local groups	Agree on the meaning of “capacity”; map existing strengths; identify priority needs; use inclusive, participatory tools; ensure representation of diverse groups; create safe spaces; treat assessment as a two-way learning process.	Community members define priorities; trusted facilitators lead; organisations learn from local knowledge; power imbalances are reduced; assessment becomes mutual learning rather than data extraction.
Map training offers and identify key capacity-sharing partners	Identify relevant training; engage displaced-led organisations as co-trainers; co-develop content; coordinate with actors to avoid duplication; ensure sustainability and pathways to apply learning.	Local organisations act as knowledge holders and trainers; content reflects lived realities; partnerships value local expertise equally to external expertise.
Co-design a realistic capacity-sharing plan	Develop shared objectives, roles, and timelines; allocate resources; include mentoring and peer exchange; involve community groups across the programme cycle; establish M&E; ensure transparency.	Planning is joint with shared decision-making; resources strengthen local actors; accountability is mutual; community influences design, not only implementation.
Collaborate in the implementation of the plan	Remove participation barriers; organise joint workshops and buddy systems; support wellbeing; compensate community contributors fairly; share ownership of activities.	Community groups lead and co-facilitate; costs are covered for equal participation; time and expertise are valued; implementation is a shared learning process.
Monitor, learn, adapt, and sustain	Use pre/post tools; hold participatory feedback sessions; track indicators; document lessons; adapt the plan; create communities of practice; support long-term partnerships.	Communities assess progress; children’s and caregivers’ voices shape improvements; local organisations are supported to sustain and scale efforts; ownership remains with the community.

# APPENDIX

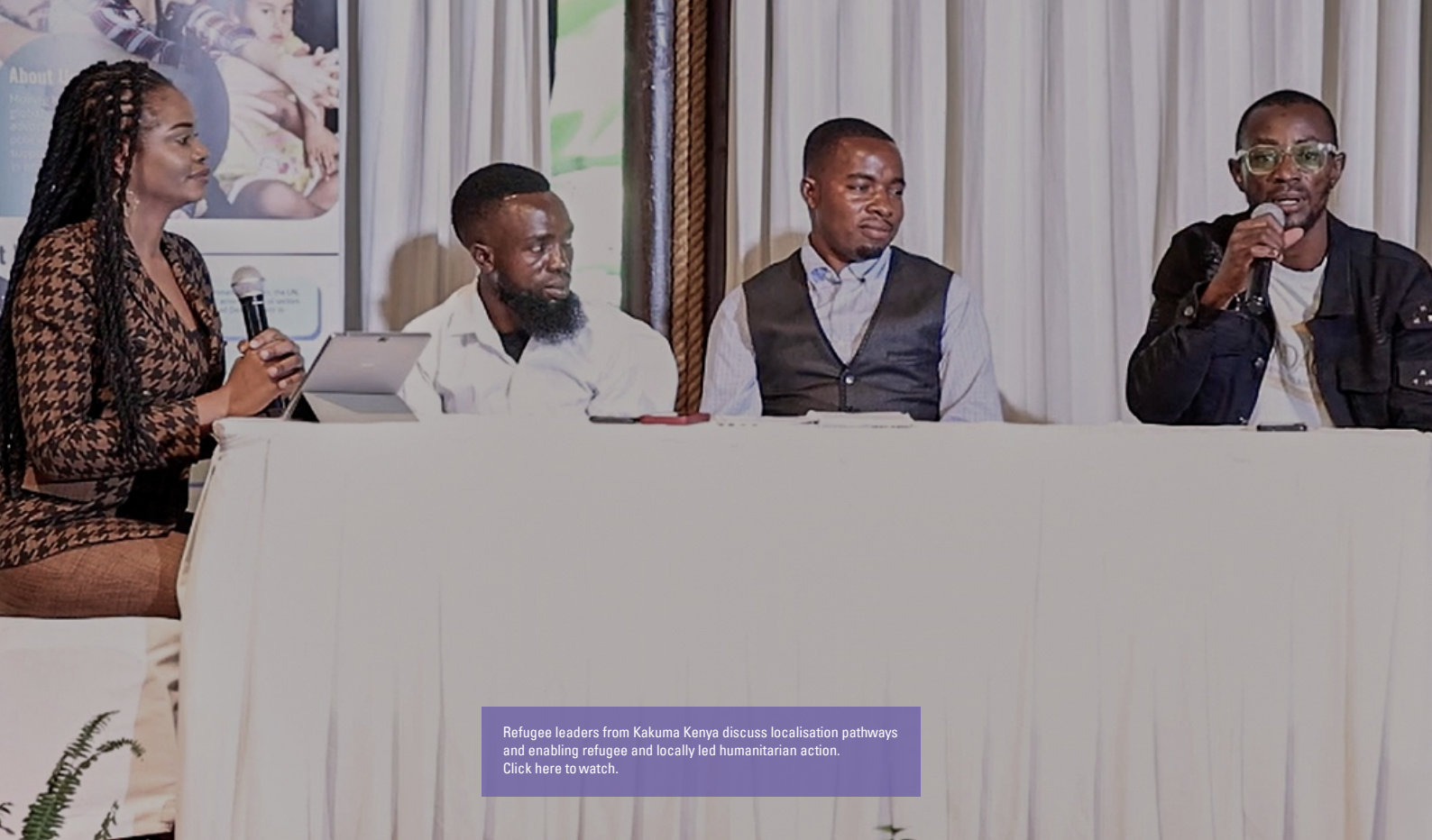
## Appendix 1: A Curated List of Training Resources

For RLOs, LLOs, and Their Staff

- 1) Advocacy and Organisational Strength
  - Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR): <https://apnor.org/skill-enhancement-program/>
  - Urban Refugees Incubation Programme: <https://www.urban-refugees.org/incubation/>
  - MENA: [UNHCR MENA Community Protection Network Capacity Development](#)
  
- 2) Child-Centred Programming and Protection (Free & Accessible)
  - The Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action: <https://kayaconnect.org/course/view.php?id=4810>
  - The MHPSS Collaborative: <https://mhpsscollaborative.org/resources/?e-filter-fc28d69-resources-category=training-resource>
  - [Protection Advocacy Toolkit](#)
  - Moving Minds Alliance will continuously gather and share specific ECD training from our member organisations: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MFB5qWlvlyVfYOMbCv\\_5MTP6ulkIgu1DcxTWIGVikls/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1MFB5qWlvlyVfYOMbCv_5MTP6ulkIgu1DcxTWIGVikls/edit?usp=sharing)
  
- 3) General Humanitarian Skills
  - Disaster Ready: <https://www.disasterready.org/>
  - Kaya Connect: <https://kayaconnect.org/>
  - UNHCR and WFP training portal: <https://wfp-unhcr-hub.org/resources/learning-and-training/>
  - [UNITAR: free and open courses](#)

## For International and National Actors

- Learning from Lived Experience
- Forcibly Displaced People Network (FDPN): <https://www.fdpn.org.au/>
- Refugee Advocacy Lab: <https://refugeeadvocacylab.org/>
- Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR): [Training on Meaningful Refugee Participation](#)
- Forcibly Displaced People Network (FDPN): [e-learning platform for capacity building of service providers and SOGIESC communities](#)
- Refugee Advocacy Lab: [A guide for centring displaced people in policy advocacy](#)
- INEE: <https://inee.org/resources/unicef-programme-guidance-early-childhood-development>
- UNICEF Care for Child Development: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/care-child-development>
- UNICEF Caring for the Caregiver: <https://www.unicef.org/documents/caring-caregiver>



Refugee leaders from Kakuma Kenya discuss localisation pathways and enabling refugee and locally led humanitarian action. [Click here to watch.](#)

## MOVING MINDS ALLIANCE

Moving Minds Alliance (MMA) is a multi-stakeholder alliance of 40+ international organisations advocating for early childhood development in every crisis response, leveraging the strengths of diverse actors from the local to the global. In Nigeria, the Alliance is funding and supporting a locally led, multi-stakeholder coalition to advocate for early childhood development in crisis contexts.

**Website:** [movingmindsalliance.org](https://movingmindsalliance.org)  
**LinkedIn:** [@MovingMindAlliance](https://www.linkedin.com/company/movingmindsalliance)  
**X:** [@MovingMindsECD](https://twitter.com/MovingMindsECD)  
**YouTube &:** [@movingmindsECD](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC...)

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Cover Photo:

At the 2024 Annual Meeting, Moving Minds Alliance members explored why direct funding to local and refugee-led organisations is essential for impact and accountability. Watch the recording [here](#).