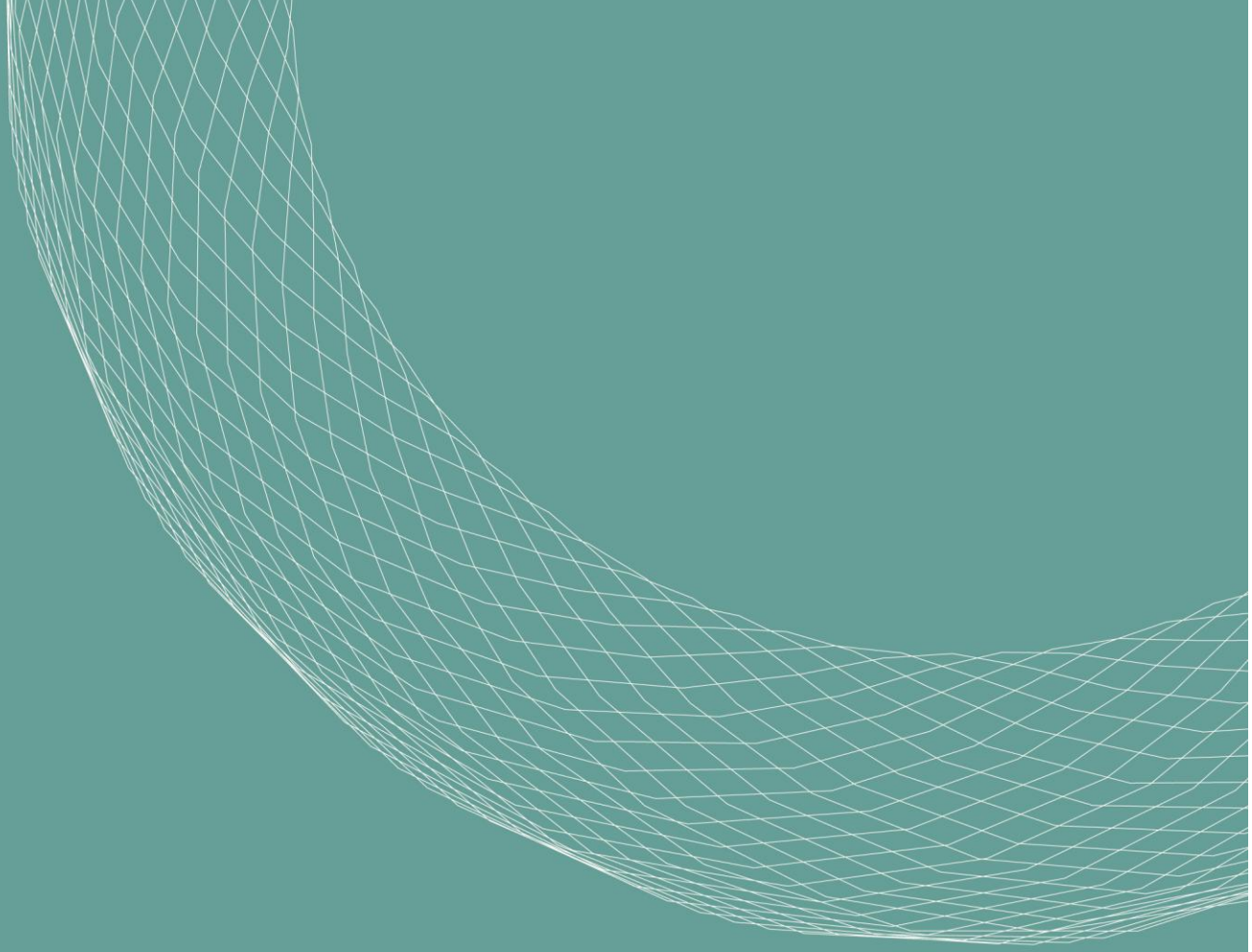


Where Is The Trust? Before You There Was Us

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This study seeks to reframe how trust is built and understood, and to reposition refugee communities not as passive recipients, but as active agents with long-standing traditions and systems of care.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background to the Study

Refugee communities in East Africa, especially in Kenya and Uganda, have sustained themselves for generations, dating back to the 60s and 70s, through a strong sense of community, traditions of giving, and systems of mutual giving. These systems such as *sanduk* (saving groups) and *Iddir* among the South Sudanese / Sudanese, the Ethiopians in Kenya, and burial groups among the Rwandese in Uganda, are grounded in dignity, reciprocity, and shared identity. These traditions predate the arrival of formal humanitarian assistance and remain essential to community resilience. However, the rise of global humanitarian aid has often overridden or erased these local systems, imposing external structures that shift power away from community-defined solutions and often approaching these communities primarily as passive beneficiaries, forming them through narratives of scarcity and dependency. Such framing obscures the wealth of local knowledge, leadership, and self-organizing capacity present within refugee settings (Hodgson and Pond, 2018; Lentfer, 2020).

Trust is an important aspect of leadership and agency, especially between refugee communities and international actors. It is built on the quality of relationships, fostered over time, and should be rooted in mutual respect, accountability, and recognition. In contexts like Kakuma refugee camps in Kenya, trust is often tested by the way aid is designed and delivered. When decisions are made without meaningful community involvement, it can erode confidence, reduce programme uptake, and undermine long-term self-reliance (Hodgson, 2018).

There is a growing mistrust between refugee communities and philanthropic institutions around the way aid is delivered. This study seeks to reframe how trust is built and understood, and to reposition refugee communities not as passive recipients, but as active agents with long-standing traditions and systems of care.

1.2 Problem Statement

Global philanthropy can at times knowingly or unknowingly overlook or undervalue local existing systems in refugee settings, resulting in a disconnect between how aid is delivered and the reality communities face. This contributes to the narratives of scarcity and dependency. It also often leads to erosion of identity, a breakdown of trust, and a lack of equitable partnerships between communities and external actors. Therefore, there remains a gap in recognition and relationship between refugee-led initiatives and global funding institutions which prioritize external expertise over community knowledge. Moreover, this fosters a transactional relationship where compliance and reporting take precedence over relationship-building and mutual accountability. The result of this is a persistent gap in trust that limits the effectiveness and sustainability of aid interventions, according to Mendy Hameda:

> "I have seen this narrative that they would bring in international expertise to support local interventions – which is very vague because you cannot bring an expert from America, with an American background and system of work

> ethics, to support interventions in an area that is very foreign to their scope. Some of them even come and try to impose their projects on the local perspectives, and they fail because they do not understand the nature and perspectives of the cultures of the area."

This study argues that trust is not merely a transactional concept but a relationship and culture, shaped by shared values and community-defined indicators such as belonging and dignity.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study seeks to:

1. Explore how trust is built or broken between refugee communities and global philanthropic institutions.
2. Understand the role of local traditions of giving and care in sustaining refugee communities.
3. Highlight how encouraging communities to revisit and value their own systems can strengthen identity and agency.
4. Propose a model of partnership that centres community knowledge and shifts power towards equity.

1.4 Significance of the Study

This study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for community-led development and locally-rooted philanthropy. It provides empirical insights into how trust functions in refugee settings and offers practical recommendations for philanthropic institutions seeking to build more equitable relationships with the communities they serve by centreing community voices. It challenges conventional narratives and invites a fundamental change in how aid is conceptualized and delivered.

1.5 Definitions of Key Terms

Key Term	Definition
Trust	The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party, based on expectations of reliability and recognition (Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman, 1995). In this study, trust is also understood as relational, expressed through solidarity, inclusion, and dignity within refugee communities.
Refugee-led organizations (RLOs)	Community-based organizations initiated and managed by refugees themselves, accountable primarily to their communities rather than external actors.

Accountability	For donors, accountability refers to compliance with reporting, financial management, and risk minimization. For refugee communities, accountability is relational, built on reputation, shared responsibility, and ownership.
Mutual aid	Informal systems of giving and support practiced within refugee communities (e.g. rotating savings, food sharing, burial groups, etc.), reflecting philosophies such as *harambee* and *Ubuntu*.
Differentiated assistance	An aid model (for example, in Kakuma) where households are classified by vulnerability, and resources are distributed accordingly. While designed for fairness, it can create divisions if not co-designed with communities.
KPIs	Key performance indicators.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Trust in Humanitarian and Philanthropic Work

Trust, especially in humanitarian and philanthropic work, has been described as the “glue” that holds effective aid delivery together (Six, Sorge, and Nooteboom, 2010). It encompasses both the belief that partners will act in good faith and the assurance that they are competent and reliable. Despite this, power imbalances often distort how trust is perceived and practiced, particularly in relationships between donors, refugee communities, and RLOs that are the voices of their communities. Community philanthropy offers a framework for shifting power by restoring dignity, rooting aid in local systems and knowledge. Moreover, Hodgson frames community philanthropy as radical, driven by value in development practices that build capacities, trust, and shift power closer to the ground (Hodgson, 2020).

The Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF) has long argued that philanthropy is an essential human behaviour, embedded in communities as much as it is imported from the outside. Case studies such as “The Story Behind the Well” (Mahomed and Peters, 2011) illustrate how communities in Kenya mobilized their own resources for development without external aid. More recent GFCF research (2021; 2024) further highlights how local organizations sustain themselves during crises by drawing on traditions of solidarity, dignity, and mutual recognition. This goes to show that there is an importance to understanding refugee communities in East Africa, where local giving and systems of care predate and coexist with international aid; hence, this literature review examines the current understanding of trust, community giving traditions, and the limitations of conventional aid models in refugee settings.

2.2 Local Traditions of Giving in Refugee Communities

African traditions such as *harambee* (Kenya), *Obukuma* (Mashi, Congo), *Emo* (Kibebe), *Ubumwe* (Burundi), *Iddir* (Ethiopia), and *Juer Chin* (South Sudan) reflect deeply-rooted systems of collective responsibility and reciprocity. In ordinary times, these practices act as informal safety nets for communities, persisting and continuing even in the face of displacement. Hodgson and Pond (2018) argue that recognizing and integrating such traditions into formal aid systems can strengthen both social cohesion and programme success.

2.3 The Disconnect Between Aid Models and Community Realities

Top-down aid models frequently fail to account for the pre-existing strengths and capacities of communities that their aid aims to serve. Pavanello and Darcy (2008) note that when aid is designed without meaningful community involvement, without community understanding and conceptualization, it risks undermining existing coping mechanisms. The recent introduction of differentiated assistance in Kakuma refugee camp illustrates this tension. While the model aimed to allocate resources based on household needs, its rollout without deep community co-design created friction and missed opportunities to leverage established systems of mutual aid (World Food Programme, 2023).

Studies such as Lentfer's "Time to Let Go" has critiqued top-down philanthropic practices that ignore local expertise. African traditions of giving have demonstrated resilience and effectiveness even in displacement contexts. Yet, these practices are rarely recognized by mainstream aid institutions. Literature points to a growing need to rethink how aid measures success, particularly regarding non-quantifiable values like trust, dignity, identity, and belonging.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore perceptions of trust and systems of giving in East African refugee settings. The research aimed to capture lived experiences, historical knowledge as well as community perspectives and collective memory, using interviews, focus group discussions, and participatory reflections to understand the relationships between refugee communities and philanthropic institutions.

3.2 Target Population

The study engaged refugee community members, local leaders, representatives of RLOs, and selected philanthropic institutions working in Uganda and Kenya. The population was chosen for its relevance to the research focus on community-level perspectives and institutional engagement.

3.3 Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Purposive sampling was used to identify 17 interview participants and two focus groups, ensuring diversity in experience, gender, geography, and organizational role. Participants included community members, elders, local NGO workers, and donor representatives.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using a qualitative approach that involved semi-structured interviews and facilitated group discussions, which were designed for in-depth responses from participants. The use of open-ended questions allowed for more flexible dialogue, enabling participants to share their insights and experiences in their own words.

The topics covered related to trust, its definition and personal meaning, the cultural traditions surrounding giving, personal experiences with different forms of aid, and the overall perceptions of partnership dynamics. By exploring these areas, the study aimed to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these concepts influence relationships and interactions within the community.

Each interview was recorded with the informed consent of the participants to ensure that their voices were accurately captured. Following the interviews, the recordings were transcribed to create a written record of the discussions.

The responses were recorded thematically to identify key patterns and themes. This enabled systematic analysis of the information gathered, highlighting recurring concepts and insights that emerged from the interviews and discussions. By synthesizing this data, the study aimed to uncover deeper meanings and understandings related to trust, giving traditions, and collaborative partnerships.

3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns and contrasting viewpoints across participant groups. Coding focused on relational vs. transactional trust, community traditions, aid impacts, and indicators of dignity, agency, and belonging.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants provided informed consent, and their identities were kept confidential. The study prioritized respectful engagement and upheld the principle of “do no harm”, particularly given the sensitive nature of refugee experiences and funding dynamics.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents key findings from the interviews and focus group discussions conducted with refugee community members, local leaders, RLO representatives, and philanthropic institutions to understand how trust is built, broken, and sustained in refugee communities. The data revealed insights into how refugee communities in East Africa conceptualize trust, sustain themselves through traditions of giving, and experience the effects of international aid. Several themes reflect how trust is experienced, challenged, and redefined in refugee-hosting contexts, including: trust as relational; traditions of mutual aid; erosion of trust and identity; donor trust models; non-measurable but critical values; and, the case study of the differentiated assistance in Kakuma.

4.1 Trust Built on Relationships

Trust can be defined as the firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something. It is essential in fostering relationships and interactions, often involving a willingness to be vulnerable based on the expectation that others will act beneficially. According to Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995), trust is:

> "The willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party."

This definition underscores the relational nature of trust, highlighting that it is built on expectations and the inherent risks involved in trusting other.



Community leaders at a focus group discussion.

For the community, trust emerges as a relational practice rather than an abstract principle. According to focus group participants, trust is lived in both the intimate spaces of community and also in broader relationships with aid actors. A community leader from the Kyaka II settlement in Uganda – who requested that their full name not be used and who will be referred to here as Bianca – explained:

> "As community members, trust means supporting each other in times of need."

This reflects the deep social expectation that is engraved in individuals to be there for one another, regardless of material wealth. Trust is therefore expressed in acts of solidarity like sharing food, helping families in need, or helping with small contributions in times of weddings, illness, or death, and, in other cases, helping towards paying school fees for children within the community.

Externally, participants of focus group discussions emphasized that trust with outsiders is experienced differently. Mohamed from Daadab argued that:

> "At the community level, trust is when we are involved in decision-making, not just receiving instructions."

Here, trust is framed not as a charity but as recognition of a community's capabilities. Rather than being positioned as passive recipients of aid, instead, trust is defined in terms of being included, consulted, and respected. Several RLO leaders also challenged donor-driven notions of trust-based relationships and reporting:

> "Trust should be based on knowing us, not just compliance."

This points to a mismatch between community expectations and donor practices. For donors, trust is built on paperwork, while communities link it to relationships.

4.2 Communities' Traditions of Mutual Aid

A consistent theme across the interviews was the persistence of traditions of giving, even under the strain of displacement. Elders, community leaders, and women's groups were repeatedly cited as custodians of these traditions. Mohamed highlighted the role of elders:

> "We have traditional elders who guide us and make sure people share what little they have."

This illustrates how leadership within refugee communities is not new, but deeply rooted in cultural systems of care. Bianca described rotating savings and support groups, recalling practices that long predated aid:

> "Even before aid, we had systems of rotating savings and helping vulnerable households."

Such mechanisms mirror cultural philosophies such as *harambee* (Kenya) and *Ubuntu* (Southern Africa), which emphasize dignity, solidarity, and belonging. These systems reveal that philanthropy is not foreign but embedded in refugee communities, going by different names such as *Juer Chin*, *Emo*, *Ubukuma*, *Ubumwe*, *Dharocho Oratho*, etc. They all serve as reminders that communities are not empty vessels waiting to be filled by external actors, but rather that resourceful networks are already in place, sustaining themselves.

4.3 Erosion of Trust and Identity

While traditions of giving endure, focus group participants reflected on how external aid has disrupted identity and self-perception. Aid often communicates scarcity, producing dependency narratives. As remarked by one responden:

> "If you tell us we don't have resources or capacity, we will believe you."

This highlights how scarcity narratives, when repeated, are internalized. Over time, they discourage confidence in existing community strengths. Mohamed added:

> "Being with international organizations made us feel less capable."

While Israel Tombe noted that:

> ''When we became refugees, we were people who had gone through school – it is not like we have left our brains in our countries. We fled with these skills and when we go to the country of asylum we are seen as people who have never gone to school; when there are refugees who are professors and doctors who have been engaged in various interventions in their countries. But in their countries of asylum, because of their refugee status, they are seen as not professionals who can do anything good.''

Such reflections reveal that aid, though having helped the community, can inadvertently erode trust in oneself and one's community. Bianca asserted that what she would want an aid organization to know is:

> "That we are not disabled, really. Yes, we need support, but we can also support ourselves."

Still, the participants emphasized that while:

> "The USAID funds have been cut, we are still able to run our programmes – but this is not the case for some INGOs."

4.4 Donor Organizations' Trust Models

Local actors reported that donors often prioritize paperwork and metrics over relationships. From this perspective, compliance-heavy systems risk distancing local

actors from decision-making, and reducing trust to a bureaucratic exercise. Yet, from the perspective of philanthropic institutions, these mechanisms are often seen as necessary safeguards. A representative of a donor organization explained:

> "For us, trust means knowing funds are used as intended, believing that our partners work with integrity and that they have the right intentions and the capabilities to work, as well as a shared commitment for change for all of us."

Similarly, one foundation representative emphasized the role of risk management:

> "We have to minimize risks, otherwise it becomes difficult to justify investments in refugee-led initiatives."

This highlights the tension: while communities emphasize dignity, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility as the foundations of accountability, donor systems frequently privilege formal reporting and measurable outputs. As another philanthropic representative noted:

> "We know communities know."

Participants across both sides acknowledged that genuine accountability must find a balance between these approaches, combining the rigour of formal systems with the relational values that sustain trust within communities. Aden Samriye, an incentive worker and RLO leader in Dadaab, described the lived impact of shifting aid policies:

> "My neighbours, relatives, and friends supported me with the little I am carrying today on this bicycle. I thank God, and I also thank the donors who have supported me through GOK, UNHCR, and WFP since 1991, from when I was single to now, living with a large family…Today, things have changed once again. I was recently placed in Category 4, and from this month, WFP food support for me and many others has stopped. Imagine – after three decades of depending on food aid, suddenly having nothing to rely on."

His story illustrates both the reliance created by humanitarian aid and the void felt when assistance is reduced, underscoring the need for greater community involvement in aid design.

4.5 Non-Measurable but Critical Values

Focus group participants emphasized the importance of values like dignity, respect, and reputation, which are often not recognized in traditional monitoring and evaluation frameworks. Participants described these as the foundations of trust within communities. One respondent explained that they measure trust not through reports but through lived relationships:

> “We know who we can trust because of how they show up, not because of documents.”

> “We need you to trust us, and the impact we have in our community.”

These insights underline that while donors rely on measurable indicators, communities often rely on relational and reputational markers of trust, which are equally important for accountability. Several RLOs shared how they track community trust through relationships and story-telling, rather than reports alone.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The findings of this study show that trust in refugee contexts is relational, lived, and grounded in recognition. While for philanthropic institutions, trust is frequently tied to systems of accountability, compliance, and risk management. Both perspectives are legitimate in their own contexts, yet it seems to create potential for miscommunication and can cause tension for refugee communities, leaving them frustrated as they are not given the space to show what they are capable of. At the same time, philanthropic institutions can feel that local actors in a community do not have the necessary capacity.

5.1 Trust through Relationships vs. Compliance-Based Trust

For communities, trust is based on how they know each other, sharing the status of refugees, expressed through solidarity, reciprocity, and participation rooted in togetherness. In contrast, donor representatives framed trust within institutional accountability. From this perspective, compliance-heavy systems are safeguards rather than barriers, intended to maintain credibility with their funders and their obligations to a country's tax laws.

As Hodgson (2018) notes, community philanthropy demonstrates that trust can be built through lived relationships and shared responsibility rather than compliance mechanisms alone, pointing towards models where accountability flows both upwards to the funders and downwards to communities themselves.

5.2 Mutual Aid and Donor Recognition

Before becoming refugees, focus group participants emphasized that there were traditions of giving that they carried with them. They had found ways to bring these traditions and blend them with other communities' traditions, therefore creating new traditions that predate international aid. Bianca explained:

> "Even before aid, we had systems of rotating savings and helping vulnerable households."

These forms of local philanthropy reflect values of *Ubuntu*, *harambee*, and similar traditions across the region. Donor representatives did not dismiss this knowledge, but admitted challenges in embedding it into existing frameworks. This suggests that while both sides acknowledge the value of community systems, institutional structures often struggle to validate them in practice.

5.3 Identity, Scarcity Narratives, and Risk

Communities expressed how aid narratives can erode self-perception. Israel Tombe observed:

> “When we became refugees, we were people who had gone through school… but in the country of asylum, we are seen as not professionals who cannot do anything that is good.”

Similarly, Mehndy reflected that association with international organizations made people feel less capable:

> “I have seen this narrative that they would bring an international expert to support in local interventions which is very vague because you cannot bring an expertise from America, with an American background and system of work ethics to support in interventions in an area that is very foreign to their scope. Some of them even come and try to impose their projects on the local perspectives, and they fail because they do not understand the nature and perspectives of the cultures of the area.”

Aid was not dismissed outright; participants acknowledged its importance but emphasized that external labels of scarcity and incapacity undermined identity and agency.

Donors, however, emphasized risk minimization as a rationale for cautious engagement. This reveals that what communities experience as disempowering narratives, donors often view as necessary risk management practices. Eric stated that:

> ''Normally, you can’t trust somebody that you have never seen, never met and someone you have never received positive news about. If you have negative information about someone, it means you will automatically not trust that person. So, trust comes when you know the person or you have positive information about that person.''

5.4 Accountability and Non-Measurable Values

For refugee communities, accountability is grounded in their relationships and proximity. Focus group participants explained that because they know each other personally, accountability is enforced through reputation and everyday interactions. As one community member put it:

> “We know who we can trust because of how they show up, not because of documents.”

Leadership within the community was consistently highlighted as part of this accountability system. Participants acknowledged elders, women’s groups, and RLOs as structures that maintain trust and ensure that resources reach those in need. Several noted that RLOs are particularly trusted and seen as accountable because they are embedded within the same communities they serve. Sudi Omar, a RLO leader, emphasized this point clearly:

> “As RLOs, we need to be accountable to the community because they are the people we serve; let us not exploit them.”



RLO leaders at a focus group discussion.

Similarly, Samuel Binja, founder of Kalobeyei Initiative for Better Life (KI4BLI), explained how accountability is fostered through inclusion and ownership:

> "When we do our programmes, we involve the community in order for them to have ownership, and that ensures accountability. I've witnessed a parent, someone from the community, bringing visitors to my office, and out of that visit, we were able to secure funding that supported our early childhood development programme. This tells you how people are now shifting their mind-sets and feel this is our thing. It's not about someone, it's not about X and Y and Z. It's about us, local ownership."

At the same time, RLO leaders acknowledged their limitations compared to INGOs and donor institutions. One noted:

> "We don't have the structures that INGOs or donors have. Sometimes it is one person who does everything."

This structural gap has implications for how accountability is perceived. While RLOs are trusted by their communities because of proximity and lived experience, they often lack the formal reporting systems that donors require, which fosters trust. RLO leaders also expressed concern that their participation can sometimes feel extractive. As one individual explained:

> "They use us for their own objectives, to meet their own KPIs."

From the donor side, representatives acknowledged these relational forms of accountability but noted the challenge of integrating them into formal systems. As one philanthropic representative explained, they do acknowledge community knowledge and systems, and they have tried to involve communities in co-designing their programmes. Efforts in this regard have greatly improved, acknowledging that core support plays a key role in building fast institutional trust as well as the capabilities of their partners.

Bridging these two forms of accountability requires mechanisms that allow relational values like dignity and ownership to stand alongside financial compliance, without reducing refugee participation to a checkbox for external objectives.

5.5 Case Study: Differentiated Assistance in Kakuma

Differentiated assistance in Kakuma Refugee Camp by the World Food Programme and UNHCR was intended to make aid more equitable by allocating resources according to assessed household vulnerability. On paper, this approach represents a shift away from uniform rationing towards targeted support.

However, the findings from this study reveal that while the model was designed to improve fairness, its implementation did not sufficiently involve refugees in decision-making. Mohamed reflected:

> "When organizations want to support the community, they should sit with us to know what we already have."

This underscores the disconnect between top-down aid design and the local systems of care already operating in camps.

Community members explained that differentiated assistance unintentionally created a sense of exclusion. Households labeled as "less vulnerable" felt abandoned, even though they still faced daily struggles. Leaders noted that had refugees been included in designing the model, they would have offered insights on how to balance vulnerability assessments with solidarity mechanisms already present in the community.

The model illustrates how donor efforts to increase equity can falter without participatory design. Yet it also reflects institutional priorities, ensuring resources are distributed according to measurable vulnerability categories. Without trust as inclusion, even well-intentioned reforms risk producing disempowerment. Samuel Binja said the risks of not acknowledging community strengths are that:

> "They solve their problems, they lack community ownership, which affects the sustainability of the project. Also, it becomes very expensive in terms of the cost effectiveness, and likely the community can create mafias against the project, and nothing will go on."

5.6 Bridging the Gap: Towards Relational Accountability

The discussions revealed that both communities and donors value trust, but define it differently. Neither is "wrong." Instead, their priorities reflect their lived realities: communities are accountable to one another, while donors are accountable to boards and global funders. The challenge is not to eliminate either perspective, but to build relational accountability frameworks that combine the strengths of both.

This could mean:

- Developing reporting systems that integrate stories, reputation, and community validation alongside financial compliance.
- Involving refugee leaders in co-designing aid models, such as differentiated assistance.
- Encouraging donors to invest in relationships and presence, not just outputs.
- Recognizing traditions of giving as legitimate forms of philanthropy.

As Hudson (2021) argues, trust in humanitarian partnerships is not built through compliance alone, but through sustained, reciprocal engagement. Bridging these two perspectives requires moving beyond a zero-sum framing of accountability and embracing models where dignity and risk management coexist.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

This research began with a central question: **in the relationship between refugee communities in East Africa and global philanthropic institutions – where is the trust?** The findings demonstrate that both donors and communities recognize the importance of trust, yet they define and practice it in different ways. For refugee communities, trust is based on relationships, grounded in recognition, dignity, and solidarity. It is expressed through acts of mutual aid, through shared responsibility, and through inclusion in decision-making. For philanthropic institutions, trust is primarily defined through accountability, compliance, and risk management mechanisms necessary to maintain legitimacy with funders and to ensure tax compliance.

These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, but they often create friction. Communities feel reduced to paperwork, used by donors to get funding that creates mistrust, and are too often treated as passive recipients of aid. While donors worry about risks, the misuse of funds, and the need for measurable outcomes. This tension was particularly evident in the example of differentiated assistance in Kakuma, where institutional priorities clashed with community expectations of participation and recognition.

At the same time, there are areas of convergence. Both communities and donors acknowledge traditional systems of giving. Donors also recognize the role of local ownership, even as they struggle to integrate it into compliance-driven frameworks. Similarly, communities recognize the value of external aid, even as they resist its unintended consequences on identity and agency.

Ultimately, the question is not whether trust exists, but how it is defined, practiced, and sustained. Building trust requires seeing each other as partners or equals rather than “we are up here and you are down there”, and creating accountability systems that integrate both relational and formal dimensions.

The contribution of this study lies in:

1. It shows that philanthropy is not merely imported into refugee spaces, but is already deeply embedded there.
2. It highlights the structural mismatch between community-based accountability and donor driven compliance.
3. By showing that both communities and donors value trust but measure it differently, the study urges that relational accountability must be built into donor frameworks in order to create partnerships, rather than transactions.

Chapter 7: Recommendations

This study highlights the gap between community-based understandings of trust and donor-driven accountability frameworks. The following recommendations aim to bridge this gap in ways that are both practical and grounded in the realities of refugee communities and philanthropic institutions.

7.1 Balance Compliance with Relational Accountability

Donor institutions will continue to require reporting and safeguards to satisfy boards and funders. However, accountability frameworks should also recognize community-based measures such as trust, dignity, and ownership. Practical steps include incorporating qualitative indicators such as stories, reputational trust, and evidence of inclusion, alongside financial reporting. This creates a dual system where formal compliance coexists with relational accountability.

7.2 Institutionalize the Co-Design of Processes

Rather than designing aid models in isolation, philanthropic actors should expand participatory processes that involve refugee communities at every stage – from assessment, design, implementation, to evaluation. This is already feasible with some donor organizations. Scaling such practices would ensure that models, such as differentiated assistance in Kakuma, do not inadvertently undermine solidarity within communities.

7.3 Support RLOs

RLOs were consistently recognized as trusted by, and accountable to, their communities, even when operating with limited structures and resources. Donors can make realistic investments by:

- Providing flexible, unrestricted, and multi-year grants tailored to RLO capacity.
- Offering technical support in areas like financial systems and reporting, without imposing rigid templates.
- Recognizing RLOs as equal partners rather than sub-contractors.

Such support strengthens accountability because RLOs already operate within systems of social proximity.

7.4 Resource Communities' Traditions of Giving

Rotating savings groups, communal contributions, and cultural practices are central to refugee resilience. Instead of bypassing these systems, donors can strengthen them indirectly by funding RLOs and community leaders to embed these traditions in their work. This approach lowers donor risk while respecting community practices.

7.5 Create Spaces for Dialogue and Relationship Building

Trust cannot be built solely through documents. Both communities and donors highlighted the importance of relationships. Establishing regular dialogue platforms where donors, INGOs, and refugee communities meet outside of compliance cycles would deepen mutual understanding. These could take the form of community visits or joint learning forums.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Community Members

- What does trust look like within your community?
- How did your community support each other before aid organizations arrived?
- What traditions of giving or helping exist within your community?
- How has external aid changed how you see yourselves?
- What systems still work for you today?
- What does trust mean to you when you are working with outsiders or in the context of partnerships?
- What do you wish aid organizations understood better about your community?

Community Local Leaders / Elders

- What does trust look like within your community? What makes someone trustworthy in your opinion?
- What does trust mean to you when working with outsiders, or in the context of partnerships?
- What does philanthropy / giving (money, time, or resources) mean to you?
- What are the values that guided community giving before?
- In what ways has that changed over time?
- What do you think has been lost or forgotten that you feel should be restored?
- What would you say are the main differences between the way you build trust in your communities and the way donors seem to build trust?
- What is the role of paperwork in building trust in your community vs., for example, a word of honour or the value of a reputation?

Local Non-Governmental Organizations / Community-Based Organizations / RLOs

- How would you describe trust? What does trust mean in your opinion?
- What challenges do you face when partnering with large or international donors?
- How do you integrate local traditions, wisdom, and practices into your work / programmes?
- Are there impacts you've seen in your work that are difficult to measure but very important?
- What are they, and how do you measure them?
- How do you track or communicate things like dignity, trust, or local leadership growth?
- Are there challenges in keeping people accountable in giving or projects?
- What would a trusting partnership look like to you? How could external organizations build more trust with local communities?
- What are the risks when outside funding doesn't recognize community strengths?

Philanthropic Institution Representatives

- How do you define or understand trust in your partnerships with local communities?
- What space is there for local traditions, knowledge, or systems in your funding approach?
- What have you learned about giving or partnership from working in refugee contexts?
- What do you think needs to change in how aid is delivered?
- How are you accountable to the communities you serve?
- Do you feel like you need to know all of the details about what happens with your funds downstream? If so, why? What is the foundation's approach to following the money, and what is the rationale?
- Is there a chance that your idea of a better future for the communities you fund might not fully align with theirs? Is it fully possible as an outsider to hear and understand a community's vision for change?
- What would improve transparency in community projects?

The GFCF works to strengthen, harness and demonstrate the value of community philanthropy as an essential element of community-led development and as a strategy for shifting power. Through small grants, technical support, peer exchange and evidence based learning, the GFCF helps to strengthen community philanthropy institutions around the world, so that they can fulfill their potential as vehicles for locally-led development, and as part of the larger global infrastructure for progressive social change.

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About the Author

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