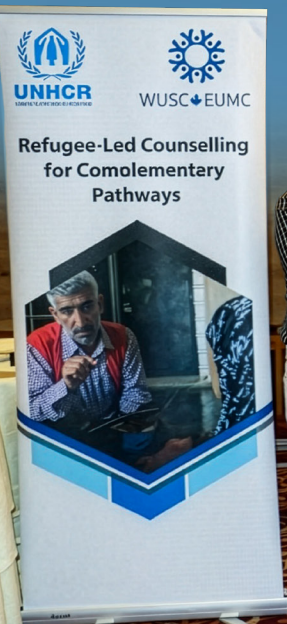




LESSONS LEARNED ON REFUGEE-LED GUIDANCE AND ADVISORY MODEL



Introduction

Between 2023 and 2025, WUSC implemented two initiatives rooted in the idea that peer-to-peer guidance models are essential to unlocking refugees' unique ability to foster trust, leverage lived experience and expertise, and ensure the sustainability of development interventions. The Refugee-Led Counseling for Complementary Pathways project in Jordan, in partnership with UNHCR, and the “University Now”, DREEM Project initiative in Kenya, in partnership with the Mastercard Foundation, had the underlying objective of contributing to a shift in higher education and third-country solutions systems by moving away from traditional top-down models toward a localization-centered approach that empowers refugees as permanent actors within these systems. These initiatives utilized refugee-led models to expand access to higher education, employment, and family reunification pathways among refugee populations through trusted community outreach and individualized guidance and mentorship. These initiatives prioritized refugee leadership and co-design, fostering a sustainable, protection-sensitive ecosystem that supports displaced populations to navigate complex immigration and education systems independently.

The **Refugee-Led Counseling for Complementary Pathways project** implemented over three years (2023–2025) across six locations in Jordan, leveraged a network of Refugee Guidance Counsellors (RGC), who were trained to deliver specialized sessions on third-country solutions such as education and labour mobility pathways, with the aim to scale access to third-country solutions for refugees by leveraging community trust, spreading and diversifying information sharing methods, and enhancing broader community knowledge.

The **“University Now”** pilot (2025) in Kenya is a strategic initiative of the DREEM Project co-created with Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) to transform access to the Mastercard Foundation Scholars Program. By utilizing a peer-to-peer advisory model, the pilot addresses the structural barriers, such as information and connectivity gaps, that have historically limited urban and camp-based refugees to access higher education. Beyond direct support for complex application processes, the initiative is designed to shift power dynamics by strengthening RLOs' capacity, enabling them to lead coordination with university partners and build a sustainable, durable pipeline of qualified candidates for the Mastercard Foundation Scholar's Program.



Impact Analysis

With these initiatives now concluded, we have a deeper understanding of their impact on driving changes within the higher education and third-country solutions systems. The models' contributions to scaling access to higher education and complementary pathway opportunities include:

Expanding Awareness through Community Trust and Leadership

The initiatives significantly helped to raise awareness on existing opportunities with broad and diverse refugee populations by empowering refugee leaders and refugee-led organizations who acted as trusted peers and proactive leaders within their communities and the higher education and complementary pathway ecosystems. This peer-led approach fostered a sense of credibility and helped overcome cultural and systemic barriers that often hinder traditional outreach. Refugee-led sessions were found to significantly enhance community trust and increase interest in higher education and complementary pathways. By positioning young refugees as community leaders, the project effectively helped bridge the gap between complex application mechanisms and the refugee populations in Jordan and Kenya.



Being a refugee-led counsellor means a lot to me. It's a chance to help build a community that shares knowledge and benefits everyone. In this role, I can support others in reaching their goals. It also offers continuous learning and personal growth, as I learn new things from every interaction.

Khaled, a refugee guidance counsellor in Jordan in 2024



It enabled broad geographic coverage (more than 8,000 combined participants in 2025), including urban settings (Amman, Zarqa, Mafraq, Irbid, and Nairobi) and refugee camps (Zaatari, Azraq, Kakuma, and Dadaab), ensuring that even harder-to-reach and marginalized populations had access to information. The initiatives developed inclusive outreach strategies to ensure young women and persons living with disabilities were also supported through program activities. To overcome logistical barriers, such as transportation costs and limited infrastructure, and diversify access to program activities, a multi-channel hybrid delivery modality was employed for information sharing.

The youth-centered model in both Jordan and Kenya was particularly successful in attracting younger participants (over 50% of the overall participants in 2025), a demographic critical for educational and employment opportunities.

Improving Community Knowledge

Scaling access is not just about the number of people informed, but also the level of retention of that information. Extensive data from participant surveys indicate a marked increase in community knowledge regarding higher education and labour mobility opportunities locally and in third countries. By providing verified information, peer advisors helped refugees distinguish between genuine opportunities and fraud, as well as safer legal alternatives to risky, irregular migration paths.

Addressing Application Quality and Eligibility

By providing intensive individualized guidance to participants, the model addressed high application drop-off rates caused by applicant ineligibility, misunderstanding of eligibility criteria, incomplete applications or missing documents. It offered personalized support to help refugees navigate specific prerequisites, eligibility criteria, soft skills strengthening resources, and selection processes for their chosen pathways.

“

I never imagined someone like me could be selected. Without the peer advisor's help, I would have missed this opportunity completely.

Person with disability and scholarship awardee, 2025

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Strengthening the Ecosystem through Partnerships

Both initiatives served as catalysts for connection between system actors that together can contribute to change. They emphasized building trust-based relationships with local stakeholders and institutions to ensure the programs could be sustained. The model scaled access by integrating into the broader local infrastructure in both Jordan and Kenya. Collaboration with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) in Jordan enhanced outreach efforts and provided physical spaces for engagement, especially when centralized community centers were closed. In Kenya, the initiative initiated 33 new partnerships between RLOs and institutions, including high schools, universities, and NGOs, ensuring long-term, structured coordination for outreach and mentorship.





Capacity Development and Sustainability

Refugee leaders and RLOs that partnered with WUSC reported that the role helped them acquire new skills in communication, mentorship, and leadership. The model ensured its own scalability through continuous capacity building, a training of trainers approach, and peer-to-peer exchanges, equipping advisors with advanced facilitation, data collection, and financial management skills, allowing them to take on leadership in their respective communities, increasing the project's operational autonomy and effectiveness in the field.

The initiatives demonstrated that community-based peer advisory is an empowering and sustainable model. 80% of RLOs expressed the intent to continue outreach activities in Kenya beyond the pilot phase by leveraging volunteer networks and alumni contributions.

Lessons Learned for Expansion or Replication

Key lessons learned for replicating or expanding the refugee-led guidance and advisory models in Jordan and Kenya emphasize the need for co-creation, intensive capacity building, and context-specific adaptation. While the models are highly effective, they require structural support to be sustainable.

The Necessity of Co-Design and RLO Leadership

A critical lesson across both initiatives is that RLOs and the participation of refugee leaders' in high-level planning is critical, including proposal development and needs assessments prior to project execution. Similarly, tools and processes must be contextualized and co-created with refugees to ensure uptake, as pre-made tools are often not fit for their intended purpose. Lastly, partner RLOs should take on genuine leadership roles, fostering the agility of refugee-led models and the strategic decision-making processes based on their contexts.

Intensive and In-Person Capacity Building

The capacity-building phase for refugee leaders and RLOs needs to be substantive in terms of time allocated and content covered. In-person training has a stronger and more effective impact than virtual sessions. Additionally, targeted training must be dedicated to building the organizational infrastructure of RLOs and the project management skills of refugee leaders (finance, data management, and MERL) before outreach activities can successfully scale. Expansion requires regular refresher sessions and micro-trainings to reinforce competencies and address knowledge gaps as pathways and eligibility criteria frequently change. Space and time for peer-to-peer exchanges between advisors from different locations must be set aside to ensure knowledge and experience transfer, fostering network building and alignment, as well as project quality and improvements when expanding.

Targeted Strategies for Marginalized Groups

Replication must account for cultural and systemic barriers that standard outreach might miss. In countries or regions with strict cultural norms, successful strategies included leveraging trusted networks, hosting mother-daughter sessions, and conducting women-only events with transport reimbursement. Language barriers (especially English proficiency) and transportation costs can be major hurdles for applicants. Future models should consider integrating information on free language-learning resources and provide stipends for participants. A multi-year effort is necessary to build a pipeline of candidates who meet program requirements, rather than focusing only on immediate application cycles.

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