



# Building Meaningful Refugee Participation into Protection Policymaking

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INTERNATIONAL PROGRAM

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# Contents

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- Executive Summary** ..... 1
- 1 Introduction** ..... 3
- 2 Motivations for Meaningful Refugee Participation** ..... 5
- 3 Models of Participation** ..... 9
  - A. The Consultative Model ..... 10
  - B. The Advisory Model ..... 13
  - C. The Professional Model ..... 16
- 4 Factors that Shape Refugees’ Ability to Influence Policy** ..... 18
  - A. Political Space for Participation ..... 18
  - B. Selection of Participants ..... 20
  - C. Resources ..... 21
- 5 Evaluating Refugee Participation** ..... 22
- 6 Conclusion and Recommendations for Navigating Trade-Offs and Moving Beyond Participation** ..... 26
- About the Author** ..... 29
- Acknowledgments** ..... 30

## Executive Summary

Worldwide, there is a pressing need for more effective policies to address protection and displacement challenges. One promising but underutilized component of addressing this challenge is meaningfully engaging refugees themselves in policymaking processes to ensure their knowledge, expertise, and unique perspectives are reflected in program design and that they have a shared sense of ownership over implementation. While the protection community acknowledged this in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, there is a general dearth of evidence on how, concretely, refugee participation can foster better policies. Similarly, there have seemingly been limited efforts to develop clear theories of change that outline how refugee participation initiatives are supposed to achieve their goals and to document these initiatives' processes and outcomes. As participation efforts continue to emerge globally, stakeholders ranging from states and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to refugee-led organizations and networks have an opportunity to sharpen their understanding of the goals of refugee participation, how to best reach them, and how to remove barriers that impede progress. In order to make these links explicit and ground participation opportunities in best practices, robust evaluations and stronger evidence will be essential.

One notable development in recent years has been a shift in the rationale behind refugee participation initiatives. While calls for meaningful participation have often relied on a moral argument (that displaced people should be involved in decisions that affect them), stakeholders are increasingly making the pragmatic case for this engagement as well: that refugee participation has the potential to improve the effectiveness of policies and programs at the design and implementation stages. At the design stage, engaging refugees can allow other stakeholders to tap into information that only refugees have access to, and it may reveal resources, networks, and solutions that policymakers were not aware of. As a result, the policies should align better with refugees' preferences and needs. At the implementation stage, refugees are more likely to accept policies and engage with programs over which they have a sense of ownership. And over the long term, regular engagement may build refugees' capacity to take greater ownership over programs and policies in their entirety.

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Refugee participation comes in many forms, and selecting the appropriate model for an initiative's goals, motivations, and desired outcomes requires careful consideration. To start, as states, UNHCR, and other national and global actors hone their approaches and initiatives for refugee participation, they should develop theories of change and related indicators, and ingrain them within their organizations and communicate them externally. This will give refugee participants a clear idea of how their involvement is expected to affect final decisions and policies, as well as allow for internal learning and external monitoring. This report proposes a preliminary theory of change and set of indicators that can be built upon and customized to suit the context of a specific organization or initiative.

Global, national, and local initiatives to engage refugees in decision-making processes and humanitarian responses generally fall into three categories:

- ▶ **Consultative model.** Most current efforts to engage refugees are consultative, whereby a relatively large number of refugees are invited to share their stories and opinions on an ad hoc basis. This light-touch form of engagement allows for the collection of a diversity of viewpoints from people outside the usual policymaking process. However, consultations often involve only surface-level input, which limits both the degree to which the feedback can be informed by and tailored to the process and the extent to which policymakers take refugees' input into consideration.
- ▶ **Advisory model.** This approach, which is gaining in popularity, sees refugees serving on advisory boards or as individual advisors, which allows the selected individuals and organizations to continuously engage in a specific policymaking process and provide more sustained, in-depth input. Advisors can leverage their role as outsiders to these processes to bring new perspectives, while also cultivating a deeper understanding of the policymaking process and how to navigate it and developing closer relationships with policymakers than is usually possible via consultations. However, this model tends to favor well-resourced and highly skilled refugees, which limits the diversity of participants and the advice they can offer.
- ▶ **Professional model.** Some organizations have appointed refugees to senior leadership positions or hired them as staff, which promises to foster change from within. This is in some ways the ultimate avenue for influence because, as insiders, these refugee professionals can take part in internal discussions about challenging or sensitive issues and serve as liaisons between an organization and their communities in a way that outsiders cannot. However, as is the case for advisory roles, access to professional opportunities is often limited to high-skilled refugees, particularly for senior leadership positions.

The choice of model may depend on the motivations of those seeking input, as well as the resources they have. It should also be noted that these models can be complementary, and that creating multiple entry points for refugee engagement in a process can make it possible to leverage their different benefits in terms of participant diversity and depth of engagement. To strengthen understanding of which models are best suited for different processes and purposes, states, UNHCR, and other global and national actors should pilot a variety of participation models, document these initiatives, and share publicly the information gathered, including reflections on whether and how refugee input was incorporated into final decisions.

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Across these models, a range of factors can affect refugees' access to decision-making processes and participants' ability to influence decisions. The degree to which states are willing to engage with refugees often determines whether refugees have access to decision-making fora, at what point in the process, the nature of their involvement, and whether they can speak openly without fearing for their safety. Policymakers often question whether selected refugee participants—who in global fora tend to be younger,

English speaking, well-connected, and based in the Global North—legitimately represent the interests and concerns of other refugees, even as the same policymakers may struggle to engage with larger groups that are not structured in ways they are familiar with and that may present diverging opinions. Access to funding, information, and training are critical for a more diverse group of refugees and refugee-led organizations to engage with policy processes in a way that is sustained and well-informed, and that allows them to identify allies and avenues for influence.

In the absence of democratic structures that represent refugees' public opinion at the global level, states, UNHCR, and other global and national actors should support refugee-led networks in taking steps to guarantee a diversity of participants within the networks. Addressing structural barriers that disproportionately face refugees who are women, minorities, and from the Global South will require long-term engagement, resourcing, and training with both refugee-led networks as they work to set up inclusive and effective mechanisms and with emerging advocates from more marginalized groups. Organizations should also include refugees and other people with lived experiences of displacement in their human resources (HR) diversity policies.

In the lead-up to the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, states, UNHCR, and nongovernmental actors alike have an important opportunity to strengthen the links between refugee participation initiatives' goals, their design and operation, and the mechanisms for measuring progress toward the identified goals. Using the theory of change and indicators proposed in this report, stakeholders can foster more thoughtfully designed refugee participation initiatives and ensure that lessons can be drawn and shared. And as refugees become increasingly familiar with policymaking processes and avenues for influence, and as evidence is generated on how best to leverage their contributions, policymakers can move from facilitating refugees' participation toward enabling more equal partnerships.

## 1 Introduction

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The global protection regime is under considerable strain. Global actors including states, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other international organizations are struggling to provide solutions to people who have been forcibly displaced and who remain in vulnerable situations worldwide. As opportunities for durable solutions—resettlement to a safe third country, local integration in the country of first asylum, or voluntary repatriation to a refugee's origin country—remain limited, the search for more effective policies to address protection challenges is more critical than ever.

Increasing the meaningful participation of refugees in protection policymaking is one promising approach to improving the effectiveness of policies and responses. By engaging affected communities consistently at the policy design and implementation stages, refugee participation initiatives can lead to policies that better reflect the needs and priorities of these communities and eventually to improved protection outcomes. But to maximize these benefits, more attention needs to be paid to understanding engagement initiatives' goals and theories of change—how interventions are supposed to achieve their goals—and to gathering evidence and documenting their effectiveness in reaching these objectives.

Global actors have engaged individual refugees, refugee leaders, and refugee-led organizations and networks since the 2000s, but these efforts have been uneven.<sup>1</sup> For example, while some countries such as Canada, the United States, and Germany now include refugee advisors in their delegations to UNHCR meetings, others are still reluctant to embrace such practices. Since the mid-2010s, refugee-led organizations, refugee advocates, and their supporters have increased their push for refugees to play a greater role in national and international policy conversations, culminating in the acknowledgment of refugee participation as an important principle of policymaking in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR).<sup>2</sup> By doing so, the GCR created a foundation on which interest in refugee participation among global actors and further advocacy can build.

### BOX 1 Defining Meaningful Participation

Although the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) clearly states the importance of meaningful refugee participation, it does not provide a definition of what this looks like in practice. Key stakeholders working on this issue (in particular, advocates) have coalesced behind the following definition put forward by the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN):

*“When refugees—regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity, and demographics—are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies), in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially.”*

This definition captures the key elements of meaningful participation: the diversity of participants, the need for sustained engagement, and support provided to participants to ensure they are well-prepared to contribute.

Source: GRN, “Meaningful Refugee Participation as Transformative Leadership: Guidelines for Concrete Action” (guidance document prepared in collaboration with Asylum Access, 2019).

Efforts to link these budding refugee participation initiatives with specific goals and motivations, however, have been limited, as have attempts to measure the extent of their influence. For instance, the GCR does not take the next step to clearly outline how refugee participation will lead to more effective responses. And limited data are being collected that could be used to track the influence of refugee participation or to evaluate the effectiveness of the policies and programs refugees help shape.

This report examines a wide range of global, national, and local initiatives that engage refugees in decision-making processes and responses in order to provide a foundation for thoughtful design, implementation, and monitoring of meaningful refugee participation in policymaking. By outlining how these initiatives can

1 James Milner, Mustafa Alio, and Rez Gardi, “Meaningful Refugee Participation: An Emerging Norm in the Global Refugee Regime,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 565–93.

2 Paragraph 34 of the Global Compact on Refugees states: “Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist. Relevant actors will, wherever possible, continue to develop and support consultative processes that enable refugees and host community members to assist in designing appropriate, accessible, and inclusive responses.” See United Nations, “Global Compact on Refugees,” December 2018.

affect change and how progress should be evaluated, this study aims to help actors target their efforts to go beyond tokenistic and inconsistent practices that further marginalize refugees from decisions on issues that concern them. While this report specifically focuses on refugee participation initiatives, there is much to learn from other areas where the participation of affected people in decision-making is more robust, including women, persons with disabilities, and Indigenous communities.

This report begins by identifying what motivates, or could motivate, actors to implement refugee participation initiatives. It then outlines the different types of refugee participation initiatives, the mechanisms through which they are expected to improve policies, and their limitations. It goes on to examine the factors that affect refugees' ability to influence policymaking. Based on this analysis, the study constructs a preliminary theory of change and a set of indicators to measure the influence of refugee participation on policy effectiveness. The report concludes by offering a set of recommendations to states, UNHCR, and humanitarian organizations that could help them develop clear theories of change, document processes, and overcome barriers to participation and influence.<sup>3</sup>

## 2 Motivations for Meaningful Refugee Participation

Calls for meaningful refugee participation often frame this engagement as a moral imperative—that those who have been forcibly displaced should be involved in decisions that affect them, as reflected in the slogan “Nothing about us, without us.”<sup>4</sup> Particularly because refugees generally lack democratic representation in national and global processes, other forms of participation are deemed critical to ensuring that refugees are active partners in forced displacement responses rather than simply the objects of policy and programming. The moral argument has helped pave the way for more refugee participation in some fora and has been a powerful advocacy tool to convince some actors of its necessity. However, the number of stakeholders moved to prioritize meaningful participation has not been enough to build a globally accepted norm and implemented practice. Furthermore, opportunities for participation that are developed based on moral arguments can be uneven in quality and tokenistic, with refugees given a chance to share their stories but not to truly affect the decisions being made. By foreclosing sufficient space for influence, those in power are signaling inclusivity without actually ceding any power over policy decisions.

3 This report is largely based on an in-depth review of reports and articles focused on refugee engagement in protection policymaking, most of which were published between 2019 and 2022. The author also conducted six remote interviews in November 2022 with one government official, four members of national and global refugee-led networks, and one representative of the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN). In addition, the author gathered input from a September 2022 advocacy training program and an October 2022 roundtable discussion organized by Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT) on the meaningful participation of refugees in policymaking, in which the author participated in his individual capacity as a refugee advocate and researcher. For more information, see LERRN and R-SEAT, “From Accountability to Meaningful Participation: Refugees and the Governance of International Refugee Responses” (event report, 2022).

4 Tristan Harley and Harry Hobbs, “The Meaningful Participation of Refugees in Decision-Making Processes: Questions of Law and Policy,” *International Journal of Refugee Law* 32, no. 2 (2020): 200–26. At the global level, this culminated in the establishment of the Network for Refugee Voices in 2017 and the first Global Summit of Refugees in June 2018. See also Sana Mustafa, “Nothing About Us Without Us: Why Refugee Inclusion Is Long Overdue,” *News Deeply*, June 20, 2018.



The GCR provides an alternative to the moral frame. The compact notes that “responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.”<sup>5</sup> It does not, however, take the next step by outlining a theory of change on how refugee participation leads to more effective policies. This is the case with many refugee participation initiatives, which do not provide a clear rationale for what refugee participation is intended to achieve and how. Nevertheless, the shortcomings in existing policies and programs, as well as practices at the local level, indicate what benefits refugees’ meaningful participation can logically provide.

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At the policy and program design stage, engaging refugees can allow other stakeholders to tap into information that only refugees have access to and reveal resources, networks, and solutions that policymakers are not aware of.<sup>6</sup> These inputs can help ensure that the resulting policies and their implementation are better aligned with refugees’ preferences and needs.<sup>7</sup> When this engagement is absent, refugees may be less likely to participate in the resulting policy. For example, one of the aims of the 2016 Jordan Compact was to increase access to job opportunities for Syrian refugees in Jordan within designated economic zones and industrial parks. The relatively low uptake of these jobs in the seven years since the agreement was signed can be partly attributed to the lack of consultation with refugees. When negotiating the compact, policymakers did not consider that these jobs might be undesirable for refugees because the wages were lower than what refugees can earn in the informal sector, that working conditions and the distance from where many refugees live could further weaken interest, and that refugees might be reluctant to tie themselves to specific employers.<sup>8</sup>

At the policy implementation stage, meaningful engagement can help foster a sense of ownership, trust, and acceptance among refugees of the policies and programs implemented by host states, UNHCR, and other entities.<sup>9</sup> If refugees are not involved in policy development and implementation, they may consider decisions illegitimate or regard them with mistrust, and this can result in protest or disengagement from policymakers and authorities. For example, during Rwanda’s Great Lakes refugee crisis in 1994, policymakers may have been able to prevent some Rwandan refugees from entering Congolese territory by doing more to engage them in consultations.<sup>10</sup> In other cases, mistrust of state authorities may lead refugees to avoid engaging with policies or initiatives (such as registration schemes), even if this means they live more

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5 United Nations, “Global Compact on Refugees,” Paragraph 34.

6 See, for instance, Will Jones, “Refugee Voices” (World Refugee Council Research Paper No. 8, Center for International Governance Innovation, Waterloo, ON, February 2019).

7 This point reflects the argument, often made by advocates, that refugees are experts due to their lived experience and know firsthand the needs and interests of their communities. See Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), “Meaningful Refugee Participation as Transformative Leadership: Guidelines for Concrete Action” (guidance document prepared in collaboration with Asylum Access, 2019), 23.

8 For an in-depth analysis of the Jordan Compact, see Veronique Barbelet, Jessica Hagen-Zanker, and Dina Mansour-Ille, “The Jordan Compact: Lessons Learnt and Implications for Future Refugee Compacts” (briefing paper, Overseas Development Institute, London, February 2018); Jones, “Refugee Voices.”

9 Amanda Klassen, “From Vulnerability to Empowerment: Critical Reflections on Canada’s Engagement with Refugee Policy,” *Laws* 11, no. 2 (March 10, 2022): 22.

10 Jones, “Refugee Voices.”

informal lives that may threaten their safety and well-being.<sup>11</sup> At the program level, not engaging with refugees during the design and implementation stages can lead some refugees to not access services for which they are eligible, particularly in communities that have had multiple failed initiatives foisted upon them.

In the longer term, refugee participation may also foster capacity building among a policy or program's participants and reduce their dependence on refugee agencies by creating a sense of shared ownership. This argument can be found in several donor and UN agencies' guidelines for participation at the local level,<sup>12</sup> and in the GCR's discussion of the importance of engaging young refugees.<sup>13</sup> The rationale is that refugees will gain skills from their participation, which will empower them to contribute to their

*Some proponents of this reasoning point to the critical work that refugee-led organizations have done during the COVID-19 pandemic to respond to the needs of other refugees when many international organizations had to stop their operations.*

communities. Eventually, UNHCR anticipates that refugees may take over the operation of some policies and programs when those cease to be run by external actors.<sup>14</sup> Some proponents of this reasoning point to the critical work that refugee-led organizations have done during the COVID-19 pandemic to respond to the needs of other refugees when many international organizations had to stop their operations.<sup>15</sup> For such efforts

to be sustained and grow over time, the emerging refugee leaders involved will need more seats at the decision-making table. The Refugee Steering Committee created to provide input to the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) offers another example of how refugee involvement in policymaking can grow overtime, moving toward a model in which refugees become co-designers on an equal basis as states, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and UNHCR (see Box 2).<sup>16</sup>

11 Jones, "Refugee Voices."

12 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations in 2006, cited in Harley and Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees."

13 The compact highlights that: "The empowerment of refugee and host community youth, building on their talent, potential and energy, supports resilience and eventual solutions. The active participation and engagement of refugee and host community youth will be supported by States and relevant stakeholders, including through projects that recognize, utilize, and develop their capacities and skills, and foster their physical and emotional well-being." See United Nations, "Global Compact on Refugees," Paragraph 77.

14 Tristan Harley, "Beyond Storytelling: Refugee Participation in Decision-Making Processes" (PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2022).

15 Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, GRN, Act Alliance, Act for Peace, and Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, "On the 'Meaningful Participation' of Refugees" (written submission for the High-Level Officials Meeting, March 2022). See also Andhira Yousif Kara, Abis Getachew, Mary Gitahi, and Uwezo Ramazani, *Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa: Community Perceptions in Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, and Tanzania* (Nairobi: Refugee-Led Research Hub, 2022).

16 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

**BOX 2****The Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement**

The Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) serve as an example of the path from exclusion to participation to, potentially, transformation. Prior to 2019, refugees had largely been excluded from global discussions on refugee resettlement. In 2019, the Refugee Advisory Group from the United Kingdom was allowed to deliver a statement as part of the ATCR agenda, calling for increased refugee engagement. In 2020, a Refugee Steering Committee was set up to liaise between the ATCR and refugee-led networks to help set the ATCR's agenda and priorities. As an advisory body, the Refugee Steering Committee can contribute to the discussion, but its role does not extend to the bilateral relationships that ultimately shape individual states' resettlement decisions. The group's ultimate goal, however, is "the establishment of a refugee co-chair for the ATCR and to move the ATCR from a tripartite model (states, NGOs, and UNHCR) to a quadripartite model, with refugees participating on an equal basis as states, NGOs, and UNHCR." While this goal has not yet been achieved, this evolution demonstrates how such a body could be a stepping-stone toward more transformative partnerships, where refugees no longer act as advisors but as co-designers. This is rooted in the rationale that, as refugees and policymakers become increasingly familiar with such processes and with each other at an individual level, this enables more equal partnerships.

Sources: James Milner, Mustafa Alio, and Rez Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation: An Emerging Norm in the Global Refugee Regime," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 565–93; Tristan Harley, "Beyond Storytelling: Refugee Participation in Decision-Making Processes" (PhD dissertation, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 2022).

States and policymakers could learn from emerging efforts at the local level to co-design responses and integrate some of these principles into policymaking processes.<sup>17</sup> When it is appropriate and politically feasible, policymakers and international organizations could transfer decision-making power and resources directly to refugee-led organizations and networks. Historical examples illustrate how refugee leadership in decisions can lead to successful policies. In the 1980s, Guatemalan refugees in Mexico set up permanent commissions and directly negotiated a bilateral agreement with the Guatemalan government in 1992. Refugee leadership had several benefits, notably the inclusion of guarantees for land reclamation that had not been secured by UNHCR.<sup>18</sup> Neither state authorities nor UNHCR had intended for the refugee groups to play a lead role in negotiations; as such, refugees likely had to dedicate significant time and mobilize resources of their own. More than 30 years later, it is clear that direct funding to refugee-led organizations and networks can help foster transformative leadership, enabling these actors to claim and negotiate power to advocate for changes in the humanitarian and protection sectors.<sup>19</sup> And in some cases, refugee-led organizations garner enough support that they become the primary designers and implementers of policies and programs. For example, Jumpstart Refugee Talent helped co-create and co-run Canada's labor mobility pathway for refugees, a world first.<sup>20</sup>

A similar shift can also occur within organizations, as has been the case with ongoing efforts to transfer power and resources to refugees in some humanitarian organizations. For example, St. Andrew's Refugee

17 See, for instance, Rebecca Bartlett, Jessica Watterson, and Jacqueline Boyle, "Co-Designing Health Interventions with Refugee Communities – A Scoping Review," Research Square, September 2021.

18 Harley, "Beyond Storytelling."

19 Kara, Getachew, Gitahi, and Ramazani, *Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa*.

20 Alec Regino, "How Jumpstart Refugee Talent Is Brining Displaced Talent to Canada," Talent Beyond Boundaries, April 26, 2023.

Services (StARS) in Cairo has built a staff team in which refugees comprise a large majority, transforming an existing organization into a refugee-led organization.<sup>21</sup> The rationale behind this change was that supporting the development of refugees as staff and leaders would be a smart investment for the organization, given refugees' firsthand knowledge of community needs and personal stake in the success of long-term responses.<sup>22</sup>

### 3 Models of Participation

Refugee participation initiatives can take various forms, with existing initiatives falling into three general categories: consultative, advisory, and professional. These models are defined by four key variables that, while broad and interconnected, create the parameters within which influence can be generated. These models and variables are presented in Table 1 and discussed in more depth throughout this section.

TABLE 1  
Models of Refugee Engagement in Policy and Program Processes

Model	Degree of Engagement	Number of Participants	Time Frame	Outsider/ Insider Status	Example
<b>Consultative model</b>	Light touch	Many	Ad hoc	Outsider	Consultations ahead of the Global Compact on Refugees and the development of the <i>Refugees Act</i> in Kenya
<b>Advisory model</b>	Deep	Few	Continuous	Outsider	UN High Commissioner for Refugees' advisory boards; refugee advisors to Canada, the United States, and Germany
<b>Professional model</b>	Deep	Few	Continuous	Insider	Appointing refugees in high-ranking positions (e.g., CEO of Asylum Access, a refugee rights advocacy organization) and hiring refugees as employees in policy and response teams

Source: Developed by the author.

21 Saint Andrew's Refugee Services, "Welcome to StARS," accessed March 2, 2023. As of 2019, more than 80 percent of StARS staff were refugees. See also Refugees Thrive International, "Refugee Leadership Brings Innovation," Medium, December 19, 2019.

22 Interview with Christopher Eades, Executive Officer at the St. Andrews Refugee Service, November 12, 2019, cited in Harley, "Beyond Storytelling."

- ▶ **Degree of engagement.** Models of engagement vary in terms of the degree of refugees' participation in the decision-making process, from light-touch engagement that involves collecting targeted, surface-level inputs to deep engagement where refugees have a hand in shaping all facets of a process. Consultations tend to be lighter touch, as refugees provide their opinions and stories at a designated point in the process. When refugees serve on advisory groups and take on professional roles, on the other hand, they are able to offer input at multiple opportunities and greater weight is generally assigned to their input.
- ▶ **Number of participants.** Opportunities for refugee participation may involve just one individual, a small group, or many participants. There is often a trade-off between the number of participants and the type of engagement that is both feasible and effective. Engagement with a large number of refugees allows for the expression of a diversity of opinions and experiences and can help ensure that a wider range of the viewpoints present within a population are represented; however, the financial costs and logistical complexities of engagement tend to rise when more participants are involved. Having fewer participants allows for more targeted engagement, builds expertise on specific issues and processes, and makes it possible to be more flexible in how each participant is engaged, but it runs the risk of lacking, or seeming to lack, adequate representativeness, and this could threaten an initiative's legitimacy. Consultations tend to engage a much larger group of participants than the advisory or professional models.
- ▶ **Time frame.** The time frame for each model is in part a product of its degree of engagement and number of participants. Deeper levels of engagement take longer than lighter-touch ones, and more participants can be accommodated for short-term activities rather than long-term initiatives. Time frames for consultations are typically short, and refugees are often engaged in a single or a few ad hoc events. On the other hand, refugees engaged in advisory boards, as advisors, or as high-ranking professionals generally interact with decisionmakers on a more ongoing basis and are able to contribute to a process at multiple points in time.
- ▶ **Outsider/insider status.** In different types of engagement, refugees may be either outsiders or insiders. Outsiders are not embedded within a process or organization, meaning that they provide external opinions and feedback at the invitation of those leading the initiative. Insiders, on the other hand, are fully embedded within the process or organization, and may even be responsible for running it. Insiders are more familiar with and often better able to work within various bureaucratic and political constraints, and they can sometimes serve as a liaison with other members of their community; however, they may themselves face certain constraints. Consultations and advisory models recruit outsiders for feedback, whereas refugees who take on professional roles within an organization become insiders.

## A. *The Consultative Model*

Under the consultative model, a large number of refugee participants play a light-touch role in decision-making processes. Refugees are typically invited to share their stories and opinions in public fora, meetings, events, roundtables, and hearings organized on an ad hoc basis by states, UNHCR, and other humanitarian

organizations. At the local and national levels, consultations are typically open to all (or many) refugees, elected or selected representatives of refugee communities, and/or refugee-led organizations.

Consultations are often used to gain input from a range of refugee stakeholders, aiming to cast a wide net and collect a diversity of opinions and experiences. Because of their short-term and ad hoc nature, consultations offer refugees a limited role in decision-making, with contributions from the larger group of consultees aggregated. While this reduces the potency of any one individual's input, it can help identify trends and crosscutting needs as well as provide important perspectives from people outside of the process or policy sphere. Consultations also tend not to require refugees to make significant investments of time, which can make them accessible to more participants; however, this means refugees have relatively little time to gain familiarity with the process and with the decisionmakers involved. If this hinders the development among decisionmakers of an appreciation for refugees' expertise and opinions, the decisionmakers may be less likely to meaningfully take the results of the consultations into account when shaping policy.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, participants may not have time to build trust in the decisionmakers, potentially leading some refugees to disengage from the resulting policy or program.

*Consultations have long been used in refugee responses at the local level to inform policy and programming, helping identify needs on the ground and troubleshoot challenges.*

Consultations have long been used in refugee responses at the local level to inform policy and programming, helping identify needs on the ground and troubleshoot challenges in humanitarian and development programs. These often take the form of participatory assessments, community dialogues, surveys, and other community-based approaches.<sup>24</sup> While less common, consultations have also taken place at the national level to inform broader legislation or policy. This was done in Kenya, for example, when developing the country's refugee law (see Box 3).

At the global level, a smaller number of refugee representatives and networks have been invited to consultations that occur over longer periods of time. Starting with the negotiations over the GCR, stakeholders have held ad hoc consultations with refugees and refugee-led organizations, and refugee-led networks have mobilized to gather and present input from refugees around the world. While it is difficult to directly link these consultations to specific outcomes, it is likely that this mobilization, combined with the support of allies such as Canada, may have led to the inclusion of strong language highlighting the benefits of refugee participation in the GCR's "zero draft," which remains relatively unchanged in the final text.<sup>25</sup>

The GCR set a normative goal in favor of consultation and served as a launchpad for subsequent consultations ahead of the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). UNHCR in particular took several steps to consult refugees from different regions and with different profiles. These included: inviting refugee-led

23 Haqqi Bahram, "Between Tokenism and Self-Representation: Refugee-Led Advocacy and Inclusion in International Refugee Policy" (working paper 2020/58, RESPOND, July 29, 2020).

24 Bahram, "Between Tokenism and Self-Representation." See also UNHCR, *The UNHCR Tool for Participatory Assessment in Operations* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2006); UNHCR, "A Community-Based Approach in UNHCR Operations" (UNHCR, Geneva, January 2008).

25 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation." This opinion is also shared by Network for Refugee Voice (NRV) participants cited in Bahram, "Between Tokenism and Self-Representation."

networks to preparatory workshops at UNHCR headquarters in Geneva, as well as elsewhere in Europe and in East Africa and the Middle East; supporting national and local consultations with refugees and refugee-led organizations; and facilitating 70 refugee participants' attendance at GRF discussions as "speakers and presenters, pledge-makers, members of state and multistakeholder delegations, as well as representatives of academia and sports entities."<sup>26</sup>

The results of these initiatives, particularly at the global level, have been mixed. The GCR and GRF allowed for greater discussions of and advocacy for refugee inclusion. However, they lacked binding commitments to guide refugee participation in policymaking and indicators by which to measure progress.<sup>27</sup> In addition, advocates argue that the limited number of refugees attending the 2019 GRF (70 out of 3,000 participants) meant that participation was largely symbolic and tokenistic.<sup>28</sup> While the inclusion of this small number of refugee participants could be a good starting point to meaningfully engage refugees in global processes, it is important to monitor whether the proportion of refugees to total participants increases at the 2023 GRF and subsequent events.

The challenges to refugee participation in global fora reflect the broader challenges in designing and implementing meaningful consultations. First, the manner and content of approved refugee contributions often involve refugees acting as storytellers at events, which can be traumatizing and come with no guarantee that inputs will be taken into account and acted on.<sup>29</sup> Not only does this raise ethical concerns, but it can also create resentment among participants who want to actively contribute to broader policy discussions. This is evident at the local level, where organizations with stated refugee participation goals and policies—typically in support of refugee inclusion—implement practices that restrict the nature or scope of engagement, according to the participants.<sup>30</sup> Second, consultation participants frequently argue that decisions were already made before their engagement began, or that they were involved too late into the process to shape its outcomes and, thus, that their participation was purely tokenistic. Some representatives of refugee communities also note that the light-touch nature of consultations can allow states and organizations to use them to gain moral legitimacy; consultations can be easily organized and generate positive publicity, but the organizers have no binding responsibility to report on the consultations' outcomes or how they have influenced policies and responses. Finally, because consultations are often one-off, participants rarely receive follow-up information, which devalues their experience with the consultation process.

26 UNHCR, "Refugee Engagement and Participation in the Global Refugee Forum," accessed May 10, 2023.

27 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

28 Mustafa Alio and Rez Gardi, "End the Tokenism. Give Refugees a Voice on Our Own Futures," *The New Humanitarian*, December 15, 2021.

29 Alio and Gardi, "End the Tokenism"; Oliver Lough et al., "Participation and Inclusion in the Rohingya Refugee Response in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh: 'We Never Speak First'" (Humanitarian Policy Group working paper, Overseas Development Institute, London, October 2021).

30 Midori Tijen Kaga, "Can Refugees Speak? Challenging Power and Creating Space in the Humanitarian System for Refugee Agency and Voice" (PhD dissertation, University of Ottawa, 2021).

**BOX 3****Refugee Consultations during the Development of Kenya's *Refugees Act***

Throughout the development of the 2021 *Refugees Act*, Kenya increased the engagement of refugees in the policy process, largely providing them with a consultative role. Kenyan law requires public participation in the policymaking process, and this provision extends to refugees, as was confirmed in 2020 by a High Court decision. After the initial version of the *Refugees Bill* was vetoed by the president in 2016 for lacking public consultation, policymakers took two main steps to consult refugees. First, members of the Kenyan Parliament visited major refugee camps to gather informal input from refugees. Second, once the bill was introduced, the Departmental Committee on Administration and National Security organized public participation fora in six locations where refugees live and invited refugees to submit memoranda on the bill through newspaper advisements. Consultations were supported by training sessions organized by national and international organizations.

Like the GCR process, results appear to be mixed. Refugee concerns, such as how refugees and host communities could better share resources, were included in the updated *Refugees Bill* and members of parliament gained greater awareness of refugee affairs. However, some refugees involved in the process described it as largely tokenistic and frustrating. They felt that they were included for the sake of inclusivity, that there was no mechanism through which their opinions could be meaningfully considered, and that authorities had already made their decisions. These dynamics can also be seen in the Departmental Committee's response to a written memorandum submitted by a group of refugees, which described the memo as "relevant and useful in review of the bill" but provided no additional details on how the contribution would be used to shape the final policy.

This case, like the GCR, illustrates how consultative activities at the lower levels of a process can feed into decision-making, but those decisions remain the responsibility of authorities and the extent of refugees' influence may not be clear.

Source: Lilian Obiye, "Hear My Voice: Refugees' Participation in Kenyan Policy Development," *Forced Migration Review* 70 (September 2022).

## **B. *The Advisory Model***

Under the advisory model, a selected number of refugees play a sustained role in a decision-making process. Participants may be serving in an individual capacity or as representatives of refugee networks and/or refugee-led organizations. These advisors or advisory boards provide direct input that informs the decisions of policymakers; however, because the refugee advisors remain outsiders, they can bring a critical lens to their input and do not necessarily face institutional constraints. While refugees are not the final decisionmakers, there is an expectation that they will have influence in the decision-making process thanks to their sustained, long-term engagement and increased familiarity with the process and the other stakeholders involved.

At the local level, advisory bodies can directly represent displaced populations and serve as liaisons between their communities and policymakers. Communities are also more able to directly select their representatives because of how close to the ground these bodies are. This has been the case in Brazil, for example, where some municipal boards and regional advisory boards have been established to help



develop plans and policies responding to the needs of displaced populations.<sup>31</sup> However, these usually deal with locality-specific issues and do not necessarily engage with larger policy questions, which are decided at the national level. Given the growing role of cities as actors in the migration and refugee policy space at the global level, however, it is possible that refugee participation in local advisory positions could also have an effect at the global level.

Several international organizations, humanitarian organizations, and think tanks have also set up advisory boards for specific programs, often including or entirely comprised of refugee participants.<sup>32</sup> UNHCR, for example, has begun to establish its own refugee advisory groups at the national level. The first was established by UNHCR Bulgaria in 2020, with the intention of influencing policies and programs targeting protection beneficiaries as well as serving as a liaison with refugee communities.<sup>33</sup> Likewise, UNHCR Ireland established an advisory board in 2022 to influence policy debates, identify policy and practical barriers refugees face to exercising their rights, and raise awareness.<sup>34</sup>

At the global policy level, a few countries have started including refugee advisors in their delegations to global refugee fora. Canada has played an influential role by being the first country to do so at GCR-related meetings in 2019. The benefits of including a refugee advisor were that it “enhanced Canada’s moral and expert authority during the meeting, brought new perspectives to the delegation’s work, and facilitated new connections for the delegations that were not otherwise possible.”<sup>35</sup> Based on this experience, Canada committed to including a refugee advisor in future delegations and, in 2020, established the Refugee Advisory Network of Canada (RAN Canada).<sup>36</sup> The network submits recommendations to the Canadian government to help shape its priorities in global policy discussions and plays an active role in supporting individual refugee advisors.<sup>37</sup> This approach has been replicated by the United States and Germany, who, in addition to Canada, included refugee advisors in their delegations to the virtual 2021 High-Level Officials Meeting, organized by UNHCR to discuss the building of a long-term framework for the engagement of states and other actors in refugee situations.<sup>38</sup> In recent years, UNHCR has also taken steps to establish its own advisory board comprised of refugee-led organizations (see Box 4).

Refugees engaged in advisory boards are typically highly skilled, well connected, and, at the global level, often based in the Global North. In some cases, refugees are selected to be on an advisory board through a competitive process and must demonstrate knowledge and experience. This is the case with, for example, the United States Refugee Advisory Board,<sup>39</sup> UNHCR Ireland’s Advisory Board, and the European Union’s

31 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, “Meaningful Refugee Participation.” Sao Paulo, Brazil, for example, has its own elected Municipal Council for Immigrants, comprised of representatives of different migrant communities and with the mandate to provide input on the implementation of the Municipal Policy Plan for Refugees and Migrants. See Cidade de São Paulo Direitos Humanos e Cidadania, “Conselho Municipal de Imigrantes – (CMI),” accessed January 26, 2023; Global Compact on Refugees, “How the City of Sao Paulo Is Placing Refugee Perspectives at the Heart of Its Policy,” updated October 29, 2020.

32 For instance, see Alisa B. Miller et al., “Developing Advisory Boards within Community-Based Participatory Approaches to Improve Mental Health among Refugee Communities,” *Progress in Community Health Partnerships: Research, Education, and Action* 15, no. 1 (2021): 107–16. For instance, the advisory board created by the Migration Policy Institute and Robert Bosch Stiftung for the Beyond Territorial Asylum Initiative, the joint project that this report was developed as part of, includes refugee members.

33 UNHCR Bulgaria, “UNHCR Bulgaria Establishes First Refugee Advisory Board,” European Website on Integration, October 6, 2020.

34 UNHCR Ireland, “UNHCR Announces the Formation of the Irish Refugee Advisory Board” (press release, March 15, 2022).

35 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, “Meaningful Refugee Participation.”

36 For more information, see the Refugee Advisory Network of Canada, “Refugee Advisory Network of Canada,” updated March 2022.

37 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, “Meaningful Refugee Participation.”

38 Alio and Gardi, “End the Tokenism.”

39 For more information, see Refugee Congress, “The United States Refugee Advisory Board,” accessed March 2, 2023.

Expert Group on the Views of Migrants in the Field of Migration, Asylum, and Integration.<sup>40</sup> In other cases, refugees are identified through existing networks and invited to participate. While this approach can help identify the right participants in certain cases, especially when an advisory board is just starting out, it runs the risk of excluding the voices of less well-connected, more vulnerable refugees who may be most directly affected by the policies being discussed (see Section 4.B.).

Finally, it is difficult to assess the extent to which the establishment of refugee advisory boards translates to policy influence. The recency of many of these initiatives, combined with a lack of documentation about the specific recommendations they make and the policies that may ensue, preclude the evaluation of influence. In addition, the lack of oversight mechanisms means that this information is not necessarily being produced. As such, it is unclear to what extent refugee advisory boards' advice is being taken up, and in some cases it may ultimately depend on the influence of individual refugees and allies who push for influence.<sup>41</sup>

#### BOX 4

#### UNHCR Advisory Board to the Task Team on Meaningful Engagement and Partnership with Organizations Led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless People

As UNHCR has built out its engagement with refugee-led organizations, it created a specific, cross-divisional task team to coordinate, align, and support these efforts. When the task team was established, it created an interim advisory group composed of displaced and stateless persons to help advise and develop some of the team's activities and deliverables. The group's designation as "interim" reflected the rapid timeline on which the group was established, which foreclosed a competitive, representative selection process. The group was voluntary in nature, with no funding allocated to compensate participants for the time and effort they put into the work. One of the interim advisory group's primary contributions was the co-design of a transparent selection process for its successor: a representative and inclusive advisory board reflecting the diverse experiences of displaced and stateless communities. The board was launched in December 2022.

The advisory board's objectives cover a variety of types of influence. These include *defining* guiding principles, *supporting* UNHCR's follow-up on Global Refugee Forum (GRF) pledges, *identifying* gaps and best practices, and *contributing* to and *supporting* refugee participants and refugee-led organization capacity building. These objectives align with continuous, deep engagement of outsiders to the organization, and they should allow board members to draw on their experiences and expertise while bringing a different perspective. As the board's work continues, all parties involved—including advisory group members and their counterparts at UNHCR—should take the opportunity to document their activities and influence on policy decisions, as well as to note challenges and obstacles faced in the process.

Source: UNHCR, "UNHCR's Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Persons of Concern-Led Organizations" (briefing note, UNHCR, Geneva, January 2023).

40 This European Union group advises the European Commission on strategy and policy initiatives at the bloc level, although it does not necessarily advise on European engagement with global processes. See European Commission, "Expert Group on the Views of Migrants in the Field of Migration, Asylum and Integration (E03734)," Register of Commission Expert Groups and Other Similar Entities, updated January 19, 2023. This group was preceded by the European Migrant Advisory Board, launched in 2018. See Lea Scheurer, "European Migrant Advisory Board (EMAB)," European Commission, September 10, 2018.

41 Global Refugee Youth Network (GRYN) and World University Service of Canada (WUSC), *Time to Act: How to Be an Ally to Young Refugees* (N.p.: GRYN and WUSC, 2021); GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation"; Lough et al., "Participation and Inclusion in the Rohingya Refugee Response."

## C. *The Professional Model*

Under the professional model, organizations hire people with lived experience of displacement for positions with varying levels of responsibility. This can range from incentive workers<sup>42</sup> on the ground in the countries where organizations work and volunteers with UN agencies to senior leadership positions. Relatively few refugees are involved in this model, compared to consultation and advisory opportunities, but their engagement is the deepest. Refugees in these positions are often more able to have an influence on policy and institutional decisions because their expertise has been legitimized by their professional position, and because they gain skills, insider knowledge, and familiarity through sustained inclusion.

Individuals with forced displacement experience who are hired or appointed to senior positions are the most prominent examples of this model. For example, Ahmed Hussen, Canada's former minister of immigration, refugees, and citizenship, came to Canada as a refugee from Somalia.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, U.S. Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas was a refugee from Cuba.<sup>44</sup> And Asylum Access (an international organization that supports refugee-led initiatives globally) selected as its CEO Sana Ali Mustafa, a human rights defender who was displaced from Syria, as part of the organization's commitment to reflect "refugee leadership [...] at all levels."<sup>45</sup> Refugee professionals in leadership positions are expected to have the moral authority and personal understanding to speak on issues of displacement, set appropriate objectives, and where relevant, convince donors more effectively of a cause than people who have not experienced displacement.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, particularly for those in government, they can shed light on constraints that make changing policy difficult, for example legislative or bureaucratic limitations.

Refugee leadership and influence at such senior levels has historical precedent, especially in the development of early refugee law and policy.<sup>47</sup> Refugees or former refugees served in senior leadership positions at the League of Nations and UNHCR, such as the first UN High Commissioner for Refugees Gerrit Jan van Heuven Goedhart, directly influencing the development of refugee policy and law between 1921 and 1955.<sup>48</sup> As the global community debates who should serve as high commissioner following Filippo Grandi's term, organizations such as Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT) are advocating for the selection of a candidate with lived experience of displacement, arguing that this will help elevate

42 Incentive workers are refugees who support and assist UNHCR and implementing partners for compensation that is often lower than the prevailing minimum or market wage. See Helen Morris and Frances Voon, "Which Side Are You On? Discussion Paper on UNHCR's Policy and Practice of Incentive Payments to Refugees" (Policy Development and Evaluation Service, UNHCR, Geneva, December 2014).

43 Catherine Porter, "In Canada, an Immigration Minister Who Himself Is a Refugee," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2017.

44 Nick Miroff and Maria Sacchetti, "Biden Picks Alejandro Mayorkas, a Son of Jewish Cuban Refugees, to Lead the Department of Homeland Security," *The Washington Post*, November 23, 2020.

45 See Asylum Access, "Introducing Our New CEO" (news release, July 19, 2022). Asylum Access also announced that it would fill 50 percent of staff positions with members of the refugee community. See Asylum Access, "Asylum Access Global Refugee Forum Pledges" (2019), cited in Harley, "Beyond Storytelling."

46 This point is often used to illustrate why refugees should occupy senior leadership positions. See, for example, GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

47 The shift toward decreased refugee participation in the 1990s is explained in the literature by the "changing nature and professionalization of humanitarian responses in the 1990s and more restrictive policy approaches by refugee-hosting states," which furthered patterns of paternalism; see Milner, Alio, and Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

48 Harley, "Beyond Storytelling."

refugee concerns to the highest level and that candidates with a displacement background will have a high level of personal commitment to finding effective solutions.<sup>49</sup>

But organizational leadership is not the only level where the professional model of refugee participation plays out. Employing refugees throughout an organization places them at multiple points in decision-making and implementation processes. In these positions, refugee professionals can bring unique expertise and knowledge, and their involvement may lead affected communities to view programming as more legitimate. Many organizations, institutions, and governments have in recent years put a significant amount of work into enhancing their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. And in higher-income countries, substantial guidance has been issued to raise awareness in the private sector of the benefits of and best practices for hiring and retaining refugee employees.<sup>50</sup> But these two streams of work have not intersected in a systematic way. For example, having a forced displacement background does not appear in many government DEI policies.

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There are, however, barriers to the employment of refugees, often due to national restrictions on labor market access for refugees or foreigners. National governments in destination countries are often only allowed to hire citizens, particularly for senior-level positions,<sup>51</sup> and labor market restrictions in host countries foreclose positions in many relevant sectors to refugees. UNHCR does not hire many refugees in senior positions, partly because internal regulations related to conflicts of interest may discourage them from hiring refugees with personal relationships to members of the communities with which UNHCR works.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, UNHCR's Age, Gender, and Diversity Policy makes no mention of hiring refugees and other people with a forced displacement background.<sup>53</sup> Instead, the organization has launched volunteer positions for refugees (see Box 5). This approach may allow refugees to build their careers and take steps toward senior leadership positions where they can influence policies in the future, though UNHCR does not mention this as an explicit objective in documents about the volunteer initiative.

49 Megha Kaveri, "Call for Next Head of UN Refugee Agency to Have Lived Experience as a Refugee," *The New Humanitarian*, June 27, 2022. Similar calls for representation include having UNHCR's governing body, the Executive Committee, be 50 percent comprised of refugees. See Bahati Kanyamanza and Emily Arnold-Fernandez, "Meaningful Representation Starts at the Top: Refugees on UNHCR's ExCom," *Forced Migration Review* 70 (September 2022).

50 See, for example, Tent Partnership for Refugees and Friendly Nation Initiative, *Australian Employer's Guide to Hiring Refugees* (Kingston, Australia: Migration Council Australia, 2019); Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and UNHCR, *Engaging with Employers in the Hiring of Refugees: A 10-Point Multi-Stakeholder Action Plan for Employers, Refugees, Governments and Civil Society* (Paris and Geneva: OECD Publishing and UNHCR, 2018).

51 While the Refugee Convention suggests that states should facilitate access to nationality for refugees where possible, this is often not available. Canada and the United States are exceptional in this regard, as their legislative frameworks provide individuals with refugee status quicker access to long-term residency and, eventually, naturalization than many other groups of noncitizens. In Germany, which has relatively stricter naturalization laws, there is some discussion of loosening these requirements, including for refugees. Minister of State Reem Alabali-Radovan, who came to Germany as a refugee and serves as the Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees, and Integration, is one of the officials working on this change.

52 Harley, "Beyond Storytelling."

53 UNHCR, *UNHCR Policy on Age, Gender and Diversity* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2018).

## BOX 5 Refugees and the UN Volunteers Program

Through the UN Volunteers (UNV) program, the United Nations partners volunteers with different UN entities and offices to support their development, humanitarian, and other activities. In 2019, following the adoption of the GCR, UNHCR launched an initiative to establish a special program for volunteers who have refugee status. This initiative has the stated goal of changing “perceptions of refugees as passive recipients of assistance, to one where refugees are active agents of change,” in addition to providing skill-development and income-generating opportunities. The agency also notes that UNHCR operations will be enhanced by refugee volunteers’ “expertise, skills, and unique insights.” Refugee UN Volunteers receive the same compensation as National UN Volunteers (another category of participants within the UNV program, comprising nationals of the country in which they are volunteering); however, refugees are only allowed to engage in tasks that cannot be done by host-country nationals. At the global level, UNHCR nominated a Refugee UN Volunteer to support its work on global engagement with refugee-led organizations and refugees.

The limited UNHCR reports available on refugees’ participation in the UNV program claim that the initiative has successfully led to longer-term opportunities for refugees. However, no evidence is publicly available on the extent to which Refugee UN Volunteers have had an influence on decision-making at UNHCR. This may be because UN Volunteers tend to be more junior and, therefore, often lack the experience and legitimacy to influence processes and responses. On an anecdotal level, some former UN Volunteers in national offices have described in informal discussions how they felt more excluded from decision-making processes than they had expected and like they had few opportunities to contribute to internal discussions.

Sources: UN Volunteers, “Added Value of UNV, UN Volunteers and Volunteerism,” updated February 21, 2020; UN Volunteers, “Volunteering as a Pathway for Refugees to Transition from Education to Employment” (new release, December 18, 2019); UN Volunteers, *Conditions of Service for Refugee UN Volunteer Assignments* (Bonn, Germany: UN Volunteers, 2020); UN Volunteers, “Refugee UN Volunteer Special Initiative” (program description, October 2022); UNHCR, “UNHCR’s Task Team on Engagement.”

## 4 Factors that Shape Refugees’ Ability to Influence Policy

Several factors condition refugees’ access to decision-making processes and their ability to influence decisions once involved. These factors determine not only the ability of each participation model to succeed, but also which models are feasible in different circumstances.

### A. *Political Space for Participation*

The legal and political environment in which refugees participate in policymaking affects refugees’ ability to meaningfully influence policies. While countries with policy frameworks that provide refugees with more flexibility and freedom can offer space for robust participation, more restrictive political environments may foreclose this space entirely.<sup>54</sup> For example, refugee-led organizations are more prevalent and have greater access to decision-making processes in Uganda than in Tanzania, which respectively have notably

54 GRN, European Coalition of Migrants and Refugees (EU-COMAR), and New Women Connectors (NWC), “Beyond Consultation: Unpacking the Most Essential Components of Meaningful Participation by Refugee Leaders” (reflection paper, Oxfam International, Oxford, March 31, 2022).

more flexible and more restrictive policies toward refugees.<sup>55</sup> Political spaces also tend to be more open to refugees in higher-income resettlement and destination countries, which often have more robust protections for the right to assembly. Finally, national policy frameworks around refugees' access to nationality will dictate the extent to which the most influential positions in government are open to people who have experienced displacement.

The amount of space for refugee participation also varies depending on the policy area. Refugee participation is relatively common in discussions surrounding on-the-ground policies and programming—in particular, on protection policies and humanitarian and development responses—and increasingly in conversations around resettlement and complementary pathways. On the other hand, policy areas that are politically sensitive or that touch on issues of security and sovereignty generally are not open to meaningful engagement. For example, instances of refugee participation in return programs are rare, with the most recent examples dating to the 1990s.<sup>56</sup> There are also few instances of displaced persons contributing to policy decisions related to asylum and refugee status determination processes, in part due to their sensitivity and the potential for conflicts of interest. UNHCR's guidance in Rwanda, for example, considers work related to resettlement and refugee status determination unsuitable for refugees, due to potential conflicts of interest.<sup>57</sup>

Even when states make space for refugee participation, political constraints may limit or raise questions regarding the legitimacy of the process or refugee representatives. First, states may simultaneously want to reap the reputational benefits of refugee participation or secure refugees' buy-in to a policy while also needing to respond to constituents who may not support such efforts.<sup>58</sup> In these cases,

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*Even when states make space for refugee participation, political constraints may limit or raise questions regarding the legitimacy of the process or refugee representatives.*

states may design quasi-participatory processes that foreclose actual influence, such as consultations late in the decision-making process. Second, refugees living in restrictive policy environments may self-censor when participating in global fora due to fear for their personal security and legal status.<sup>59</sup> And even if they are speaking freely, refugees may be perceived as self-censoring or, at the other end of the spectrum, presenting a government-approved line. Finally, some policymakers may enter into participatory initiatives with the view that refugees are too vulnerable and unskilled to influence important decisions that affect

55 Kara, Getachew, Gitahi, and Ramazani, *Refugee-Led Organisations in East Africa*.

56 A 2022 PhD dissertation by Tristan Harley only identified two instances of refugee participation in the development of return policies globally. First, in 1989, the South West Africa People's Organisation, recognized formally as the "authentic representative of the Namibian people," represented "the interests of Namibian refugees in Angola during the development of a tripartite arrangement with the government of Angola and UNHCR." Second, between 1987 and 1994, Guatemalan refugees managed to secure an organized and collective return by forming permanent commissions, with support from UNHCR, and entered a bilateral accord with the government of Guatemala. Since then, despite calls for refugees to be included in tripartite return agreements, "states and UNHCR have been largely resistant to the idea." See Harley, "Beyond Storytelling," 117 and 122.

57 UNHCR Rwanda, "Standard Operating Procedure for Hiring Refugees as Either Staff or Incentive Workers by UNHCR and Partners in Rwanda" (guidance document, UNHCR Rwanda, Kigali, June 22, 2017).

58 Bahram, "Between Tokenism and Self-Representation."

59 GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

their lives, often because of policies and politics that treat them as such.<sup>60</sup> Without the opportunity to become familiar and work closely with refugee representatives, these policymakers are less likely to trust refugees' contributions and more willing to discount them.

Allies—whether they are states, individuals within states, UNHCR, or other organizations—play an important role in creating political and policy space for meaningful participation and bestowing legitimacy on refugee participants. When actors create new precedents, as Canada did by including refugee advisors in its delegations to global fora, others may replicate their efforts to reap the same benefits (in this example, added “moral and expert authority”<sup>61</sup>). These precedents can also apply normative pressure on other actors. For example, as proponents of refugee participation increasingly make the case that bringing refugees' perspectives into policy discussions has practical benefits and can improve policy efficacy (in addition to having moral value), this could shift the norms around how and why refugees are included. In the professional model, where there may be limits to what topics or activities someone with displacement experience can work on due to potential conflicts of interest, lack of seniority, or nationality restrictions, having strong champions of refugee participation within the organization, especially in senior leadership positions, is often necessary to increase refugees' access to closed policy conversations.

## *B. Selection of Participants*

Some initiatives are open to a large number of refugees, but in those that involve fewer refugees, the selection of participants can be highly contentious. Selected participants may have their legitimacy questioned, which influences how seriously they are taken in policymaking spheres. For example, refugee participants have faced criticism for not being adequately representative of the wide diversity of refugee experiences, which has led them to feel as though they were not being taken seriously.<sup>62</sup>

At the same time, policymakers tend to expect refugee participants to conform to certain behavioral norms at global fora, such as being able to speak, advocate, and network in the manner senior officials are used to. Groups that are more organized and better conform to these expectations often appear more familiar to stakeholders and are therefore perceived as more legitimate.<sup>63</sup> As a result, refugees who participate in global processes are often younger English speakers, based in the Global North, tech savvy, and have a reliable legal status and access to national and global networks. Structural barriers that disproportionately affect women and minorities, such as those related to access to education and financial resources, cultural stereotypes, self-censorship, and safety concerns, make it more difficult for some refugees to gain access to, safely participate, and be considered legitimate in decision-making spaces at the global, national, and local levels.<sup>64</sup>

This presents a catch-22: Selection of refugee participants cannot necessarily account for all refugee experiences, especially when participants need to meet specific criteria to be taken seriously. But when

60 Shaza Alrihawi et al., “Power & the Margins: The State of Refugee Participation” (Recommendations for the 2021 UNHCR High-Level Officials Meeting, GRN, 2022).

61 Milner, Alio, and Gardi, “Meaningful Refugee Participation.”

62 Bahram, “Between Tokenism and Self-Representation.”

63 Jones, “Refugee Voices.”

64 Klassen, “From Vulnerability to Empowerment.”

the selected participants get to these fora, their legitimacy is questioned because they are not representative of the broader refugee population. In essence, they are asked to appear simultaneously as insiders and outsiders. The difficulty of reconciling these competing demands can lead to disengagement by policymakers and refugees alike. When faced with a diversity of refugee experiences and opinions, states and organizations might choose to ignore refugee participation overall, or only engage certain refugees who are able to fit the narrative they seek to promote. And refugees, facing these no-win scenarios despite considerable effort on their part, may experience burnout and cease their participation, taking with them the experience and knowledge they had gained.

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*The difficulty of reconciling these competing demands can lead to disengagement by policymakers and refugees alike.*

An additional challenge is that salient information regarding policy processes is often closely held by state authorities and UNHCR officials, and typically does not flow to refugees. This can include general information, such as what upcoming participation opportunities exist, when specific decisions will be made, and who the key policymakers are, as well as the very knowledge and evidence being evaluated in the policy discussion. Without this information, refugee participants arrive unprepared, unable to meaningfully engage in ongoing discussions or to adequately strategize on how best to have influence.<sup>65</sup>

Some efforts have begun to address these issues, including through greater information-sharing and training for refugee participants. Preparatory meetings for global processes and bespoke side events have helped refugee participants better prepare and offered opportunities for informal engagement and planning. Networks can also play a role in disseminating information to refugee-led organizations and refugees, and in raising up recommendations that originate in affected communities. And some initiatives have emerged to train refugee participants on how to effectively participate in these fora, such as R-SEAT's Geneva Advocacy Training Program and the planned Mentorship Program for Refugee Leaders in Canada.<sup>66</sup> Still, policymakers should also seriously consider who they view as legitimate to speak on behalf of other refugees, in what capacity, and who is left out and why.

## C. Resources

A common critique of consultations and advisory groups is that refugees who participate are often not compensated for their time and input.<sup>67</sup> For many refugees, the time involved in preparing for and attending these fora is time not spent working paid jobs. This stands in contrast to their counterparts in government and international agencies, for whom participating in these fora is part of their jobs. If compensation is not offered to refugee participants, only those who are wealthier and able to take time off and those who work with well-funded organizations that cover the costs of their participation can attend and contribute, limiting the diversity of participants. Ongoing compensation could also allow refugees to engage in longer-term follow-up on recommendations from these fora and in efforts to ensure accountability for

<sup>65</sup> GRN, EU-COMAR, and NWC, "Beyond Consultation."

<sup>66</sup> For more information, see LERRN, "What We Do," Carleton University, accessed March 2, 2023.

<sup>67</sup> Bahram, "Between Tokenism and Self-Representation."



decisions.<sup>68</sup> Participation could also be made more accessible if organizers of these fora were to allocate specific pots of funding to cover the logistical costs of refugees' participation (including transportation and accommodation), as well as adequate compensation for their time and contributions.

## 5 Evaluating Refugee Participation

Even when refugee participation does occur, it can be difficult to evaluate its effectiveness in improving policy and programming. Doing so requires both a clear understanding of how refugees' involvement is intended to have this effect and measurable benchmarks for success. While some ongoing and recently completed initiatives have publicly stated their motivations, it is unclear whether their designers have taken the critical next step to develop a detailed understanding of how the program is going to achieve those goals and to integrate it into the program's design. This also makes it difficult to track progress toward these goals, as there is no roadmap to gauge program performance against. At the global level, for example, the first GCR indicator report does not include indicators related to refugee participation or that could be used to trace specific pledges influenced by refugee participants.<sup>69</sup>

Moving forward, if stakeholders who engage refugees and refugee-led organizations develop and communicate the theories of change behind their initiatives, they will be able to collectively monitor progress toward these targets and shift their activities based on lessons learned during implementation. The first step, developing a clear theory of change, allows stakeholders to think through and clearly articulate their intended impact—in this case, to make refugee-focused policies and responses more effective by better targeting them to affected communities' needs and providing these communities with greater ownership over decisions that affect them. Stakeholders then work backward to identify what specific activities will lead to concrete outputs, and then outcomes, that can achieve these targets. But developing and implementing theories of change can be difficult, given the competing priorities and perspectives of different stakeholders as well as the relative complexity of the process itself. By starting small with specific, targeted objectives, decisionmakers could gather the necessary buy-in.

Based on the analysis this report has presented thus far, Table 2 suggests a preliminary, illustrative framework theory of change that can serve as the basis for more concrete, process- and program-specific models. These specific theories of change should be shared with, if not co-developed by, refugee organizations and networks to foster genuine mutual ownership and accountability.

68 GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation"; GRN, EU-COMAR, and NWC, "Beyond Consultation."

69 UNHCR, *Global Compact on Refugees Indicator Report* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2021). Four countries made participation-related pledges: Canada (December 2019), Germany (December 2019), the United States (December 2021), and Portugal (December 2021). The pledges from Germany and Portugal focus on participation at the national and local levels, while those from Canada and the United States focus on global participation. Likewise, in the 2006 UNHCR *Practical Guide to the Systematic Use of Standards and Indicators in Operations*, indicators on refugee participation only focus on refugees' participation in assessments (Indicator 11) and the participation of women in food distribution committees (Indicator 30). See UNHCR Division of Operational Services, *Practical Guide to the Systematic Use of Standards and Indicators in Operations* (Geneva: UNHCR, 2006).

TABLE 2

**Preliminary Illustrative Theories of Change for Consultative, Advisory, and Professional Models of Refugee Participation**

	<b>Consultative Model</b>	<b>Advisory Model</b>	<b>Professional Model</b>
<b>Objectives</b>	Individual refugees and refugee-led networks and organizations are able to meaningfully offer opinions and feedback about issues that concern them.	Individual refugees and refugee-led organizations are able to advise policymakers and program designers through continuous and robust engagement, while bringing an outside perspective.	By taking on insider positions, refugees are able to consistently work on refugee-related issues within governments, the United Nations, and international organizations.
<b>Illustrative Activities</b>	<p>Policymakers hold listening sessions with refugees in different parts of a country to get feedback on legislation.</p> <p>UNHCR holds region-specific virtual meetings with refugee-led organizations to understand their priorities for the upcoming GRF.</p>	Governments establish advisory groups to provide regular input during preparations for the GRF.	<p>Refugees are appointed to senior levels of government.</p> <p>Refugees are hired as program officers and implementing staff at international organizations.</p>
<b>Enabling Factors (Inputs)</b>	<p>Participants are supported financially and receive training and information.</p> <p>Participants are involved in the right step of the process and contributions are well-facilitated.</p> <p>Participants are diverse (age, gender, nationality, place of residence).</p>	In addition to the enabling factors listed under the consultative model, policymakers are allies who seriously consider the contributions of refugee advisors.	<p>In addition to the enabling factors listed for the other two models, organizations adopting a professional model should include refugees in their human resources (HR) diversity policies.</p> <p>Refugees should be able to build their careers toward senior leadership positions.</p>
<b>Outputs</b>	States and international organizations are better informed of refugees' priorities and have greater awareness of who the relevant local actors are.	Governments regularly gather input from refugee advisors and leverage them to inform key aspects of program and policy design and implementation.	Refugees work on issues, policies, and programs relevant to displaced populations.
<b>Outcomes</b>	Decisionmakers take refugee preferences into account when designing and implementing programs and policies and include local refugee actors in program/policy implementation.	Policymakers make decisions and set agendas based on refugee advisors' input.	Refugees become policymakers themselves and can influence processes based on their intimate understanding of displacement.
<b>Primary Impacts</b>	<p>Policies and programs address refugees' preferences and needs.</p> <p>Refugees have a sense of ownership over decisions and have greater trust in the decision-making process.</p>		

Source: Developed by the author.

Measuring progress toward the intended outcomes requires indicators that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART). These criteria can help ensure that the resulting indicators are able to provide concrete evidence on a program’s progress as well as inform any changes needed to achieve the intended objectives. A set of preliminary indicators could be developed generally to measure refugee participation and customized for specific processes, in alignment with their specific theories of change. The 2023 GRF presents an opportunity to launch these indicators as well as to measure evolution in refugee participation trends, given that participation in the 2019 GRF has been well-documented by scholars and advocates and can act as a baseline.<sup>70</sup> Relevant indicators have already been developed by the United Nations’ Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) in 2021 based on the 2016 Grand Bargain, which aims to improve the effectiveness of humanitarian action by strengthening the participation of local and national actors in humanitarian coordination.<sup>71</sup> These indicators may inspire both states and international humanitarian organizations to develop more context-specific indicators related to refugee participation, though efforts to report and make progress on Grand Bargain indicators have been limited.<sup>72</sup>

Based on the IASC indicators and the analysis in this report, Table 3 presents a set of indicators that could, at a minimum, provide a baseline for a robust discussion on general indicators of meaningful refugee participation. These include measures focused on the process (and to what extent it addresses factors identified as enabling successful participation), the diversity of participants, the effectiveness of

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*While their ability to collect and analyze data will vary, the development of an evaluation system is an opportunity for states, refugees, and international partners to collaborate, share expertise, and co-own the evaluation and learning process.*

the resulting policies (compared to policies not informed by refugee participation), and the legitimacy of the process and its outcomes, as perceived by various stakeholders (including refugees). These indicators could be measured based on the perspectives of states, aid organizations, refugee advocates and networks, and the refugee population more broadly. While their ability to collect and analyze data will vary, the development of an evaluation system is an opportunity for states, refugees, and international partners to collaborate, share expertise, and co-own the evaluation and learning process.

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70 Harley and Hobbs, “The Meaningful Participation of Refugees.”

71 Although the scope of the Grand Bargain focuses on humanitarian action, it has the similar end-goal of increasing effectiveness through increased local participation. Grand Bargain indicators relate to participation and representation, leadership, capacity strengthening, resourcing for coordination, visibility, preparedness, and response and humanitarian-development-peace collaboration. See Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC), “Strengthening Participation, Representation and Leadership of Local and National Actors in IASC Humanitarian Coordination Mechanisms” (guidance note, IASC, July 2021).

72 Victoria Metcalfe-Hough, Wendy Fenton, Barnaby Willitts-King, and Alexandra Spencer, *The Grand Bargain at Five Years: An Independent Review* (London: Overseas Development Institute, 2021).

TABLE 3

**Proposed Indicators to Track Meaningful Refugee Participation in Policymaking**

Type	Indicator	Potential Source of Data
<b>Process Indicators</b>	Percentage of delegates invited to participate in global and national decision-making processes who are refugees (participants and advisors)*	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Amount of funding allocated to facilitate refugee participation	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Number of refugee inputs included in final policy or programming decisions	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations, refugee networks
	Number of preparatory workshops organized before global and national decision-making processes	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Number of refugee advisors involved in global and national policymaking processes	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Number of refugees in top senior positions in humanitarian organizations	UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Amount of funding directed to refugee-led organizations' and refugee networks' programs	Donors, UNHCR, international and national organizations
<b>Diversity Indicators</b>	Percentage of refugees invited to participate in global and national decision-making processes who are minorities, women, and from the Global South	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Percentage of participants in refugee-led networks (members and senior leadership) who are minorities, women, and from the Global South	Refugee-led networks
	Availability of translation mechanisms in global and national decision-making processes	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
	Inclusion of refugees and other displaced persons in HR diversity policies, accompanying implementation plans, and oversight mechanisms	States, UNHCR, international and national organizations
<b>Impact Indicators</b>	Overall effectiveness of the resulting policy or program in addressing the needs of refugees	Independent evaluations
	Percentage of refugee beneficiaries who perceive the program or policy to be effective	Refugee public opinion
	Percentage of refugee participants in the policy or program development process who were satisfied with the participation process and/or felt their voices were heard	Refugee public opinion
	Percentage of refugee participants who perceive participation opportunities as legitimate	Refugee public opinion
	Overall well-being of refugees affected by changes in policies	Refugee public opinion

\* Under this indicator, the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) calls for setting a minimum standard that 25 percent of attending participants and advisors at the 2023 GRF be refugees (compared to less than 3 percent in 2019). See GRN, "Refugees Call on World Leaders to Pass the Mic at the Two-Year Review of the Global Compact on Refugees" (press release, December 15, 2021), cited in Milner, Alio, and Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

Source: Developed by the author.

Beyond measuring progress through these indicators, documenting processes and decisions is critical to provide concrete examples that can inform future refugee participation initiatives. Existing initiatives have provided little public information on the models they use and their outcomes. When information is available, it tends to be exceedingly positive accounts, along with limited supporting evidence. Organizations, whether they are refugee-led or external stakeholders, should clearly communicate what changes they have made based on input from refugees, as compared to original policy and program plans. An aggregation of case studies could shed light on what impacts refugee participation can have and how, contribute to the design of indicators for evaluation, and help identify causal links between refugee participation and efficient policies. Along with regular reporting and dissemination, this systemic documentation of decision-making processes could also foster transparency with refugee participants and communities, who could see whether and to what extent their input is being considered.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations for Navigating Trade-Offs and Moving Beyond Participation

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Existing models of refugee participation in policymaking are characterized by trade-offs between the number of refugees who are involved, for how long, the depth of their involvement, and whether they are outsiders or insiders to the relevant organizations. None of the current models navigates these trade-offs seamlessly: the most in-depth forms of engagement are open to relatively few refugees, while initiatives that target larger groups of refugees are often ad hoc and offer limited opportunities for meaningful engagement.

The first step toward understanding these trade-offs, and their implications for policies and programming, is to **develop clear theories of change and measurable indicators**. As they institutionalize their approaches and initiatives for refugee participation, states, UNHCR, and other humanitarian and international organizations should both integrate theories of change into their internal operations and communicate them clearly to external stakeholders, so participants have a clear idea of how their participation is expected to have an impact on final decisions and policies. Measurable indicators, meanwhile, would help these actors reflect on critical elements of meaningful refugee engagement and act as benchmarks for refugee engagement policies.

Armed with theories of change and progress markers, these actors can take the next steps to:

- ▶ **Engage refugees through multiple entry points and pilot a variety of participation models.** Initiatives that engage refugees in consultations, as advisors, and in various professional roles have different benefits that can contribute to better-informed policies over which refugees feel a sense of ownership. The diversity of refugees' backgrounds and concerns is also more likely to be reflected in policy fora if there are multiple points of entry for participation. Involving refugees in consultations with a broader scope, creating advisory boards, and hiring refugees (particularly in positions of power) are complementary approaches, and adopting more than one could have a mutually reinforcing effect. This meaningful engagement could serve as a stepping-stone toward involving refugees in the co-design of policies and programs, and even to the transfer of more power and resources to refugee-led organizations and initiatives.

- ▶ **Document the participation of refugees in policy processes.** Little information is available about the process, selection, results, and internal dynamics of refugee participation in policymaking processes. States, UNHCR, and other humanitarian and international organizations should transparently and publicly communicate this information in order to support institutional and mutual learning within the field. This could include reflections on whether and how refugee feedback was incorporated into final decisions.<sup>73</sup> External evaluations might be needed to ensure that stakeholders do not simply use documentation as a way to signal they are inclusive and, thus, to attract funding. The 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) is one notable and upcoming opportunity to measure the evolution in participation trends, compared to well-documented baseline participation data from the 2019 GRF, and to test the assumptions and theory of change outlined in this report.<sup>74</sup>

In order to support these initiatives' success, states, UNHCR, and other international and humanitarian organizations can take steps to:

- ▶ **Promote diversity over representativeness.** In the absence of democratic structures that represent refugees' public opinion at the global and national levels, states, UNHCR, and other organizations should support refugee-led networks in working to guarantee a diversity of participants within the networks' structures. Addressing structural barriers to access that disproportionately affect refugees who are women, minorities, and from the Global South will require long-term engagement with refugee-led networks as they work to set up inclusive mechanisms and with emerging advocates from marginalized groups. Organizations should also include refugees and other people with lived experiences of displacement in their HR diversity policies.
- ▶ **Enable refugee participation through capacity development and direct resourcing.** Meaningful engagement requires refugees to develop strong skills in a variety of areas, including advocacy, communication, and leadership. These skills give refugees the tools to not only understand how to present their key messages effectively, but also to manage strategies to have those messages heard and achieve the desired impact. Making funding available to support refugees as they strengthen their skills in these areas is an important part of facilitating meaningful access to policy processes and of fostering an enabling environment for advocacy among groups at the local, national, regional, and global levels.

But perhaps the key to solving these trade-offs is to move beyond refugee *participation* in processes led by others and to *co-design* and *co-ownership* of policymaking and programming. As many refugees find themselves in protracted situations of displacement, deeper, continuous engagement and co-design are critical to addressing recurring and long-term challenges. In this respect, there is much that can be learned from existing efforts to deepen refugees' engagement in policy processes, ranging from

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*But perhaps the key to solving these trade-offs is to move beyond refugee participation in processes led by others and to co-design and co-ownership of policymaking and programming.*

<sup>73</sup> This recommendation is also made in Milner, Alio, and Gardi, "Meaningful Refugee Participation."

<sup>74</sup> Harley and Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees."

the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement’s creation of a Refugee Steering Committee to local efforts to co-design responses to displacement.

All three participation models discussed in this report have the potential to lead to more equitable partnerships between refugees and policymakers. Participating in meaningful consultations will help refugees gain skills and understanding of potential avenues of influence, leading to more effective plans

*Policymakers who engage with refugees on a regular basis ... are more likely to see refugees as legitimate policy actors and seriously consider their input.*

to advocate for their communities’ needs and interests. Policymakers who engage with refugees on a regular basis, whether the refugees are consultation participants or advisors, are more likely to see refugees as legitimate policy actors and seriously consider their input. Likewise, hiring refugees in junior positions and including

experience with forced displacement in DEI policies may enable more refugees to build professional careers in this field and eventually become senior staff and leaders who can more directly influence policies, thanks to the legitimacy that comes with their positions.

Much like meaningful participation, efforts to move toward co-design, ownership, and eventual transfers of decision-making power will require analysis of effectiveness, with a focus on establishing explicit causal links and using measurable indicators. The 2023 GRF provides an opportunity for states, UNHCR, and nongovernmental actors alike to take concrete steps down this road. It could also serve as a case study for the active implementation of these principles, so that after the GRF stakeholders can assess how refugees’ contributions were incorporated, make the results of the assessment widely available, and propose concrete recommendations for the next global convening.

More broadly, refugee engagement still needs a greater push to move away from symbolism and tokenism and to instead meaningfully involve refugee communities in policy decisions that affect them. As improved assessments produce more evidence in this area and practices evolve, a positive feedback loop can emerge—one in which better documentation of the benefits of meaningful participation incentivizes more participation opportunities, and the lessons learned make those opportunities even more meaningful and impactful.

## About the Author

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Uwezo Ramazani is a researcher based in Tanzania with lived experience of displacement. Prior to developing this paper, he was the Tanzania Lead Researcher for a study of refugee-led organizations in East Africa on behalf of the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) at Carleton University and the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) at the University of Oxford. Previously, he worked with Resilience Action International (RAI), a refugee-led organization operating mainly in Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, most recently as Interim Executive Director.

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