



# POWER & THE MARGINS:

The Global Refugee-led Network's Recommendations  
for the 2021 UNHCR High-Level Officials Meeting



## The State of Refugee Participation

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# Introduction

**W**ith few exceptions, refugees have historically been excluded from systematic and meaningful inclusion in high-level governance areas of policy- and decision-making (Harley 2021). The exclusion of refugees and other forcibly displaced people matters because these governance processes significantly impact the daily life of the over 34 million displaced persons currently under UNHCR’s mandate for protection (UNHCR 2021a). These processes determine refugees’ rights, and the material distribution they access, as well as critically secure durable solutions that end their displacement (Arnold-Fernández 2019). Despite these high stakes, decision makers have often considered refugees as too vulnerable (Sigona 2014), unskilled, or otherwise unable to participate in decision making (Barnett 2011, Tsion-Abebe 2021). In this working paper, we underscore that refugee-led initiatives and

*“Refugee efforts are steadfastly driving the change from exclusion to inclusion.”*

refugee-led efforts are debunking these outdated and inaccurate assumptions. To wit, we evidence that refugee efforts—including efforts by this paper’s co-authors who are founding members of the Global Refugee-Led

Network (GRN) — are steadfastly driving the change from exclusion to inclusion.

In part, recognition of refugee-led efforts is observed in shifting global policy frameworks and in academic literature that highlights the normative and instrumental rationale for direct refugee participation. Chiefly, the 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) affirm an international commitment to recognize displaced persons as participatory stakeholders (Harley and Hobbs 2020). Moreover, scholars identify how direct refugee participation can empower refugees, as well as result in more appropriate and effective interventions (Badran 2019, Jones 2019). Scholars also emphasize the merit and tangible effects of refugee-led initiatives to provide social protection and material provision (Alio et al 2020, Pincock et al 2020a,

Kuntzelman and Hakiza 2021), and to provide rights-based and protection knowledge to other displaced people including during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chandiga Justine 2020, Lau 2021). This burgeoning literature further captures how refugee-led organizations (RLOs) and networks are expanding beyond the local community level to advocate at the national, regional, and international levels (Pincock et al 2020b). Significantly, NGOs, researchers, and research institutions are following suit by making pledges and taking strategic actions to expand the breadth and depth of multi-sectoral refugee participation (United Nations 2019, Shivakoti and Milner, 2020, Kuntzelman 2021).

As leaders from the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), we draft this report ahead of the 2021 High-Level Officials Meeting (HLOM) because the HLOM represents an ideal time to reflect on the global progress made towards refugee inclusion and participation since the 2019 Global Refugee Forum, and ahead of the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. We believe there is an urgent need for refugee leadership and the inclusion of new voices given the dearth of durable solutions, the global increase in displacement numbers, and the projections of further displacement due to unmitigated global conflict and emerging challenges such as climate change (UNHCR 2021b). Acknowledging the challenges and opportunities, now is an apt time to renew global commitments to recognize, strengthen, expand, and honor refugee efforts.

**The report is structured around the GRN’s primary objectives to**

- (i)** Increase refugee participation in shaping policies,
- (ii)** Build refugee capacity to engage locally, nationally, regionally, and globally, and
- (iii)** Strategically advocate for and promote inclusive human rights approaches to forced displacement.

It concludes with concrete recommendations for the international community to consider during the HLOM, and to prioritize ahead of the 2023 GRF.

# Increasing refugee participation in shaping policies

**T**he pursuit of meaningful refugee participation is the foundational pillar and principle of our work. To unpack the significance of refugee participation, the GRN defines meaningful refugee participation as occurring “...when refugees — regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics — are prepared for and participate 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” (GRN 2019).

All around the world, refugees come together to organize and support one another, as well as advocate for, and develop their own solutions. At its earliest stages, the GRN developed through our personal connections and by word of mouth. For example, Shaza Alrihawi, a former refugee and current GRN leader in Europe, first became involved in March 2017. Knowing that she had worked at UNHCR in Syria before being forced to flee, a friend asked if she was interested in advocating for refugee rights alongside other displaced persons in her host community.

Refugee-led organizations, networks, and advocates bring vital and distinct perspectives and ideas to policy discussions concerning forced displacement. However, the invaluable efforts by refugee-led organizations, networks, and advocates are often under-recognized, under-financed, and under-utilized. Despite their rich experiences, personal and professional knowledge, refugees have been denied

a voice in discussions about their present and future lives. The GRN is a response to this representation gap as it is a space that is 100% created for and led by refugees. We unite and amplify refugee perspectives for multi-sectoral audiences. Through our actions, the GRN has uprooted the traditional, top-down structure of humanitarian aid and initiated a participatory, bottom-up approach to refugee policy.

Despite the Global Compact on Refugees’ call for “States and relevant stakeholders [to] facilitate meaningful participation of refugees...ensuring the inclusion of their perspectives on progress” (Paragraph 106), this is not happening. While an effort has been made to increase refugee representation, it has fallen short in terms of both quantity and quality. For example, in terms of quantity, refugees represented only 2% of participants at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). Further regarding quality, refugees often themselves limited in global forums to participating through advisory roles rather than being afforded direct participatory access. For example, the GRN’s refugee leaders recently mobilized to be included in the drafting processes for a UNHCR report that seeks to establish indicators that track the GCR’s implementation. Although we successfully joined this meeting, we faced a number of challenges to meaningfully participate. We were limited in access and abilities for direct representation, and faced unwarranted questions about our accountability, legitimacy, and whether our group is representative of global refugee populations.

Notwithstanding these challenges, due to concerted efforts from the GRN and their allies, there have been some successes to implement meaningful refugee participation that can be used as a model. The GRN led the initiative to increase direct engagement at the Annual Tripartite Resettlement Consultation on Refugees (ATCR 2020). The GRN has long advocated for a change in the architecture of ATCR to ensure refugees are included as key contributors. We have pushed for a transformation from a tripartite structure involving only UNHCR, Governments, and international-NGO to become a more inclusive, multipartite structure. Our advocacy resulted in the establishment of the first-ever Refugee Steering Group (RSG) at ATCR (Ca-

nadian Council for Refugees 2021a and 2021b). Furthermore, GRN Steering Committee members Najeeba Wazefadost and Anila Noor contributed towards a concept note that advocated enhanced refugee involvement in the ATCR – which the ATCR community later endorsed (ATCR 2020). The GRN attended this year’s ATCR preparatory meeting and presented this concept note on refugee participation. Our efforts have resulted in the ground-breaking accomplishment that the RSG will be among the main actors to shape the forthcoming ATCR.

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Meeting of New Women Connectors, a Refugee-led Organization that is a part of the European Coalition of the GRN. New Women Connectors was founded by Anila Noor, who is a member of the GRN Steering Committee.



# Building refugee capacity to engage locally, nationally, regionally, and globally

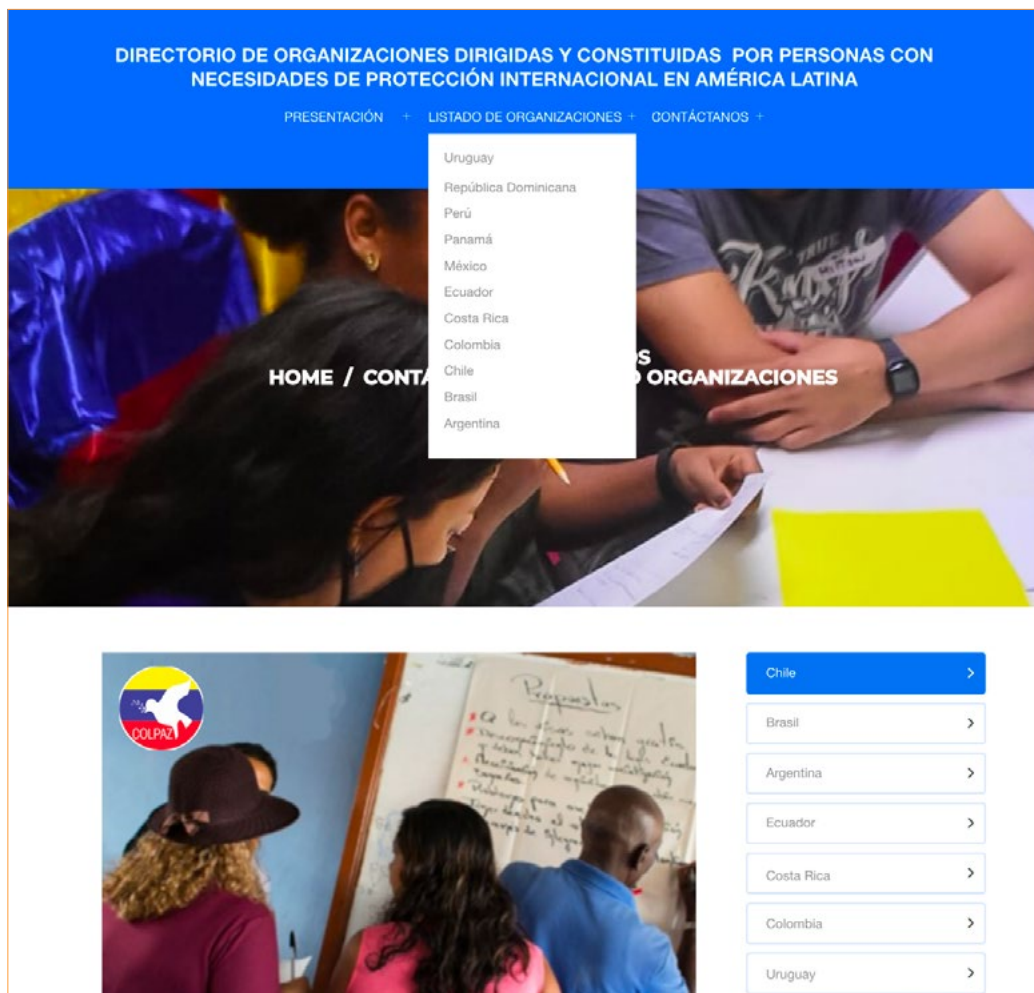
**R**LOs and networks are uniquely positioned to facilitate engagements between governments, NGOs, the private sector, and other stakeholders; therefore RLOs and networks should be strengthened and resourced. For example, the GRN has served since its creation as an essential hub to identify and unite the often diverse forms of refugee-led interventions occurring at various levels. Through bringing these actors together, refugees work collaboratively to identify shared struggles and enumerate policy priorities, programmatic interventions, and best practices to respond. The GRN is also a platform to share knowledge and resources to internally build capacity among refugee efforts.

The GRN in collaboration with various partners organized four regional refugee summits for our Africa, Middle East and North Africa, Europe, Asia Pacific Chapters in 2018 and 2019. A second Asia Pacific Summit was held in 2021. Across our four regional Summits, we connected refugees from all over the world to determine the needs we found urgent. The summits provided space for robust policy discussions which have directly led to the development of a refugee-led policy response – the Trans-Border Manifesto – which articulates a clear and ambitious vision for a better world. The Manifesto highlights five overarching pillars that require urgent attention to address the needs of refugees

globally: participation, protection, pathways, work, and integration and inclusion. It makes policy recommendations for how to move forward. These pillars align our voices to the priorities stated in the Global Compact for Refugees, validating them with our lived experience and expertise. Thus far, we have learned from the knowledge and expertise of over 130 refugee-led initiatives from over 60 countries and counting. Across summits, demands were similar. Namely, refugee-led initiatives want to be included in discussions where decisions are being made about their lives.

In 2021, GRN members in Latin America initiated a mapping project to identify RLO initiatives within the region. At its core, the mapping project is intended to be a resource to assist displaced persons in accessing vital knowledge on how to achieve international protection and assistance. The GRN-Latin America chapter will share their mapping results through an open-access webpage that they intend to launch by 2022. Through this webpage, other RLOs can also network and identify themselves in order to expand the resource network available to internally displaced persons and refugees in the region. Furthermore, the database will increase the visibility of Latin American RLOs to governments, international organizations, donors and other stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>This website will launch at [www.refugiadasamericas.org](http://www.refugiadasamericas.org) (to launch by 2022)



The landing page for the newly-designed Directory of Refugee-led Organizations in Latin America. This webpage will launch before 2022 and was researched, written, and designed by GRN-Latin America Members.

Following the African Leaders Summit, the GRN launched its Africa Chapter, the African Refugee-Led Network (ARN). The ARN's 13 member steering committee meets regularly in a virtual format to develop best practices, to update each other on the work they are doing, and to coordinate and strategize regional policy advocacy efforts. Coordination and facilitation is also occurs through a proliferation of Refugee-Led Network (RELON) consortiums

in Uganda, Kenya, Malawi, and, soon, in South Africa. Through the ARN, refugees throughout Sub-Saharan Africa are working to shape national and regional policies.

For example, in

Uganda, the network members have partnered with the International Refugee Rights Initiative to remove barriers so refugees can achieve their rights to employment. Finally, the network secured unprecedented access to attend the 8th Annual African Union Humanitarian Symposium, where

they presented recommendations from their communities to tackle climate change and migration, food insecurity, and the challenges presented by Covid-19.

Bringing together their mapping activities to identify RLOs and their enhanced knowledge of the humanitarian and refugee response sector, the GRN has been an instrumental actor for capacity development and resourcing refugee-led initiatives. In the European region, GRN members through a collaboration with Place Network and BMW Foundation, the European Coalition of the GRN launched the "Emerging Leaders" initiative. This initiative provided eight months of capacity development designed and facilitated by Place Network to promote responsible leadership, as well as skills-building for refugee leaders to pragmatically translate their vision for refugee engagement into reality (Place Network 2021). In the Asia Pacific, GRN members launched the "Refugee Leadership Alliance," a consortium of RLOs and networks that pools funding for under-resourced RLOs in the region (APNOR 2021). These examples demonstrate how the GRN is building the communication and coordination infrastructures to strengthen refugee civil society.

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# Strategically advocating for and promoting inclusive approaches to forced displacement

**G**lobal challenges often disproportionately impact vulnerable groups, which is why the GRN strategically advocates for intersectional and inclusive approaches that put affected communities at the center of global refugee response. Since 2019, the world has faced numerous challenges, including the global Covid-19 pandemic, as well as new and renewed conflicts that have increased migration flows. These challenges often produce an unequal impact among the most vulnerable refugee sub-communities, specifically the elderly, unaccompanied children, female-headed households, women and girls, and members of the LGBTQI community. Partnership with the GRN and other refugee-led initiatives allows for the identification of these vulnerable groups to ensure they are not left out of vital responses.

The GRN advocates for inclusive policy change founded on the principles of the Grand Bargain’s “Participation Revolution;” the Age, Gender, and Diversity Framework; and the Sustainable Development Goals Agenda to leave no one behind. For example, the GRN coordinated, drafted, and launched the multi-stakeholder Refugee Participation Pledge in 2019. In line with goal 6 of the Grand Bargain, this pledge calls on its signatories to commit to “support the meaningful participation of refugees... in decisions

that affect their lives” and to “support the agency of those we seek to assist while improving the relevance, quality, transparency and accountability of that assistance.” The Refugee Participation Pledge currently has over 17 signatories including the International Federation of the Red Cross, the IKEA Foundation, and the Open Society Foundation, as well as numerous national governments, including the Governments of the Netherlands, Australia, Denmark and Canada. The GRN also importantly developed and presented guidelines for refugee participation during the GRF (see GRN 2019b). These guidelines establish critical benchmarks to evaluate whether refugee participation is meaningful, systematic, and equitable.

This inclusive approach also applies to the GRN’s advocacy in response to emergent global issues. In Uganda, GRN members of the Refugee-Led Organisations Network were on the frontlines of the COVID response, providing life-saving support to refugees and helping them to access vaccines. In the absence of

*“The GRN strategically advocates for intersectional and inclusive approaches that put affected communities at the center of global refugee response”*



specific government campaigns targeting refugee access to the vaccine, these groups have kept their community informed and protected from challenging vaccine misinformation to translating crucial information about COVID-19 into refugees' native languages. These kinds of refugee-led initiatives around the world are vital to fighting vaccine hesitancy and making sure refugees are protected.

Refugee engagement in the Afghanistan response once again demonstrated in real-time how RLOs contribute to uniquely informed, more inclusive policies. The Taliban's recent seizure of Afghanistan put thousands of Afghans in grave danger, many of whom

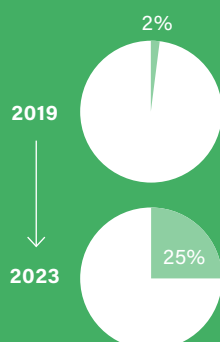
scrambled to flee the country to seek asylum abroad. RLOs, like the GRN's Asia chapter, the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), have been using their personal experience and professional expertise to support Afghan refugees. APNOR was a first responder — it coordinated legal aid, facilitated a hotline for psychological counseling, and supported evacuation efforts for Afghans in danger. Having fled Afghanistan in the 90s, refugee leaders had vital information from the ground about how the situation was progressing, as well as a unique understanding of the danger Afghans face under Taliban rule and in the journey to seek asylum.

Shaza Alrihawi, Representative of the GRN's European Coalition, underscores the necessity of meaningful refugee participation at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum.



# Recommendations

**B**uilding from the preceding sections, we call upon all stakeholders gathered at the High-Level Officials Meeting to increase refugee participation in shaping policies by considering the following recommendations.



## Increase refugee participation in shaping policies by:

- Committing to 25% refugee participation in the next Global Refugee Forum in 2023, reflecting an integration of age, gender and diversity. (The 2019 Forum only had 2% refugee participation.)
- Establishing refugee representation in UNHCR's governing body, EXCOM, by 2023.



## Build refugee capacity to engage locally, nationally, regionally, and globally by:

- Increasing RLO direct access to flexible funding, particularly to help women, youth, LGBTQI and other often excluded refugee groups.



## Strategically advocate for and promote inclusive approaches to forced displacement by:

- Securing equal, quality health treatment for forcibly displaced people, including access to the COVID-19 vaccine.

# About The Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN)

**G** The Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) is a network of refugee-led organizations in six regions: North America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, MENA and the Asia-Pacific. It is governed by a steering committee, with representatives from each of the six regions. Steering committee members represent the regional branches of the Network, which work autonomously under the umbrella of the Global Refugee-led Network to shape local, national and regional policies. The GRN aims to provide a unique platform for refugees to connect, organize, and improve national, regional and global refugee policies for the better.

The GRN was born out of the first ever Global Summit of Refugees, which was convened in Geneva, Switzerland, and attended by 75 refugee leaders from 30 countries. Members of the GRN have personal and professional contact with the global refugee crisis — they have refugee backgrounds and lead responses to address the challenges they, and their communities, face. Made up of activists, advocates, and community organizers, the GRN has found that while their individual stories are different, both the challenges they face and the solutions they have arrived at are surprisingly similar.

Learn more about the Global Refugee-led Network at [www.globalrefugeenetwork.org](http://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org)



Refugees gather in Addis Ababa for the 2019 Africa Refugee Summit. Approximately 70 refugees shared their lived experiences, proposed solutions for effective and durable global and African refugee policies, and planned their contributions for the first Global Refugee Forum in Geneva.

# Acknowledgements

**W**e want to sincerely thank the Steering Committee Members of the Global Refugee-Led Network who have vitally contributed to the drafting of this report by completing our survey on GRN history, achievements, recommendations. Among these contributors, we specifically thank Eliasib Amet Herrera, Diana Ortiz, and Mauricio Viloria of the GRN- Latin America, and thank Amer Alkayed from GRN-MENA. We additionally acknowledge the contributions of Robert Hakiza and Jerry Mbokani of the African Refugee-led Network for their contributions and updates on the ARN's work. Finally, we acknowledge and thank the refugees, refugee leaders, and refugee-led organization

staff and delegates who provided contextualized feedback on refugees' achievements, as well as feedback on the best practices and challenges they experience in conducting their phenomenal work. This feedback was provided through GRN-facilitated Zoom meetings, including a virtual meeting held on 1 December 2021 where the GRN engaged global refugee leaders in preparation for the forthcoming HLOM. We would like to thank Katja Flükiger for the design of this report. We also acknowledge the work of Kevin Irakoze on the initial phase of this project. We thank Independent Diplomat for helping facilitate this project.

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**Christa Kuntzelman** is a PhD Candidate and researcher at Northwestern University. Her research focuses on how refugees in Uganda understand their rights, and explores why having knowledge on rights matters.

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