

The multi-stakeholder pledge on meaningful refugee participation: progress and developments

December 2023

1. The Refugee Participation Pledge

The Refugee Participation Pledge was launched in 2019, in anticipation of the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF), to foster cooperation for the meaningful participation of refugees in policymaking processes. It is the outcome of collaborative multi-stakeholder discussions led by the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), the Government of Canada, the Government of the Netherlands, Oxfam International, Independent Diplomat, and UNHCR. As of 10 December 2023, there are 92 signatories to the pledge, including governments, RLOs, I/NGOs, private sector actors, philanthropic foundations and international organisations, and many more who have expressed interest in signing on to the pledge.

By signing the pledge, stakeholders make the following commitment:

"In accordance with the commitments established under goal 6 of the Grand Bargain to support a 'Participation Revolution,' we pledge to support the meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives. Participation should take into account the diversity within communities, including age, gender, and disability. This pledge will support the agency of those we seek to assist while improving the relevance, quality, transparency, and accountability of that assistance. We furthermore commit to share experiences on the implementation of this pledge at subsequent Global Refugee Forums and/or high-level officials' meetings."

Meaningful participation of refugees implies shifting power, decision-making and funding, and challenging

entrenched systems and structures that perpetuate inequality and marginalisation.

The GRN defines meaningful refugee participation as:

"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."

The pledge itself measures progress in three concrete areas:

1. Inclusive decision-making
2. Accountability
3. Sustainable funding and resources

This short briefing sets out a preliminary overview of progress that has been achieved in all three areas since the initial development of the pledge.[1] Whilst gaps still exist, we have seen a qualitative shift in the emphasis placed on the meaningful participation of refugees since the 2019 GRF and its normalisation in policy discussions, with this issue now front and centre in the context of preparations for the 2023 GRF.

The pledge continues to be as relevant now as it has ever been, and it is essential that support for this issue grows in order to ensure that the principle of "nothing about us without us" becomes more than just a slogan.

This briefing has been developed under the leadership of the Global Refugee-Led Network.

To access more information about the Refugee Participation pledge: see <https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/refugee-participation-pledge>

2. Inclusive decision-making

Inclusive decision-making is at the heart of the pledge on meaningful refugee participation. The Grand Bargain's 'Participation Revolution' set out a collective ambition to ensure the inclusion of people receiving aid in making the decisions which affect their lives, and this is key when it comes to shifting power to communities.

Pledge signatories have made huge steps forward since 2019 when it comes to ensuring meaningful participation of refugees and stateless persons in formal decision-making spaces. A number of signatories amongst governments – including Australia and Canada - have committed to regularly including refugee advisors on their delegations to meetings on global refugee policy, and this has been demonstrated in practice at meetings of the UNHCR Executive Committee, the annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, and the 2021 High-Level Officials Meeting. In aid of this, Australia has also recently established a Refugee Advisory Panel providing a formal mechanism to systematically integrate meaningful refugee participation in Australia's engagement with the international refugee protection system and humanitarian action.

Signatories representing international organisations and institutions have also included refugees in their delegations, including but not limited to IFRC, Oxfam and RefugePoint. Several signatories have also supported the meaningful participation of refugees and stateless persons in policy fora organised by other stakeholders, such as the IFRC's support for people with lived experience of displacement to speak at events at COP27 and in the planning for events at COP28.

Ensuring participation in key policy-making spaces

Canada was the first country to include a refugee advisor as part of its delegation to the inaugural Global Refugee Forum in December 2019. This has provided a blueprint for other countries, and since then a number

of governments - including Australia and the USA - have confirmed that they would be including refugees in their delegations for the 2023 GRF.

At the 2022 UNHCR Executive Committee (ExCom), Canada's General Statement was jointly delivered by the delegation's refugee advisor and Canada's Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations in Geneva. At the 2023 ExCom, meanwhile, several governments included refugees in their delegations and refugee delegates delivered statements for Canada and the USA.

A number of signatories have also committed to ensuring that they are themselves including people with lived experience of forced displacement in their institutions' governance structures.

The IFRC, for instance, created a Lived Experience Advisory Committee, composed of Red Cross Red Crescent staff and volunteers with lived experience as refugees or migrants in need of humanitarian assistance, that advises and contributes to the development of its strategies on migration and displacement. RefugePoint has constituted an advisory and accountability committee (AOC) in Nairobi made up of refugee leaders, which provides oversight and guidance to its Urban Refugee Protection Program. Cohere has set up a six-member refugee advisory panel with equivalent decision-making powers to the board of trustees, and has hired a person with lived experience of displacement to head its Department of Advocacy at its senior leadership (executive team) level. Last Mile Climate is led primarily by people with lived experience of forced displacement, while the Coordination Unit of Global Platform for Action on Sustainable Energy in Displacement Settings (GPA), hosted at UNITAR, has set an internal objective that 30% of its staff members will have lived experience of forced displacement.

Establishment of Refugee Advisory Boards

Independent Diplomat has provided strategic advice and support to the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) so that it is positioned to influence a variety of policy forums. In the last four years, this has included the High-level Official's Meeting, the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, UNHCR Executive Committee Meetings and UNHCR NGO Consultations at the global level; and the Quito Process, the African Union Annual Humanitarian Symposium and the African Union Humanitarian Summit at the regional level. These efforts have helped pave the way for the establishment of a Persons of Concern Advisory Group made up of refugee leaders at UNHCR, as well as well as to the anticipated establishment of a Refugee Advisory Board for the Quito Process.

Signatories have also taken steps to influence the commitments of other states and organisations for advancing refugee leadership and supporting their inclusion in decision-making.

The IFRC made a statement at the International Migration Review Forum in May 2022, noting the importance of supporting and empowering the inclusion of people with lived experience at all levels of policymaking. Cohere is in the process of developing a Community of Practice (launched in October 2023 in the form of an 'interactive workshop series') with the inclusion of refugee leaders to support international NGOs and donors engaged in efforts to promote meaningful refugee participation, with an overall aim of improving their practices in supporting refugee leadership.

Oxfam supported the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), the European Coalition of Migrants and Refugees and New Women Connectors to drive forward thinking on meaningful refugee participation and propose ways to ensure that efforts to promote refugee participation also shift power and challenge systemic inequities in international refugee policy-making systems.

Participation of refugee leaders and RLOs in developing the Multi-stakeholder Legal Pledge

In the lead-up to the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, PILnet has been working to ensure that the Global Refugee Forum Legal Community multi-stakeholder pledge (Legal Pledge) is a platform for engaging the legal community to meaningfully include refugees in the identification of needs, project design, decision making and implementation of legal programmes.

Recognising a gap in the development of the initial Pledge in 2019, and in its informal governance system, PILnet undertook active outreach to RLOs and RLO networks to increase their involvement in the Pledge. Two RLOs are now members of the Pledge's Core Group and are involved in decision-making around the Pledge, including the development of the 2023 Legal Pledge. PILnet has also sought to actively engage lawyers with lived experience of displacement in this process. In addition to the RLOs in the Core Group, two private sector lawyers with lived experience of forced displacement from other Core Group organizations, as well as two PILnet-Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRG) Fellows were part of the drafting team, and PILnet actively consulted other lawyers with lived experience of displacement, refugee advocates and RLOs in the finalisation of the Pledge. "Legal assistance for RLOs" and "Refugee Inclusion and Hiring" are now two of the six focus areas of the 2023 Legal Pledge.

3. Accountability

Accountability to refugees and other affected communities in all their diversity is also of vital importance for advancing the meaningful participation of refugees in the decisions that affect their lives. The Global Compact on Refugees and the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework both call for collective efforts to enhance the development and implementation of solutions that enhance the well-being and long-term

prospects for refugee communities. Numerous states and organisations have also committed to supporting accountability to affected populations through the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability, the Grand Bargain, and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Revised Commitments on Accountability to Affected Populations (AAP) and Protection from Sexual Exploitation and Abuse (PSEA).

Since 2019, pledge signatories have made significant progress in supporting the meaningful participation of refugees in efforts that seek to improve their well-being, enhance their self-reliance and their access to sustainable solutions.

For instance, Australia invites refugee-led networks and representatives to participate in the Minister for Immigration, Citizenship, Migrant Services and Multicultural Affairs' public consultations on the Humanitarian Program, to share their views on the program composition. The Australian Government's response to the crisis in Afghanistan has involved extensive consultation and engagement with refugee members of the diaspora in Australia, including through establishing an Advisory Panel on Australia's Resettlement of Afghan Nationals in August 2021 that includes Afghan refugees. Canada, meanwhile, engages with people with lived refugee experience in policy and program discussions through biannual consultations with the Canadian Council for Refugees, regularly scheduled meetings with Canada's Sponsorship Agreement Holders Association, the Refugee Advisory Network Canada, and other ad-hoc consultations with civil society organisations whose memberships include refugees.

A number of signatories have also taken steps to ensure that their own programs and strategies align with the priorities and needs of refugee communities and their organisations and initiatives. The GPA Coordination Unit has partnered with the GRN and Ashden to enable displaced communities to feed into the planning and implementation of energy programs. Other signatories have also invested in connecting with refugee-led organisations and initiatives so that their perspectives

can be reflected in ongoing consultations around program, strategy, and pledge development impacting refugees.

For example, PILnet coordinated with several RLOs to shape its interventions at consultations organised by UNHCR with NGOs on issues relating to access to justice and to co-organise an event on 'Refugee Leadership and Access to Justice'.

Consulting and meaningfully involving refugees and RLOs in developing policy positions

In advance of the 2023 GRF, Oxfam has supported partners including the GRN's regional chapters and the Refugee Council of Turkey (TMK) to organise consultations with refugee leaders and RLOs. These consultations - which have taken place across the MENA region and in East Africa - have sought to identify and better understand the priority issues for refugees and RLOs in these regions in the lead-up to the GRF, some of the suggested solutions that policymakers could consider for addressing these issues, and the messages that they would like for RLOs to bring to global leaders at the GRF.

The consultations reflect the high diversity of perspectives among forcibly displaced communities, underlining the importance of including diverse refugee groups in efforts to shape policy and influence programs and strategies.

Pledge signatories also invested in ensuring that age, gender, and diversity considerations are integrated into their efforts to ensure accountability to and support refugees. The Government of Australia has provided financial support to a project implemented by the University of New South Wales Forced Migration Research Network that seeks to enhance the implementation of commitments on gender equality in the Global Compact on Refugees by strengthening women's organisations and other stakeholders to include refugee women and girls in

program design, implementation, management and monitoring of the GCR. Signatories like Canada advocate for all its partners to adopt an intersectional approach and to include age, gender and diversity considerations in its humanitarian programming through its Feminist International Assistance Policy, while others focus on supporting women, people living with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ individuals among refugee communities and their organizations to be mainstreamed in their programs and for them to take an active role in influencing decisions that impact their communities.

4. Sustainable Funding and Resourcing

There is increasing acknowledgement that effective and accountable responses to refugee crises and other humanitarian emergencies require the involvement of refugees and local populations in shaping and leading the delivery of aid. The 2016 Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework and the 2018 GCR both emphasise the importance of local civil society in refugee programming and envisage a more prominent role for refugees as first responders. Signatories to the Grand Bargain committed to ensuring that 25% of humanitarian funding goes to local and national responders, to strengthen local capacities and allow for more effective, context-specific responses. Predictable and consistent access to adequate, long-term, high-quality funding is particularly key to supporting the institutional growth and long-term development of local actors, including RLOs and refugee-led initiatives.

Pledge signatories have made positive progress since 2019 when it comes to provision of high-quality funding to RLOs. Donor governments including Australia and Canada have funded initiatives that have focused on refugee inclusion (e.g. Australia's support to the University of New South Wales' Forced Migration Research Network), contributed to pooled funds in contexts with large numbers of refugees, and advocated for additional resources and support to respond to situations of forced displacement. Other signatories - including Oxfam and RefugePoint, amongst others - continue to grow their partnerships with RLOs, including when it comes to

provision of financial resources, and have advocated for greater funding to be channelled to them. Several signatories also provide opportunities to connect donors with RLOs. Cohere, for instance, has established the Reframe platform which serves as a dedicated resource to support initiatives led by forcibly displaced persons, including women-led RLOs, as well as host communities. Through the platform, Cohere encourages direct funding for RLOs, and over 42 RLOs have been funded through the platform. The GPA Coordination Unit has also provided financial support to refugee-led businesses and enterprises to expand their operations in energy provision through the THEA project, providing refugee-led businesses with a source of critical funding while also enhancing refugee self-reliance.

Providing predictable, flexible funding to RLOs

In 2022, Porticus launched a pilot learning year to support the development of a new global programme, 'Transforming migration parameters through movement building and lived-experience leadership' (MOVE).

All pilot partners included people with lived experience of migration and forced displacement in their leadership, and the longer-term programme which was created following the pilot will focus on supporting movements and lived-experience leadership to realise systems change. Through it, Porticus has committed to provide flexible funding to RLOs, including direct funding and core costs. Porticus also invests in innovative RLO-to-RLO funding mechanisms, such as the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) and Refugee Leadership Alliance (RLA). Together with OSF and RRLI, Porticus co-designed and hosted a convening of 30-40 funders (private foundations and bilateral) and RLOs to help realize many of the stated commitments by funders to RLOs in actual moving of resources, as RLOs remain underfunded.

5. Conclusion

As laid out throughout this briefing, states and organisations signatory to the Refugee Participation pledge have made significant progress since the first GRF in 2019 in promoting the meaningful participation of refugees in the decisions that impact them in the areas of inclusive decision-making, accountability and sustainable funding and resourcing. The efforts summarised in this briefing are helping to drive systemic changes in the international refugee regime so that refugees are enabled to drive the design and development of policies and strategies that seek to support them.

Despite this progress, there continue to be significant gaps in ensuring meaningful refugee participation in all three areas. Refugees continue to face challenges in accessing policy- and decision-making spaces, including to the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. When they are able to access these spaces, there continues to be the risk that their participation is tokenistic and does not facilitate the transformative participation that is needed for overcoming systemic inequities in the international refugee regime. At the core of these challenges is a

continued gap in direct, quality and sustainable sources of funding for RLOs that position them as equal partners in the international refugee response.

Nevertheless, in the last four years, the activities of the signatories to the Refugee Participation pledge have succeeded in 'normalising' a simple, yet important idea: that refugees and their organisations and initiatives must have a say in the decisions which directly impact them, and that it is only through ensuring this participation that the international refugee system can improve outcomes for refugees and their access to sustainable solutions.

Looking forward, keeping to the spirit of "nothing about us, without us", the joint active efforts of pledge signatories will play a key role in ensuring that refugees are agents of change for their communities and the wider international refugee system.

[1] The information contained in this briefing is based on progress shared by 12 signatories to the Refugee Participation pledge in implementing meaningful refugee participation across its work, based on a progress rubric developed by the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) for tracking progress on the pledge.