



# “TOWARDS A MORE EFFECTIVE AND PARTICIPATORY GLOBAL REFUGEE REGIME”

October 2023

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global refugee regime is facing **unprecedented pressures and challenges**. At a time when a record number of 108.4 million people, including 35.3 million refugees, are forcibly displaced across the globe<sup>1</sup> (with UNCHR estimating that this number will further grow to 117.2 million<sup>2</sup>); access to durable solutions<sup>3</sup> remains largely out of reach; and the level of “protracted displacement” is skyrocketing<sup>4</sup>, international actors are grappling to provide protection to millions of refugees. As such, it is more vital than ever to search for more effective and impactful policies to address protection challenges.

At the same time, recent years have also seen a new and positive dynamic, where refugees and “Refugee-Led Organizations” (RLOs)<sup>5</sup> are **questioning the power structures within the global refugee regime** and are demanding a seat around the table where decisions about their life and future are being made. They have demanded that international actors, such as UNHCR and donor states, allow for meaningful participation of refugees (and host communities) and take ambitious steps to transform the global refugee regime into a more legitimate and accountable system. Such asks have increasingly shifted from a moral argument towards a pragmatic one, by **offering concrete evidence that meaningful participation of refugees at global, regional, national and local policy level allows for more effective policies and programming**.

Against this background, and in the run-up to the upcoming UN Global Refugee Forum (December 2023), this 11.11.11 policy brief calls upon international policymakers to lend their support to efforts by refugees and RLOs to transform the global refugee regime. After briefly describing the problematic nature of the existing refugee regime it provides an overview of evidence gathered in recent years by RLOs and researchers, on why and how meaningful refugee participation in the refugee regime is urgently needed. The policy brief concludes with a set of recommendations for donor states, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and International NGOs (INGOs).

## 2. SETTING THE SCENE: THE GLOBAL REFUGEE REGIME

*“With few exceptions, refugees have historically been excluded from systematic and meaningful inclusion in high-level governance areas of policy- and decision-making”*

Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) (2021)<sup>6</sup>

In the aftermath of the horrors and large-scale forced displacement of the Second World War, states created a global refugee regime that consisted of three main elements: norms, a central institution and a decision-making mechanism:<sup>7</sup>

- First, the **norms** of the refugee regime were codified in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (“Geneva Convention”). This Geneva Convention, later complemented by the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (which removed both temporal and geographic restrictions of the 1951 Convention) provided an internationally recognized definition of a refugee and outlined a series of rights, protection and assistance a refugee is entitled to receive, and States are entitled to provide. It also codified the principle of *non-refoulement*, which prohibited that a refugee would be returned to a country where he or she would face serious threats to their life or freedom, and which would later become a key element of (binding) customary international law.<sup>8</sup>
- Second, states created an **institution**, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to “*provide international protection*” to refugees and to support governments in finding “*permanent solutions for the problem of refugees*.”<sup>9</sup>
- Finally, following the creation of UNHCR, the United Nations General Assembly in 1958 also created a central **decision-making body**, in the form of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme (ExCom). This body, which initially had a membership of 25 UN member states (107 member states as of 2021<sup>10</sup>), meets annually in Geneva to review and approve UNHCR’s programs and budgets, to provide guidance and advise to the High Commissioner, and to discuss a range of other issues with governmental and non-governmental partners.<sup>11</sup> In between ExCom’s plenary sessions, which take place every year in October, ExCom’s “Standing Committee” also meets several times throughout the year to examine thematic issues included by the plenary in its program of work, to review UNHCR’s activities and programs in different regions, and to adopt decisions and conclusions on issues included by the plenary in its annual program of work.<sup>12</sup> The work of ExCom is further informed by global and regional UNHCR-NGO consultations, which take place biennially on an alternating basis.<sup>13</sup>

This global refugee regime has faced severe (and increased) criticism.<sup>14</sup> A first critique relates to **legitimacy**. In the past seven decades the views and opinions of refugees themselves have rarely been meaningfully included or represented in the global refugee regime. As stated by Sana Mustafa, a feminist human rights defender and CEO of refugee rights group Asylum Access who herself was displaced from Syria, *“conversations about refugees and migration (have been) dominated by Western ‘experts’ who had never experienced forced displacement and who lived thousands of kilometres away from where the political repression, conflicts, and human rights violations that drive people from their homes actually take place. These ‘experts’ have been able to define our experiences and make policies about what happens with our lives while people like me have been blocked from the rooms where decisions are made. This fact is not unintentional: It’s a product of how the global protection system for refugees was designed.”*<sup>15</sup> Moreover, many actors have rightfully observed that since its inception, the refugee regime has been based on a power logic in which the interests of powerful states in the “Global North” prevailed over the interest of other (Global South) states, although the latter are actually hosting over three quarters of the global refugee population.

Another critique has to do with the (limited) **effectiveness** of the refugee regime and the main actors that it brings together, where critics point to the record numbers of refugees under UNHCR’s mandate (29.4 million refugees in 2022); the fact that 76 percent of all forcibly displaced persons are being hosted in low- and middle-income countries; the rapidly increasing number of refugees who find themselves in a situation of “protracted” displacement; and the decreasing number of refugees who have access to resettlement or other complementary legal pathways to third countries.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, the past decades have also seen an erosion of the principle of *non-refoulement*, the central norm that underpins the global refugee regime. Finally, a third critique relates to the lack of **accountability**, both in terms of the limited accountability for states that violate the norms of the regime (in particular but not limited to the *non-refoulement* principle) as well as the lack of accountability of UNHCR and other international actors towards the refugees they serve.<sup>17</sup>

Against this background, recent years have seen intense debates culminating in the adoption, by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018, of the **UN Global Compact on Refugees (GCR)**. Grounded in the international refugee protection regime and the framework of “durable solutions”, the Global Compact sets out four key objectives: 1) ease pressures on host countries, 2) enhance refugee self-reliance, 3) expand access to third country solutions, and 4) support conditions in countries of origin for return in safety and dignity.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, paragraph 34 of the Global Compact on Refugees- for the first time ever in such explicit terms and in such a high-level policy document- recognized the vital importance of **meaningful refugee participation**, by stating that *“responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist”* and adding that *“States and relevant stakeholders will explore how best to include refugees and members of host communities, particularly women, youth, and persons with disabilities, in key forums and processes, as well as diaspora, where relevant.”*<sup>19</sup> Additionally the Global Compact on Refugees also highlighted the key role of **Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs)**, by recognizing the *“important work for refugees”* of *“civil society organizations, including those that are led by refugees (...)”*.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of follow-up, the Global Compact on Refugees stated that from 2019 onwards, every four years a **Global Refugee Forum (GRF)** will be convened, while every two years between forums a **High-Level Officials' Meeting (HLOM)** will gather in Geneva.<sup>21</sup> In addition to the GRF and HLOM, the Global Compact also tasked the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to provide an annual update, in his/her regular report to the UN General Assembly, on progress made towards the achievement of the objectives of the Compact.<sup>22</sup>

During Global Refugee Forums, states and other stakeholders are expected to take stock of progress being made, to announce new pledges to operationalize the Global Compact on Refugees, and to share learning and inform and inspire further “burden- and responsibility-sharing”. Importantly, the GRC explicitly specified that “*States and relevant stakeholders will facilitate meaningful participation of refugees, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth, in Global Refugee Forums, ensuring the inclusion of their perspectives on progress.*”<sup>23</sup>

The first GRF in 2019 garnered over 1,400 pledges and initiatives and 350 submissions of “good practices” linked to the GCR.<sup>24</sup> In 2021, UNHCR also convened a first HLOM, where **twenty key HLOM recommendations** and follow-up actions were identified to guide the development of pledges and contributions for the 2023 GRF. In addition to recommendations relating to (among others) enhanced access to international protection; the importance of a “triple nexus” approach between humanitarian support, development cooperation and peacebuilding; the need to provide more flexible, predictable and multi-year funding for refugee responses; and increasing the volume of resettlement opportunities and other complementary pathways to third-country solutions, the 2021 HLOM recommendations also included a specific recommendation (**recommendation 6**) to “*facilitate more systematic, inclusive, and meaningful refugee participation.*” In this recommendation, states and other stakeholders are called upon to “*include refugees in GCR follow-up at all levels (local, regional and global)*”, to “*provide direct, flexible funding for refugee-led organizations (RLOs)*”, and to “*address barriers to refugee engagement, including through equal partnership approaches.*”<sup>25</sup>

**Despite this progress, many challenges remain.** Although some positive steps have been taken (see also section 3.1), the international humanitarian system largely remains premised on a top-down logic and relationship of provider/beneficiary, in which UN agencies are the protectors, refugees the protected and RLOs mere “implementing partners.”<sup>26</sup> RLOs are, all too often, still considered as helpless actors in urgent need of “capacity-building”, rather than powerful actors with unique advantages and (often) robust organizational structures.<sup>27</sup>

Moreover, RLOs still receive less than 1 percent of global funding streams<sup>28</sup>, while major international organizations (such as UNHCR) did not manage so far to ensure meaningful refugee leadership within their own organizational structures. Refugees are still unrepresented at UNHCR's Executive Committee<sup>29</sup>, while refugee representation at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum amounted to approximately 2 percent of all participants.<sup>30</sup> This is fundamentally problematic, as rightfully pointed out by the Global Refugee-led Network *Many working in refugee response would intuitively understand that a women's rights conference led by men is destined to be ineffective. Responders would likely question the validity of a straight, cisgender person as the spokesperson for a LGBTIQ+ rights organization, and critique a panel on indigenous rights with no indigenous panel members. However, within the refugee response sector, refugees are rarely present at sites of decision-making or even discussion.*<sup>31</sup>

And even when refugees are allowed to participate in such policy discussions, their participation is often limited to an advisory role rather than meaningful participation through which refugees can directly influence outcomes, which raises risks regarding refugee tokenization.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, researchers have also pointed out how it is not always clear to refugees/RLOs participating in policy processes if and how their input has been followed up with concrete action<sup>33</sup>; how the legal and political environment in which refugees participate in policy processes affect their ability to meaningfully influence policies; how the selection of refugee participants to policy processes can be highly contentious; how refugee participants often do not have access to vital information regarding the policy process itself and its internal dynamics; how refugees often lack means or resources to physically reach places in which decisions are made and dialogues held; and how refugees who are allowed to participate in policy processes are often not compensated for their time and input (in contrast to other, non-refugee participants).<sup>34</sup>

### 3. WHY IS MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES IN THE GLOBAL REFUGEE REGIME KEY?

*“There is a growing appreciation for the fact that including refugees in substantive ways is not only the right thing to do, but that it results in policies and programs that are more effective and legitimate.”*

Global Refugee-Led Network & Asylum Access (2020)<sup>35</sup>

#### 3.1. Meaningful Refugee Participation as an emerging norm in the Global Refugee Regime

In the past decade, refugee-led networks such as the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN)<sup>36</sup>, Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT)<sup>37</sup> and the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI)<sup>38</sup> have successfully advocated for the inclusion, and proper implementation, of clear and ambitious commitments regarding **meaningful refugee participation**<sup>39</sup> in global policy frameworks such as the Global Compact on Refugees. This had led prominent researchers to argue that “meaningful refugee participation” has become an emerging norm in the global refugee regime.<sup>40</sup>

A first important milestone was the convening by the GRN of the first-ever Global Summit of Refugees (June 2018), which called for greater leadership by forcibly displaced people in decisions about responses to forced displacement.<sup>41</sup> This was followed, in 2018 and 2019, by the convening of regional refugee summits in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, and Europe. In 2021 the GRN also launched a “**refugee participation pledge**”, in which states and other relevant actors are asked to:

*“(....) 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.”<sup>42</sup>*

Both UNHCR and individual donor states have since taken several actions to advance the notion of refugee participation. **Canada** was the first country to include a refugee advisor in its delegation to the 2019 GRF, which was followed (June 2020) by a public commitment to structurally include a refugee advisor in future Canadian delegations to meetings of the global refugee regime. In September 2020 a Refugee Advisory Network of Canada (RAN Canada) was also created, consisting of twelve refugee advisors to promote the meaningful participation of refugees in Canada’s engagement within the global refugee regime.<sup>43</sup> RAN Canada has, for example, provided recommendations to the Canadian government in advance of UNHCR ExCom’s meetings and the 2021 HLOM, and supported and prepared the refugee advisors in the Canadian delegation for these meetings. In 2021, both **Germany** and the **United States** (which has also created a US Refugee Advisory Board<sup>44</sup>) also started to include refugee advisors in their delegation to the HLOM, while progress has also been made to better include

refugees in the work of the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR).<sup>45</sup> In 2020, the **European Commission** also set up an “Expert Group on the Views of Migrants in the Field of Migration, Asylum and Integration”.<sup>46</sup> While promising first steps, many RLOs have at the same time taken a critical position, highlighting that it remains to be seen whether this will result in *meaningful* participation and that these same governments are still reluctant to provide financial support to RLOs.

**UNHCR**, meanwhile, has created an “Advisory Board of Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless Persons”, as well as a “Refugee-led Innovation Fund” that provides direct financial grants (maximum 45.000 USD/grant) to RLOs and Community-Based Organizations (CBOs).<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, UNHCR has created a “Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless People”, which has been set up to align internal efforts and develop a framework for UNHCR on engagement of and partnering with organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless persons. According to a UNHCR Briefing Note, this framework has five key objectives: 1) develop guidance on engagement and partnership with organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people; 2) develop a modality for partnership with organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people on an equal basis; 3) follow up on Global Refugee Forum (GRF) pledges on meaningful participation and partnership with forcibly displaced and stateless people -led organizations; 4) conduct a mapping and maintain an up-to-date database of organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people; and 5) create a repository & develop capacity building material to enhance partnerships with organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people.<sup>48</sup> Although promising developments, it remains to be seen whether the input gathered through these processes will translate into meaningful policy change. It should also be noted, in this regard, that UNHCR’s Strategic Directions for 2022-2026 do *not* specifically refer to RLO engagement, neither under the five strategic directions nor the eight “areas for additional, accelerated and targeted action” identified in the strategy.<sup>49</sup>

### 3.2. Meaningful Refugee Participation as a tool for more effective policies

Calls for meaningful refugee participation have increasingly been put forward as a pragmatic argument (meaningful representation results in better and more effective policies and programs), rather than (only) a moral one (refugees should be involved in discussions that influence their lives).<sup>50</sup> Indeed, a growing body of literature and research has identified, in recent years, **concrete evidence that more meaningful engagement of refugees can allow for more impactful refugee policies and programs:**

- Relevance and impact: Given that refugees and RLOs often have unique access to information, resources, networks and solutions that non-refugees are not always aware of, meaningful refugee participation can allow for more relevant policies and programs that are better aligned with refugees’ own preferences and needs.<sup>51</sup> This is also evidenced in a metasynthesis report of five external impact evaluations covering RLO-run programs, commissioned by the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), which found that the RLOs in question demonstrated high community connectedness, responsiveness, availability and cultural awareness, resulting in programming that was considered by refugees as responsive to their specific needs.<sup>52</sup>



Further stressing the vital importance of actively and meaningfully engaging refugees (and RLOs) in the development and implementation of interventions, a UNHCR manual on “Accountability to Affected Populations” (AAP) has emphasized the importance of refugee communities being able to “*meaningfully participate in key decisions throughout the program cycle: assessment and analysis, planning and design, resource mobilization, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.*” If not done properly, UNHCR has acknowledged that there is a high risk that there will be “*ineffective programming that does not build on the knowledge, capacities and needs of persons of concern*”, because refugees are “*best placed to identify the main risks, concerns and the most effective, sustainable solutions to the problems they face.*” Lack of meaningful participation and inclusion further risks to result in refugee community indifference, a reduced sustainability of programming, and reduced credibility and goodwill towards humanitarian actors.<sup>53</sup>

Similarly, it should be noted that the Chairs’ Statement of the Brussels VII Conference on the Future of Syria and the Region (Syria remains the biggest forced displacement crisis across the globe), in June 2023, for the first time explicitly recognized that “*in countries hosting Syrian refugees, civil society and refugee-led organisations continue to play a vital role in addressing refugee and host community needs.*”<sup>54</sup>

- Accessibility and reach: In the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI)’s metasynthesis report of five external impact evaluations covering RLO-run programs, as well as a research project by the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN) and the Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)<sup>55</sup>, it was found that RLO services often are more accessible to refugees than other interventions. Among other reasons, this has to do with the fact that RLO work is frequently characterized by neighbourhood-level service-delivery methods (for example through community centres), intentional targeting of specific populations, and interpretation and language programming.<sup>56</sup> RLOs were found to be closer to refugees according to the people’s perception and to have gained their trust through their consistent interactions, services, and follow up. Another advantage is that RLOs have access to regions that INGOs do not always have, allowing RLOs to provide help to communities more effectively.
- Legitimacy: When developing and implementing policies and programs, ensuring meaningful participation by refugees and RLOs increases a sense of ownership, trust and acceptance among refugees, thereby increasing the legitimacy of the intervention in question.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, meaningful refugee participation in global policy processes, such as the UN Global Refugee Forum, has the potential to increase the legitimacy of decisions being taken by the refugee regime, which in its turn can lead to higher numbers of refugees participating in the policy outcomes of the regime, ultimately resulting in a more effective global refugee regime.<sup>58</sup>



- Accountability: Given that RLOs are being run, and mainly staffed by, refugees who live among the refugee communities they serve, RLOs are often in a good position to capture feedback and complaints, resulting in more accountable policies and programs.<sup>59</sup> This is important: if formal and informal feedback from refugees is not systematically received and responded to and corrective action is taken, there is a high risk of inefficient and ineffective protection, assistance and solutions programs that do not meet the needs of refugee populations.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, meaningful refugee participation in global policy processes, such as the UN Global Refugee Forum, also enables refugees to more effectively raise their concerns regarding the conduct and performance of UNHCR, states and other actors within the global refugee regime.<sup>61</sup>
- Long-term, holistic solutions: RLO programming often adopt a holistic approach, in which immediate life-saving support and longer-term solutions are being offered to refugees at the same time. 11.11.11 partner Basmeh & Zeitooneh (B&Z), for example, is an RLO reaching over 100.000 Syrian refugees every year with protection, livelihoods, education and peace-building programs and advocacy interventions.
- Sustainability: given that RLO staff members often are refugees themselves who are part of the refugee community the RLO is serving, RLOs are there to stay for the displaced communities since their mandate and existence is justified by serving their communities. This in contrast to international organisations who might – for reasons related to lack of funding, changed donor or internal priorities, or security reasons – at some point reduce the scale of their operations or leave altogether. When this happens, as could be observed for example during the COVID-19 pandemic, community members are at the risk of being left without services, while RLOs continue to serve the communities.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, RLOs programming and interventions foster and promote durable solutions that focus on sustainability as a core element.

#### 4. HOW TO ENSURE MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION OF REFUGEES WITHIN THE GLOBAL REFUGEE REGIME?

In order to ensure *meaningful* refugee participation, the Global Refugee-Led Network and Asylum Access in 2020 issued a set of “Guidelines for Concrete Action”<sup>63</sup>:

1. **Facilitate *ongoing* and *sustained* access to strategizing and decision-making processes at every level**, and involve refugees in all steps and aspects of decision-making processes, including by: not limiting refugee participation to moments of ad hoc consultation; increasing the level of refugee representation within organization’s staff, including at senior and leadership level; allowing refugees to sit within governance structures (such as Board of Directors or UNHCR’s ExCom); by creating Advisory Committees; building equal partnerships with refugee-led initiatives; establishing donor funding criteria that require the direct and meaningful involvement of refugees; providing support to acquire visas to accommodate refugees’ differing abilities to travel; providing technological support to allow for remote participation when refugees are unable to physically attend meetings; and providing interpretation and translation services for refugee advocates.
2. **Facilitate refugee preparedness to engage in strategizing and decision-making moments**, including by: offering trainings, mentorship programs, employment opportunities and funding for professional development.
3. **Initiate self-reflection and enact changes that dismantle power dynamics**: the Guidelines call upon national and international institutions (including UNHCR, civil society organizations, donor states and host governments) to identify and change internal practices that make engagement unsafe, unproductive or impossible for refugees. As part of such efforts, the Guidelines encourage refugee response institutions to provide inclusion and diversity training to staff members.
4. **Finance refugee participation and refugee-led initiatives**, by offering flexible grant opportunities that fund core costs, compensate refugees for their time and expertise and cover travel fees.
5. **Address and prevent the tokenization of refugees**, by not limiting participation to low numbers or specific initiatives, to consultation or presentation, or to insensitively prompted storytelling; but by involving refugees in all steps and aspects of decision-making processes on a basis of equality.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Building on our own insights and experiences (working in equal partnerships with many RLOs), and drawing on previous work done by refugee-led networks such as the Global Refugee-led Network and the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, 11.11.11 offers the following recommendations:

### TO DONOR STATES:

- In the run-up or during the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, join the “Multi-Stakeholder Coalition on Meaningful Refugee Participation”<sup>64</sup> and the “Multistakeholder Pledge” on “Advancing Localisation in Displacement and Statelessness Responses.”<sup>65</sup>
- In the run-up or during the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, endorse the “Refugee Participation Pledge” of the Global Refugee-Led Network.<sup>66</sup>
- Building upon the best practices on refugee participation created by Canada (RAN Canada), the European Commission and the United States (USRAB), create a “Refugee Advisory Board” and include Refugee Advisors on your country’s national delegation to Global Refugee Forum meetings, High-Level Officials Meetings (HLOM), the annual meeting of UNHCR’s ExCom and the meetings of the ExCom Standing Committee, the High Commissioner’s Dialogue on Protection Challenges, and meetings of the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement.
- Publicly support the call by refugee leaders around the globe, to transform the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) into “Quadpartite” Consultations, by formally including a refugee co-chair alongside the chairs of UNHCR, states, and civil society.
- Explore modalities to provide sustained and flexible financial support for organizations led by refugees, including women and youth, and/or to RLO initiatives such as the “RLO-to-RLO fund”.<sup>67</sup>
- With the support of national parliaments, organize annual national hearings with RLOs to discuss progress and priorities.
- Increase efforts to apply the principle of “Accountability to Affected Populations” (AAP) in funding strategies and requirements, in order to ensure that funding recipients meaningfully involve refugees in the design, implementation and evaluation of interventions.
- Urge UNHCR to take concrete action towards implementing the below-outlined recommendations for UNHCR, including (but not limited to) through national statements delivered during the General Debate of UNHCR’s ExCom.

- Consider co-convening the 2027 Global Refugee Forum, in equal partnership with RLO networks and coalitions.
- Utilise innovative and digital methods to promote meaningful participation of refugees and RLOs and ensure their access to the tools needed for this.

#### **TO UNHCR:**

- Ensure a minimum refugee participation rate at the 2023 GRF of 25% of total participation, and for refugees to be represented on all panels. While doing so, increase the financial resources dedicated to supporting the participation and preparedness of refugee-led organizations and refugee participants at the GRF; and actively address administrative barriers to refugees' participation (travel visa, permits).
- During the GRF and subsequent policy moments, create a refugee safe space with refugee debriefers so that refugees can have a space to process their experiences, and jointly plan follow-up actions with other refugee leaders.
- Allow refugees to be directly represented in UNHCR's ExCom.
- Further expand the scope and size of the Refugee-Led Innovation Fund.
- Put in place a monitoring system, and report in the High Commissioner's annual report to the UN General Assembly, on how initiatives regarding refugee participation (including but not limited to the UN Global Forum, the "Advisory Board of Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless Persons" and the "Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless People") have been translated into concrete and tangible policy change.
- Intensify efforts to build equal partnerships with RLOs, in line with the guidelines provided by the Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) and Asylum Access.
- Increase the number of people with lived experience of forced displacement among UNHCR staff, including in leadership positions.
- Publicly support the call by refugee leaders around the globe, to transform the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) into "Quadpartite" Consultations, by formally including a refugee co-chair alongside the chairs of UNHCR, states, and civil society.

- Take further action to promote participation and co- leadership of local actors, including Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs), in inter-agency coordination mechanisms in contexts of forced displacement.<sup>68</sup>
- Take action to address language barriers that hinder refugees' proper access to information, by accompanying information documents with summaries that explain key points and implications in easy-to-understand language.

#### **TO INTERNATIONAL NGOs (INGOs):**

- Increase the number of people with lived experience of forced displacement among staff, including in leadership positions.
- Intensify efforts to build equal partnerships with RLOs and other local CSOs, in line with the guidelines provided by the Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) and Asylum Access, which focus on: implementing the values of diversity, representation, equity and inclusion; co-designing projects with local actors, including RLOs; ensuring co-leadership during project implementation and evaluation; promoting co-visibility of local actors to ensure sustainability and impact; and ensuring trust and transparency with local partners, specifically RLOs.
- Intensify efforts to ensure meaningful participation of refugees in own programming and planning, i.e. in the form of continuous engagement, feedback, and consultation.
- Advocate towards donor states and UNHCR to take up the above recommendations towards a more effective and participatory refugee regime, including by co-leading advocacy efforts with, or supporting initiatives by, RLOs.
- In the run-up or during the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, join the “Multi-Stakeholder Coalition on Meaningful Refugee Participation” and the “Multistakeholder Pledge” on “Advancing Localisation in Displacement and Statelessness Responses.”
- In the run-up or during the 2023 Global Refugee Forum, endorse the “Refugee Participation Pledge” of the Global Refugee-Led Network.

## REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/global-trends-forced-displacement-2022#:~:text=In%202022%2C%20the%20number%20of,the%20end%20of%20the%20year.>
- <sup>2</sup> See <https://reporting.unhcr.org/globalappeal#:~:text=2023%20Global%20planning%20figures,2023%2C%20according%20to%20UNHCR's%20estimations>
- <sup>3</sup> Safe, voluntary and dignified return; local integration in the country of first asylum or other local solutions; and resettlement or other complementary pathways to a third country. See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>, p 33-40.
- <sup>4</sup> Current UNHCR estimates show that a person in a situation of protracted forced displacement remains so for around 26 years. See <https://reporting.unhcr.org/unhcr-strategic-directions-2022-2026>, p 9. In its 2022 Global Trends report, UNCHR also stated that 67 percent of all refugees under its mandate are living in a situation of protracted displacement. See <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>, p 22.
- <sup>5</sup> This policy brief adheres to the definition of an RLO provided by the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), which defines RLOs as “any formal or informal initiative/organization that is founded and run by people of forced displacement background and/or any formal or informal initiative/organization where people of forced displacement are in major leadership positions and able to influence the work of the organization.” See [https://www.refugeeslead.org/files/ugd/3caee8\\_429d194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a\\_6.pdf](https://www.refugeeslead.org/files/ugd/3caee8_429d194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a_6.pdf), p 5. For more information and analysis of the UNHCR definition of “RLOs”, see <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/defining-refugee-led-organisations-analysis-unhcrs-2023-definition#:~:text=According%20to%20UNHCR's%20new%20definition,refugees%20and%20For%20related%20communities.>
- <sup>6</sup> See [https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/files/ugd/8abc91\\_19542681e3774471be9eba0247ba5d9f.pdf](https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/files/ugd/8abc91_19542681e3774471be9eba0247ba5d9f.pdf), p 1.
- <sup>7</sup> See <https://carleton.ca/learn/wp-content/uploads/Milner-CPSA-paper-refugee-participation-May-2021.pdf>
- <sup>8</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>
- <sup>9</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/statute-office-united-nations-high-commissioner-refugees> (cited in <https://carleton.ca/learn/wp-content/uploads/Milner-CPSA-paper-refugee-participation-May-2021.pdf>, p 5).
- <sup>10</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/excom-membership-date-admission-members>
- <sup>11</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/executive-committee>
- <sup>12</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/standing-committee-meetings>
- <sup>13</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/global-consultations-ngos>
- <sup>14</sup> See <https://carleton.ca/learn/wp-content/uploads/Milner-CPSA-paper-refugee-participation-May-2021.pdf>
- <sup>15</sup> See <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2023/03/14/flipping-narrative-roots-refugee-protection-system-are-colonial-and-racist>
- <sup>16</sup> In 2022, only 7.7 % (114,300 persons) of people who were estimated by UNHCR to be in need of resettlement (1,473,156 persons) were resettled. See <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/62b18e714.pdf> and <https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>
- <sup>17</sup> See in this regard, for example, an RPW case study regarding the lack of “Accountability to Affected Populations” (AAP) of UNHCR Lebanon: <https://refugeeprotectionwatch.org/putting-syrians-refugees-centre-stage-rpw-research-paper-into-the-accountability-to-affected-populations-of-unhcr-lebanon/>
- <sup>18</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>, p 4.
- <sup>19</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>, p 14.
- <sup>20</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>, p 16.
- <sup>21</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/global-refugee-forum-2023> for more background and details about the upcoming Global Refugee Forum, that will convene in Geneva from 13 to 15 December 2023.
- <sup>22</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>, p 42.
- <sup>23</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/global-compact-refugees-booklet>, p 42.
- <sup>24</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/2023-global-refugee-forum-concept-note>, p 1.
- <sup>25</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/summary-key-recommendations-and-follow-actions-2021-high-level-officials-meeting>
- <sup>26</sup> See <https://www.rsc.ox.ac.uk/publications/research-in-brief-refugees-as-providers-of-protection-and-assistance>, p 1. See also <https://refugeeprotectionwatch.org/putting-syrians-refugees-centre-stage-rpw-research-paper-into-the-accountability-to-affected-populations-of-unhcr-lebanon/>
- <sup>27</sup> See also in this regard <https://www.refugeeslead.org/post/refugee-led-organizations-need-sustained-flexible-funding-not-capacity-building#:~:text=RLOs%20should%20not%20just%20be.create%20sustainable%20community%20Dled%20institutions;and> and <https://asylumaccess.org/new-position-paper-building-equitable-partnerships/>, p 9.

- <sup>28</sup> <https://asylumaccess.org/new-position-paper-building-equitable-partnerships/>, p 8; See also <https://www.refugeeslead.org/post/refugee-led-organizations-are-limited-from-reaching-their-full-potential-by-resource-constraints>
- <sup>29</sup> See <https://odihpn.org/publication/reimagining-refugee-leadership-at-the-un-forcibly-displaced-people-should-sit-on-unhcrs-executive-committee/>
- <sup>30</sup> See <https://odihpn.org/publication/displacement-and-decolonisation-refugee-participation-and-leadership-in-the-forced-displacement-sector/>;
- <sup>31</sup> See [https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines\\_Web.pdf](https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf), p 10.
- <sup>32</sup> See <https://www.wrmcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/GRN-Power-and-The-Margins-The-State-of-Refugee-Participation.pdf>, p 2; <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/handle/10546/621363>; and <https://respondmigration.com/wp-blog/between-tokenism-and-self-representation-refugee-led-advocacy-and-inclusion-in-international-refugee-policy>. For a more in-depth analysis of the various models of refugee participation, see <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/refugee-participation-policy-making>.
- <sup>33</sup> See for example [https://www.wearecohere.org/static/media/Refugee\\_Participation\\_Report.e95dd36663810d1955f1.pdf](https://www.wearecohere.org/static/media/Refugee_Participation_Report.e95dd36663810d1955f1.pdf), pp 35-42.
- <sup>34</sup> See <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/research/refugee-participation-policy-making>, pp 18-22.
- <sup>35</sup> See [https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines\\_Web.pdf](https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf), p 6.
- <sup>36</sup> See <https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/>
- <sup>37</sup> See <https://refugeesseat.org/>
- <sup>38</sup> See [https://www.refugeeslead.org/\\_files/ugd/3caee8\\_0acfd563d4e24f34a1a1fdb1251c542.pdf](https://www.refugeeslead.org/_files/ugd/3caee8_0acfd563d4e24f34a1a1fdb1251c542.pdf)
- <sup>39</sup> In the absence of a definition of what constitutes “meaningful participation” in the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, the Global Refugee-Led Network has defined “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.*” RPW adheres to this definition. See [https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/\\_files/ugd/8abc91\\_19542681e3774471be9eba0247ba5d9f.pdf](https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/_files/ugd/8abc91_19542681e3774471be9eba0247ba5d9f.pdf), p 2.
- <sup>40</sup> See <https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/41/4/565/6581517>
- <sup>41</sup> See <https://odihpn.org/publication/displacement-and-decolonisation-refugee-participation-and-leadership-in-the-forced-displacement-sector/>
- <sup>42</sup> See <https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/refugee-participation-pledge>. Since then, the pledge has been signed by five donor countries (Australia, Canada, Denmark, Netherlands, United States of America) and 25 other stakeholders.
- <sup>43</sup> See <https://www.ranacanada.ca/>
- <sup>44</sup> See <https://refugeecongress.org/usrab>
- <sup>45</sup> See <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation%3A-An-Emerging-Norm-Milner-Alio/66a088842936fcabbceace7c79e5ff42daaa29a9>, p 586-591.
- <sup>46</sup> See <https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/expert-groups-register/screen/expert-groups/consult?lang=en&do=groupDetail.groupDetail&groupID=3734> and [https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/integration-and-inclusion-migrants-first-meeting-commission-expert-group-views-migrants-2020-11-13\\_en](https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/news/integration-and-inclusion-migrants-first-meeting-commission-expert-group-views-migrants-2020-11-13_en)
- <sup>47</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/refugee-led-innovation-fund-concept-note>; <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/refugee-led-innovation-fund/>; and <https://www.unhcr.org/ie/news/announcements/refugee-led-organizations-receive-unhcr-support-innovative-projects>
- <sup>48</sup> See <https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-s-task-team-engagement-and-partnership-organizations-led-displaced-and-stateless>
- <sup>49</sup> The Strategic Directions only include a brief reference to RLOs, under the heading “Realising the Strategic Directions 2022-2026, stating that “Growing our engagement with new civil society actors and organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people such as youth and women-led organizations is a priority and in line with our Grand Bargain commitments.” See <https://reporting.unhcr.org/unhcr-strategic-directions-2022-2026>, p 29.
- <sup>50</sup> See for example [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-ramazani\\_refugee-participation-policy\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-ramazani_refugee-participation-policy_final.pdf), p 1; <https://d3jwam0i5codb7.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/RefugeeParticipationinGRF-July2019-2.0-final.pdf>, p 1.
- <sup>51</sup> See [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-ramazani\\_refugee-participation-policy\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-ramazani_refugee-participation-policy_final.pdf), p 6. See also <https://www.epim.info/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Migrant-led-advocacy-across-Europe-Report.pdf> and [https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/documents/WRC%20Research%20Paper%20no.8\\_1.pdf](https://www.cigionline.org/static/documents/documents/WRC%20Research%20Paper%20no.8_1.pdf) (cited in [https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/\\_files/ugd/8abc91\\_19542681e3774471be9eba0247ba5d9f.pdf](https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/_files/ugd/8abc91_19542681e3774471be9eba0247ba5d9f.pdf), p 1); <https://odi.org/en/insights/meaningful-participation-means-refugee-led-organisation-rlo-inclusion/>; <https://odihpn.org/publication/supporting-meaningful-refugee-participation-at-all-levels/>; <https://odihpn.org/publication/centring-forcibly-displaced-people-in-policy-making/>; and <https://odihpn.org/publication/from-anecdote-to-evidence-researching-rlos-in-east-africa-and-the-middle-east/>
- <sup>52</sup> See [https://www.refugeeslead.org/\\_files/ugd/3caee8\\_429d194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a6.pdf](https://www.refugeeslead.org/_files/ugd/3caee8_429d194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a6.pdf), p 10.
- <sup>53</sup> See <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/protection-principles/accountability-affected-people-aap>
- <sup>54</sup> See [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/65267/2023\\_06\\_15\\_chairstatement.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/65267/2023_06_15_chairstatement.pdf), p 3.



- 
- <sup>55</sup> See <https://odihpn.org/publication/from-anecdote-to-evidence-researching-rlos-in-east-africa-and-the-middle-east/>
- <sup>56</sup> See [https://www.refugeeslead.org/files/ugd/3caee8\\_429d194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a6.pdf](https://www.refugeeslead.org/files/ugd/3caee8_429d194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a6.pdf), p 10. See also <https://odi.org/en/insights/meaningful-participation-means-refugee-led-organisation-rlo-inclusion/>
- <sup>57</sup> See [https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-ramazani\\_refugee-participation-policy\\_final.pdf](https://www.migrationpolicy.org/sites/default/files/publications/mpi-ramazani_refugee-participation-policy_final.pdf), p 6.
- <sup>58</sup> See <https://carleton.ca/learn/wp-content/uploads/Milner-CPSA-paper-refugee-participation-May-2021.pdf>, p 17; and <https://odihpn.org/publication/centring-forcibly-displaced-people-in-policy-making/>
- <sup>59</sup> See <https://odihpn.org/publication/refugee-led-organisations-towards-community-based-accountability-mechanisms/>; and <https://odihpn.org/publication/from-anecdote-to-evidence-researching-rlos-in-east-africa-and-the-middle-east/>. For more on the importance of "downward accountability" from RLOs towards the refugees they serve, see <https://odihpn.org/publication/refugee-led-organisations-towards-community-based-accountability-mechanisms/>
- <sup>60</sup> See <https://emergency.unhcr.org/protection/protection-principles/accountability-affected-people-aap>
- <sup>61</sup> See <https://carleton.ca/learn/wp-content/uploads/Milner-CPSA-paper-refugee-participation-May-2021.pdf>, p 17.
- <sup>62</sup> See <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/transformational-impact-refugee-led-organisations-communities-issue-83-article-7#:~:text=RL0s%20develop%20community%20skills,%2C%20families%2C%20neighbours%20and%20communities>
- <sup>63</sup> See [https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines\\_Web.pdf](https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf). See also, in this regard, <https://carleton.ca/learn/wp-content/uploads/Milner-CPSA-paper-refugee-participation-May-2021.pdf>, p 14-15.
- <sup>64</sup> See <https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/general-6#:~:text=The%20multi%2Dstakeholder%20Coalition%20for,where%20strategies%20are%20being%20developed>
- <sup>65</sup> See <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/pledges-contributions/multistakeholder-pledges-2023/multistakeholder-pledge-advancing-localisation>
- <sup>66</sup> <https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/refugee-participation-pledge>
- <sup>67</sup> See <https://www.refugeeslead.org/apply>
- <sup>68</sup> As outlined in recommendation 3 of the final recommendations of the 2022 UNHCR-NGO consultations: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/40370>