



Promoting Meaningful Participation in the Global Refugee Forum

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Introduction

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) calls for the meaningful participation of refugees in its implementation. In making decisions about policies and programs, it is essential to include those who will be fundamentally impacted by those decisions. The notion of “nothing about us without us” is not only ethically appropriate. Those with lived refugee experience – whether still in displacement, resettled, or returned – offer necessary perspectives to inform smart, practical, and sustainable programs. That refugee participation was not always prioritized, at both the local and global level, is a detriment to the international system.

Refugee Participation Prior to Global Refugee Forum

There is reason to be skeptical about whether meaningful participation in the GRF will be achieved. In interviews for this paper, several experts and refugee leaders described past attempts at facilitating refugee participation in Geneva-based meetings as largely pro forma exercises. They failed to afford refugees real opportunities to influence policy. For instance, a single refugee might be invited to speak at an opening plenary session but would otherwise have no substantive bearing on the outcome of the policy discussions.

Fortunately, this time looks to be different, largely because of the opportunities for refugee-led groups to be involved in the lead up to the Global Refugee Forum and at the event itself. To their credit, UNHCR and others have made a significant effort to facilitate refugee inclusion. There is still, however, a long way to go and time is short between now and the forum. The key is to support existing gains, build on them, and lay the groundwork for meaningful participation at the GRF and beyond.

One of the most influential actors pushing for refugee participation at the GRF is the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), formerly called the Network for Refugee Voices, a consortium of refugee groups across six global regions. The network’s leadership includes refugees from a variety of contexts, several of whom have been resettled to different corners of the world. The network has begun hosting their own regional refugee summits with the hope that the outcomes of these summits will contribute to discussions at the GRF on ensuring effective implementation of the GCR. Additionally, the GRN have been collaborating with the Global Youth Advisory Council (GYAC), a group of 15 refugee youth leaders appointed by the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Overall, the GRN emphasizes the importance of avoiding token refugee representation at UN meetings, the value for refugees to participate in leadership and advocacy training, and the need for follow-up by the humanitarian and development community regarding the way refugee contributions are used.¹ Based on contributions from its members, representatives of the GRN and GYAC issued statements at the GRF preparatory meetings with concrete recommendations to promote refugee participation in the lead up to the forum, as well as at the event itself.

Opportunities for engagement have opened and momentum is building. This is thanks to the initiative of refugee-led groups, as well as the establishment of a more enabling environment by UNHCR. The key is to build upon this engagement, broaden the base of participants, and establish systems that can grow and evolve well past the first GRF.

Challenges to Meaningful Participation

This will be no easy task, and several key challenges and barriers must be overcome. First, the bulk of the

¹ “Policy Discussion and Outcomes Paper,” Geneva: Asia Pacific Summit of Refugees (APSOR), August 2018.

planning for the GRF remains Geneva-based. It is very much an insiders-game filled with jargon and evolving processes that are not always clear, even to seasoned officials.

Second, supporting meaningful participation is a complex, multi-pronged pursuit, but at present, the resources dedicated to this objective are limited. As noted above, the small GRF team at UNHCR that is tasked with outreach in advance of the forum has multiple, competing priorities, including engaging with financial institutions, the private sector, and other UN agencies. Facilitating refugee participation is one objective among many. Indeed, several international NGOs and independent groups are also supporting refugee engagement, but additional donor support is needed.

Adding to the challenge, some have pushed back against the very notion of facilitating refugee participation in high-level UN meetings. Several States have indicated concern that any acquiescence to refugee inclusion at high-level UN meetings signals an openness to welcoming refugees across their own borders. Another, different line of argument, is that it is impossible to achieve true representation of such a diverse community, so it is best to avoid the effort entirely.

Going forward, there are concrete steps that UNHCR can take, with the support of governments and in collaboration with NGOs and others, to expand and enhance refugee participation in the remaining months before the GRF, ensure robust refugee participation at the forum itself, and galvanize meaningful refugee participation over the long-term. Significant gains have already been made. Now the task is to build upon them.

Recommendations

To prepare for the Global Refugee Forum:

- UNHCR should facilitate remote refugee participation at the next GRF preparatory meeting
- UNHCR should continue supporting refugee participation at regional NGO consultations
- UNHCR should partner with NGOs and refugee networks to offer advocacy training ahead of the GRF

At the Global Refugee Forum:

- Member States and others should include refugees as members of their delegations to the GRF
- UNHCR, with support from the Swiss government, should invite a refugee-only delegation to the GRF

To galvanize refugee participation over the long-term

- UNHCR should support the creation of comprehensive mapping of refugee-led groups
- UNHCR should create a Refugee Participation Office at UNHCR
- After the GRF, UNHCR should evaluate how refugee contributions were incorporated and report back to refugees the results of the evaluation

Conclusion

Facilitating meaningful refugee participation at the GRF is a complicated but critical mission. UNHCR has already begun taking steps to facilitate this participation, and additional steps can be taken to expand on this work and ensure a robust, meaningful participatory experience for refugees in advance of the GRF, as well at the event itself.

Based on the initiative of refugee-led groups themselves, support for meaningful refugee participation is finally beginning to achieve the prioritization it deserves. Refugees must be seen as partners, knowledge-holders, and actors who have perspectives and proposals to offer beyond identifying needs. The robust engagement of several self-organized refugee groups is evidence that refugees are certainly capable and ready to contribute to discussions on both needs and solutions to the refugee situation.

UNHCR and others have made significant strides to enable refugee participation in the lead up to the GRF. A strong effort in the coming months will be needed to make that participation as meaningful as possible and to set the stage for only greater inclusion in the future.