

Event Report

Prepared by LERRN and R-SEAT

From Accountability to **Meaningful Participation: Refugees** & the Governance of International Refugee Responses

Hosted & supported by :

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Context

ON October 3rd, 2022, the Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations and R-SEAT (Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table) hosted a hybrid roundtable discussion, with some 100 participants joining in person in New York or virtually via Zoom.

Accountability and participation are now understood as central to collective action in response to most global human-centered issues. The same is true in discussions of responses to the needs of refugees. When the UN General Assembly affirmed the Global Compact on Refugees in 2018, it acknowledged that “responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.”

The roundtable discussed how to implement this commitment from the Global Compact on Refugees, recognizing that meaningful refugee participation is becoming an important norm in the international refugee system. Speakers and participants considered “lessons learned” from recent efforts to promote meaningful refugee participation in the governance of the international refugee system, including the practice of having refugee delegates as part of Member State delegations to meeting of the international refugee system, and the establishment of new Refugee Advisory Councils. They also reflected on how meaningful refugee participation can make global responses to displacement more legitimate and effective.


Introductory Remarks & Presentations

Introductory remarks were provided by **Ambassador Bob Rae (Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations)**, **Mustafa Alio (R-SEAT: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table)**, and round-table moderator, Project Director, **James Milner (LERRN: Local Engagement Refugee Research Network)**. They gave an overview of the work of R-SEAT and the context for the discussion, including recent developments in meaningful refugee participation.

They emphasized the importance of shifting the discussion from “if” meaningful refugee participation is important to a discussion of “how” it can be implemented in practice and in policy processes. These remarks were followed by short presentations from three round-table speakers.

1. **Anna Crowley (International Migration Initiative, Open Society Foundations)**

Anna Crowley discussed how refugee leadership in local and national contexts can be translated into refugee participation at the global level. In the process of preparing the Global Compact on Migration, many national and global migrant-led civil society organizations were engaging with Member States in New York to have a productive dialogue that reflected the concerns of migrants. In contrast, refugee-led organizations were not as involved in the process of preparing the Global Compact on Refugees. Open Society Foundations responded by seeking refugees who were already engaged in policy discussions at local or national levels and connecting them to global policy discussions. Crowley highlighted several examples of refugee leaders engaging in local and national policy discussions, such as Malaysian asylum seekers engaging with Malaysian parliamentarians to advocate for their status and rights, and Venezuelan partners in Colombia engaging with local authorities. However, these refugee leaders were disconnected from global policy discussions. Going forward, it will be important to link those involved in local and national discussions to broader global policy spaces, creating integrated rather than parallel systems. Crowley highlighted three practical ways to support refugee participation: access, preparation, and resourcing. First, everyone can play a role in facilitating access for refugees in policy discussions at local, national, and international levels.



Sometimes it is assumed that refugee leaders in Geneva have connections to local and national decision-making authorities. However, Crowley emphasized that exposure at the global level may open doors to local and national-level interactions with governments. Second, preparation is important in ensuring that refugees can contribute substantively to global conversations. Preparation may range from formal training to more informal mentorship and should focus on what refugees want to learn. For example, the US Refugee Advisory Board has offered a training course in partnership with Georgetown University. In the course, refugee leaders learn about diplomatic strategy and practice, as well as about the politics of global policy discussions. Preparation is critical to shifting from tokenistic identity-based participation to expertise-based participation. Third, implementing participation will require resources and funding, beyond only funding travel. For example, OSF has provided funding for childcare to facilitate the participation of refugee women.

2. Rez Gardi (R-SEAT: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table)

Rez Gardi discussed the example of the most recent Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR). Many refugee leaders are advocating for a transition to Quadpartite Consultations, formally including a refugee co-chair alongside UNHCR, states, and civil society. In 2021, for the first time, refugee leaders were involved in preparing for the ATCR with the co-chairs the Swiss government and the Swiss Refugee Council. In 2022, refugees again played an important role in preparing for ATCR alongside the United States government and the Refugee Council of the US. This is an example of how refugees have gone from participating on an ad hoc basis to co-designing the agenda. More than 35 refugees attended ATCR 2022 as part of refugee, NGO, and state delegations. At every ATCR panel, a refugee was selected to speak not based on identity, but rather based on expertise. Partners must shift from a tokenistic approach where refugees are only selected based on their personal experiences and invited to tell their individual stories, to one that welcomes the professional contributions of refugee experts.

Gardi highlighted the need for refugee participation in a global context of rising displacement, ongoing and new crises causing displacement, low resettlement numbers in comparison to the need, and overall ineffective and insufficient collective responses. It is estimated that 15% of the global population will be displaced by 2050 and the world does not seem prepared to respond to that magnitude of displacement. Gardi emphasized that refugee participation is not the end goal, rather it is a means to the end of better, more effective, and more legitimate responses to displacement. Finally, Gardi noted that the inspiring response to the Ukrainian crisis shows the power of decisive collective action and offers an opportunity to recommit to support all refugees, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or race.

3. Leah Zamore (Centre for International Cooperation, New York University)

Leah Zamore discussed the importance of refugee participation in New York, not only in Geneva. The United Nations General Assembly has played an important role in the governance of the global refugee regime, historically through adopting the founding documents of the global refugee regime (the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol) and in recent years through adopting the New York Declaration and the Global Compact on Refugees. Today, refugees are part of “high politics” which generally take place in New York rather than in Geneva. Zamore also noted that General Assembly resolutions now explicitly reference participation. Meaningful refugee participation is about much more than symbolism because it requires redistributing power and resources to ensure refugees have a seat at the table.

Zamore also noted the importance of economic participation and refugee inclusion in the labour market, which is discussed in Chapter 4 of the 1951 Convention. In practice, many of these rights are not realized, as refugees continue to be exploited in their host countries and often do not have access to decent work. Even without citizenship, refugees should have a full voice and participation in the economic and social fabric of their host countries. Finally, Zamore noted the positive response to displaced Ukrainians in Europe. There is the potential going forward for the Ukrainian response to set new minimum requirements for future refugee responses and to improve responses for all refugee groups.

Interventions & Discussion

1. **Anna Maria Diaz (Deputy Coordinator of Coalición por Venezuela) – pre-recorded** Given technical difficulties in playing the recorded video, the points were instead summarized by moderator James Milner.

The video emphasized the importance of refugee-led responses in Colombia, Brazil, and Peru, as well as the critical role of partnerships with government officials.

2. Ricardo Rizzo (Head of the Division of Humanitarian Assistance, Government of Brazil)

Ricardo Rizzo responded to the video, remarking how the response to Venezuelans in Brazil is a good example of refugee participation at the operational level. He highlighted the success of the government-led taskforce that engages with local Indigenous leaders to design local responses to Indigenous Venezuelan refugees and migrants. There has also been success in Venezuelan economic participation in local communities. Given local successes, host communities should not be excluded from participation mechanisms. Brazil is currently hosting the Quito Process and is exploring the possibility to include a refugee advisory group within this process, bringing refugee participation to the regional scale.

3. Elizabeth Campbell (Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration at the US Department of State)

Elizabeth Campbell shared about several initiatives from the United States to renew their involvement in refugee responses and to implement refugee participation. Campbell reported on the progress in rebuilding the United States refugee resettlement system, where the United States has doubled their admission of resettled refugees this past fiscal year and intends to set the ceiling at 125,000 resettled refugees for the 2023 fiscal year. Campbell also highlighted the inclusion of refugees as part of the recent US delegations to the ATCR, the High-Level Officials Meeting, and UNHCR's Executive Committee. Campbell praised the recent launch of the United States Refugee Advisory Board. The United States also recently made several pledges about refugee inclusion and self-reliance.

4. Dale Busher (Women's Refugee Commission)

Dale Busher noted how discussions of refugee participation often focus on policy processes rather than operations, with operational agencies missing from the conversation. Busher encouraged participants to consider how operational agencies can identify the skills of those who are displaced to shape the response from the outset, rather than recruiting refugee participation at a later stage of humanitarian responses.

5. Nathalia Sánchez García (Mission of Colombia)

Natalia reported that Colombia will be a co-host of the Global Refugee Forum in 2023 and asked how they can ensure meaningful refugee participation and learn from the experience of the 2019 Global Refugee Forum. She also noted the importance of considering other means of meaningful participation beyond voting, since many national constitutions restrict voting rights to citizens.

6. Scott Pohl (UNHCR New York)

Meaningful participation has been a UNHCR priority for many years, especially at the operational level. Within refugee communities, refugee leaders take on important roles such as teachers and psychosocial support workers.

However, at the global level, participation is still tokenistic. UNHCR is working to strengthen local Refugee-Led Organizations, allowing them to access flexible financing, building capacity, and creating linkages with global institutions. In addition, within refugee populations, different groups face barriers unique to their identities when accessing decision-making spaces. UNHCR is working to address barriers for women, youth, and members of the LGBTQ+ community so that the refugee voices heard are more representative of the diverse refugee population

7. Anna Crowley (International Migration Initiative, Open Society Foundations)

Roundtable speakers responded to these interventions and reflected on questions from the Zoom chat. Crowley noted that refugees often act as first responders, yet lack the equitable partnerships, resources, and financing that is usually associated with this work. To remedy this gap, she recommended working with refugees to co-design programming, not just sub-contract refugees to implement it. Crowley also suggested that Colombia may create a process that engages refugees leading up to the Global Refugee Forum and may consider pledges that relate to refugee participation.

8. Rez Gardi (R-SEAT: Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table)

Rez Gardi suggested that for countries that are hesitant about refugee participation, it may be useful to reframe participation from “a nice thing to do” to emphasize the practical benefits and better return on investment. She also drew attention to the fact that less than 2% of participants in the 2019 Global Refugee Forum were refugees, noting that it would not be acceptable to have only 2% women participants at a UN Women’s Conference. Gardi highlighted the work that remains and encouraged participants to pursue this work rather than celebrate prematurely.

9. Leah Zamore (Centre for International Cooperation, New York University)

Leah Zamore discussed why refugee participation is not happening as quickly as participation for other minority groups. Since the existence of refugees challenges the sovereign state system, refugee participation is a significant political act. Despite this, refugee participation is critical for effective responses. For example, the Jordan Compact failed largely because of its lack of refugee participation. Refugee participation is also needed outside of refugee-specific policy, such as in development processes.

10. Derakshan Qurban-Ali (Researcher)

Qurban-Ali suggested that the system that governs refugees was designed to systematically exclude them and even when participation mechanisms exist, they are often challenging to access. Qurban-Ali also noted that many refugees are from persecuted minority communities that are not represented by state delegations. It may be necessary to consider the representation of “nations” not just states.

11. Questions posed on ZOOM from the Swiss Mission

Members of the Swiss Mission shared three questions for reflection in the Zoom chat: What measurement systems exist for assessing accountability and participation? How can they be standardized in such a way that they become comparable? Is there a global knowledge hub that can promote the exchange of knowledge and best practices

12. Hourie Tafech (US Refugee Advisory Board)

A representative from the US Refugee Advisory Board explained that some approaches to meaningful participation falsely assume that refugees do not have the capacity to lead and as a result focus exclusively on training. Refugees already have skills and expertise, but it is necessary to address the various forms of systematic exclusion from the policy table.

13. Sana Mustafa (Chief Executive Officer, Asylum Access)

Sana Mustafa shared the example of the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RLLI) as a promising model that so far has financed 17 Refugee-Led Organizations. This grant mechanism reduces various barriers to accessing funding, such as by allowing RLOs to submit applications in multiple languages and by removing pre-conditions to apply for funding, such as removing a requirement to have a bank account before submitting an initial application. She reiterated the importance of recognizing the diversity among and within groups of forced migrants rather than seeing refugees as one homogenous population.

14. Raphaela Schweiger (Program Director Migration, Robert Bosch Stiftung) – pre-recorded message

Due to technical difficulties, the event was not able to hear the second pre-recorded intervention, in which Raphaela Schweiger highlighted the substantive value of refugee participation in the implementation of Germany's inclusive approach to refugee settlement, and how this experience has informed the Bosch Foundation's active engagement with the issue of meaningful refugee participation.

Key Takeaways

Meaningful refugee participation is important, especially in the context of growing global displacement. The conversation is shifting from the why to the how on both implementing mechanisms and reducing barriers to participation. Meaningful refugee participation is important in practice and in policy processes at all scales: operational, local, national, regional, and international, in both New York and Geneva.

While the United Nations state-based system is often exclusive, there are successful examples and promising practices of refugee participation at each of these scales. New York has a role to play through the work of the General Assembly and various committees, as well as through discussions of “high politics” where refugee and displacement issues frequently appear as political issues. There is a need to further link existing participation at operational and local scales to international policy discussions. R-SEAT continues to work to support states in replicating promising practices and invites other states to work with them to include refugee delegates for meetings and establish Refugee Advisory Councils. States can also provide the necessary resources to financially support refugee participation and to fund refugee-led organizations. Questions about representation should not delegitimize refugee participation, but rather seek to recognize the diversity of refugees and facilitate the participation of refugees from many backgrounds and demographics. It is important to shift participation from an identity-based approach that includes refugees only for their personal stories, to an expertise-based approach that recognizes the potential professional contributions of refugees. The speakers agreed that creating a global knowledge hub on refugee participation would be a beneficial future direction. Overall, the event celebrated the exciting progress towards implementing meaningful refugee participation, but also recognized the significant work that remains for meaningful participation to be put into practice in New York and beyond.