

Outcomes Document

The Role of Refugees in Responses to Displacement: How Can Canada Support and Facilitate Refugee Participation in Local, National and Global Settings?

A Policy Dialogue Held on September 26th, 2019, 1:30pm – 4:00pm

University of Ottawa, Fauteux Hall

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Introduction

This Outcomes Document reflects major points of discussion and proposals for action put forward at a Policy Dialogue jointly convened by the uOttawa Refugee Hub and the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN). It is the first of a series of such dialogues planned for 2019-20, with two main objectives: to foster candid discussion of strategically important issues in global refugee protection among practitioners, researchers and policymakers; and to surface concrete and actionable ideas to address these issues, with an emphasis on identifying opportunities for Canadian leadership on the national and global stage.

This first Policy Dialogue focused on the vital and urgent issue of refugee participation in responses to displacement. Participants strongly affirmed the ethical imperative to include refugees in all aspects of responses to displacement – advanced by refugee-led organizations under the principle of “nothing about us without us” – and emphasized the urgency of the issue in view of the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF) to be held in Geneva on 17-18 December 2019. There was consensus that implementation of the Global Compact for Refugees (GCR) at all levels – local, national and international – must include a strong focus on refugee participation. Participants outlined several concrete proposals for achieving meaningful refugee participation and expressed a desire for further collaboration, to both advocate for, and directly advance, the implementation of these proposals.

The 22 participants in the Dialogue included individuals with lived experience as refugees, including leaders of national and global refugee-led networks, as well as academic and policy-

focused researchers, representatives of national and local civil society organizations, and a UN agency. Collectively, they represent a broad cross-section of expertise and decades of experience on refugee and forced displacement issues. The discussion was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, and as such, while the substance of the discussion (including this Outcomes Document) may be freely shared, the identity and affiliation of individual speakers and participants are not identified.

Discussion

What does meaningful refugee participation look like?

While there is currently no consensus on what refugee participation means, participants in the Policy Dialogue rejected the notion of establishing a fixed definition. Rather, meaningful participation ought to be **understood through practice**, with its meaning evolving over time and according to context. There was broad agreement that refugee participation is multi-faceted and arriving at a unified definition is unlikely. Rather than investing energy in definitional debates, there was a desire to **focus on actions** that can be taken to strengthen refugee participation in a broad range of settings. Several participants strongly endorsed the development of a set of **guiding principles** for refugee participation, as a way to create shared understandings of the characteristics and objectives of meaningful participation without the need for a fixed definition.

It was noted that the principle of **“nothing about us, without us”** bears similarities to other efforts for increased agency and participation – including efforts led by people living with HIV/Aids, people living with disabilities and gender equality advocates – and the experience of those movements may offer valuable insights. Some have employed guiding principles as a central organizing framework.

It was agreed that there is a distinction between **representation** and **participation**, with each raising different questions. Both can lead to tokenistic (performative) inclusion, rather than agency, if not properly designed and implemented.

With respect to **representation**, questions relating to legitimacy often arise: Who can legitimately represent refugees (and whom specifically can they claim to represent)? Are the individuals or groups who purport to speak on behalf of refugees sufficiently representative? Do they adequately reflect the diversity of refugee communities and circumstances? While recognizing that these are important questions, participants emphasized that they are not unique to refugee representation and must not be used as a reason or pretext to deny refugees access to deliberations that directly affect them. There must be a starting point, and imperfect representation is better than none.

With respect to **participation**, it is important to consider the stage of the process at which refugees have input, the type of input they have, the weight that is given to their input, and the financial and other logistical barriers to participation. **Meaningful participation** requires

involvement in agenda setting, implementation, and evaluation. It means participation in the **genesis and design** of projects, not just at the implementation stage, in order to ensure refugees have **agency and decision-making power** in the use of finite resources, and that the subject-matter expertise of refugees is respected.

A distinction was drawn between two reasons that refugee participation is important. It is valuable because it can lead to **better outcomes** by leveraging refugees' expertise and perspectives. However, quite apart from this instrumental value, participation is also essential for **legitimacy** where decision-making power is being exercised in ways that directly implicate the lives and well-being of refugees.

Participants drew attention to feminist discourse, where the framing of key terms such as 'gender equality' and 'substantive equality' is necessarily a **flexible endeavor** with key principles identified, committed to, and then built upon over time as feminist priorities shift and new perspectives – on intersectionality and gender and sex diversity, for example—enable new definitions to develop. Concepts of refugee participation and agency are likely to undergo similar evolution. Likewise, it was noted that queer critical perspectives caution us from reinforcing existing practices of exclusion, particularly in refugee resettlement processes. The **diversity of refugee experience** must be meaningfully engaged with, including how gender, class, race perception and other relevant personal characteristics intersect with refugeehood.

Likewise, refugee voices and means of meaningful participation will be different **depending on context**. What is understood as meaningful participation in Uganda, for example, will be different to processes in Lebanon, Canada, or Geneva, etc. There are always **existing networks** and initiatives 'on the ground' in refugee producing, hosting, or diaspora communities, and these networks should be sought out, consulted, and centrally involved in responses to local, regional, and global issues of displacement. Care should be taken to ensure this **participation is broad** and includes perspectives that can often be marginalized, such as those of women, girls, and other minorities. **Local ingenuity** should not be routinely dismissed in favour of internationally institutionalized processes and metrics of success.

Financial and logistical barriers to refugee participation

Some **key barriers** to meaningful participation were addressed. For example, while many events and consultations occur internationally or in the Global North, the **financial and logistical** accommodations for these events are rarely made in a timely manner to genuinely enable refugee participation. It was noted that invitations to attend these events are often made very late, and organizers fail to consider the necessary time to get a visa or travel clearance. It is also rare that refugees are offered sufficient financial reimbursement for travel and accommodation as well as reasonable per diems. Furthermore, where travel is not available, **technological alternatives** to ensure participation, such as videoconferencing and appropriate language translation, are rarely made available. Participants suggested that **regional consultations** should

be encouraged to diversify the locations of dialogue and boost access and opportunity, particularly in the Global South.

Proposals for Action

Participants outlined several concrete proposals for achieving meaningful refugee participation and expressed a desire for further collaboration to both advocate for, and directly advance the implementation of these proposals, which were as follows:

1. A Mentorship Program for Refugee Leaders in Canada

Participants strongly supported further collaboration to develop a proposal for a mentorship program to build a wider pool of refugee leaders across Canada, who have the necessary training and experience to effectively represent the perspective of refugees in policy and public dialogue nationally, regionally and globally. A key focus of such a program would be to encourage and mentor people who have already demonstrated leadership at the local level, in order to enhance their capacity to engage at the national and international levels. Canada is well-placed to foster such an initiative, as refugee-led networks and organizations are already active and globally engaged. See Appendix A for further details.

2. Refugee participation in GCR-related fora

Participants strongly endorsed the view that there must be meaningful participation in *all* aspects of GCR implementation. It was suggested that countries such as Canada should include refugee representatives on national delegations to the Global Refugee Forum, and UNHCR should ensure refugee participation in GCR-related meetings, including ExCom. The 2019 Global Refugee Forum was viewed as an important test of the willingness of states and institutions to meaningfully include refugees.

3. Guiding principles for refugee participation

Participants strongly endorsed the development of a practical set of guiding principles that describe and guide refugee participation. The process of developing these principles – which requires further consideration – needs to be led first by refugee-led organizations, supported by allies in civil society, the research community and governments. These guiding principles should inform and support meaningful changes in development and humanitarian programming, approaches to policy making, research, funding and a broad spectrum of other activities. Participants also emphasized that organizations with a mandate to serve or work on behalf of refugees should ensure there is refugee representation in their governance structures.

4. A Global Refugee Assembly

Participants saw value in the concept of a Global Refugee Assembly to elect representatives and develop a framework for meaningful consultation and deliberation at regional and international

levels. This Assembly could be facilitated by a digital platform to facilitate communication, organization and deliberation. It was noted that concepts similar to a Global Refugee Assembly have been previously developed (notably, through the work of the High Commission for Refugees in the 1920s), and these precedents could be beneficial to examine along with literature on models of democratic representation.

5. Support of meaningful participation through creative mediums

Participants raised the importance of creative forms of cultural and political expression as a means of meaningful participation. Whether through literature, photography, or other artforms, it was urged that meaningful participation be broadened to include means of creative expression. Specifically, these mediums of expression should be supported and funded to enhance the ‘voices’ of people who have experienced displacement, and embrace the diversity of their experience. They can also be a means of effective political critique.

6. The provision of funds to enable meaningful refugee participation

Participants raised the idea of creating a standing fund which could draw on contributions from multiple actors, including member organizations, states, and international donors. This fund would facilitate the participation of refugees and refugee-led organizations at national, regional, and international fora. One of the clearest barriers to meaningful refugee participation is the financial cost of travelling to consultations and other events, particularly in the Global North. This is a simple but often insurmountable barrier to refugee participation.

7. Improving meaningful refugee participation in research

Participants suggested that researchers working on forced displacement should move toward more participatory approaches, including at the research design stage. The importance of community-based research as a methodology was acknowledged, as was the point that research projects ‘about refugees’ must recognize and respect refugees’ expertise – including with respect to the questions that require investigation. Funding models should also reflect participatory criteria. For example, the evaluation of refugee-related research should include not only metrics of reach and influence (e.g. citations), but also the degree of meaningful refugee participation.

Appendix A

Proposal for a Mentorship Program for Refugee Leaders in Canada

Refugee leaders have identified the need to build a **wider pool of refugee leaders across Canada**, who have the necessary training and experience to effectively and independently represent the perspective of refugees in policy and public dialogue in Canada. The risk of repeatedly inviting a limited list of leaders is that they may be unable to respond to all of the opportunities that arise due to personal schedules.

The launch of a **Mentorship Program for Refugee Leaders in Canada** has been proposed to address this need and build a broader cohort of refugee leaders within the country, who have the necessary skills and experience to independently participate and effectively represent refugee perspectives in policy and public discussions.

This **Mentorship Program** would aim to train 10 refugee leaders per year. The initiative would be managed by a Steering Committee that includes refugee leaders and members of Canadian civil society from academic, NGO, and community sectors. While it would be necessary to develop selection criteria, the program would issue a **call for applications** from refugee leaders wishing to participate. The Steering Committee would then work to match successful applicants with a mentor from civil society, who would work with the refugee leader for 12 months.

This 12-month mentorship would include:

- Participation in a mentor-run Policy Engagement Workshop in Ottawa. This workshop would be attended by the cohort of refugee leaders and organized by the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN).
- Support for refugee leaders to travel to meetings and events with their mentor, in order to shadow them and receive real-time training on engaging in policy and public debates.
- Opportunities for collaboration between mentors and refugee leaders in preparation for specific events and meetings, including comments on speaking points and advocacy strategies.
- Training opportunities to develop specific skills the refugee leaders may wish to improve, such as public speaking, policy analysis, and fundraising.

In order to launch, the Mentorship Program requires:

- **Volunteers** from civil society to form the Steering Committee, develop the terms of reference for the program (including the selection criteria), and match the selected refugee leaders to mentors.
- **Funding** to facilitate travel for refugee leaders participating in the program.