

Report: RAN Canada's Webinar on Meaningful Refugee Participation

Introduction:

The Refugee Advisory Network of Canada (RAN Canada) organized its inaugural webinar titled "Meaningful Refugee Participation: Taking Stock and Charting the Way Forward" in celebration of World Refugee Day on June 20, 2023. With 53 participants from 10 different countries, the webinar explored the concept of meaningful refugee participation and discuss its significance in improving the lives of refugees. The panel featured representatives from four refugee-led organizations (RLOs), including Dr. Hourie Tafech from United States Refugee Advisory Board (USRAB), Rabia Talal Almbaid from New Zealand Refugee Advisory Panel (NZRAP), Mustafa Alio from Refugees Seeking Equal Access to Table (R-SEAT), and Tsering Norzom Thonsur from Refugee Advisory Network of Canada (RAN Canada). The panel discussion was moderated by Dawit Demoz from RAN Canada.

Opening Remarks:

James Milner, the Project Director of the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN), introduced the webinar by emphasizing the importance of meaningful refugee participation within the global governance regime. He highlighted that refugees are not passive recipients of aid but active agents in finding effective solutions to improve their lives. Milner referred to an article on meaningful refugee participation co-authored by Rez Gardi, Mustafa Alio, and himself. Dawit then took the floor as the moderator and opened the webinar by presenting the topic and its alignment with the theme of World Refugee Day this year, titled "Hope Away from Home, In Hopes that Refugees Always Feel Included." He then introduced RAN Canada and elaborated on the significance of empowering refugees at both grassroots and policy levels to drive meaningful refugee participation forward. He proceeded to introduce the panelists and asked about their individual perspectives on the concept of meaningful refugee participation.

Panel Discussion:

During the panel discussion, the participants briefly shared their perspectives on what meaningful refugee participation meant to them. Dr. Tafech stated that meaningful refugee participation should aim for normalization, where refugees do not have to advocate for their place at decision-making tables. Rabia emphasized the importance of ensuring that all refugees' voices, including those who consider themselves former refugees, are heard and valued. Tsering expressed her encouragement from this year's World Refugee Day, where the hope carried by refugees should be matched by non-refugees. Mustafa highlighted that meaningful refugee participation is a learning curve and a means to achieve better outcomes, calling for patience and mutual efforts between refugee advisors and governments.

Key Discussion Points:

1. Governments' Role in Supporting meaningful refugee participation: The panel discussed how governments could go beyond appointing advisors and actively support meaningful refugee

participation. Mustafa used the analogy of an organ donation, where both the organ (refugee participation) and the body (government) need to put effort into creating a mutually beneficial environment. He emphasized the importance of knowledge production from refugees on the ground and its translation into government policies. Dr. Tafech added that governments should demonstrate genuine intention and enable refugee access to the decision-making processes that lead to substantive changes.

2. **Barriers to Refugee Participation:** The panel identified language barriers and inadequate funding mechanisms as significant obstacles to meaningful refugee participation. Rabia highlighted the need for translation services during government meetings to ensure that the perspectives of non-native speakers are heard. Tsering pointed out logistical challenges, such as travel restrictions and financial constraints refugees face, which limit their participation in international meetings. Dr. Tafech stressed the historical trend of wrongful engagement, where refugees were included only to share their stories without utilizing their technical expertise and professional experience. So meaningful refugee participation is also a way to resist the stereotype of refugees as passive agents of aid.
3. **Balancing Power Dynamics:** The discussion addressed the power dynamics between refugees in resettlement countries and those in host countries. Mustafa acknowledged the privilege and access to rights enjoyed by refugees in resettlement countries but emphasized the importance of not forgetting the experiences and needs of refugees in host countries. Rabia added that there is an ethical obligation to remember the struggles faced by refugees in host countries. Especially as the refugees in host countries should be informing the advocacy of refugees in resettlement countries, demonstrating the need for equitable participation.
4. **Role of Civil Society Organizations and Evidence-Based Research:** The panel discussed the contributions of civil society organizations (CSOs) and evidence-based research in supporting meaningful refugee participation. Rabia highlighted how research provides a platform for refugees' voices to be heard and creates a case for policy changes. Dr. Tafech emphasized the need for refugee advisors to hold leadership positions within CSOs and avoid falling into a checklist item that satisfies a diversity agenda. She also emphasizes that academia should collaborate with RLOs to avoid creating knowledge bubbles and advance measurable impacts of meaningful refugee participation in policymaking. Similarly, Tsering concluded that research is important in generating data that can inform policymaking to improve the lives of refugees.
5. **Advancing Equity, Inclusivity, and Accountability:** The panel explored how meaningful refugee participation can contribute to advancing equity, inclusivity, and accountability. Dr. Tafech emphasized the need to address institutional and systemic barriers to effectively implement diversity and inclusion. She stressed that in turn there will be stronger accountability structures because refugee leaders understand firsthand that these decisions are a lifeline. Rabia added that the role of storytelling in humanizing refugees and combating racism and xenophobia presents tangible examples of equity and inclusivity.

Q&A Session:

During the Q&A session, the panelists discussed successful examples of refugee participation in decision-making processes. Mustafa provided examples of initiatives, including funding allocations for educational

RLOs in Canada and the involvement of refugees in creating the economic mobility pathway program (EMPP), a complementary pathway adjacent to resettlement. The panel also discussed the upcoming Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2023 and the importance of refugee inclusion in agenda-setting and policy-making processes that looks at meaningful refugee participation beyond government delegations.

Conclusion:

The webinar provided valuable insights into the concept of meaningful refugee participation and the challenges and opportunities associated with it. The panelists emphasized the need for sustained collaboration, genuine intention from governments, and equitable representation to advance meaningful refugee participation. The discussion highlighted the role of CSOs, evidence-based research, and refugee voices in shaping policies and improving the lives of refugees. The panelists emphasized that meaningful refugee participation is a continuous learning process and called for ongoing efforts to ensure better outcomes for all refugees.

The conversation can be followed on [RAN Canada's Twitter](#), where they welcome further engagement and feedback on the topic of meaningful refugee participation. To learn more about RAN Canada, please visit the [website](#).

Resources shared during the event:

Milner, James, Mustafa Alio, and Rez Gardi. "Meaningful refugee participation: An emerging norm in the global refugee regime." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 41, no. 4 (2022): 565-593.

<https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article/41/4/565/6581517?login=false>

UNHCR. 2023. "Definition – Refugee-Led Organization." Relief Web.

<https://reliefweb.int/report/world/definition-refugee-led-organization-rlo>.