

Canadian refugee makes history as UN delegate

Man who fled Syria after war broke out says conference was 'surreal'

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With little fanfare, Canada made history at a recent United Nations conference in Geneva by having a refugee as part of its official delegation.

While Mustafa Alio's role as a state delegate had gone largely unnoticed, it marked a historic moment for the international community to — for the first time — have a refugee at the table among world leaders and diplomats who made high-level global policy decisions that dictate the fate of millions of displaced migrants seeking resettlement.

"It was transformative and had never happened before. It might have been a pedestrian act to have a refugee sitting next to a minister as an adviser, but it's unprecedented to have a refugee sitting there as a national delegate," said Prof. James Milner, policy director of the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network based at Carleton University, who attended the Geneva conference.

"It is not just the right thing to do to include refugees in the process — who knows the issues and challenges of resettlement better than refugees themselves?"

Alio, who sought asylum in Canada in 2012 after war broke out in Syria, was seated next to Immigration Minister Marco



Mustafa Alio, left, who sought asylum in Canada in 2012, was seated next to Immigration Minister Marco Mendicino at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva in December.

Mendicino and Leslie Norton, the Canadian ambassador to the UN, at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva hosted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in December.

Although the 35-year-old Toronto resident had previously attended many international refugee conferences as an observer, being granted equal status with global policy decision makers as an official Canadian delegate took it to a whole new level and left him feeling "scared."

It was frightening, Alio said, because he had no knowledge of UN protocol or how to behave and speak around heads of state and foreign government officials — a totally different experience than he had previously as an observer.

"It was a new thing for me and

doors to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees. He quit his job as a financial adviser to devote himself to the non-profit group that helps refugees find jobs.

"It makes a world of difference to have somebody with that experience of living in limbo to help other refugees because we understand where they are coming from and they don't feel ideas are pushed on them by others based on some pre-thoughts of what they need and want. A doctor can't prescribe treatment if they don't consult with the patient," said Alio.

"Refugees want to be listened to. You need to talk to them and build trust and include them when designing and developing these policies and programs ... Refugees have the drive, passion and experience to be creative. Their involvement legitimizes the process."

The UNHCR started engaging refugees in the 1990s through refugee camp committees by consulting them on local daily operations, but Milner said policy decisions have always been made top-down at the state level without refugee input.

However, the war in Syria led to the exodus of a new wave of educated, articulate and connected refugees who assumed an active role as agents of change in the face of the growing erosion of refugee rights imposed by the international community.

Refugee-led groups started to organize to get their voices heard leading up to the UN General Assembly meeting in

2016 when UN members adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants vowing to better protect displaced people. The 2018 Global Refugee Compact subsequently made dozens of references to refugee participation underlining the role of refugees in designing policies and programs.

Mark Yarnell, senior advocate and UN liaison for Washington-based Refugees International, said his organization has been advocating for refugee participation in global policies for four decades so the people whose lives are directly impacted by the decisions of world leaders can have a say at the table about their rights, such as the freedom to work and move around.

Yarnell said having a refugee on an official delegation is a significant milestone though the representation of refugees at the Geneva forum was still dismal; only 70, or two per cent, of the 3,000 people who attended the forum were refugees or former refugees.

In a recent report, Refugees International identified logistical and financial barriers for refugees to participate in international policy debates as well as the pushback by some states that fear refugee inclusion signals an openness to welcoming asylum seekers across their own borders.

The inclusion of Alio on Canada's official delegation "is a small step but an important one in the right direction," Yarnell said, adding there is still a long way to go.