

## **Between Tokenism and Self-Representation: Refugee-Led Advocacy and Inclusion in International Refugee Policy**

**Haqqi Bahram**

Linköping University

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### **Abstract**

*There have been increasing efforts at the international level to make migrants and refugees' participation and inclusion in policy more meaningful. Yet, little is known on their perspectives about these possibilities and the outcomes of these efforts. Drawing on the case of one refugee-led initiative, the Network for Refugee Voice (NRV), in attending the drafting process of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), this paper describes the refugee-led advocacy approach to attaining meaningful participation and representation on high policy platforms, including the United Nations organizations. I examine NRV members' experience of advocating for refugee inclusion against a background of recent international commitment to refugees' meaningful participation. Based on interviews, my analysis identifies the achievements as self-evaluated by NRV members as well as the challenges they face while highlighting the obstacles and opportunities for a more inclusive international refugee policy.*

# **Between Tokenism and Self-Representation: Refugee-Led Advocacy and Inclusion in International Refugee Policy<sup>1</sup>**

Haqqi Bahram<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

While migration is a standard characteristic of social life, it is often perceived as a challenge on several levels. This is mainly due to the observed impact of migration on global, political, social and economic affairs as well as its relation to transformative societal changes in contemporary societies (Castles, 2010). In response to the challenges of migration, various policies have emerged aiming at regularizing population movements (Woolfson and Likic-Brboric, 2008; Betts, 2011; Piper and Grugel, 2015). These policies, that are predominantly designed by states and essentially sustain the interests of states, have resulted in what is generally referred to as global migration governance. With states' dominance over migration governance, processes of policy formation have mostly failed to be inclusive of all concerned stakeholders, especially migrants and refugees. Within existing institutions for international policy formation, migrants and refugees are often absent, unrepresented, misrepresented or tokenized.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written between August-October 2019, and a version of it was presented at the 'Unpacking the Challenges & Possibilities for Migration Governance' conference (University of Cambridge, 17-19 October 2019). The paper has undergone several review processes, and was last updated on 16 July 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Institute for Research on Migration, Ethnicity and Society (REMESO), Linköping University, Sweden  
[haqqi.bahram@liu.se](mailto:haqqi.bahram@liu.se) +46 11 36 30 01

Recently, there have been increasing efforts at the international level to make migrants and refugees' voices heard and allow for their inclusion in policy. In fact, such efforts are not new, as opportunities for representation of migrants' interests in policy have been recognized since the end of the last century, notably at the European Union level (Geddes, 1998). While the dominance of states in this policy arena has been unshakable, actors in global migration governance and refugee policy have developed various kinds of terminology promising participatory assessments, community consultation and community-based protection (UNHCR, 2006; 2008; 2013). However, these practices, as I will argue, present limited and sometimes conditional opportunities for participation.

Amidst the tension between the exclusivity of policy platforms designed as formal state procedures and growing claims for the inclusion of non-state actors, it is questionable whether global refugee regimes and inter-state policy can cater for meaningful participation for all stakeholders; more significantly for the refugees themselves.<sup>3</sup> In the following, I briefly review the place of migrants and in particular refugees in global migration governance and refugee policy and describe the recent observed shift in approach through the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (NYD) and the following two processes of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) (UN, 2016). This is followed by a discussion of the case of one refugee-led initiative, the Network for Refugee Voice (NRV), representatives of which attended the process of drafting the GCR. The aim of this is to analyze refugee-led advocacy and activism approach to attaining meaningful participation and representation at higher political platforms, including United Nations (UN) organizations. I focus on achievements that NRV members identify and the challenges and conditionalities they face while highlighting the opportunities that exist for a more inclusive global refugee policy.

## **Global Migration Governance and Refugee Policy**

In a globalized world, where inequality, political unrest, adverse livelihoods, environmental disasters, wars and internecine conflicts drive large numbers of people out of their homes (Hollenbach, 2010), migration is routinely framed by receiving states as a threat or a problem to be managed. Solutions to the 'the problem of migration' range from repressive measures such as tight border control to positions that address root causes (Castles, 2010). Across this range of perspectives, migration is often perceived more as a threat rather than as a social reality that has always been an integral part of human history.

Within the global outlook on migration, some people are perceived as 'mobile' professionals or expats while others, less wanted, as irregular migrants and refugees. It is the latter category that often preoccupies the core of attention and policy response to the extent that the twenty-

<sup>3</sup> The question can equally apply to all migrants, regardless of the distinction between refugee and migrant. However, for the purpose of this article, the scope of analysis will cover only refugees.

first century has been arguably named 'the age of migration' (Castles et al., 2013) or 'the century of the migrant' (Nail, 2015). The figure of the migrant as Nail points out has acquired this space because the states too often understand the migrant as 'a figure without its own history and social force' (Nail, 2015:4). In the contexts of displacement, refugees are often portrayed in public discourse either as victims in need for protection or as a threat to the nation, economy or social cohesion. Such perspectives tend to avoid broader understandings of the conditions of inequality and problems of globalization as a system of inequitable participation (Castles, 2003, 2010; Moses, 2006) and instead target migration as the root problem in itself. Moreover, these approaches center on policy to 'fix the problem' while overlooking the subtle realities of people on the move by homogenizing them into groups of migrants, refugees, temporary workers, etc.

Alongside this homogenization, a whole set of complex, incoherent, fragmented, asymmetrical and multi-level responses have been produced under the label of global migration governance (Woolfson and Likic-Brboric, 2008; Betts, 2011; Piper and Grugel, 2015). The urgency by which migration is seen as a problem has exacerbated attempts to homogenize global governance regimes. This has appeared in growing political turns to establish a 'greater global governance' (Piper and Grugel, 2015:263) where coordination between states has been encouraged and induced through various initiatives within and outside the UN. At the same time, it is not unknown that the concern with what states consider as 'the social consequences of migration at the global level' (Piper and Grugel, 2015:263) has been the major drive for most, if not all, of these initiatives. As such, policies on migration designed by states are definitely expected to stem from states' interest and serve these interests in the first place while the rights of migrants, as expressed in various constellations and categorizations, are consequently placed lower in the order of states' priorities (Geiger and Pécoud, 2010; Georgi, 2010). Likewise, on national levels, approaches to migration policy and 'regularization' as Morris (2006:90) contends are more often related to 'state concern about the governance of people present on national territory' than about upholding human rights.

The protection of refugees as part of the global governance of migration in a wider sense has also been mainly state dominated. Starting with the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its Protocol (UN, 1951, 1967) all the way down to the recently adopted (and generally considered quite progressive) NYD, the language of burden and responsibility sharing among states has been prevalent. The NYD precisely underlines 'the centrality of international cooperation to the refugee protection regimes' (UN, 2016:13). That is why, in the light of states' exclusive involvement and the absence of an equivalent refugee representation that could promote refugee rights and engage in policy, these configurations of global governance of refugee protection carry an inherent failure in being inclusive of the perspectives of those directly affected by these regimes. It remains however a matter of investigation whether the multiplying frameworks to expand the refugee protection regime have amplified the right to asylum or rather tightened the 'governance' of this right by states.

## **Refugee Inclusion and the Recent Shift**

In the light of what has been named 'the refugee crisis', the NYD, which further pronounced the need for burden and responsibility sharing, was adopted by the UN General Assembly on

19 September 2016. Reaffirming the need to protect the rights of refugees and migrants and the role of the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in this regard, the NYD came out as a complementary procedure to fill in protection gaps as recognized in former international law, specifically in the 1951 Refugee Convention and its Protocol.<sup>4</sup> Whether such gaps can actually be remedied through the NYD and its ensuring processes of the GCR and GCM is a matter of debate (Türk and Garlick, 2016; Ineli-Ciger, 2019). Nevertheless, the NYD is significant in two main aspects. Firstly, actors globally acknowledge that refugee policy needs to be decided, coordinated and implemented in a spirit of solidarity and resource sharing, despite a remaining language of burden- and responsibility-sharing. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees reflected exactly on this in an interview in 2018 saying that ‘we need to try and find a response that is better than we have managed so far’ (Bernard and Policinski, 2017). Secondly, and more importantly, is the recognition that refugees should be partner in developing refugee policy for it to work. This stands out in several parts of the Declaration text as well as in Annex I on the *Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework* which clearly indicates this shift:

The comprehensive refugee response framework will be developed and initiated by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, in close coordination with relevant States, including host countries, and involving other relevant United Nations entities, for each situation involving large movements of refugees. A comprehensive refugee response should involve a multi-stakeholder approach, including national and local authorities, international organizations, international financial institutions, regional organizations, regional coordination and partnership mechanisms, civil society partners, including faith-based organizations and academia, the private sector, media and the refugees themselves (UN, 2016:16).

The inclusion of refugees is motivated in the above excerpt as part of responses at national and local level whereas the development of policy is still restricted to states and UN entities. However, it is remarkable that this recent configuration of multi-stakeholder approach considers refugees themselves as actors to be involved in the response in contrast to the previous language of community participation. The value of this can be further manifested by recognizing that refugee involvement is now being officially inscribed in global policy declarations.

Following from the NYD, the drafting of the GCR and GCM started as two separated processes, tasked for facilitation to the UN organizations, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) respectively. This raises a number of questions on the reasons behind this split between the protection of refugees and migrants and the implications of that for the rights of persons while on the move and after. For refugees

<sup>4</sup> Volker Türk and Rebecca Dowd (2014) have identified these gaps in three categories: First, application gaps related to whether a certain state has acceded or not to the *1951 Convention and its Protocol*; implementation gaps that concern how the *Convention* is interpreted and implemented by the states; and finally normative gaps that cover all the issues related to changing refugee contexts, forced displacement, large movements, admission and burden sharing that have not been comprehensively addressed in the *Convention*.

and migrants alike, it is unclear that this split would necessarily serve to develop protection mechanisms. Some scholars have already raised such concerns about the GCR and the GCM. For example, Costello (2019:649) concludes that ‘the bifurcated Global Compacts risk endorsing an unduly narrow conception of refugeehood, and failing to root out the refugee containment that taints the global refugee regime’. Others have highlighted concerns about the practicality of GCR (Ineli-Ciger, 2019), when implemented on its own in isolation from the GCM. The top-down approach taken through the NYD towards providing protection meant that actors working on advocacy relevant to, but not limited to, refugees had to split accordingly or organizationally in their involvement during the process of drafting both the GCR and GCM. The result was that advocacy had to split between migrants’ rights and refugees’ rights respectively, while issues are actually overlapping.

Eventually, in spite of the recent shift towards giving more space for participation to all stakeholders, refugees and migrants’ involvement was restricted to discussions and consultations in both processes. While for the GCM, the involvement of several networks representing civil society organizations of migrants, diaspora and grassroot communities took place in a series of consultations,<sup>5</sup> the GCR witnessed an active and persistent participation by civil society actors, INGOs, youth representatives and self-organized refugee groups, among them the Network for Refugee Voices (NRV) which is the focus of the analysis here. This involvement, although not powerful enough to claim a balancing role, is still a significant reflection of the recent interest towards more participation by refugees which is also starting to catch particular attention among many actors including researchers.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the visibility, self-organization and active presence of refugees themselves in the context of the GCR represent a unique experience. NRV as a refugee-led initiative and their involvement with the GCR provide an important case through which the recent configuration of policy for refugee inclusion can be studied.

## Methodology

### ***Participants: The Network for Refugee Voices***

As representative of refugees and their experiences, NRV defines itself as ‘a group of refugee and refugee-led organizations working to contribute to processes and commitments aimed at reforming the international refugee protection regime, including the UN Global Compact on Refugees and Compact for Migration’ (NRV, 2017a). The Network was officially founded online in 2017, following an earlier actual meeting in Brussels in 2016, by a group of twelve

<sup>5</sup> According to the official information from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) these consultations took place in several regions and were anchored by, among others: Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA), Cross-Regional Center for Refugees and Migrants (CCRM), Pan-African Network in Defense of Migrants Rights (PANiDMR), Migration and Development Civil Society Network (MADE) and Platform for the International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM). Full list of organizations can be found at IOM website.

<sup>6</sup> Two recent studies, Lenette et al. (2019) and Rother, S. and Steinhilper, E. (2019) have provided in various ways an evaluation of youth and refugees’ participation at international policy events including the processes of the GCM and the GCR.

young (mostly Syrian) refugee activists and advocates, seven males and five females. Since its inception, the group chose to operate at a global level to address the lack of refugee inclusion in ongoing international discussions leading up to the process of the GCR. Having refugees as active agents and experts in international policy making is what the group took to its focus with a long-term vision to engage in local and national levels alongside the implementation of the GCR.

While little emphasis is put on the Network's organizational structure and membership criteria, NRV's website has a 'Declaration for Effective and Sustainable Refugee Policy' that is open for endorsement for individuals and organizations that 'believe in refugee-led solutions to the global migration crisis' (NRV, 2017b). In practical terms, membership and involvement in refugee-led advocacy through NRV does not follow strict criteria as it is open to all refugees and refugee-led organizations who endorse the NRV's Declaration.

The participation of the NRV in the drafting course of the GCR occurred during all the thematic discussions under the Network's name and later as part of the collective civil society bloc in the more limited space of the formal consultations. While the work of NRV has primarily focused on the GCR process, the network has been sharing knowledge about refugee experiences and advocating for self-representation and inclusion of refugees at all levels of the refugee protection regime. During this short period of time, the Network has come to be known at a large scale, gaining more visibility, and its members have made the case for refugee-led advocacy at several significant policy platforms worldwide. This also translated into a wider reach to more refugees and refugee organizations leading up to the organization of the first ever Global Summit of Refugees in June 2018 in Geneva (NRV, 2018) where new partnerships and more organized and global structures for refugee representations were considered. In contrast to instances where refugees or refugee representatives could be invited to participate at national or regional fora on refugee policy, NRV's global reach, and the network's concern with processes of global migration governance and refugee policy, has represented a unique position in terms of advocacy.

While this experience of refugee-led advocacy and its visibility on the political scene as a whole is noteworthy, it is vital to raise questions with regards to the substantial achievements in policy as self-evaluated by NRV and as manifested in the text of the GCR, and how refugee activists from NRV themselves perceive their experience with self-representation and advocacy at this stage.

### ***Procedure and data analysis***

This study is based on qualitative data gathered through a small-scale project with members of the NRV. The main source of data comes from three in-depth recorded interviews conducted online in the summer of 2019. Additionally, I had several individual conversations (ca. 20) with founders, members and supporters of the NRV throughout the years of 2017-2018. I also participated in my individual capacity as a refugee in the activities of NRV on several occasions and was a supportive member during that period. Overall, the main question that drove my inquiry was based on NRV members' perspectives on their participation in the GCR process as well as their role and advocacy work as refugee activists.

Collected data has been analyzed following thematic analysis techniques outlined by Ryan and Bernard (2003). This involved thoroughly scrutinizing the data for both 'broad and

sweeping' and 'more focused' themes. Eventually, these four main themes were identified and explored: refugee agency, challenges and tokenism, support, and future prospects. All quotes that are used in the context of these themes have been anonymized upon request from participants in the interviews. While differences in perspectives are referred to in the presentation, any leads to personal identification of individual persons have been accordingly removed.

Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I have been self-reflective on my position as both an activist and a researcher. As an activist researcher, I shared an 'overt commitment' with the research participants 'toward a shared political goal' (Speed, 2006:71). This duality of positions, I believe, has enabled me to arrive at better research results. As Hale (2001:13) also argues, activist research has the potential to render 'deeper and more thorough empirical knowledge of the problem at hand, as well as theoretical understanding that otherwise would be difficult to achieve'. Although such a position comes with its own set of challenges (Couture, 2017), being an activist and a researcher for me carries no contradiction. At the same time, I have been especially conscious that the argument reflects the collective experience and voice of the network, rather than my personal opinions. This was done while being extra careful to the specificities of each and every response and experience. Accordingly, ideas and quotes presented below have been conveyed as NRV members articulated them.

## **Findings and Discussion**

The history of refugee and migrant activism demonstrates a plurality of political expression, experiences, and spaces (Nyers and Rygiel, 2012). These can range from demonstrations, marches and strikes in public spaces to boycotts, petitions, and networking. (Caraus, 2018) especially when claiming for a space in policy formation concerning migration and asylum. While experiences of migrant and refugee activism have been diverse, the bottom-up approach to claiming rights and refugees as agents devising their own solutions has been a common feature (Bradley et al., 2019). This approach which aims to change the world from the bottom up (Caraus, 2018), is now further attempting to be part of the space in the top which has previously been exclusively reserved for state actors. NRV's advocacy and activism as an example reflects this attempt as a whole and demonstrates the achievements made along with the various challenges that the network members have experienced. Their narratives below also refer to the kind of support they have gained and what the future of refugee-led advocacy and activism looks like for them.

### ***Agency and self-representation: 'nothing about us without us'***

Answering to the questions of why it is important to have a refugee voice at present and what can be described as the biggest achievement for NRV within the GCR and beyond, members of the Network highlight that their very agency and claiming rights for self-representation can be considered an achievement on its own right. They further refer to the process of the GCR as a concrete platform where they could actualize this achievement. As a member of NRV

describes below, the GCR has been a critical moment for them to invoke their transformative capacities and develop agency to effect policy change:

*We have been very vocative about saying nothing about us without us, and that is because we are the people affected by refugee policy, and that is why we have to be part of it. The number of refugees is increasing and so is change in refugee policy, whether through UNHCR or via other actors. This is the moment when we can do something for both the host communities and refugees. The participation of NRV in the process is an achievement in itself. Before the New York Declaration in 2016, no refugees were seen on the table or attending any high-level events. When we attended the events of drafting the GCR, NRV, I can say, was the only group which was made up of refugees and self-organized by refugees.*

The notion of agency as I refer to here, and which is also evident in the NRV member's narrative, is that of collective action with transformative and transcending capacity mostly discussed in feminist theory (Eduards, 1994; Lister, 2005). It is an agency that makes new ways for putting the refugee voice forward in the advocacy beyond victimhood (Wroe, 2018). The fact that refugee policy affects first and most refugees entails that refugees be part of the process as the informant suggests here. Not only is it ethically appropriate but also effectively needed to inform policies and practices (Drozdowski and Yarnell, 2019:1). Additionally, claiming the equal right that all humans can be agents of change especially in matters that directly concern their lives (Caraus, 2018:802) is what the motto of 'nothing about us without us' is trying to assert. However, it is how and in what capacity refugees can claim this space that has not always been evident. For the NRV member here, the NYD (and by extension the following process of the GCR) has represented a critical point where refugees could transform agency into action and occupy the space for initiating change. Another NRV member agrees with this and further refers to the GCR as the right opportunity for refugees to gain this space:

*GCR served as a really good SMART target;<sup>7</sup> it was specific and measurable. We as NRV had something to look for, we had a date, we had a process, so it was convenient to have the GCR as a policy target. That also meant that we knew what we would go through and that we should be prepared.*

Although the NRV as movement is quite new to the scene of international policy on refugees, what the members show here indicates a determination to actualize their vision for meaningful participation so that they, to borrow Lister's (2005) words, do not 'get by' but 'get out of' the process with results. The SMART goal as mentioned above refers to the fact that NRV members are aware of the various elements involved in designing refugee policy and are further mindful about where impact can be achieved. Moreover, they know that the process of drafting the GCR has presented a great opportunity to advocate for formalizing refugee self-representation in the later stages of implementation and evaluation of the GCR.

Recognizing that in a world where power is distributed inequitably, for NRV members acting on sole agency, although extremely vital, cannot always bring about transformative change.

<sup>7</sup> SMART is an acronym commonly used in policy matters to denote goals that are specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and tangible.

Therefore, tangible achievements are very important for them to sustain the agency of the group and the collective capacity as refugees. The sense of achievement, no matter how big or small, is essential for the sustainability of any social movement. In the case of NRV, achievements following a strategic choice of goals represent important cornerstones for refugee agency. During the GCR, in spite of little space given for NRV in formal consultations, the members highly praise their participation as refugees and indirect influence on the draft and the commitments from states to sustain refugee inclusion in policy:

*The biggest success when it comes to the GCR is that you have countries committing to include refugees in their policy design through meaningful engagement. This is really important. Yes, they might not do it, they might not commit to it, but this is unique, and it is something that can be referred to in future policy design. It's not a deal maker; however, it is useful a tool and a reference point.*

In fact, the final text of the GCR reflects in some parts such commitments when it comes to refugee participation, particularly in two parts, the Programme of Action and the Follow-up and Review as follows:

13. The programme of action is underpinned by a strong partnership and participatory approach, involving refugees and host communities,' (UN, 2018:3).

106. States and relevant stakeholders will facilitate meaningful participation of refugees, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth, in Global Refugee Forums, ensuring the inclusion of their perspectives on progress (UN, 2018:20).

It is important to note here, however, that it remains unclear to identify whether the shift in the language of participation, especially with the addition of words like 'meaningful', has been a direct achievement of refugee-led campaigning or not. The document itself does not clarify what 'meaningful' participation will look like in application (Drozdowski and Yarnell, 2019). But for NRV members, at least, their advocacy and communication with state representatives, throughout the process, is perceived to have played a major role.

At the same time, NRV's advocacy does not appear to be challenging the normalizing role of the state in contrast to what scholars such as Caraus (2018:803) argue about other migrants and refugee social movements which potentially break from the confines of the nation-states through radical cosmopolitan appeal. Reflecting on the role of the states within the GCR and refugee policy and how far a refugee voice can challenge this, an NRV member says:

*Because it was a state-led process, so having a foot there is not easy. At the end of the day states want to listen to states. However, we remedied this through working with certain supportive states.*

For NRV members, to be vocative about demanding rights of self-representation and inclusion does not necessarily mean undermining the significant role of cooperation with supportive actors, including states, as the above quotation suggests. The outreach of the network has indeed focused on utilizing the various channels for such cooperation as long as they serve the vision of ensuring refugee self-representation and inclusion in policy.

In the last two years, members of NRV, both founders and new members, have been active not only in the GCR process but also on multiple local, national and global platforms, and they took the opportunity to proclaim their rights in various occasions. In the narratives of the network's members, this adds up to their list of achievements taking into consideration the short period of time in which they have been operative. The Global Summit of Refugees is repeatedly mentioned as an example of the cooperative platforms that have been initiated by refugees for refugees while also inviting other stakeholders to be part of it.

Acting on their agency, claiming their space for self-representation, navigating through policy processes and targeting the right platforms where a change can be made and reaching out to all stakeholders are all elements of the achievement that NRV members have connected to their involvement with the GCR as demonstrated above. And it is on the basis of these achievements that the members of the Network aspire to continue and develop their activism throughout the implementation and evaluation of the GCR in various contexts. This is highly significant for NRV in order to keep a sustainable presence beyond the GCR and to monitor the commitments and pledges of including refugees in policy. And even more so is it for NRV members to prove that by their participation in the GCR, they have averted a tokenistic representation which is undeniably one of the major challenges for refugee activism in general (Jones, 2019), and of which NRV's work can be no exception.

### ***Challenges, tokenism and the 'favorite refugee'***

Reflecting on the major challenges that they have experienced during the GCR process and in their advocacy work in general, NRV members refer to issues of representing refugees and how their legitimacy is often questioned in addition to their struggle with asserting their right for self-representation and meaningful participation without being tokenized or favored as the 'best refugees'.

Being able to advocate for refugee rights and being perceived as a legitimate voice in this regard has not been an easy task for NRV. It is a major challenge that the Network has to deal with as the question of representation is used to dismiss refugee voices when nobody can indeed represent all refugees worldwide as one member indicates:

*The question of representation, although is a valid question we are asked, it is not always well-intended. Whoever comes to talk about this group [refugees] is going to be dismissed on certain grounds. You could be gay, black, Muslim, woman, but then you are not everything else, so you are not seen as representative. We had good diversity within our group but still we did not have enough, and you will never have enough. Surely, we don't represent all cases and we don't represent all refugees, but we as a group we represent initiatives, and we have got the tools to advocate for the rest of the refugee community.*

Refugee voices, like those of members of all other communities, are plural and diverse, as are the platforms, situations, processes and institutions that seek to include them (Jones, 2019), and as the NRV member suggests above, there can probably never be an absolute representation. Whether during the GCR or later, NRV members have often sensed the need to justify that they do not represent all refugees, but they share the refugee experience, they

know it, and they live it. Hence, they take the initiative to talk about it and advocate for inclusion and rights.

Moreover, members of the NRV mention the pressure of having to be representative without being tokenized in their quest for meaningful participation. More often than not, as the members notice, participation is understood differently and for some stakeholders it is merely a matter of ticking the boxes:

*Meaningful participation is a challenge. Everyone is talking now about participation or refugee participation, but most are tokenizing in a way or another. Just to be invited to a meeting, like attending the GCR events, should not be considered as participation. We are not taken seriously in these situations. We, as refugees, are now trying to establish some guidelines on what the meaning of meaningful participation is. So, being there, sitting on the table, taking photos is not what we see as participation. We would like to be partners and to be there because our presence is important. For us this applies to all policy levels and stages, designing, implementing and evaluating. That is how meaningful participation should look like. Yes, we can say that we have achieved some sort of participation, but we are still fighting for meaningful participation.*

The call to take refugees seriously, as the NRV member wants to emphasize here, indicates that tokenism can be effortlessly identified especially by those who are impacted by it. As Jones (2019:10) rightly mentions ‘refugees are, after all, just as good at spotting tokenism as everyone else and are rightly offended’. Incorporating refugees in some parts of policy, rather than others, or favoring some groups or profiles of refugees for inclusion or consultation are variations of tokenism that NRV members are cautiously aware of. As one member describes, these forms of tokenism are indeed more harmful than zero participation:

*Policy makers sometimes find the easy way out when they invite refugees who can travel, refugees who have the right papers, and refugees who will repeat the same cliché. They [policy makers] like to be praised for the work they do for refugees by bringing someone who will just speak highly of opportunities given to refugees or UNHCR’s achievements and the fact that refugees are invited for consultations in the GCR, for example. These refugees, or ‘favorite refugees’ are the ones who do not question things that might disturb policy makers. They are not critical, and they do not spot faults or shortcomings. Basically, they do not challenge the system. They are presented as successful refugees and the right examples. And because they make things go smoothly, they are brought forward, and you see them everywhere in most meetings and conferences. Their participation is actually worse than having no participation at all.*

Being given a convivial space as the NRV member argues here does not in any way mean that refugees are included. What the refugees can say in this space is what should count. It is about the possibility to be seen as partners and knowledge holders (Drozdowski and Yarnell, 2019). In other words, a very key stance is reiterated here which rejects conventional representations of refugees and demand for ‘partnership with those whose stories are being told’ (Slade, 2019:47). Other accounts of the Network’s members indeed refer to the fact that

some refugees are favored because they have the story that policy makers and sometimes the UNHCR would like to listen to. This can be for example refugees with stories of ‘successful integration’ or refugees who are supported by some INGO and their presence in the policy space is part of the agenda driven by that INGO<sup>8</sup>. Yet, most importantly, as NRV members highlight, in all of these instances, refugees bear part of the responsibility in the same way as other stakeholders when they accept to be tokenized in such ways. Therefore, while a self-reflective approach, as Slade (2019) contends is crucially and ethically needed from all actors involved, refugees themselves have an important role to play in this self-reflective process.

As seen in the narratives above, NRV members’ advocating for meaningful participation and inclusion have been faced with challenges of asserting their legitimacy as a voice for refugees during the GCR process and struggling with forms of participations which are not free from tokenistic dispositions. The current tendency of favoring some refugee profiles rather than others has been further seen as another major challenge that affects the truthfulness and autonomy of the refugee voice – both within the GCR process and elsewhere – as well as it impacts the type of support that this voice can retain in the short and long run.

### ***Support for refugee inclusion***

Advocacy work in general requires a basis for support in order to develop and expand its reach. In the case of NRV, it is important to see what kind of support the members can identify through their experience with the GCR and afterwards, and what they think of this support.

Recognizing that they are negotiating for their rights for self-representation and inclusion in policy with states, NRV members have been aware of where support can potentially be located among these states. In other words, they have been ‘working with certain supportive states’ as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, that also means that they have learned early on how to navigate through this ‘pool’ of support and be careful about how that support could impact their advocacy as one member says here:

*It depends really on the country and mainly on the representative of that country in Geneva. I won't say that we have enemies or allies. It's all about playing the right politics game with them and giving them an easy way to be on board with us.*

In addition to the support of certain states, NRV members also refer to UNHCR’s current agenda which, in spite of being heavily dominated by policies formed at headquarters and that are set by states and can work for states, is considered very supportive for refugee participation, with the process of the GCR as a vivid example. However, they note that this kind of support can be temporal and tightly connected to the availability of funds and certain degree of political will among states that encourage and could eventually provide for refugees to be present on refugee policy platforms like the GCR meetings.

<sup>8</sup> See for example Rother, S. and Steinhilper, E. (2019) for the role of NGOs in facilitating refugee participation at the GCR.

It is worth mentioning here that NRV members in several occasions connect the lack of support from certain states to the present sway of right-wing populism and the rise of extreme anti-migration right wing politics in several places around the world, and in some European national contexts in particular.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this is not a surprising or particular situation for the current agenda on refugee and migration policy. The discrepancy and the overlapping interests among states when it comes to shaping a common migration policy is a historical fact, at least in the European Union (Niessen, 2001). However, it can be understood that today's right-wing populist politics is making it more difficult for states to be supportive of migration in general and refugee movements in particular.

Finally, in contrast to states national policies on migration which might not always be supportive, the role that municipalities and cities could play in including refugees in local policy is something that NRV members highly value. They specifically highlight cases where some municipalities in Europe and Canada have extended their services and shown greater support for having refugees represented in decision making processes on the local level. Seen from a wider perspective, it remains, however, unclear to what extent municipality and cities together can impact national policies on refugees or contribute to policy making at the international level.

Encountering the reality and witnessing how policy is shaped at higher levels such as during the GCR process, it is evident that NRV members have developed an understanding of mechanisms of garnering support for refugee inclusion, whether through states, INGOs or even at the local level. This understanding therefore becomes highly significant when they later discuss the shape of their future advocacy and strategies for their activism.

### ***The future of refugee-led advocacy***

Looking for how they want to drive their agenda for inclusion and self-representation beyond the GCR, NRV members come up with various pathways, which are not the same yet complementary in many ways. Based on previous research on migrant rights organizations such as the *European Council on Refugees and Exiles* (ECRE) and the *European Network Against Racism* (ENAR) as analyzed by Schnyder (2016), NRV's ways of working and non-uniformity in setting priorities do not appear very different. As Schnyder (2016) reveals, cleavages in ECRE and ENAR related to priorities, issue framing and target population can differentially affect participation and representation; something which can also become true for NRV in the near future. However, it should be recognized here that the organizational structure of NRV is different and much smaller in size and its history is more recent than that of both ECRE and ENAR.

In spite of the different opinions of how the future looks like for NRV and refugee-led advocacy beyond the GCR, members agree on one perspective expressed as:

*It is not only about now, we always need refugee activism and that is not because we're refugees, but because we're stakeholders.*

<sup>9</sup> See for example Lazaridis, G. et al. (2016) and Wodak, R. et al. (2013).

For some members of NRV, going forward means that the network should continue being active globally to observe the implementation of the GCR in different contexts, monitor states' pledges and commitments, participate in subsequent events such as the Global Refugee Forum and expand advocacy work through regional networks. For other members, however, more attention should be given to national refugee policies to advocate for the inclusion of refugees in policy and implementation at the local and national levels. More importantly, some other members find that the core element for NRV's success and sustainability lies in continuing to be a free voice for refugees without having to be formally structured or institutionalized, a voice that keeps its agency and that can independently set the rules for meaningful participation of refugees in policy that concern their own lives.

Whatever direction and/or focus the refugee-led advocacy takes in the case of NRV, it is essential that the movement remains a truly informed voice of refugees that can inform change in policies. At the same time, as Jones (2019:9) remarks 'when refugees are well organized, well informed and well resourced, it becomes possible to include them in processes of policy formation in a non-tokenistic way'. Therefore, to continue going forward towards the ultimate goal of a policy that includes all stakeholders and that can work for everyone, it is essential that the NRV takes the questions of its development, sustainability, formalization, and organization as serious tasks ahead.

## **Conclusion**

As discussed above refugee policy is an area that has predominantly been restricted to formal deliberations among states with outcomes that have aimed to solve what is often considered as 'the problem of migration'. With recent reconfigurations of migration and refugee policy, refugees have been increasingly considered as important stakeholders. Setting forth from NYD as a point of departure for examining the recent agenda around the inclusion of refugees and going through processes of the GCR and GCM, my aim has been to open the discussion about what this inclusion means for refugees and migrants. As demonstrated through the analysis of the case of the NRV, acting on their agency and claiming the space for self-representation during the GCR were seen as major achievements by the members of the network, in addition to their participation in negotiating high policy drafts among other stakeholders. At the same time, struggling to legitimize their representation of refugee voices without allowing to be tokenized and favored were perceived as central challenges in the process of the GCR and beyond. NRV members also shared their perception on the conditions of support to refugee inclusion which can be selective and impacted by several factors such as anti-migration politics or temporary interest related to the availability of funds and political will. And finally, while the future of their advocacy for inclusion and self-representation could take divergent itineraries, NRV members emphasize that a refugee voice is always needed, and they must be included in policy that concerns their lives. This, however, depends on how such a voice can develop in sustainable and organized ways in the local, national and global spheres. It is also contingent on how other stockholders remain committed to the perspective of developing a refugee policy with a meaningful participation and inclusion of refugees. This eventually opens up opportunities for future research that can follow such commitments, and how they may

transform to institutionalized practice where refugee participation becomes the standard in refugee policy.

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