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**REFLECTIONS ON MEANINGFUL REFUGEE
PARTICIPATION AT THE GLOBAL REFUGEE
FORUM PROGRESS REVIEW 2025**

FOLLOW UP TO OUR 2023 “WE WERE SEEN, BUT
WERE WE HEARD” ASSESSMENT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025 Global Refugee Forum Progress Review (GRF PR) marked an important midpoint in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) cycle, providing an opportunity to assess progress toward the commitments made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and to consider how implementation can be strengthened ahead of the next GRF in 2027. For R-SEAT, the Progress Review also provided an important opportunity to assess the evolution of meaningful refugee participation within the GCR cycle.

Since the adoption of the GCR in 2018, meaningful refugee participation has become increasingly recognized as an emerging norm for more effective, responsive, and accountable refugee policy. This progress was visible at the 2025 GRF PR. Of the 1,486 participants, 260 had lived experience of forced displacement, representing approximately 17.5% of total attendance—more than double the 8% recorded at the GRF in 2023. Refugees and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) participated in a range of roles, including as advisors, speakers, moderators, trainers, and partners. Dedicated advisory mechanisms have also continued to emerge at national, regional, and global levels.

Yet increased presence and access in global convenings does not necessarily equate to meaningful influence.

This report finds that refugee participation at the GRF PR remains uneven and is not yet consistently embedded within decision-making processes, institutional structures, or resource allocations. While refugees and RLOs are increasingly present and active within global refugee spaces, significant barriers continue to limit their ability to shape agendas, access decision-makers, influence resource allocation, and contribute to implementation and accountability. Participation therefore risks remaining event-based or consultative rather than becoming a sustained mechanism for shared decision-making.

Participants highlighted a range of structural barriers. Financial constraints remain particularly significant for RLOs, many of which face limited and unstable funding and difficulties accessing traditional funding mechanisms. Visa restrictions and administrative barriers continued to prevent some refugee leaders and RLO representatives from attending global events.

Language and accessibility barriers also limited participation beyond formal sessions, restricting access to informal conversations and networking spaces where relationships, partnerships, and influence are often developed. Participants further described informational and institutional barriers, including limited familiarity with Geneva-based processes and difficulties accessing governments, donors, foundations, and other decision-makers.

These barriers point to a broader challenge: meaningful refugee participation cannot be assessed solely by counting how many refugees attend international meetings or how many are included in formal participation formats. The more important question is whether participation enables refugees and RLOs to exercise influence over the decisions that affect them.

The report therefore argues that while the international refugee system is making measurable progress in expanding participation opportunities, these gains must now be deepened by strengthening refugees' sustained influence over policy, implementation, and decision-making.

Refugees and RLOs should be meaningfully involved not only at global events, but throughout the full pledge cycle—from agenda-setting and pledge development through implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. Participation must also be supported by the resources and conditions required to make it meaningful, including funding, preparation and capacity-building, language access, visa facilitation, accessibility measures, and transparent information about decision-making processes.

This shift requires action across the refugee response ecosystem. UNHCR should strengthen opportunities for refugees and RLOs to co-lead consultations, pledges, working groups,

and policy discussions, while establishing clearer indicators and accountability measures for progress from participation to influence and shared leadership.

States also have a critical role to play. National refugee advisory mechanisms can create sustained channels through which refugee expertise informs government policy and connects national engagement to international processes. More broadly, Member States and other stakeholders should recognize meaningful refugee participation as a core component of effective and accountable refugee responses, invest in long-term partnerships with RLOs, while addressing barriers that continue to restrict participation.

INGOs and NGOs, should leverage their networks, platforms, and resources to create equitable partnerships, strengthen localization efforts, and improve the effectiveness and relevance of humanitarian and development responses.

At the global level, NGOs and INGOs should also ensure to include refugee experts in their delegations to global convenings and ensure invitations are shared well in advance to enable meaningful in-person participation, with six months' notice recommended where possible.

The Progress Review also demonstrates the importance of connecting global participation to national and regional structures. Global engagement has limited impact when it is disconnected from the policy environments in which refugees experience protection, inclusion, and displacement. Sustained participation therefore requires stronger linkages between global refugee governance and country-level decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and accountability.

Ultimately, meaningful refugee participation should be understood not as an end in itself, but as a tool for strengthening the effectiveness, sustainability, and responsiveness of policies by bringing refugee lived experience and expertise into decision-making.

The fulfillment of commitments under the GCR will be judged not only by what is pledged, but by who is empowered to shape, implement, and sustain those commitments.

INTRODUCTION



From 15-17 December 2025, the [Global Refugee Forum Progress Review \(GRF PR\)](#) was co-hosted in Geneva by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Switzerland, and co-convened by Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan, and Uganda. Positioned at the midpoint between the [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\) 2023](#) and the forthcoming GRF in 2027, the Progress Review is a key moment within the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#) cycle to take stock of progress towards the goals of the GCR with specific attention to pledges, identifying gaps, and assessing implementation.

In this report, R-SEAT [\(Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table\)](#) approaches the GRF PR not as a standalone event, but as a **diagnostic moment within a broader refugee system**. It asks a central question: *what does the Progress Review reveal about the evolution —and the limits—of meaningful refugee participation within the GCR cycle?*

Since the adoption of the GCR in 2018, meaningful refugee participation has increasingly been recognized as an [emerging norm](#) for more effective, responsive, and accountable refugee policy. This recognition has translated into visible progress across

strictly with its legal definition under international law. Throughout this report, the term is used to refer to individuals who have experienced, or are currently experiencing forced displacement and statelessness.

As the GCR cycle moves toward its next global milestone in 2027, the findings of this report suggest that the central challenge is not only ensuring refugee participation in global processes, but securing the necessary political will, resources, structures, and champions for meaningful participation and for its sustainability. This includes moving toward a system that is prepared to systematically share power and decision-making authority, so that participation is adequately resourced and can translate into tangible outcomes.

It also requires a broader shift in how meaningful refugee participation is understood: not as an end in itself, but as a practical tool for improving the effectiveness, sustainability, and grounding of policies in lived realities. This means moving beyond a procedural framing of participation toward recognising refugees' lived experience and technical expertise as essential inputs that strengthen policy design and implementation.

METHODOLOGY



This report draws on R-SEAT’s institutional engagement across the GCR cycle, complemented by qualitative and internal data collected in the lead-up to, during, and following the GRF PR 2025. The analysis is informed by three primary sources, in addition to R-SEAT’s own participation before, during and after the event:

- **Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders with lived experience.**

From early 2026, R-SEAT conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders with lived experience of forced displacement who participated in the GRF PR in a range of capacities. Interviewees included individuals serving as advisors within state delegations (“refugee advisors”), representatives of RLO delegations, and members of advisory mechanisms, including the [Advisory Board to UNHCR](#). The sample of eighteen focused primarily on participants based in East Africa and Latin America, reflecting R-SEAT’s major areas of active engagement.

- **Structured feedback from supported participants**

R-SEAT provided financial and logistical support to five individuals participating in the GRF PR as part of RLO delegations. Feedback was collected through pre- and post-engagement forms, enabling a comparative assessment of participant expectations and experiences.

- **Internal reporting on the efficacy and relevance of training**

R-SEAT reviewed internal assessments of the training programme which was held in partnership with the International Institute for Humanitarian Law (IIHL or Sanremo Institute) and in collaboration with UNHCR. These reports, developed by IIHL and UNHCR respectively, draw on participant survey data collected following both the training programme and the GRF PR, providing insight into preparedness, accessibility, and perceived relevance.

While this methodology prioritizes depth of insight over statistical representation, the combination of these sources enables a grounded assessment of how meaningful refugee participation is experienced across different roles in global refugee meetings. Findings should be interpreted as indicative.

- 7 State delegations included refugee advisors: Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
- Currently, at the global level, 27 out of 47 multi-stakeholder pledges engage people with lived experiences or their organizations in their pledge architecture – some through formal advisory mechanisms, some through co-leadership of a pledge, and others through less formalized reference or advisory groups.

Notably, the Progress Review took place at a moment of significant transition for the global refugee system, shaped by growing displacement, funding shortfalls, geopolitical instability, and increasing pressure on humanitarian responses worldwide:

- [117.3 million people remain forcibly displaced around the world](#)
- [UNHCR closed 2025 with approximately 25% less funding than 2024](#)
- [Between 2024 and 2025, ~30% of all humanitarian funding has been eliminated](#)

Post-event

- **UNHCR disseminated a post-event survey**, following the GRF PR to gather feedback from forcibly displaced and stateless participants regarding accessibility, inclusion, participation experiences, and recommendations for future engagement processes. The survey findings contributed to broader reflections on barriers to meaningful participation and areas for improvement across future GCR-related convenings.
- **UNHCR also facilitated regional debrief sessions**, throughout January and February 2026. A total of 166 participants attended these sessions and consistently highlighted a perceived gap between participation and actual influence within decision-making processes. These discussions were important in helping capture perspectives across the broader GCR cycle rather than limiting engagement to isolated global events. According to UNHCR, the reflections gathered through these sessions will help inform future efforts to address barriers to meaningful refugee participation.

More broadly, participation at the GRF PR appears to be concentrated at the level of representation and consultation, rather than co-design and decision-making. Even where it can be argued that there was some level of co-design and co-decision-making, it remained ad hoc throughout all phases, with sessions/event organizers maintaining a monopoly over decision-making and follow-up. Refugees are present in the room and increasingly recognized as contributors, but are not yet systematically positioned to shape how the agenda is organized, how decisions are taken, or how priorities are set.

As a result, meaningful refugee participation risks being operationalized as inclusion without corresponding shifts in power. While progress in expanding access and representation should be acknowledged and sustained, the central challenge for the GCR moving toward 2027 is to build on this progress by enabling participation to generate sustained influence within institutional processes, decision-making, and implementation.

complementary objective, but as part of the solution. As difficult decisions are made regarding funding, prioritization, and implementation, systematically integrating refugees and RLOs into these processes can help ensure that limited resources are directed toward the most pressing needs and grounded in community realities. The humanitarian reset is therefore not only a funding challenge—it is a governance test.

populations are systematically involved not only in participation formats, but in decision-making processes around pledging, shaping priorities, and assessing progress throughout the implementation cycle.

