

REFLECTION NOTE

BEYOND PRESENCE: WHO SHAPES DECISIONS IN GLOBAL REFUGEE GOVERNANCE?

A POST-GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM
PROGRESS REVIEW REFLECTION FROM
R-SEAT (2025)

R:SEAT

In December of 2025, R-SEAT attended the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review (GRF PR), convened under the framework of the Global Compact on Refugees and co-hosted by UNHCR and Switzerland. For R-SEAT, as a refugee-led organization dedicated to advancing and operationalizing meaningful refugee participation within global refugee governance processes, our engagement in the GRF Progress Review served as a key moment for critical reflection.

This reflection serves as a precursor to a forthcoming report, to complement our GRF 2023 report, “We were seen, but were we heard?”. Rather than presenting a conventional assessment, it raises guiding questions for all stakeholders: **in an international system that frequently speaks the language of inclusion and meaningful refugee participation, who continues to make decisions? To what extent are refugees genuinely shaping those decisions? And how can we move from symbolism to real influence?**

The Progress Review reflected ongoing progress in advancing the discourse on and commitment to meaningful refugee participation. Seven states (New Zealand, Australia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Norway, Germany and Canada) included refugee advisors to their state delegations, five national refugee advisory mechanisms had additional members in attendance, and UNHCR estimates that over 250 participants with lived experience of forced displacement were in attendance.

Another notable shift during the Progress Review was how collaboration and solidarity among actors, particularly with **refugee-led organizations (RLOs)**, has moved closer to the center of the conversation. While often expressed indirectly, there was broad recognition across partners that in moments of crisis and contraction, RLOs are frequently among the first and most severely affected, even as they are also among the most relied upon to sustain community trust, continuity of response, and adaptive solutions. This growing recognition is welcome, but it must translate into a sustainable approach: equal partnership with RLOs should not intensify only during “bad times,” but it should be institutionalized as a consistent way of working in both stable and crisis contexts.

R-SEAT, in partnership with the International Institute of Humanitarian Law (IIHL), and in collaboration with **UNHCR**, provided a 6-week training program open to all attendees with lived experience of forced displacement to ensure they were prepared to engage and advocate on their own work effectively. The role of refugees seemed relevant in official and linked side events, and the R-Space provided an additional platform to engage on issues that refugees deemed critical. **But is this enough?**

Refugee Participation in a Time of Humanitarian Reset and Funding Contraction

The Progress Review took place amidst a shifting humanitarian landscape characterized by funding reductions, donor fatigue, and increasing political pressures on refugee responses. These funding and structural constraints are prompting what many actors have described as a “humanitarian reset.” Yet, paradoxically, this moment of financial contraction underscores, rather than diminishes, the urgency of actualizing and institutionalizing meaningful refugee participation in how decisions and programs are designed and implemented.

Restrictive funding environments demand more efficient, context-responsive, and sustainable policy approaches. Refugee-led organizations and actors with lived experience of forced displacement are not only stakeholders but key operational and essential actors with contextual expertise, community trust, and adaptive solutions. **Their systematic participation in policy design and implementation processes can enhance cost-effectiveness, program relevance and efficiency, and long-term sustainability.**

If the humanitarian system is indeed undergoing reform, meaningful refugee participation should not be approached as an optional add-on, but as a core strategy for delivering more effective, accountable, and contextual responses. As humanitarian actors reassess reforms and funding allocations under severe budget constraints, systematically integrating RLOs and refugee expertise into decision-making processes can strengthen prioritization, help align funding for both immediate life-saving priorities and longer-term sustainable programming, and ensure that limited resources are used more effectively and strategically. This is not new terrain for refugee-led organizations: RLOs have long operated under chronic resource constraints, and often bring unmatched experience in maximizing impact, making hard tradeoffs, and delivering results with minimal funding.

COVID-19 offered a clear example of this dynamic: partnership with RLOs increased as traditional operational models slowed, and RLOs often sustained response efficiently through community trust and adaptability. The missed opportunity was that, once the crisis eased, the system largely reverted to marginalizing RLOs rather than institutionalizing them as equal partners.

The Limits of Side Event Engagement

The Progress Review included a series of official side events addressing critical and timely contexts, including developments related to Syria's transitional trajectory and returns, the protracted displacement of the Rohingya population, and the escalating humanitarian crisis in Sudan. These thematic focuses demonstrated an awareness of pressing geopolitical and humanitarian realities.

Yet, the format of many official side events limited the depth and authenticity of engagement. Several panels followed a tightly scripted format, with a carousel of speakers offering short interventions instead of enabling deeper, dynamic discussions.

However, the format of many official side events limited substantive engagement. While panels brought together recognized experts, the compressed format—featuring multiple short interventions—restricted the possibility for deeper analysis, exchange, and collective reflection.

While this structure allowed for broad representation, it often came at the expense of meaningful dialogue.

Notably, the space for interaction between panelists and audiences — including forcibly displaced participants — was minimal. Question-and-answer segments were either significantly constrained or absent, reducing opportunities for reflexive exchange, critical questioning, and co-creation of solutions.

This dynamic raises an important concern: when participation spaces are curated primarily for presentation rather than dialogue, refugee inclusion risks becoming performative. Meaningful participation requires more than simple presence on panels, but the ability to influence the framing of discussions, the direction of debates, and the articulation of policy recommendations and solutions.

Moving to Continuous and Institutionalized Participation

One important reflection from the Progress Review is that refugee participation is increasingly being treated as part of an ongoing cycle, rather than a single moment of engagement. There have been visible efforts by UNHCR to connect refugee participants in the Progress Review to the broader Global Refugee Forum process, including the cycle of pledge development, implementation, monitoring, and analysis

following the Global Refugee Forum 2023. This signals a positive shift toward seeing participation as something that should be sustained over time, not limited to high-level meetings and adhoc engagements.

However, across the different ways forcibly displaced people engage in these spaces, there is work to be done on strengthening continuity. Refugee participation does not happen through one channel alone. It includes refugee advisors within State delegations, representatives participating through NGO and RLOs delegations, academia, international organizations and UN entities, to name a few. Ensuring that these different refugee actors remain involved throughout the full pledge cycle — not only during global convenings — is essential if participation is to move beyond one-off engagement.

Meaningful refugee participation needs to operate along two parallel and mutually reinforcing tracks. It is essential that refugees are present in global forums and occupy speaking roles that help shape high-level narratives and priorities. At the same time, participation must extend beyond these moments to encompass follow-up at the national level — including pledge implementation, policy dialogue, monitoring, and accountability across a full pledging cycle of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). Without this continuity, representation at global events risks being disconnected from concrete influence in practice.

As highlighted in the closing panel of the GRF PR, Filippo Grandi, former UNHCR High Commissioner, stressed the importance of meaningful participation and the need to operationalize it at all levels. Engagement at the policy level is particularly important because it addresses root causes, creates space for dialogue on complex and protracted situations, and informs the guidance that shapes country operations.

However, for participation to be truly meaningful, it cannot remain only at the global level. RLOs have immense unrealized capacity and should be engaged as both core and implementing partners through measurement and assessment stages of work. Connecting these levels of engagement, from the grassroots to the national to the international, based on the innate understanding that comes from lived experience of displacement, is the only way to ensure policies and programs are reflective of those in need of assistance.

Without this continuous connection between global forums and local realities, international spaces risk becoming procedural rather than transformative. Participation must flow in both directions, from communities to global platforms, and back into national and local implementation, if we desire to shape outcomes rather than simply narrate them.

A System at a Crossroads

The Progress Review demonstrated clear continuance of refugee participation. The language of inclusion is now firmly embedded in global refugee policy spaces. However, the operationalization of this commitment remains inconsistent.

The system appears to be in a transitional phase — simultaneously preparing for deeper participation while still relying on legacy structures that centralize decision-making among traditional institutional actors. This creates a tension between aspiration and practice. Forcibly displaced actors are increasingly invited into global spaces, yet their role in shaping final decisions, priorities, and resource allocation remains limited.

As Majdi Laktinah, refugee advisor for the German delegation and member of the German Refugee Advisory Board, said in the closing panel, meaningful refugee participation is a long-term partnership, including trust-building between refugee communities and governments. Similarly, In the same closing panel, Cecile Losamandjo Pango, refugee leader from Malawi and founder of Women for Action, emphasized that building diplomatic skills, particularly in negotiation and policy dialogue, is essential for forcibly displaced actors to move from being consulted to actively participating in decision-making and influencing global policy processes.

This raises a critical reflection for the whole international community: is refugee participation being advanced as a structural shift in governance, or instrumentalized as a symbolic marker of inclusivity?

Looking Ahead

As R-SEAT continues its work to advance meaningful refugee participation, the Progress Review 2025 serves as both a milestone and a mirror. It reflects growing recognition of refugee agency, while simultaneously revealing the structural barriers that continue to constrain genuine participation.

In a period marked by funding constraints, complex displacement crises, and calls for systemic reform, the international refugee response architecture stands at a decisive juncture. Strengthening meaningful refugee participation is not only a matter of equity and representation; it is a strategic imperative for more legitimate, effective, and sustainable refugee policies.

As participation deepens, particular attention should be paid to the growing leadership emerging from the Global South. Refugee-led organizations across regions such as Latin America, Africa, and Asia are increasingly shaping national and regional policy conversations, building cross-border networks, and developing locally grounded solutions. Strengthening meaningful participation in these contexts is not only a matter of representation, but of rebalancing influence toward those regions where displacement realities are most acutely experienced and managed.

The question moving forward is not whether refugees should be included — this consensus largely exists — but how power, decision-making, and accountability structures must evolve to ensure that participation is substantive, continuous, and institutionalized. This means funding directly to RLOs, shifting power over decisions closer to the front lines of crises, partnering as equals instead of employing displaced persons only as project implementers, and ultimately recognizing forcibly displaced persons as central actors in shaping policy and response efforts.