

Meaningful Refugee Participation: Principles and Enabling Factors

Over the past decade, meaningful refugee participation (MRP) has advanced as [an emerging norm](#) in the global refugee system. In 2016, under the Grand Bargain, signatories committed to a “[participation revolution](#)”, recognizing the importance of people with lived experience to engage meaningfully in shaping responses that affect their lives. That same year, the UN General Assembly unanimously adopted the [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#), which laid the foundation for the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) (GCR) and the [Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) (GCM). Paragraph 34 of the GCR affirms that responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.

Since then, MRP has been reinforced through fora such as the [Global Refugee Forum](#) (GRF), with refugee participation increasing significantly between its first iteration in 2019 and its second in 2023, alongside commitments under the [Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Refugee Participation](#). MRP has also been institutionalized through the establishment of Refugee Advisory Mechanisms in Canada, the United States, New Zealand, Australia, and Germany. Regional initiatives such as [Cartagena+40](#) provide a leading example of how MRP is being incorporated into regional refugee protection frameworks, underscoring its growing relevance beyond the global level. Crucially MRP is not merely a moral or political imperative; it is a strategy that leverages the expertise of refugee leaders and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) to strengthen outcomes. This paper outlines the principles and enabling factors that underpin MRP and demonstrates their applicability across themes and geographies as a tool to strengthen localization, program design, and policy processes.

Principles

A) Shift perspectives and power: Too often, refugees are contextualized within the humanitarian system as beneficiaries of aid. This framing eliminates agency and disregards the numerous contributions and expertise that refugee leaders and RLOs bring to the table. Institutions must recontextualize refugees from passive recipients to powerful agents of change.

B) Reconsider Storytelling: While storytelling can provide valuable insight into situations of forced displacement, refugees should not be solely asked to share their story of displacement and should not be reduced to their stories of trauma. Refugees should be engaged in their thematic expertise and involved in relevant policy and programmatic spaces as equals.

C) Advance Intersectionality: Refugees experience displacement through different intersections of identity, which can shape both their experience and the expertise they bring. Including diverse perspectives and identities ensures that marginalized groups are not left behind and provides wider and more accurate information.

D) Move past representation: Not one person can represent an entire identity group, and this holds true for people with lived experience of forced displacement. Rather than asking refugee participants to “represent” all refugees, recognize the unique skills and perspectives they offer. Refugee leaders are most effective when they are embedded in networks and communities that allow them to source feedback and insights—but this is not the same as claiming to speak for all its members.

E) Ensure Sustainability: Participation must not be treated as a one-off or check-box exercise. It should be a sustained, ongoing, long-term process embedded across the full lifecycle of policy and program development, implementation, and measurement.

F) Safety and sensitivity to risk: Participation must be designed with careful attention to safety, power dynamics, and potential risks for those involved. Initiatives such as the “Safe Space” at GRF 2023, which provided psychosocial support, are helpful models to mitigate harm and ensure a duty of care.

G) Transparency: Throughout the extent of the participatory process, refugees should have clear, timely and informed communication on how and why their participation is being sought. This includes background information, thorough onboarding, and consistent follow-up on how their input has shaped decisions.

H) Mutual Accountability: Participation must go both ways. Refugee leaders should be supported with clear roles aligned with their expertise and held accountable for their contributions. This includes setting clear deliverables, timelines, and establishing regular check-ins or evaluations to assess progress, provide feedback, and ensure meaningful engagement is effective and outcome driven.

Enabling Factors

Based on these principles, R-SEAT recommends the following enabling practices:

1) Mitigate barriers and provide appropriate resources

Refugees face multiple barriers to participation, including a lack of information about opportunities for engagement, exclusion from closed-door meetings, financial constraints and lack of funding support, and difficulties obtaining travel documentation and visas. Ideological barriers are also prominent and can include deep-rooted assumptions that frame people with lived experience of forced displacement as passive recipients of aid rather than active agents capable of engaging in a professional, expert capacity.

2) Build intentional partnerships

Engage refugee participants in a timely manner, including in the co-design and planning of programs or policies. Seek out refugee experts with relevant thematic or regional knowledge and ensure that their expertise informs all key decisions from the outset.

3) Design mechanisms for sustained MRP

Create and maintain trusted structures such as standing advisory groups or ongoing partnerships with refugee leaders. These mechanisms should provide regular input across a range of projects, including those where refugees are not directly involved, to support continuous engagement and institutional learning.

4) Address tokenizing behaviors

Engagement should never be symbolic. Refugees must be included based on the substantive value and expertise they provide. Working consistently with only one or two individuals can lead to tokenism. This can be addressed through building supportive, transparent, and inclusive structures that allow for diverse engagement over time rather than engaging in an ad hoc manner.

5) Move past consultative measures

While consultation is important in many settings, it alone does not constitute meaningful participation. Consultation can gather useful feedback, but it often occurs after key decisions have already been made. MRP requires co-leadership and shared decision-making throughout the entire process—from design through to implementation and evaluation.