PROMOTING REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN THE GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM: WALKING THE WALK

By Hayley Drozdowski and Mark Yarnell

JULY 2019

INTRODUCTION

The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), affirmed by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2018, provides a framework for collaboration and responsibility-sharing when responding to refugee emergencies across the globe. The GCR’s objectives include easing pressure on refugee-hosting countries, enhancing refugee self-reliance, and expanding access to third-country solutions, such as refugee resettlement. It also calls for the meaningful participation of refugees in its implementation.

To measure progress to date and to garner pledges going forward, the Compact calls for the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to co-host, along with one or more member states, a Global Refugee Forum (GRF) every four years. The first is to be held in December 2019 in Geneva. UNHCR’s co-host will be the government of Switzerland and the meeting will be co-convened by Turkey, Germany, Ethiopia, and Costa Rica. Its preparations will serve as a clear litmus test of whether the commitment to refugee participation is real.

In making decisions about policies and programs, it is essential to include those who will be fundamentally impacted by those decisions. The notion of “nothing about us without us” is not only ethically appropriate. Those with lived refugee experience – whether still in displacement, resettled, or returned – offer necessary perspectives to inform smart, practical, and sustainable programs. That refugee participation was not always prioritized, at both the local and global level, is a detriment to the international system.

In a promising development, refugee-led networks have already offered a set of concrete
recommendations for achieving meaningful participation in the GRF, and UNHCR is working to provide additional opportunities for engagement on shaping the policies priorities that will be addressed at forum. The process, however, has largely been Geneva-based, so there is a need to broaden access and participation at the regional and local level, as well as to establish mechanisms for remote engagement.

There is important work to do between now and December to ensure that refugees not only participate in the GRF but can also influence its agenda and outcome. This issue brief provides recommendations designed to facilitate meaningful participation in the lead up to the GRF, at the forum itself, and into the future. The commitment made by the GCR for the meaningful participation of refugees must be fulfilled.

**BACKGROUND**

“Meaningful Participation” of Refugees in the Global Compact on Refugees

The Global Refugee Compact’s text calls for refugees to be directly involved in the pursuit of the GCR’s objectives. For example, the GCR notes that its “programme of action is underpinned by a strong partnership and participatory approach, involving refugees and host communities, as well as age, gender, and diversity considerations...”1 This makes it incumbent on Member States, UNHCR, and others involved in the GCR to ensure refugee inclusion.

The compact specifically points to the GRF as an opportunity for refugees to participate in the agreement’s implementation. It sets out the expectation that “states and relevant stakeholders will facilitate meaningful participation of refugees...in Global Refugee Forums, ensuring the inclusion of their perspectives on progress.”2 The document also underlines the importance of paying attention to the diversity of representation among refugee communities, specifying that participation should include “women, persons with disabilities, and youth.”3

The document does not describe what meaningful participation should look like in practice. Instead, it leaves it up to Member States and other stakeholders to facilitate the participation of refugees and to measure whether their involvement is impactful.

The 2019 Global Refugee Forum

The first Global Refugee Forum, scheduled for December 2019 in Geneva, is only months away. The forum has two main tasks. First, UN Member States and others, such as UN agencies and civil society groups, will have the opportunity to make concrete pledges and commitments toward achieving the GCR’s objectives. Second, participants will be expected to identify and catalogue best practices and lessons-learned with respect to the implementation of the GCR on the ground.

UNHCR is the main organizer of the event. While Member States will be the primary attendees, UNHCR is working to broaden participation to include a wide range of groups. These include non-governmental organizations (NGOs), other UN agencies, financial institutions, civil society groups, and refugees.

---

themselves, among others. This is a major undertaking. A small team at UNHCR is responsible for engaging with all these groups – with refugees as one of many.

To facilitate wider participation in the preparations for the GRF, UNHCR recently established a “co-sponsorship” arrangement. First, UNHCR identified six key areas relating to the protection and assistance of refugees and the communities that host them. These areas are: supporting arrangements for burden and responsibility sharing, promoting access to quality education, supporting jobs and livelihoods, improving access to clean energy and better infrastructure, facilitating long-term solutions, and strengthening protection capacity. Second, UNHCR has called for all “relevant actors” – whether States, non-governmental organizations, the private sectors, or refugee-led networks – to sign up as co-sponsors of one or more of the areas of focus.

Members of the co-sponsorship groups are then expected to “form a broad base of support and advocacy around that area” by announcing new commitments, mobilizing contributions from others, and highlighting good practices. The system is still taking shape, but co-sponsorship groups began meeting in Geneva in early July.

**REFUGEE PARTICIPATION PRIOR TO GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM**

There is reason to be skeptical about whether meaningful participation in the GRF will be achieved. In interviews for this issue brief, several experts and refugee leaders described past attempts at facilitating refugee participation in Geneva-based meetings as largely pro forma exercises. They failed to afford refugees real opportunities to influence policy. For instance, a single refugee might be invited to speak at an opening plenary session but would otherwise have no substantive bearing on the outcome of the policy discussions.

Fortunately, this time looks to be different, largely because of the opportunities for refugee-led groups to be involved in the lead up to the Global Refugee Forum and at the event itself. To their credit, UNHCR and others have made a significant effort to facilitate refugee inclusion. There is still, however, a long way to go and time is short between now and the forum. The key is to support existing gains, build on them, and lay the groundwork for meaningful participation at the GRF and beyond.

Separate from the co-sponsorship process, UNHCR has thus far hosted two Geneva-based meetings where stakeholders convened to discuss the forum’s planning. The third and final preparatory meetings is slated for November 14th. At the first two meetings, representatives of refugee-led organizations had the opportunity to share recommendations on refugee participation in the GRF. Additionally, the second preparatory meeting included a side-event dedicated to the discussion of refugee participation not just in the GRF, but in the full implementation of the GCR. Also, at UNHCR’s Annual Consultation with NGOs in early July, leaders from refugee-led networks moderated a session on the need to include refugees in policy and decision-making that will affect them.

To complement the annual Geneva-based NGO consultations, UNHCR has organized additional regional NGO consultations to provide more access to these discussions for people in refugee-affected regions. The first was held in June in Amman, Jordan, for

---

5. “Co-sponsorship arrangements,” UNHCR, July 1, 2019, accessed July 8, 2019
One of the most influential actors pushing for refugee participation at the GRF is the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), formerly called the Network for Refugee Voices, a consortia of refugee groups across six global regions. The network’s leadership includes refugees from a variety of contexts, several of whom have been resettled to different corners of the world. The network has begun hosting their own regional refugee summits with the hope that the outcomes of these summits will contribute to discussions at the GRF on ensuring effective implementation of the GCR. Additionally, the GRN have been collaborating with the Global Youth Advisory Council (GYAC), a group of 15 refugee youth leaders appointed by the High Commissioner for Refugees.

Overall, the GRN emphasizes the importance of avoiding token refugee representation at UN meetings, the value for refugees to participate in leadership and advocacy training, and the need for follow-up by the humanitarian and development community regarding the way refugee contributions are used. Based on contributions from its members, representatives of the GRN and GYAC issued statements at the GRF preparatory meetings with concrete recommendations to promote refugee participation in the lead up to the forum, as well as at the event itself.

These recommendations include involving refugees as part of UNHCR’s GRF planning team, urging Member States to include refugees on their delegations to the forum, and a call for the forum to be streamed online to increase the opportunity for remote participation. UNHCR and governments, especially the GRF’s co-host and co-conveners, would do well do to implement these recommendations. The GRN also put forward language for a “Refugee Participation Pledge” to which governments and others can sign-on, ideally prior to the GRF. Essentially, it is a commitment to engage refugees in a meaningful way in all processes and decisions that affect them, including contributions that are announced at the first GRF, as well as at subsequent high-level meetings on refugees.

Therefore, opportunities for engagement have opened and momentum is building. This is thanks to the initiative of refugee-led groups, as well as the establishment of a more enabling environment by UNHCR. The key is to build upon this engagement, broaden the base of participants, and establish systems that can grow and evolve well past the first GRF.

### CHALLENGES TO MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION

This will be no easy task, and several key challenges and barriers must be overcome. First, the bulk of the planning for the GRF remains Geneva-based. It is very much an insiders-game filled with jargon and evolving processes that are not always clear, even to seasoned officials. For example, UNHCR has identified the co-sponsorship process as an important opportunity for shaping the GRF. However, the way that the process is supposed to work remains opaque and opportunities for the participation of refugee groups beyond the Global Refugee-led

---

Network and Global Youth Advisory Council – which are already engaged with UNHCR at the Geneva-level – are not apparent. Additionally, the official preparatory meetings, of which there is one left, offered no opportunities for remote participation, significantly limiting the breadth of refugee engagement.

Second, supporting meaningful participation is a complex, multi-pronged pursuit, but at present, the resources dedicated to this objective are limited. As noted above, the small GRF team at UNHCR that is tasked with outreach in advance of the forum has multiple, competing priorities, including engaging with financial institutions, the private sector, and other UN agencies. Facilitating refugee participation is one objective among many. Indeed, several international NGOs and independent groups are also supporting refugee engagement, but additional donor support is needed.

There is still no clarity on whether there will be a refugee-only delegation at the forum. If this is to be done, and done appropriately, a decision needs to be made soon. In addition to visa requirements and other logistical and financial barriers that may arise, there needs to be a careful process to identify refugee leaders who are comfortable and willing to be in the spotlight, as well as support for the transition from their host country to Geneva and back.

Adding to the challenge, some have pushed back against the very notion of facilitating refugee participation in high-level UN meetings. Several States have indicated concern that any acquiescence to refugee inclusion at high-level UN meetings signals an openness to welcoming refugees across their own borders. Another, different line of argument, is that it is impossible to achieve true representation of such a diverse community, so it is best to avoid the effort entirely.

These and other challenges can and must be surmounted. To begin, Member States, especially the event’s co-host (Switzerland) and co-conveners (Germany, Turkey, Costa Rica, and Ethiopia), should sign-on to the Refugee Participation Pledge put forward by the Global Refugee-led Network as a demonstration of political solidarity.7

Going forward, there are concrete steps that UNHCR can take, with the support of governments and in collaboration with NGOs and others, to expand and enhance refugee participation in the remaining months before the GRF, ensure robust refugee participation at the forum itself, and galvanize meaningful refugee participation over the long-term. Significant gains have already been made. Now the task is to build upon them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To prepare for the Global Refugee Forum:

UNHCR should facilitate remote refugee participation at the next GRF preparatory meeting

- Unlike at the first two official GRF preparatory meetings, UNHCR should support the remote participation of refugee groups at the third and final prep meeting, scheduled for mid-November in Geneva. At the very least, videoconferencing should be made

7. Refugee Participation Pledge: “My government/institution/company/me individually, etc. pledge(s) to meaningfully engage refugees themselves in all process and decisions which affect them, and pledge(s) that the meaningful engagement of refugees will underpin and strengthen every contribution or pledge my government/institution/organization/company/I, etc will bring to or announce at the first Global Refugee Forum, to be held on 17 and 18 December 2019 in Geneva. My government/ institution/organization/ company/me individually, etc furthermore pledge(s) to share experiences on the implementation of this pledge at subsequent Global Refugee Forums and/or high level officials’ meetings.” Issued 25 June, 2019
available so that interested refugee groups can follow the proceedings. UNHCR already utilizes online Q&A platforms to crowdsource questions at large meetings. These platforms can be used at the prep meeting. The experience can then be adapted and build upon to facilitate remote participation at the GRF in December.

- To accomplish broad participation, UNHCR’s regional and country offices will need to make significant efforts to inform refugee leaders, as well as implementing partners who work with refugees, about the opportunity for remote engagement and facilitate meeting space with video-conference technology.

**UNHCR must clarify how refugees can engage in the co-sponsorship process and facilitate remote engagement**

- UNHCR must clarify how refugee groups at the local level can participate in the co-sponsorship process. Since UNHCR has noted that this as a key opportunity for shaping both the agenda and outcomes of the GRF, country offices must be sure to not only inform refugees about what the process is and why it is relevant, but provide opportunities for interested refugees to call in to the meetings of the co-sponsorship groups. For future forums, refugees should be involved even earlier to help identify the co-sponsorship areas of focus from the outset.

**UNHCR should continue supporting refugee participation at regional NGO consultations**

- UNHCR should ensure that there is the opportunity for refugee groups to participate in the remaining regional consultations with NGOs that are scheduled for this year (either in person or remotely). To UNHCR’s credit, this is already planned for the Asia Pacific meeting where UNHCR is dedicating a portion of the meeting to discussing the GRF and has partnered with a refugee-rights network to facilitate participation of refugees in the region. A similar approach should be pursued for the remaining regional meetings in Africa and Latin America.

**UNHCR should partner with NGOs and refugee networks to offer advocacy training ahead of the GRF**

- The Global Refugee-led Network has identified the need for training in policy advocacy as one of its key recommendations for meaningful participation in the GRF. Indeed, UN ministerial-level forums like the GRF are highly formalized and follow pre-determined protocols, which can be a barrier to inclusion when refugees are not experienced with these processes.

- In 2008, a training manual was designed by UNHCR and the International Council of Volunteer Agencies (ICVA) to provide guidance for NGOs to participate effectively in UNHCR’s Annual Consultation with NGOs. UNHCR, in partnership with other refugee experts, should adapt this manual to create a training guide for refugee participation in high-level UN meetings. UNHCR could then partner with NGOs interested in hosting this training, which is designed to be taught only over a few days, in the lead up to the GRF. Ultimately, online versions should also be made available.

---

At the Global Refugee Forum:

**Member States and others should include refugees as members of their delegations to the GRF**

- Member States, especially the forum’s co-host and co-conveners, should include refugees as members of their official delegations. The Global Refugee-led Network and the Global Youth Advisory Council, along with UNHCR officials, have already called for this. At UNHCR’s annual Executive Committee meeting, several governments, such as Canada, the United States, and Australia, regularly include civil society representatives as official members of their delegations. This approach provides a model for the inclusion of refugees in GRF delegations. Other groups attending such forums, such as NGOs and members of the private sector, should also seek to include refugees in their delegations.

**UNHCR, with support from the Swiss government, should invite a refugee-only delegation to the GRF**

- Although it is impossible for a five- or ten-person group to be perfectly representative of all refugees, this should not detract from the importance of supporting a refugee delegation at the GRF. At minimum, the refugee delegation should include broad geographic representation and refugees living in different circumstances, such as in camps and in cities. Additionally, every effort should be made to include women, persons with disabilities, and youth, as called for in the GCR. Ideally, the group would also include LGBTQ+ representation. Refugees who have already emerged as leaders and outspoken advocates for their communities should be strongly considered. UNHCR should dedicate staff to supporting the refugee delegation in the lead up to the forum, at the event, and upon return.

As co-host, the Swiss government should announce its support for the participation of a refugee delegation.

To galvanize refugee participation over the long-term:

**UNHCR should support the creation of comprehensive mapping of refugee-led groups**

- Throughout the GRF planning process, UNHCR must seek out more marginalized refugee groups or less formalized refugee collectives for engagement and inclusion. While it is essential to collaborate with well-established refugee networks, the base of participants should be expanded. To contribute to this effort, UNHCR should conduct comprehensive mapping to identify the scope and scale of refugee-led groups around the world.

- Some actors, such as The Independent Diplomat, an advisory group with staff in Geneva, have already begun putting mapping strategies in place. UNHCR should collaborate with those already carrying out such exercises to create a comprehensive database of refugee-led groups around the world.

**UNHCR should create a Refugee Participation Office at UNHCR**

- Facilitating meaningful refugee participation is a major undertaking that requires adequate staffing and resources. To address this challenge and with donor support, UNHCR should establish a Refugee Participation Office (RPO) as soon as possible. This office would be dedicated to facilitating meaningful refugee participation at the GRF and during all future high-level policy discussions, such as the annual High Commissioner’s Dialogue on
Protection Challenges. Even if the office is established prior to the GRF, UNHCR could announce the RPO at the Forum as one of its pledges and invite others to support and endorse the initiative going forward. Staffing should include those with lived refugee experience. At the local level, UNHCR should assign Refugee Participation Focal Points for each of its country operations to support collaboration with the RPO.

- In the immediate term, UNHCR should implement the Global Refugee-led Network’s recommendation to include one or more refugees as a liaison to the GRF planning team in Geneva.

After the GRF, UNHCR should evaluate how refugee contributions were incorporated and report back to refugees the results of the evaluation

- To make improvements going forward and to build trust and accountability with refugee participants, UNHCR should pledge to evaluate how refugee contributions were incorporated into the planning and outcomes of the GRF. Once the evaluation is complete, UNHCR should establish mechanisms (via social media, messaging apps, radio, and TV) to follow-up with refugee groups throughout the world to share the results. This can form the basis for dialogue and engagement on planning for the next GRF in four years, as well at high-level refugee meetings in the interim.

CONCLUSION

Facilitating meaningful refugee participation at the GRF is a complicated but critical mission. UNHCR has already begun taking steps to facilitate this participation, and additional steps can be taken to expand on this work and ensure a robust, meaningful participatory experience for refugees in advance of the GRF, as well at the event itself.

Based on the initiative of refugee-led groups themselves, support for meaningful refugee participation is finally beginning to achieve the prioritization it deserves. Refugees must be seen as partners, knowledge-holders, and actors who have perspectives and proposals to offer beyond identifying needs. The robust engagement of several self-organized refugee groups is evidence that refugees are certainly capable and ready to contribute to discussions on both needs and solutions to the refugee situation.

UNHCR and others have made significant strides to enable refugee participation in the lead up to the GRF. A strong effort in the coming months will be needed to make that participation as meaningful as possible and to set the stage for only greater inclusion in the future.
ABOUT THE AUTHORS

HAYLEY DROZDOWSKI served as a research fellow with Refugees International through the spring of 2019.

MARK YARNELL is senior advocate and UN liaison for Refugees International. Follow him on Twitter @yarnellmark.

ABOUT REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL

Refugees International advocates for lifesaving assistance and protection for displaced people and promotes solutions to displacement crises around the world. We do not accept any government or UN funding, ensuring the independence and credibility of our work.