

# "WE WERE SEEN, BUT WERE WE HEARD?"

MEANINGFUL REFUGEE PARTICIPATION AT THE  
GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM 2023

AN ASSESSMENT BY R-SEAT

JULY 2024



**R:SEAT**

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# FOREWORD

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*"States must recognise that refugees are not passive recipients of aid. Refugees have the skills and knowledge to inform existing structures to find lasting and durable solutions. As long as states continue to produce refugees, there will be a need to engage with those directly affected, and this approach is smart foreign policy."*

**Danijel Malbasa**

**Refugee Advisor to the State Delegation of Australia to the GRF 2023**

*"Participating in GRF 2023 amplified my courage to invest in refugee women and girls finally to put in their hands the strength to save the world."*

**Cecile Losamandjo Pango**

**Founder and CEO of Women for Action, Member of the Group of the 70 Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Experts to the GRF 2023 identified by UNHCR**

*"I urge all stakeholders to continue prioritizing the needs and rights of refugees, ensuring that our voices are integrated into decision-making processes that directly impact our lives. By fostering genuine partnerships, embracing diversity, and promoting solidarity, we can overcome the challenges we face and create a world where every refugee is given the opportunity to thrive."*

**Dr. Zakira Hekmat**

**Member of the Group of the 70 Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Experts to the GRF 2023 identified by UNHCR, and Advisor on the Fostering Mental Health and Psychosocial Wellbeing Multistakeholder Pledge**

*"As a refugee-led organization, attending the GRF in person was a turning point in our work. It brought to the fore the global nature of the seemingly insurmountable challenges of forced displacement and the fierce urgency for us to act now! I was especially moved by fellow refugee leaders, who demonstrated such peerless generosity of spirit to tell us their most personal stories and their determination to keep doing this important event in the face of tragic loss and adversity. This Forum was far from perfect, but to light up those dark bits, they were these beautiful examples of human courage and resilience, and my heart is full."*

**Ryan Figueiredo**

**Executive Director at Equal Asia Foundation, Member of the Group of the 70 Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Experts to the GRF 2023 identified by UNHCR**

*"Refugees have demonstrated strengthened capacities for addressing their challenges as first responders in their communities, employing successful local strategies and approaches. However, to achieve impactful change and durable solutions for and with refugees, it is crucial for states, the UN refugee system, and partners to meaningfully include, listen to, recognize, support, amplify, and fund the work of refugees."*

**Jean Marie Ishimwe**

**R-SEAT East Africa Regional Lead, Member of the Group of the 70 Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Experts to the GRF 2023 identified by UNHCR**



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Following the second [Global Refugee Forum](#) (referred to interchangeably as the GRF 2023, the GRF, or the Forum) in December 2023, [Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table \(R-SEAT\)](#) set out to identify and assess different instances of refugee participation throughout the GRF and determine whether the participation of refugees was substantively meaningful throughout its constituent elements. This report seeks to assist all relevant stakeholders in reflecting on their own efforts towards refugee participation in the context of the GRF and consider how they can improve upon these practices for future convenings of the global refugee regime, looking towards the next GRF in 2027.

R-SEAT was involved in GRF processes across many capacities including as a member of the Advisory Board to the [UNHCR Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless Persons](#), as a training provider for refugee participants, a financial sponsor for refugee-led organizations (RLOs), an R-Space (Refugee-led Space) lead co-organizer, a strategic partner to state delegations, and in crafting the [“We’re All In, Are You?”](#) Campaign. To develop this report, R-SEAT conducted interviews with various attendees who have lived experience of forced displacement, and reviewed and analyzed materials related to the GRF to evaluate whether refugee participation in these endeavors was meaningful. At R-SEAT, we believe **meaningful refugee participation occurs when refugees from diverse backgrounds have sustained influence in all fora where decisions, policies, and responses that impact their lives are being designed, implemented, and measured in a manner that is accessible, broad, informed, safe, free, and supported.**

The GRF 2023 saw a significant increase in the number of participants with lived experience of forced displacement compared to the first GRF in 2019. While in 2019, there were only 72 participants with lived experience of forced displacement, in 2023, there were 328 individuals participating in a variety of different capacities. This included the participation of the Advisory Board to UNHCR, a group of 70 refugee experts identified by UNHCR, and numerous invitations extended to RLOs, which all indicate the growing recognition of the importance of refugee participation at the event. Fourteen states also included refugees in their delegations, the majority acting as advisors, and several international non-governmental organizations and other stakeholders made an effort to both support and invite refugee leaders and RLOs to attend in different capacities. This is progress, but were these instances of refugee participation substantively meaningful?

In this report, R-SEAT assesses the different capacities in which refugees were invited to the GRF, the preparatory processes for these participants, and the diversity of these perspectives through a mixture of interviews and program review. We reviewed the engagement of those with lived experience of forced displacement inside events at the official GRF site (Palexpo) and within the R-Space, as well as the engagement of their perspectives in pledging processes. We then identify specific barriers that prevent more robust participation and provide recommendations for future GRFs and meetings of the global refugee regime.

Significant gains have been made on the topic of refugee participation since 2019; nonetheless, there is still room for improvement in terms of the quality and extent of participation. This report seeks to illuminate ways in which these processes can be improved to better harness the power of refugee participation and make it increasingly meaningful. These recommendations seek to expand upon existing commitments and inspire all actors to enhance meaningful refugee participation. Our key recommendations, elaborated on within the report, are as follows:

### **For all stakeholders:**

- Create mechanisms for follow-up and accountability in pledge implementation that ensure meaningful refugee participation.
- Ensure timely selection and onboarding of refugee delegates and RLOs with clearly outlined tasks, roles, and expectations for refugee delegates.
- Ensure the inclusion of a diverse group of refugees, including refugee children, refugees from ethnic and religious minorities, people with disabilities, and LGBTQI+ persons.
- Continue the practice of engaging refugees as experts and advisors.
- Avoid tokenistic practices that hinder the meaningful participation of refugees.
- Provide opportunities for debriefing sessions and feedback post-GRF.
- Consider appropriate forms of compensation for refugee delegates that recognize their time and work.
- Utilize technology to expand refugee participation virtually.
- Fund, resource, and support RLOs.

### **For Member States:**

- Establish, engage, and sustain refugee advisory mechanisms at the national level to affect change internationally and domestically.
  - Engage refugee advisory mechanisms in all the phases of the pledging process.
- Include a refugee advisor who is openly and transparently selected from those mechanisms as an official member of the state delegation.

### **For UNHCR:**

- Continue working with Switzerland as the co-host in a timely manner to realize their commitment to coordinate and streamline visa applications fully.



- Develop and strengthen regional events and processes surrounding the GRF.
- Improve space for dialogue within parallel high-level events.
- Sustain further and more regular engagement of existing bodies such as the Advisory Board to UNHCR's Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons.

### **For RLOs and refugee experts:**

- Participate in training and prepare in advance of the event.
- Seek mentors, allies, and other refugee leaders who have previously attended meetings of the global refugee regime.
- Be prepared to advocate for yourself.
- Raise issues with trusted partners if something feels unethical or makes you uncomfortable.
- Maintain up-to-date emergency contacts in case of issues during travel.

### **For NGOs and INGOs**

- Identify barriers to equitable partnerships with refugee-led organizations and use skills, platforms, and networks to find solutions to address them.
- Strengthen collaboration and build genuine partnership with refugee-led organizations, and create opportunities to elevate voices of refugee leaders, utilize their expertise and bolster their skills as needed.
- Actively engage in the practices of meaningful refugee participation at international convenings, including GRF and other GCR initiatives.

This report should serve as a resource for all actors within the global refugee regime. There is ample time to prepare for the GRF 2027 and create opportunities for substantive and meaningful engagement of those with lived experience of forced displacement. R-SEAT remains optimistic that meaningful refugee participation will continue to be realized as a valuable tool for the global refugee regime to develop and enhance solutions that respond to the needs of those directly impacted.

# INTRODUCTION



The [Global Refugee Forum 2023](#) (referred to interchangeably as the GRF 2023, the GRF, or the Forum), the largest global convening on refugees, took place from 13 to 15 December 2023 in Geneva, Switzerland, with linked events starting on 11 December 2023. The GRF is co-hosted every four years by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Switzerland to support and review the implementation of the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#). This second GRF was co-convened by Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan, and Uganda and was held at the Palexpo Convention Center in Geneva. According to UNHCR, over 4,200 participants from 168 countries attended the GRF 2023 in person, and a further 10,000 people followed the event online.

Prior to the negotiations of the GCR, refugee leaders and [refugee-led organizations](#) (RLOs) spearheaded a movement towards meaningful refugee participation (MRP) within the global refugee regime, collaborating

with diverse partners, including private funders, civil society, and academia. This progress is reflected in [Paragraph 34](#) of the GCR, which states, *"Responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist."* Meaningful refugee participation was central to conversations in the lead-up to the Forum, with diverse actors underscoring the importance of including refugees in the decision-making processes that affect their lives.

Numerous initiatives were undertaken by UNHCR, member states, and other stakeholders to address calls for there to be increased refugee participation at the GRF. Consequently, during the GRF 2023, there was a significant rise in refugee participants compared to 2019. At the inaugural GRF in 2019, only one country (Canada) included a refugee advisor as part of its state delegation, and a total of 72 refugees attended. In 2023, according to UNHCR, 328 forcibly displaced individuals participated across diverse roles and capacities. Fourteen countries included refugees in their state delegations—the majority in the role of refugee advisor. Ahead of the convening, UNHCR opened a call for refugees with policy and technical expertise to attend the GRF and support its design process, from which 70 Refugee Experts were selected. 50 RLOs and their delegations were also invited, as well as refugee children, refugee representatives of the Global Youth Advisory Council, refugee student leaders and journalism mentees, and a refugee representative from the Young Champions for Refugees. Additionally, the Refugee Advisory Board of UNHCR—which comprises [16 organizations led by refugees, internally displaced people, and stateless people](#), including those led by women, LGBTQI+ persons, persons with disabilities, and other diverse groups—was present with their respective delegations.

The increase in the number of refugees since 2019 indicates that the global refugee regime is slowly recognizing the value of refugee participation in high-level events, further solidifying this practice as an [emergent norm](#) within the refugee regime. However, looking beyond the

numbers, this report will analyze whether the engagement was substantively meaningful. At **Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT)**, meaningful participation requires actors to listen to refugees and for refugees to have **tangible influence** over the priorities and outcomes of policy processes. Meaningful participation also requires a shift in how the international community views refugees—not as beneficiaries of aid, but as rights-holders who actively participate in shaping opportunities and outcomes in their lives and communities. Throughout this report and all of R-SEAT’s work, this is the definition we use to assess refugee participation.

Was refugee participation at the GRF and its respective preparatory processes actually meaningful? Was it worth the time, money, and carbon emissions required to bring more than 4,000 delegates from across the world to Geneva? Did it represent a great leap forward in realizing the goals of the GCR, including empowering refugees and finding solutions? Did refugees participating at the GRF have tangible influence over pledge development, side events, policy outcomes, and priorities? Or was it more of the same, reflecting the perpetuation of the status quo?

This report **will aim to answer these questions by assessing the different capacities in which refugees were involved in the GRF.** R-SEAT will evaluate whether the participation of refugees was accessible, broad, informed, safe, free, and supported. For this evaluation, we have conducted interviews and debriefing sessions with nine refugee advisors to state delegations and a sample of the 70 Refugee Experts Group. We have also included the input of members of the Refugee Advisory Board to UNHCR and other partner RLOs. The R-SEAT team was both present at the GRF and heavily involved in the preparation process, working alongside various partners leading up to the Forum. R-SEAT was present in each of the three formal preparatory meetings for the GRF and the four informal briefings on the GCR held by UNHCR prior to the Forum. We worked with nine states on the inclusion of refugee advisors in their state delegations, and led the development of the ‘*We’re all in. Are you?*’ Campaign. In partnership with

the [Local Engagement Refugee Research Network](#) (LERRN) and the [International Institute for Humanitarian Law](#) (IIHL), R-SEAT also provided a comprehensive training that was made available to all invited individuals with lived experience of forced displacement. This training spanned five weeks and was offered across five time zones and in four different languages. This report reflects our own experience and insight as a global refugee-led organization. We conclude this report with policy recommendations for all stakeholders and specific recommendations for states, UNHCR, RLOs, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) so that they can provide guidance for future convenings to enhance global refugee responses through meaningful refugee participation.

In this report, we often use the term “refugee” as a general unifying term that may not adhere to its strict legal definition. Instead, it serves as a reclaimed phrase that encompasses all individuals who have experienced forced displacement and statelessness. Rather than adhere to the precise legal categorization, the term “refugee” is often used interchangeably to include any “person who has lived through or is experiencing forced displacement,” a common practice in our work and the broader sector. This distinction is significant because different actors may choose terminology that best aligns with their positionality and perspective on the subject. Consequently, they will be quoted using the terms they prefer.



## The GRF 2023 in Numbers



### According to UNHCR:

- Globally, 114 million people are facing persecution, human rights violations, violence, armed conflict, and serious public disorder, forcing them to flee from their homes.
- Over 4,200 participants from 168 countries attended the GRF 2023, including five heads of state or government, ministers, heads of international organizations (including United Nations entities and specialized agencies), refugee-led organizations, civil society representatives, and companies and foundations. 427 organizations were represented, and 10,000+ people tuned in to watch online.
- Over \$2.2 billion was pledged by governments, the private sector, philanthropic organizations and foundations, faith-based organizations, and others.



- At the GRF, 1,600 pledges were submitted, contributing to one or more of the 43 “multi-stakeholder pledges”.
- States pledged to resettle one million refugees by 2030 and provide alternative pathways to third countries for three million more.

**Refugee Participation in Numbers (per the [UNHCR Report on Meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in the Global Refugee Forum 2023](#)):**

- 328 forcibly displaced and stateless persons participated in person at the GRF, constituting approximately eight percent of the total number of physical participants.
- Four states (Australia, Brazil, Canada, and New Zealand) shared a portion of their delegation’s speaking time in the Plenary with their respective Refugee Advisors.
- Three states (Brazil, Germany, and Switzerland) pledged to establish refugee advisory mechanisms at the national level.
- Fourteen states included one or more refugees in their official government delegation, and many acted as refugee advisors.
- Thirty-five of forty (88%) parallel high-level events featured speakers who were forcibly displaced and stateless and showcased their impactful contributions. However, of the 454 speakers across these parallel high-level events, only 67 had lived experience of forced displacement, constituting 15% of the entire speaker lineup.
- Approximately 53% of all multi-stakeholder pledges were announced in the Plenary by forcibly displaced and stateless participants. However, the extent to which many pledges meaningfully included those participants in the design and planning of the pledge or whether they simply announced them remains unclear.

# TRAINING PRIOR TO THE GRF



In partnership with the **Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERRN)** and the **Sanremo International Institute of Humanitarian Law (IIHL)**, R-SEAT developed a comprehensive training program to help prepare refugee participants in advance of the GRF. This training focused on preparing refugee advocates in all of their capacities to actively and meaningfully engage with the opportunities present at the GRF. R-SEAT provides training in advance of every major convening of the international refugee system, and the GRF was no exception. Over five weeks, R-SEAT covered the topics of meaningful refugee participation, the global refugee regime, advocacy within the system, and a deep dive into the GRF agenda. This training occurred across five time zones (Australia Central Standard, South Africa Standard, Eastern Africa, Central Europe, and Colombia Standard times) and was delivered in English, French, Spanish, and Arabic to over 60 participants. At the GRF, we were pleased to meet some of the individuals who participated in our training and to hear that they felt better prepared and equipped for the GRF due to this training program.

UNHCR also provided a series of webinars for forcibly displaced attendees to the GRF. These webinars were optional and prepared participants on a range of topics, from media coverage of forced displacement to promoting an Age, Gender, and Diversity (AGD) approach. R-SEAT also provided a session on Meaningful Engagement and Advocacy to the GRF as part of UNHCR's series of webinars. Many of these webinars had a great level of attendance, indicating a genuine interest from the refugee participants in preparing and engaging with the Forum. We received positive feedback on the webinar series through our interviews and encourage UNHCR to continue and enhance this practice for future Forums.

As a final step to prepare refugee participants, UNHCR ran an orientation for all attendees with lived experience of forced displacement at the Centre International de Conférences (CICG) on 12 December 2023 in advance of the first official day of the GRF. Responses to the orientation by UNHCR were largely positive, calling it very helpful and thorough, and noting the logistical assistance it provided for those who were visiting Geneva for the first time. A participant who attended the orientation remarked to R-SEAT that the orientation provided an additional helpful element in revealing the dynamics that would be at play for the remainder of the week. A distinct value is held within in-person convenings and training, becoming even more significant for such consequential gatherings like the GRF. Some attendees expressed concern about the tone of UNHCR's messaging towards refugees during this orientation, particularly regarding the remarks urging them not to be "political." By omitting the political realities that often cause displacement, this appeal highlights the contradiction in avoiding political discussions while political decisions frequently create forced displacement, making this inconsistent with other calls to address root causes.

# REFUGEES AT THE GRF AS EXPERTS

At the GRF, R-SEAT expected to see refugees not only simply ‘participating’ or ‘being included’ but also being called upon and considered experts in thematic areas of refugee policy. The following subsections detail the reflections from individuals and organizations across the various capacities in which refugees were invited to the GRF.



## **Group of the 70 Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Experts to the GRF 2023 identified by UNHCR**

In December 2022, UNHCR invited individuals with lived experience of forced displacement and statelessness to express their interest in contributing as experts to the GRF. UNHCR did an initial review and



shortlist and the final selection was made by the [Advisory Board of UNHCR's Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons](#). This selection process formed the Group of the 70 Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Experts to the GRF 2023 (the Expert Group).

The selection of the Expert Group was a step forward in realizing new approaches to the meaningful engagement of refugees in international forums. This Expert Group consisted of individuals with firsthand experience of forced displacement and expertise on thematic issues, representing Africa, the Americas, Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), and Asia-Pacific. For this process, UNHCR defined expertise as [“acquired skills and knowledge of a specific field as a result of work/voluntary experiences or formal/informal education.”](#) UNHCR facilitated their participation at the GRF.

R-SEAT conducted debriefing meetings with nine refugees from the Expert Group to gather insights on their participation at the GRF. When asked to rate their experiences on a scale from 1 to 10, with 1 being the lowest, the Expert Group members we interviewed expressed positive evaluations, averaging a score of 7.8. Their responses ranged between 6 and 10, indicating a favorable perception of their experience. These scores reflect their influential engagement throughout the GRF, with their expertise and perspectives playing a meaningful role. During these debriefs, refugee experts highlighted the strong efforts of UNHCR to facilitate their meaningful engagement. Some were involved in numerous parallel high-level events and assumed critical roles as moderators and panelists. The majority provided inputs on pledges, and contributed to the Joint Refugee Statement.<sup>1</sup> The GRF also offered them a space to expand their networks, connect, and explore potential collaborations with other stakeholders.

The participation of the Expert Group began in June 2023. As referenced in the training section of this report, UNHCR coordinated a series of

1. Read the full version of the Joint Refugee Statement in [English](#), [Spanish](#), [French](#), and [Arabic](#), and see the [list of endorsing organizations](#).

informational webinars for forcibly displaced participants, including the Expert Group, providing a space to share key information on GRF-related themes such as gender advocacy, youth, and student-led global advocacy, as well as policy and diplomacy. A large percentage of the cohort attended some of the sessions, indicating their buy-in to the process and sustained interest in their further involvement. At the same time, with such a large group of participants, the time and space for raising questions to engage in conversations was constrained. The timing of the webinars was also noted as inconvenient for some time zones, particularly Latin America.

The GRF agenda itself was packed with many side events and meetings happening simultaneously. During some of the plenary sessions and parallel high-level events, experts made contributions or delivered statements, but often felt their allocated time was insufficient, as a busy agenda required all speakers to keep their remarks brief. Moreover, some of the experts assumed multiple roles and were required to attend different meetings at the same time, which impeded their participation in other critical discussions. With the already tight agenda of the GRF, little space remained for conversations, discussions, and exchanges with other stakeholders. While the experts we spoke with largely agreed that they had a positive experience in working with UNHCR and the majority felt meaningfully engaged in specific avenues, this engagement could have been developed further, as some reported their contributions and engagement in the development of pledges could have been more meaningful.

Following the conclusion of the GRF, UNHCR's Meaningful Refugee Participation Team invited all attendees with lived experience of forced displacement and representatives of RLOs to participate in debriefing sessions. These debriefings aimed to collect feedback on their participation in the GRF, identify common barriers, and share lessons learned. These sessions focused on the practical elements



surrounding their participation, such as barriers to access, rather than on the level of engagement participants felt they had achieved. Ideally, this feedback will translate into new methods and approaches for the GRF 2027. Strikingly, most of the experts we spoke with were unaware of how, or even *if*, their participation may continue in the implementation of pledges, follow-up sessions, or other means. As it stands, the Expert Group is now without function, which is a loss to the GRF process looking forward. While UNHCR has reported that multistakeholder pledge leaders [“remain committed to continuing engagement in pledge implementation and monitoring processes,”](#) this will ultimately be on a case-by-case basis and will not be led by UNHCR. Significant work was done to match experts to their thematic areas, and maintaining these channels would be immensely useful for further work on pledges and through GCR initiatives.

### **Refugee-led Organizations (RLOs)**



UNHCR invited 50 different RLOs to the GRF, but this participation was not guaranteed to be funded, leading to some actors creating a sponsorship plan. In coordination with UNHCR, R-SEAT and five other organizations worked to sponsor as many RLO delegates as possible.

Thanks to these efforts, nearly 60 individuals were sponsored and thus able to attend the GRF in person. However, compared to other UN forums, this number of organizations remains small. For instance, at the annual [Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues](#) in April of 2023, [124 Indigenous Peoples Organizations](#) were in attendance.

R-SEAT debriefed with a sample of delegates who attended the GRF as representatives of their RLOs. In asking these delegates to rate their experience overall from 1-10 (with 1 being the lowest), responses ranged from 7.5-10; however, the meaningful engagement of these RLO delegations overall remains varied. Although UNHCR invited these 50 RLOs to attend, there was no clear role for their participation besides being physically present. With side events, including parallel high-level events hosted at Palexpo, and/or linked events across Geneva, under the purview of different organizations, there were fractures in information on where and how to engage.

Some of the RLO delegates we debriefed remarked that they were distinctly involved in preparing for side events, developing pledges in their many capacities, and providing feedback on the refugee statement, but this is not entirely consistent across RLO delegates. One individual shared with R-SEAT that their organization was not involved in any preparatory processes and only came to be invited to the GRF through their well-known presence in their respective national refugee leadership ecosystem. Another noted that the only preparation they had engaged with was R-SEAT's GRF training program, which equipped them for their attendance; however, this does not constitute meaningful engagement with the substance of the Forum.

Despite invitations being issued to the Expert Group and Advisory Board members in July 2023, RLO invitations only started to be issued in September 2023. Some of the RLOs initially invited could not attend, prompting UNHCR to extend invitations to alternative organizations. While this demonstrates a commitment to ensuring all 50 invitation slots were utilized by at least one member of an invited RLO, the continual

invitation process led to confusion in practice regarding when to expect an invitation. The limited time between the issuance and the Forum also posed a hurdle to accessing necessary travel documents.

Some RLOs sought clarification from R-SEAT regarding the timing and method of invitation issuance, given the multiple rounds of invitations and coordinated sponsorships. This ultimately created issues with securing sufficient funding and appropriate visas for travel, leading to several individuals being denied visas and unable to attend, which we elaborate on within the following ‘Barriers to Refugee Participation’ segment. Enhancing efforts around the sponsorship coordination scheme could have allowed for further sponsorships and mitigated some of the challenges faced by these individuals and others who could not attend.

These rounds of invitations led to a scramble to support as many RLOs as possible, and some confusion arose from this. Individuals holding overlapping roles sometimes needed clarification about the number of times they needed to register and under what roles. Some RLOs being sponsored had a member of their delegation also serving as a part of the Expert Group, leaving them unaware of where their financial sponsorship originated. This overlap of some refugee leaders attending in different capacities complicates the matter and does not lend itself to fostering a wide range of refugee actors in attendance, nor does it allow the individual to prepare for their attendance within that specific role effectively.

RLO delegates we debriefed believe they utilized their expertise to contribute to the Forum substantively and that networking, connecting, and accessing previously inaccessible spaces were all valuable facets of the GRF. This does not negate the fact that some RLO delegations were

invited to attend without being engaged in the design and planning processes, nor in any structured preparatory briefings. As this was only the second GRF overall, this indicates a need for enhanced oversight of these processes to ensure better and more effective engagement ahead of the GRF 2027.

Following this trajectory, preparations for the next GRF can re-engage with the 50 invited RLOs and solicit their feedback directly. The debriefing calls and detailed survey post-GRF were open to all attendees with lived experience of forced migration together, but debriefing attendees separately according to the categories of invitation may provide better insights and clarity on their roles, and give UNHCR the opportunity to build in mitigation strategies to avoid confusion. Debriefing RLOs specifically could also serve to enhance refugee participation in pledge implementation. For instance, one leader mentioned their significant efforts in drafting a pledge but had yet to be engaged in the next steps for implementation at time of interview. Timely onboarding, preparation, and post-GRF debriefing on how to utilize the expertise of RLOs best can provide new pathways that integrate these perspectives more substantively.

### **Advisory Board to UNHCR’s Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons**

The [Advisory Board to the UNHCR Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless Persons \(the Advisory Board\)](#) provides strategic advice to UNHCR to inform policy and practice with the expertise and perspective of organizations led by displaced and stateless persons. The Advisory Board [comprises 16 organizations](#) that advise UNHCR at the global level on GCR initiatives, thematic areas, and meaningful participation at the policy and strategic level.





R-SEAT, along with other member organizations of the Advisory Board, engaged in thoughtful reflection on their experiences and roles before and during the GRF. Advisory Board members recognized the GRF 2023 as a pivotal moment for refugee participation. They noted a significant increase in the number of refugee participants and their robust engagement and acknowledged the active involvement of refugee experts and delegates in various high-level meetings, side events, and plenary sessions.

The Advisory Board also identified challenges before and during the GRF. Although the numbers show an increase in refugee participation throughout the GRF, not all refugee delegates were meaningfully involved, nor was every instance of participation sufficiently meaningful, including their own. Prior to the GRF, the Advisory Board contributed to the final shortlisting of the 70 individuals who formed the Expert Group, and representatives of the Advisory Board delivered statements during two of the Formal Preparatory Meetings to the GRF and two of the Quarterly Informal Briefings on the GCR. Representatives also collaborated in the agenda design and delivery of the parallel high-level event on Meaningful Refugee Participation, and led the drafting of the Joint Refugee Statement. Although these opportunities were welcomed, Advisory Board members expressed that their involvement could have had a much greater scope, been more clear and organized, and had a greater impact.

The Advisory Board members specifically noted that they could have been more involved in pledge development, and some expressed that they had not been engaged in such processes at all. The Advisory Board brings a wide range of expertise, diversity, and experience drawn from its constituent organizations. There was some involvement from the Advisory Board in developing the Resettlement pledge, the Advancing Localization in Displacement and Statelessness Responses pledge, the Meaningful Refugee Participation pledge, and the UN Common Pledge 2.0 on Refugee Inclusion; however, the scale of engagement fell short of expectations. UNHCR reported the submission of ["1,600 pledges, contributing to one or more of the 43 multi-stakeholder pledges."](#) These figures underscore the potential for greater inclusion of refugee experts in pledge development, not only from the Advisory Board but across various capacities in which refugees participated during the GRF, as the vast majority of pledges lacked collaboration with refugees in their development. Consequently, some pledges have a deficiency of perspectives stemming from individuals with lived experience of forced displacement, highlighting the need for more robust engagement of refugees in pledging initiatives.

Members also noted that the Advisory Board's role could have been more significant in agenda setting, planning, and logistical organization of the event. In the lead-up to the event, there were fractures in the flow of information on the agenda and refugee speakers' selection. The Advisory Board recognizing the need for more significant refugee engagement across organizing, can support more meaningful and diversified participation of refugees in pledge development, a more streamlined process of agenda setting, and improved communication.



## Refugee Advisors in State Delegations



Fourteen states included refugees in their delegations, with the majority serving as refugee advisors to their state delegations. R-SEAT worked closely with 9 of those 14 states, and/or provided training on engagement at the GRF and the larger global refugee system to refugee advisors in the delegations of Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Switzerland, and the United States. Post-GRF, R-SEAT carried out a group debrief session, and individual debriefs with the nine refugee advisors to discuss the entirety of their experience. This segment reflects several common points that were raised throughout these sessions as both best practices and areas to improve upon in these engagements.

A critical distinction to note regarding the inclusion of refugee advisors in state delegations is the existence of established refugee advisory mechanisms in certain states. Refugee advisors highlighted the significance of these mechanisms as a positive means to ensure the process remains meaningful, rather than tokenistic. As of December 2023, four states had established refugee advisory mechanisms:

Canada (The Refugee Advisory Network of Canada), the United States (the United States Refugee Advisory Board), New Zealand (the New Zealand Refugee Advisory Panel), and Australia (the Australian Refugee Advisory Panel). Notably, during the GRF, Germany, Switzerland, and Brazil pledged to establish refugee advisory mechanisms within their respective national frameworks.

Refugee advisors to state delegations each identified the importance of timely selection and onboarding to their delegations for meetings of the global refugee regime. By timely selection and onboarding, we specifically mean providing the refugee advisor with enough time and space to develop a working relationship with other delegates and make substantive contributions to the delegation and its preparations. In the case of the GRF, we recommend that the integration of the refugee advisor begin at least six months in advance. This timeframe will help ensure that the refugee advisor is adequately engaged in the relevant preparatory processes, such as formal preparatory meetings convened by UNHCR, pledge development, side event planning, and defining priorities, as all occur well in advance of the convening in Geneva. These preparatory steps are crucial elements for the engagement of refugee advisors. This long-term engagement will foster the conditions for the refugee advisors to participate meaningfully and contribute to fulfilling the needs of their respective delegations.

Early onboarding would also allow for the integration of the refugee advisors to be more substantive and ensure their roles are more clearly defined. To ensure the effective engagement of refugee advisors within national delegations, it is essential for states to clearly outline their roles and assign specific tasks that match both their expertise as well as the strategic objectives of the delegation. This delineation of roles enables refugee advisors to fully prepare and actively contribute to policy discussions, the drafting of statements, and strategic planning for impactful outcomes. A thorough, state-led onboarding process should cover strategy, priorities, engagement, and all relevant minutiae of the state's goals.

This process also requires refugees to have a tangible influence on the outcomes of the delegations' decisions, as including a refugee advisor in title alone does not equate to meaningful refugee participation. Refugee advisors are willing and able to substantially contribute to the delegation's work and should be presented with opportunities to provide their insights across multiple avenues. This includes providing the refugee advisor with the opportunity to contribute to the drafting process of official statements, a portion of time to speak during the plenary, inviting them to attend bilateral meetings, providing them with speaking opportunities, engaging them on the strategic planning of side events, and identifying priorities for the country context.

As with other attendees to the GRF with lived experience of forced displacement, refugee advisors to state delegations should also substantively debrief with their respective delegations. This means setting a meeting with the specific intention of discussing the overview of the GRF, and how the refugee advisor's perspective is relevant to the delegations' work going forward. In this space, other delegation members should engage the refugee advisor's insights on their evaluation of the Forum, ideally following up on any specific items relevant to their given area of expertise.

Each GRF presents the opportunity to develop, report, and review pledge implementation. For the participation of the refugee advisor to be significant and productive, states should include refugee advisors in regional level sessions and relevant follow-up meetings regarding pledge implementation alongside the respective national refugee advisory mechanism (if established). States should also prepare a timely meaningful refugee participation strategy for follow-up sessions to the GRF, such as the High-Level Officials Meeting in 2025. Furthermore, refugee advisory mechanisms can serve as conduits to country and regional level reporting mechanisms. Importantly, these measures maintain consistency throughout the four years until the next GRF, ensuring sustained progress.

# DIVERSITY IN PARTICIPATION OF PERSONS WITH FORCED DISPLACEMENT EXPERIENCE

A review of speakers and panelists on [UNHCR's website](#) indicates the involvement of at least 86 persons with lived experience of forced displacement attending the GRF, each with diverse backgrounds and expertise. Based on R-SEAT's analysis, these individuals participated in 112 instances in both the Plenary and parallel high-level events and the Speakers' Corner. Focusing on the diversity of participation, we analyzed the [GRF official agenda](#) containing the list of speakers available publicly on the UNHCR website. We distinguished self-identified persons with forced displacement experience assuming speaker roles from their titles and designations. We recognize that more people with lived experience of forced displacement could be part of the speaker line-up or hold other diverse roles. However, this segment is focused on those participants who self-identified as having lived experience of forced displacement. Among these participants were 52 women, 30 men, one non-binary person, and two children, all contributing as experts, researchers, advisors, or advocates. Similarly, we acknowledge the limitation in identifying the gender diversity of refugee experts beyond the provided list.

These participants delivered statements and shared their expertise during the three-day event. Some of the contributions were arguably more substantial than others, as members of the Expert Group were primarily engaged in more strategic discussions pertaining to their expertise. Notably, 21 of these participants were featured as speakers more than once, with 16 people speaking twice and five speaking thrice. Those who made multiple contributions across the GRF ultimately limited the potential diversity of speakers by monopolizing these limited opportunities.

These participants represented diverse backgrounds, ranging from founders and chief executive officers of RLOs and refugee-led initiatives to refugee advisors within state delegations. They brought an extensive and diverse range of expertise to the table, encompassing healthcare, youth development, research, education, sports, journalism, and human rights activism. Their varied professional backgrounds contributed to the richness of discussions on protection, documentation, complementary pathways, resettlement, digital connectivity, localization, inclusive approaches, and meaningful refugee participation.

Geographically, these participants come from over 27 countries across Africa, Europe, the Middle East, North America, and Latin America. More than half of the participants currently reside in resettlement countries such as the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Germany. This is relevant, as access to the GRF is notably challenging for individuals from specific hosting states, which we remark upon later in this report. The varied geographical presence signifies the cultural, social, and geopolitical diversity among the participants that contributed to exchanges and shared insights.



# MEANINGFUL REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN SIDE EVENTS



Wide-ranging in scope and scale, the draw of the GRF is largely its side events outside of the Plenary. In analyzing the substance of the entire program, this section will focus on both parallel high-level events (those organized by UNHCR which took place at Palexpo Convention Center, the official site for the GRF), and linked events (organized by a range of actors with events spread across Geneva and listed on the official UNHCR Program). For the purposes of this analysis, both of these types of events will be referred to as “side events”, with specifications given where needed.

We were pleased to see a variety of side events which focused on refugee participation, including but not limited to; linked events such as **“Advancing Refugee Leadership and Participation as a Core Element of the ‘Whole-of-Society Approach’”** hosted by the International Council



for Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), **“Africa Refugee Participation at GRF: Free movement and free trade”** hosted by the Africa Refugee-led Network (ARN), **“Charting New Paths: How Refugee-Led Entities Are Advancing Global Solutions”** hosted by the United States Refugee Advisory Board (USRAB) and R-SEAT, **“Organizational Pathways Towards Meaningful Participation and Refugee Leadership”** hosted by Cohere, **“The Quest for Meaning Refugee Participation: RLO Voices from East Africa”** hosted by Joint Initiative Amin Bolis Ismael, **“Implementing the GCR's Commitments to Women and Girls - Tools to support Participation, Gender Equality and to address SGBV”**, hosted by a consortium of RLOs, and a parallel high-level event hosted by UNHCR in Palexpo **“Meaningful Refugee Participation: How Partnerships with Forcibly Displaced and Stateless People Improve Policies and Solutions”**.

Events focusing on refugee-led or locally-led responses were prolific, with a variety of both linked and parallel-high level events centering on this topic. We note that side events with both specific and tangential foci on refugee participation were largely concentrated outside of Palexpo, suggesting that state and UNHCR officials may have been less likely to engage with the topic than civil society actors and refugee leaders themselves, given the constraints of the Plenary agenda. While this report seeks to assess the meaningful participation of refugees across the planning and execution of side events in general, it will also focus on events explicitly discussing meaningful refugee participation.

Although they do not constitute side events, the GCR in Action segments interspersed throughout the Plenary constituted [“moments, during which multi-stakeholder pledges that contribute to the GCR objectives and GRF 2023 key outcomes will be announced.”](#) More on pledges will follow, however, it is worth noting here that [17 of the 40 total multistakeholder pledges](#) that were announced within the Plenary were delivered by people with lived experience of forced displacement, although the extent to which these speakers were engaged in developing said pledges is unclear. Another space, the Speakers’ Corner, was a small stage outside

the Plenary, which invited a myriad of actors to give short talks on their areas of expertise, with [19 \(36% of total\)](#) speakers having lived experience of forced displacement per UNHCR. Within the official program, the Speakers' Corner is listed as its own type of event alongside the parallel high-level events taking place in Palexpo.

Another feature inside the Palexpo was the 'Safe Space'. The Safe Space was a dedicated space for refugee participants who may have been feeling overwhelmed, needing psychosocial support, and seeking an area for quiet reflection. According to our interviews with participants, this went largely unnoticed at the GRF. Some evaluated it as a good initiative overall; however, given the myriad of events occurring within Palexpo simultaneously, it was easy for attendees to miss this type of installation. In the future, this might be more prominently featured within the physical space or made more widely known.

### **Parallel High-Level Events**

We acknowledge that the GRF must cover a broad range of topics and emergent crises across side event discussions. To that end, meaningful refugee participation is not a standalone topic but a crucial component that should be embedded within all discussions and policy-making related to refugee issues. Side events are also important spaces for more organic conversations amongst stakeholders compared to the Plenary space. Within Palexpo, there were 40 different parallel high-level events across the three official days, the majority of which ([88% per UNHCR](#)) included at least one speaker with lived experience of forced displacement. UNHCR also reports that [67 individuals](#) with lived experience of forced displacement had speaking engagements across these events, totaling 15% of all 454 speakers in parallel high-level events.

The parallel high-level event **"Meaningful Refugee Participation: How Partnerships with Forcibly Displaced and Stateless People Improve Policies and Solutions"** brought refugees closer to equal partnership because the agenda, the session, and the outcomes were developed by

the Advisory Board and its constituent RLOs. The 90-minute slot consisted of two panels, including two different moderators and 11 speakers ranging from government officials to refugee leaders. Of these 11 speakers, six had lived experience of forced displacement, representing a range of initiatives and organizations across distinct policy areas. The event itself acted as a follow-up to a [side event at the High Level Officials Meeting 2021](#) where the UNHCR Task Team on Meaningful Participation and the Interim Advisory Group of Organizations led by Displaced and Stateless People recommended the centering of refugee-led responses, genuine partnerships with RLOs, and the wide scale promotion of meaningful refugee participation. R-SEAT was pleased to note that over 300 individuals from across all stakeholder groups attended this session, demonstrating widespread interest in the subject. This substantial presence of speakers with lived experience is a promising sign, yet this representation was inconsistent across all parallel high-level events.



The **“UN Common Pledge 2.0 on Refugee Inclusion”** parallel high-level event touched on meaningful refugee participation insofar as it is a pillar of the [Grand Bargain](#) and a crucial prerequisite for new developments in this space. [The UN Common Pledge 2.0](#) consists of an overarching

commitment by the whole UN to better include refugees within its own planning and collaborate with national governments to promote the inclusion of refugees within all relevant national systems and plans. Its 15 speakers—spread across two panels—spent over 90 minutes discussing the UN Common Pledge 2.0, with specific attention to the advantages of national inclusion of refugees for all. Speakers referenced this national inclusion across topics related to their relevant portfolios—ranging from state officials to refugee-led organizations. Only three of these speakers (and one moderator) self-identified as having lived experience of forced displacement; however, it is worth noting that the event itself was developed by UNHCR, the Netherlands, and OCHA—which engaged [a group of refugee experts](#). The UN Common Pledge 2.0 Group of Experts also suggested speakers and refined the content. This group of experts has been working with UNHCR since late 2022 across all elements of the pledge design process. As an event that thoroughly engaged with the practicalities of meaningful refugee participation, this panel should have had a higher proportion of speakers with lived experience, but there is evidence that refugee perspectives were integrated into the development of the event itself.

Another parallel high-level event that tangentially invoked the topic of meaningful refugee participation was **“Advancing Localization in Displacement and Statelessness Responses”**, based on a [multi-stakeholder pledge of the same title](#). Emphasizing the whole-of-society approach that includes refugees as critical partners, this pledge promotes commitments to support all actors in “advancing locally-led action”, forming partnerships, facilitating equal decision-making, sharing capacities, and improving funding, all of which clearly aligns with Paragraph 34 of the GCR. Of the 12 speakers, only two of them had lived experience of forced displacement, however, this event put meaningful refugee participation into practice by including refugee voices in the design and implementation of the event. Several of the [Pledge’s sub-thematic leads and members have lived experience of forced displacement](#), suggesting that their perspectives are integrated throughout related processes and potentially even the event's agenda. While a higher proportion of speakers with lived experience would be

beneficial, the constituent elements of the event seem to have meaningfully included refugee perspectives.

A persistent challenge is the composition of attendees at these events and the substance of the discussions within them. When events that are focused explicitly on meaningful refugee participation are only attended by those already aware and engaged in its practice, an echo chamber forms. Many high-ranking state and UNHCR officials were confined to the Palexpo due to the location of the Plenary, meaning their ability to attend events outside of Palexpo, or even outside the Plenary, was significantly reduced. As such, the proliferation of meaningful refugee participation across and within all parallel high-level events is necessary to ensure that as many actors as possible interact with the concept. This means moving past spaces that discuss refugee participation explicitly as its own topic and instead towards an approach in which refugee participation is put into practice. Specifically, it is crucial to involve refugees in developing and co-designing the events' agendas, influencing the priorities for discussion, and highlighting their expertise. Events on all thematic areas should demonstrate meaningful refugee participation through the inclusion of RLOs and refugee leaders themselves, positioning them as equal experts alongside other respected speakers rather than a tokenized afterthought, discussing concepts outside of solely participation.

Parallel events on [Connectivity for Refugees](#) and [Unleashing economic potential](#) stand out as having substantively engaged the thematic expertise of refugee experts. The refugee-led organization, Community Technology Empowerment Network (CTEN) Uganda, was involved in developing the [Connectivity for Refugees pledge](#), with the CTEN Executive Director both speaking on the panel and announcing the pledge. This type of engagement is meaningful as CTEN constitutes a thematic expert on connectivity for refugees and has been engaged as



such rather than having their engagement begin and end at a speaking opportunity. Similarly, “Unleashing Economic Potential” (the Economic Inclusion parallel high-level event) was designed and developed by members of the Expert Group, and one of its members was Master of Ceremonies.

The subsequent question-and-answer (Q&A) periods associated with each of the parallel high-level events also remain a site of interest. Some of these events used the [Pigeonhole Live](#) system, a virtual platform where attendees could submit questions via their devices while the panel was ongoing. The benefit of using this platform within the GRF was that it maintained the flow of the panel and the anonymity of the individual posing the question if they so desired. The challenge with this approach is that it allowed the panel moderators to use their discretion to pick and choose which questions they thought would be most important or appropriate. A specifically contentious example of this occurred at the UN Common Pledge 2.0 event when an attendee submitted the question, “Why is it vital to include LGBTIQ+ refugees in national systems, and how can we ensure that the outcomes for this community are not only inclusive on paper but also measurable and impactful?” (Appendix A) Pertinent to the conversation at hand and undoubtedly of concern to the individual posing this question, a discussion on the unique needs of LGBTIQ+ refugees within national systems would have been valuable to enhance the discourse within this event. This question was upvoted ten times, more than any other question in the Pigeonhole at that moment, and was marked answered by the moderation team without being broached or read aloud. This type of omission speaks to the curated experience of the Q&A periods instead of a more natural or conversational approach.

The lack of time allocated for respective Q&A periods also posed a challenge. In some cases, like the Meaningful Refugee Participation parallel high-level event, stakeholders delivered prepared interventions on their specific areas of expertise. These interventions were interesting and deserved space or consideration; however, they consumed almost

the entire time allocated for Q&A and structured a narrative rather than allowing for organic discussion to flow, as would typically happen in a traditional Q&A format. This should have been a space for significant and meaningful audience interaction rather than pre-prepared statements. While not comparable to integrating refugee perspectives in the development of the event itself, making genuine efforts to respond to questions, concerns, or even challenges from refugee leaders would have been another means to platform the voices of refugees.

## **Linked Events**



Linked events were more democratized as a range of stakeholders with diverse priorities designed them. Across linked events, we saw the topics of education and academia, protection policy and statelessness, social inclusion, refugee engagement, climate action, communication, sport, and art emerge as organizing banners. Under the “refugee engagement” section, events ranged massively. For example, the **“Locally Led Action to Address Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies: Leadership of Women-Led & Refugee Women-Led Organisations”** event brought

together four women-led organizations (the Comité des Jeunes Filles Leaders, Hope Restoration South Sudan, the Inamahoro Movement for Women and Girls, and the Rohingya Women's Welfare Society) to discuss the essential role that local actors play, with specific attention to Gender Based Violence in Emergencies. Under the same category, the **“Nothing About Us Without Us: Brainstorming Multilateral Reform to Systematize Accountability to Affected People in the Global Refugee Response”** event (co-organized by the Global Refugee-Led Network, Independent Diplomat, Asylum Access, and Oxfam) identified systematic barriers to inclusion for refugees, and discussed strategic paths forward to enhance meaningful refugee participation.

One notable linked event advancing meaningful refugee participation as an approach rather than an individual concept was the **“Advancing Refugee Leadership and Participation as a Core Element of the ‘Whole-of-Society Approach’”** event hosted by ICVA. With one government official from Australia, two academics, one member of civil society, and one refugee leader being moderated by the ICVA Head of Forced Displacement, this event had a good balance and division of its time, and its findings were specifically timely and applicable. Focusing on best practices in the co-production of knowledge illustrated an emergent space for meaningful refugee participation to be practiced. This conversation had broader-reaching implications on how meaningful refugee participation can be both an opportunity and responsibility for every actor within the global refugee space.

Looking at the humanitarian system broadly, we see numerous actors working on a seemingly central goal, without employing the knowledge of the people who know this problem most intimately. Shifting power to those with lived experience requires an interrogation of how the balance of power is currently weighted across the system, including within academia, in resource allocation, and with decision-making power. The side event **“Promoting Evidence-Based Implementation of the GCR through Teaching, Research and Solidarity”**, officially linked to the

**Multistakeholder Pledge on Shifting Power: Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally**, had a focus on evidence-based implementation of the GCR. Speakers with and without lived experience of forced displacement were featured from the Government of Canada, the Government of Brazil, the Global Migration Centre of the Graduate Institute, the Global Academic Interdisciplinary Network, the International Development Research Centre, the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network, and UNHCR. This event highlighted the importance of shifting power towards [“communities with lived experience and scholars based in low and middle-income countries most affected by displacement.”](#) As meaningful refugee participation continues to shift from a moral discourse to a normative practice, the words of Refugee-led Research Hub Researcher Mohamed Mohamud ring true: [“It’s not about centering voices. We’re past that. It’s about changing minds.”](#)

## **R-Space**

**R-Space** was a refugee-led multi-purpose space at the Impact Hub in Geneva designed by and for refugee-led organizations, refugee leaders, and their partners and allies to organize a plethora of events, including panels, workshops, performances, bilateral meetings, film screenings, and other activities. R-Space events were considered linked events to the GRF but did not require official GRF registration for access, effectively becoming the primary arena for stakeholders to engage directly with refugees and RLOs outside the Palexpo. Beyond specifics on the substance of the events within R-Space, the symbolic importance of this space is immense. An R-Space participant described it as a “tangible moment where power was shifted for spaces of dialogue within the global refugee regime.” The bar has now been raised, and in the future, it must continue to be elevated, redefining the notion of partnership and emphasizing the critical importance of a co-designed agenda. R-Space transformed the GRF landscape by creating a safe environment for the exchange of ideas and giving refugee-led organizations the opportunity to determine their own priorities.



This space was designed by refugees, for refugees, with 42 events hosted by refugee-led organizations, in some cases alongside their institutional partners. Asylum Access, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees, the Global Refugee-led Network, New Women Connectors, Refugees International, Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, and R-SEAT, supported by the Robert Bosch Stiftung, Open Society Foundations, and joined by Porticus, Hilton Foundation, and LERRN, dedicated their efforts to curating an alternative space for engagement where RLOs maintained control over the agenda and the surrounding environment. The organizers assessed these events for representation across regions and themes, with specific attention to the centrality of lived experience of forced displacement within the proposals, requesting submissions from RLOs or RLOs in partnership with other actors. After receiving 50+ submissions, R-Space was able to platform at least one event from every group that submitted a proposal by connecting similar topics and re-imagining event formats.



R-Space was a productive and, most importantly, safe space for refugees amidst the GRF. This new addition to the landscape offered a necessary space for refugee-led organizations and leaders to center their own narratives and work, as well as network and decompress alongside their peers. Across all agendas, R-Space had the highest concentration of events that focused specifically on meaningful refugee participation. The following section will touch on the leadership and engagement of refugee leaders, which brought R-Space to fruition. In analyzing its platformed content, we see a broad variety of events engaging with both the ideological and practical benefits of meaningful refugee participation.

Of its 42 events, many centered on meaningful refugee participation, the role of refugee-led and/or locally-led organizations, and inclusion. By assessing the available materials on these events, we identified that at least 35% of the events hosted at R-Space focused on these topics. This is significant as a proportion, and it is likely that a number of additional R-Space events also interacted with these concepts without centering them in their published materials.

Some of these events included, **“Implementing the GCR’s Commitments to Women and Girls,”** which took a workshop format and assisted attendees in assessing how meaningful their efforts around refugee participation are through utilizing the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) index, and identified work to rectify these gaps with specific attention to those holding lived experience of Sex and Gender Based Violence (SGBV). Another event, **“Africa Refugee Participation at GRF,”** discussed the practical challenges in implementing meaningful refugee participation by demonstrating barriers to reaching the GRF in person and the restrictions of movement faced by refugees across Africa. **“The Leadership of RLOs in Latin America”** focused on the significant inequalities faced by refugees within the region and identified modes of partnership with RLOs to alleviate these issues. This selection of events speaks to the wide ranging and varied nature of all the topics discussed within R-Space, and how meaningful participation is vastly intersectional.

In collaboration with the United States Refugee Advisory Board (USRAB), R-SEAT hosted an event at R-Space titled, **“Charting New Paths: How Refugee-Led Entities Are Advancing Global Solutions”** where attendees ranged from refugee delegates to state officials. This event was of specific note as USRAB, an expert refugee advisory body formed of thematic experts with lived experience of forced displacement, further demonstrated the power of meaningful refugee participation through their guidance. Basma Alawee, an USRAB member, facilitated this lively multi-stakeholder dialogue on utilizing meaningful refugee participation, bringing together perspectives and attendees from governments, private philanthropy, academics, and refugees themselves to discuss the path forward from the position of their sectors.

Events within R-Space reiterated that refugee leaders remain ready to engage and work meaningfully with partners to deliver better policies and programs. The range of topics covered by R-Space made for a necessary complement to the topics platformed within other channels, filling a gap by providing an authentically refugee-led space. In maintaining R-Space as a space exclusively managed by refugees, for refugees, some may consider its events to be uniquely separate from other side events, either positively or negatively. Concerning logistics, R-Space should remain its own distinct location, while staying close to the physical space of the GRF for ease of access. Many noted this separation as positive, with the added benefit of R-Space not requiring registration to attend the GRF, which made it less exclusive. The Impact Hub itself provided a unique setting for R-Space; however, some considered it to be too far from the main event at Palexpo. Increasing the physical accessibility to the space is also a top priority for future convenings, as those using mobility aids such as wheelchairs were notably unable to reach the Impact Hub.

Applying R-SEAT’s definition of meaningful refugee participation, the development of R-Space certainly qualifies as an endeavor that meaningfully harnesses the participation of refugees. R-Space is now ingrained within the memory of 2023 GRF, and should certainly be present again for all future GRF convenings.

# PLEDGING FOR REFUGEE PARTICIPATION



During the GRF 2019, [68 pledges](#) were submitted under “refugee participation” by states, RLOs, NGOs, and INGOs. This included the Multistakeholder Pledge on Meaningful Refugee Participation, which demonstrated the first step towards recognizing meaningful refugee participation as a multi-sectoral concept in the pledging process. The GRF 2023 provided a platform for stakeholders to reaffirm their commitments, including those to meaningful refugee participation. By the Forum's conclusion, 73 individual new pledges addressing refugee participation had been registered by signatories under the Multistakeholder Pledge on Meaningful Refugee Participation.

This marks significant progress compared to the GRF 2019. In assessing these 73 new pledges with a specific focus on state submissions, substantive commitments were made by nine states: Australia, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, and

the United Kingdom, with the Australian and Canadian governments making explicit commitments to enhance refugee advisory boards (Appendix B). Brazil, Germany, and Switzerland pledged to establish similar refugee advisory mechanisms, while acknowledging the importance of direct participation of refugee leaders and RLOs in policy and decision-making processes on refugee matters at various levels of governance.

In addition to these pledges, countries such as Denmark and Norway opted for more consultative approaches and/or focused on specific refugee groups, such as youth (Appendix B). Finally, Cameroon and Ethiopia made more general pledges related to the inclusion of refugees in national programming (Appendix B). Other pledges that include refugee participation are the [Advancing Localisation in Displacement and Statelessness Responses](#) Multistakeholder Pledge, [the UN Common Pledge 2.0](#), of which R-SEAT was a member of the refugee Group of Experts engaged in the design of the pledge and its respective side event, and the [Multistakeholder Pledge: Shifting Power - Advancing Localization of Research and Elevating the Voices of Host and Forcibly Displaced Communities Globally](#), of which R-SEAT is a signatory.

Refugee participants were involved in collaborating on a number of pledges either through direct engagement in drafting or by providing feedback and inputs. UNHCR reports that refugees attending the GRF in various capacities engaged in 21 out of 43 of the GCR Multistakeholder pledges. In these engagements, refugees were able to contribute to pledges that matched their expertise, such as economic inclusion, employment, resettlement, and meaningful participation. However, several of the refugee participants we debriefed remarked on the need for further and more meaningful engagement across the entire process from development to evaluation of pledges. With the conclusion of the GRF, many refugees believe it is now time for the implementation of pledges by states and other actors. Nonetheless, with the exception of a few examples, substantial follow-up has yet to be arranged or taken place to date.



# “WE’RE ALL IN. ARE YOU?” CAMPAIGN



In collaboration with [Mobilisation Lab](#) and [Data 4 Change](#), R-SEAT brought to life the ["We're All In. Are you?" multimedia campaign](#), which elevated the perspectives of refugee-led organizations that could not participate in the GRF in person. The ten participating organizations, backed by years of experience and dedication to essential initiatives, proposed policy solutions from their unique perspectives amidst an unprecedented displacement crisis. The featured organizations included Sawiyan Foundation, Community Support Initiative for Refugees (CoSIR), Molham Volunteering Team, Multi Aid Programs (MAPs), Tawakal Youth Organisation, Asociación Venezuela en Ecuador AC, Global Rohingya Future, Apoyo a Migrantes Venezolanos AC, Geutanyoe Foundation, and Build Refugees Hope. From Mexico to Malaysia, these RLOs crafted materials reflecting diverse approaches to thematic issues related to six



policy areas under the GCR (jobs and livelihoods, education, third-country solutions, health, age, gender and diversity, and digital and connectivity). The campaign was displayed in physical and digital spaces inside the GRF's official space and in strategic locations around Geneva, including in front of the UN Palais des Nations.

These ten organizations work with, and for, refugee communities around the world, including in Mexico, Ecuador, Kenya, Uganda, Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Bangladesh, Malaysia, and one international organization. We conducted interviews with approximately 20 refugee-led organizations and selected ten based on an evaluation of their track record in assisting refugees, technical expertise in a thematic area relevant to the GCR, lived experience of forced displacement, understanding of the barriers faced in the field, and significant recommendations related to the areas of discussion.

Given the number of initiatives, it was possible to observe how a single issue encounters different levels of complexity and similar societal disadvantages across different regions. For example, on the theme of access to livelihoods, Apoyo a Migrantes Venezolanos AC (Mexico) advocated for mechanisms enabling employment for individuals over 45 years old, while Build Refugees Hope (Uganda) focused on facilitating access to land tenure for agriculture. Embracing diverse perspectives, the campaign celebrated the richness of these contributions both to the discourse at the GRF and directly to communities on the ground.

The campaign was presented as physical banners and digital posters with QR codes and was displayed in strategic spaces in Geneva relevant to the GRF. This included an exhibition of eight posters with recommendations from seven refugee-led organizations in front of the Broken Chair monument, directly in front of the Palais des Nations—the UN Headquarters in Geneva. It also featured eight billboards near UNHCR headquarters, the Geneva Airport, and the central Geneva Cornavin train station.

By integrating both expert perspectives and lived experience through the campaign, bold and direct recommendations were platformed, urging decision-makers to address deficiencies and implement policies reflecting the needs and aspirations of refugee communities. These digital and physical materials advocated for solutions, with meaningful refugee participation integrated into every step of the decision-making process. Nine of the digital posters and physical banners with recommendations to states were on display in Palexpo, including in official parallel high-level events, across the three official days of the Forum. R-SEAT further amplified these messages on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, which produced more than 80,000 views across the platforms. Notably, other refugee leaders found these materials online and made their own calls to action, demonstrating a widespread willingness to share perspectives and contribute to these processes. This campaign merely scratched the surface of the wealth of expertise and lived experience available to policymakers.

Participating RLOs and refugee leaders were compensated for their time, expertise, and efforts. Language barriers, access to film equipment, and media production knowledge were all managed in tandem by the organizing team, proving that these barriers are surmountable. "We're All In. Are You?" represents a fundamental step towards a future where refugees become essential actors in formulating policies that address their needs and goals. The question remains: We are "all in" and ready to collaborate to enhance the responses of the global refugee regime—are you?

# BARRIERS TO REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

The evident increase in the number of individuals with lived experience of forced displacement in attendance at the GRF 2023 (compared to the GRF 2019) is a promising sign that the refugee regime is recognizing the value of refugee participation in high-level events. We are not yet where we should be, but the will of stakeholders to further define and explore meaningful refugee participation in global forums is present. Given this, we interrogate some of the barriers that decreased the quality of meaningful refugee participation, with the hope that identifying these barriers will help mitigate them in future events.



## Visa and Travel Restrictions

The most widespread and significant barriers to participation at the GRF were the various forms of visa issues and travel restrictions faced by refugee leaders internationally. The movement of refugees has always been challenging, both in terms of accessing visas and in regards to travel restrictions. Refugees seeking to attend international forums often rely

on a Refugee Travel Document, also known as the Convention Travel Document (CTD), which allows refugees to travel to various destinations, excluding their country of origin. While the intention behind the CTD is positive, there are practical systemic challenges with its use. Refugees may find themselves in limbo if airports or airlines do not recognize the CTD, even when coupled with a valid visa. For those unaware, there can be perceptions that the CTD is not a legitimate document, effectively preventing refugees from traveling.

While Switzerland recognizes CTDs for visa issuance, securing a CTD with limited time poses a challenge in some states. Despite significant efforts to secure visas for refugees traveling to Geneva for the GRF, over 17 refugees from Africa were denied visas with no option to appeal.<sup>2</sup> Some of these refugee leaders were denied despite having previously traveled to and from Geneva multiple times. Notably, delegates from Cohere and Africa Refugee Led Network (ARN) were denied visas, despite clear proof of funding to support their attendance and supervision of their engagement.

A refugee leader from Latin America supported by R-SEAT also faced significant challenges. After initially being denied access to the airplane in his country of departure, he successfully boarded but was later blocked in transit. He ultimately reached Geneva two days later, incurring substantial additional expenses, rebooking flights, and missing out on events. Such barriers can feel discriminatory and weigh heavily on the minds of passionate refugee advocates.

One refugee delegate that was invited to attend the GRF through invitational support from an NGO was one of the refugee delegates who was denied a visa. Their photo was spread across many GRF spaces, including in advertisements for the event and on UNHCR's global website. In speaking with R-SEAT, they expressed,

***“I felt so bad, the events I had to go and speak had to either be canceled or my seat given to someone else... it was very***

2. We recommend that interested readers refer to their account of the situation [here](#).

*emotionally painful...you do everything right and then get a wrong and you don't understand why... even when people ask why I got my visa denied, I even don't understand myself now."*

They also remarked that seeing themselves smiling on social media, and hearing from friends and colleagues that they were prominently featured on the GRF banners, left them speechless. They stated that despite Cohere putting in "a lot of effort" they did not feel adequately supported. Many individuals experienced this unfortunate reality. Calls for relocating the Global Refugee Forum to a more accessible state pose challenges as well, as the Global Compact on Refugees designates Geneva, in principle, as the location for the GRF to be held every four years. This is outlined in Paragraph 17 of the Global Compact on Refugees, noting that the location of Geneva was selected ["to facilitate the participation of all States."](#) Increasing regional level convenings and buy-in may begin to mitigate the issue of condensing all work into one forum.

One approach to alleviating travel challenges is to ensure refugees have ample time to procure the necessary documentation. Some refugee delegates received their invitation letters weeks or even months in advance of the GRF, aligning with standard practice for many actors when navigating international travel, budgeting, and planning for such a significant event. Unfortunately, some refugee leaders received their invitations much later, suggesting that the importance of their attendance was not held in the same regard as other attendees. Given the visa restrictions and logistical challenges regularly faced by refugees, and considering lessons learned from the previous GRF and other UNHCR events, refugee leaders should ideally be invited at least six months prior to the event. Rushing preparations frantically in the final weeks, and sometimes only days, before the event can result in significant energy loss for both refugee delegates and their organizations. Moreover, this rushed approach can induce anxiety



among attendees and limit meaningful engagement of their perspectives in shaping the event. It is evident that providing more time allows refugees a better chance of attending the event and presents opportunities to meaningfully integrate their perspectives.

### **Lack of Equal Importance**

On the inaugural day, during the opening segment of the Plenary session, the GRF state co-conveners Jordan, Colombia, Uganda, France, and Japan, along with the co-hosts, Switzerland and UNHCR, took center stage to deliver their opening statements. These statements aimed to reflect upon the current state of refugee affairs within their respective nations and align them with the overarching objectives of the GCR and the GRF to effectively address the multifaceted challenges refugees confront.

Following the completion of the official statements from the co-conveners and co-hosts, the session promptly transitioned into the Broadening the Base of Support discussion. It was during this panel that the official Joint Refugee Statement was delivered. The symbolic significance of including the Refugee Statement alongside the statements of the co-convening states and co-hosts would have been profound, yet unfortunately, this was a missed opportunity.

### **Increase Speaking Opportunities and Enhance Diversity**

Many refugee participants attended the GRF without having specific speaking roles or predefined commitments, resulting in varied levels of engagement amongst attendees. As mentioned in the Diversity of Participation segment, some refugee participants had multiple speaking roles within the many spaces across Palexpo, and yet there were many individuals who did not have a chance to contribute in this way even once. This was a lost opportunity to add different diverse communities and

refugee voices into the fabric of the GRF. This leads to further questions of who ultimately selects speakers, as the Advisory Board to UNHCR had some influence over this process, but overall authority still remains with UNHCR.

Considering the diversity of refugee experiences, there is a need to engage fresh new perspectives and constantly uplift new voices. As noted in the Diversity of Participation section, over half of the speakers with lived experience of forced displacement joined from resettlement countries, which should be addressed in future convenings. Notably, two of the panelists who spoke at the closing ceremony were invited per their differing roles, but were resettled refugees from the same state. Looking toward future GRFs, more effort should be made to connect refugees from hosting states with substantive speaking opportunities.

### **Tokenism at Play**

Refugees continue to experience tokenism instead of being engaged as equal partners. In speaking with refugee advisors to state delegations, members of the Expert Group, members of RLO delegations, and members of the Advisory Board, we noted varied experiences of tokenism ranging in scope and severity.

A challenge in all multilateral forums is that states maintain ultimate authority with UNHCR setting the agenda, making a power imbalance palpable. We must question the extent to which engagement opportunities and preparatory and debrief sessions were utilized to genuinely consult or co-design with those who have lived experience of forced displacement. Shifting to a model that gives weight to the perspectives of refugees takes time, and due to the nature of the system, individual refugee advocates are currently confined to an arrangement that can easily skew towards tokenism. Additionally, many invited refugee leaders were not asked to speak at any events and were not engaged in the planning or designing of the agenda. For these individuals,

their presence was the beginning and end of their participation, which does not constitute a meaningful engagement. To mitigate this, refugee leaders must be integrated within every step of the process, and the role of refugee participants such as RLOs, the Experts Group, and the Advisory Board to UNHCR should be both expanded and more broadly recognized.

Upon completing its January debriefing sessions and the subsequent survey disseminated by UNHCR, the Expert Group no longer has anything in place to maintain its momentum, keep its members connected, or channel feedback to UNHCR. An ongoing dialogue that consistently strategizes with experts who have lived experience of forced displacement, including engaging them in pledge tracking, implementation, and follow-up sessions such as the High-Level Officials Meeting (HLOM), would constitute a more meaningful approach.

A desire to coin all instances of refugees engaging within the Forum as an instance of meaningful refugee participation can also be harmful, as instances of non-meaningful participation can be detrimental to the broader movement. For example, attending the Forum and sharing stories of displacement is not itself a negative thing, as it brings the issues and challenges of refugees closer to key decision-makers. However, being invited to solely “share your story” without further engagement should not be classified as an instance of meaningful refugee participation and is not appropriate.

Similarly, a tokenizing feedback loop occurs if one individual is constantly seen as the ultimate source for all refugee perspectives on all topics relating to refugees. Even more harmful is when these individuals refuse to share their platform or hoard their power by refusing to elevate and recommend others. A long-held perception of refugees as passive recipients who are happy to attend these forums without substantive engagement must be disrupted as we move towards a model that views refugees as partners who are there to share their expertise and not just their stories.

# NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## **Multi-stakeholder Coalition on Meaningful Refugee Participation**

During the Meaningful Refugee Participation parallel high-level event, representatives from the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) and R-SEAT announced the launch of a Multi-Stakeholder Coalition on Meaningful Refugee Participation. The concept for the Coalition sprung from the High-Level Officials Meeting 2021, where Former Assistant High Commissioner for Protection Gillian Triggs called for the formation of such a body to advance and coordinate diffuse efforts on meaningful refugee participation. Developed by GRN and R-SEAT, both acting as interim RLO Co-Chairs, this Coalition will also be led by Co-Chairing states, Australia and the Netherlands. The Coalition will focus on increasing refugee engagement across all relevant spaces by creating a space for coordinating member efforts, mapping good practices, and mobilizing for collective action. This Coalition serves as a timely addition to the landscape as it can sustain the momentum garnered at the GRF 2023 through to the GRF in 2027.

## **Recommendations for the GRF 2027 and Beyond**

### **For all stakeholders:**

- **Follow-up and accountability.** All stakeholders must ensure substantive pledge implementation with concrete actions and regular public reporting on progress. Refugee experts and RLOs should be meaningfully engaged in the implementation of pledges and any monitoring and evaluation processes. These individuals and groups are well positioned to act as interlocutors between the pledging body and the target group. Engaging their expertise throughout the pledge process can streamline and tailor implementation efforts.

- **Ensure timely selection of refugee delegates and RLOs** to allow sufficient time for procuring visas and travel documents and to facilitate proper onboarding processes. Six months to one year before the GRF, stakeholders should begin the engagement process with the refugee experts they intend to collaborate with. This extended timeframe will provide adequate preparation time for both parties.
- **Engage a broader range of voices.** Increasing the presence of underrepresented groups within the refugee community, including children, LGBTQI+ persons, ethnic and religious minorities, and persons with disabilities, is crucial to gaining a holistic understanding of the diverse experiences of refugees.
- **Provide proper internal onboarding with clearly outlined tasks, roles, and expectations.** All stakeholders facilitating the participation of refugees or engaging with refugee experts must ensure proper internal onboarding with clearly outlined tasks, roles, and expectations. This onboarding should include assigning specific streams of work that align with the participants' expertise and delineating tasks between delegation members for clear communication moving forward. This includes providing an appropriate orientation process and assigning specific streams of work that align with the participants' expertise.
- **Continue the practice of engaging refugees as experts and advisors.** The four-year intervals between each GRF should not be wasted. Consistently engaging with these experts will infuse the work with a much-needed element of continuity. In particular, stakeholders should facilitate the meaningful participation of refugee experts and RLOs in the lead-up to the High Level Officials Meeting (HLOM) in 2025 as a stocktaking moment to review pledge implementation.
- **Avoid tokenistic practices.** Most centrally, ensure refugee voices are not only heard but have a tangible influence on outcomes. Practices such as refugees announcing pledges that they did not participate in



developing, only asking refugees to share their stories of displacement, failing to thoroughly onboard the refugee delegate as an equal member of the delegation, refusing refugees the space to contribute substantially to the work of the delegation, asking the refugee participant to do administrative tasks that another delegate would not be expected to perform, or utilizing the refugee delegate for photo opportunities when they have not been invited to contribute substantially to the delegation's work all constitute tokenistic practices and must cease immediately.

- **Provide proper debrief sessions post GRF.** For refugee participation to be meaningful, the participant should be thoroughly and intentionally debriefed alongside the whole of their delegation or cohort to discuss the overall findings of the GRF and how they are relevant to the ongoing work. In this space, other members of the delegation or cohort should share insights on their key takeaways from the program, ideally following up on any specific items that may be most relevant to the participant's given area of expertise. In some cases, this may also be a space to potentially request or collect any assigned deliverables for utilization in future work.
- **Consider forms of compensation.** Those with lived experience of forced displacement have largely taken on advisory roles out of a genuine interest in furthering policy that would alleviate the challenges faced by other refugees. Between the GRF 2019 and GRF 2023, evidence has shown the substantive value of these contributions, moving past the moral obligation of including these perspectives. In short, compensation is needed for the time and effort put in by refugee experts. The type of compensation will vary between actors and depending on the roles being undertaken.
- **Fund and support Refugee-led Organizations.** Refugee-led organizations consistently do more with less. Supporting, funding, and partnering with RLOs to assist in their program delivery, grow their reach, and access new spaces, are all tangible ways to support the

refugee leadership ecosystem. This can be done in tandem with existing organizational work and pledge implementation

- **Explore how technology can play a role in enhancing refugee participation.** Modern technologies can be utilized both in the preparation for and execution of future GRFs. This could include virtual participation options, digital platforms for ongoing dialogue and feedback, and tech-based solutions to address barriers such as language and access to information.

### For member states:

- **Establish, engage, and sustain refugee advisory mechanisms at the national level to affect change both internationally and domestically.** These mechanisms maximize meaningful refugee participation by creating a consistent, working relationship between a transparently selected group of refugee experts and a respective government entity. In the case that a mechanism already exists, ensuring its sustainability and continued enhancement is crucial. This form of meaningful refugee participation can institutionalize refugee engagement to advise the government on target areas and priorities.
  - **Engage the mechanism in all the phases of the pledging process.** Refugee advisory mechanisms are equipped to participate in each phase of the pledging process, from defining thematic pledge priority areas to the pledging language and commitments, pledge mobilization, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Post-GRF, these mechanisms should be involved in defining appropriate follow-up processes. This includes contributing to pledge implementation plans, monitoring frameworks, and stock-taking discussions and potentially serving as pledge implementing partners, if applicable.
- **Include a refugee advisor openly and transparently selected from said mechanisms as an official member of the state delegation.** For convenings of the global refugee system, one member of the mechanism should be selected to accompany the state delegation

mechanism should be selected to accompany the state delegation based on their relevant expertise to the convening at hand. This advisor can be used to source insights in real-time and connect the domestic work of the mechanism to the international sphere.

### For UNHCR:

- **Continue working with Switzerland as a co-host to fully realize their commitment to support visa applications.** Refugees encounter unique challenges when traveling abroad. To make the GRF and other global meetings on refugee issues more accessible, UNHCR should continue to enhance its collaboration with the Swiss Government in processing visas in a timely manner. To facilitate swift visa processing, UNHCR must also provide invitations and other necessary documents well in advance of the GRF.
- **Develop and emphasize regional events surrounding the GRF.** While the GCR states that the GRF must be held in principle in Geneva every four years, UNHCR can re-imagine the GRF to a larger moment comprising numerous events, de-emphasizing the centrality of this specific Forum. Exploring how to directly link regional events into the GRF stream can also offer further opportunities for meaningful refugee participation. This approach should foster sustained momentum, increase the participation of those with lived experience of forced displacement, and consequently alleviate the intensity of preparations for a single event every four years.
- **Improve space for dialogue within parallel high-level events.** Given the limited time available for interjections and the necessity of adhering to the General Assembly Protocol within the Plenary, parallel high-level events stand out as crucial spaces for interaction. In the future, parallel high-level events, particularly their question-and-answer periods, may benefit from being less structured to facilitate more organic dialogue between actors.
- **Further and more regular engagement of existing refugee participation bodies.** Bodies such as the Advisory Board to UNHCR's Task Team on Engagement and Partnership with Organizations led by

Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons are already well-positioned to sustain their engagement with UNHCR. Continuing to leverage their insights and collaborate with its members for pledge implementation is one approach to upholding productive dialogue and prioritizing the expertise of lived experience within relevant work. Additionally, this body could serve as an interlocutor to foster accountability between UNHCR or pledging bodies and the affected population.

### **For RLOs and refugee experts:**

- **Participate in training and prepare in advance of the event.** Navigating the context of the global refugee regime and relevant protocol can be difficult. Taking advantage of the training opportunities available to refugee advocates well in advance of the event can equip advocates with the necessary tools and skills to complement their thematic expertise and effectively engage at the meeting.
- **Seek mentors, allies, or other refugee leaders who have previously attended global refugee convenings.** Not only are these connections valuable in providing context during the specific meeting in advance, but trusted partners can also advise on speaking points and potential issues to raise. Additionally, connecting with refugee leaders who expect to be in attendance can help make the event less stressful.
- **Be prepared to advocate for yourself.** As preparations for global meetings can be demanding for every actor, some important items may be missed and will require RLOs and refugee leaders to consistently follow up to ensure they are completed appropriately. This can include regularly following up with UNHCR to issue documents for visas in a timely manner, understanding the specificities of funding opportunities available to RLOs and refugee leaders, clearly outlining potential barriers to travel (such as protection concerns regarding certain transit countries), and requesting further information for sessions (such as other panelists and objectives) well in advance of the event.

- **Raise issues with trusted partners if something feels unethical or uncomfortable.** If a refugee leader or RLO is made to feel uncomfortable by any other actor during an international convening or its related preparatory and debriefing processes, this complaint should be raised with a trusted ally to strategize on potential next steps. It is an unfortunate reality that refugees can be made to feel uncomfortable within these spaces, and navigating processes to rectify the situation can be challenging in itself. Speaking to a trusted ally for support and guidance is a good first step towards solving the problem in the long term.
- **Maintain up-to-date emergency contacts in case of issues during travel.** International travel poses a challenge to many refugee leaders. It is important for all refugee advocates to prepare in advance of their travel by providing copies of their documentation to trusted partners, friends, or family and keeping contacts up to date for those positioned to help in any type of emergency. Specifically, refugee leaders and RLOs should ensure that their contacts from UNHCR, their respective embassies, and their sponsors are up to date in case they face difficulties during transit.

### For NGOs and INGOs:

- **Identify barriers to equitable partnerships with refugee-led organizations and use skills, platforms, and networks to find solutions to address them.** NGOs and INGOs with existing working relationships with refugee leaders and refugee-led organizations should work to identify barriers that keep refugee-led organizations from accessing resources, high-level decision-makers, and decision-making power. This process of assessment should be done in partnership with experts who have lived experience of forced displacement to identify potential shortcomings. Subsequent plans to address these barriers should also be done in true partnership.



- **Strengthen collaboration and build genuine partnership with refugee-led organizations, and create opportunities to elevate voices of refugee leaders, utilize their expertise and bolster their skills as needed.** Many NGOs and INGOs are in a position to share resources, engage meaningful refugee participation in decision-making processes, and collaborate with RLOs in humanitarian and development responses. NGOs and INGOs should work to identify new ways to partner with RLOs, and strengthen existing collaborations. RLOs are essential actors in these responses, offering unique insights, responses, and capabilities. Despite this, RLOs face significant challenges in securing funding and operational support and are often marginalized from the conversations regarding localization.
- **Actively engage in the practices of meaningful refugee participation at international convenings, including GRF and GCR initiatives.** Engage refugees in all phases of pledge development and related processes. This includes implementation, follow-up, meaningfully engaging refugee experts in official delegations, sharing speaking opportunities in plenary statements and at side events, and providing access through documentation or sponsorship for partner RLOs into high-level spaces like the GRF.

# CONCLUSION

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While the Global Refugee Forum 2023 marked statistical advancements for refugee participation, and refugees were engaged to a greater extent and in more meaningful ways compared to the GRF in 2019, significant progress is still needed. We commend UNHCR, states, and other actors for advancing the practice in some of their existing engagements and urge all stakeholders to effectively harness the power of lived experience through genuine and meaningful refugee participation. Whether in the development of pledges and side events, in shaping policy outcomes, or in identifying priorities, refugee participation must be viewed as a powerful tool as opposed to a moral obligation.

Since the first GRF in 2019, we have seen an increase in refugees attending the Forum. But have we substantially improved our approaches, engaged lived experience, and reduced the burden? Have we improved conditions for people subjected to forced displacement? Have we effectively engaged the people we aim to assist? While the GRF 2023 represented a step in the right direction, there is still ample room for improvement. Adding refugees to an existing system of power without substantively shifting power to them is insufficient. More does not mean better—in this case, more may be missing the point entirely. Increasing these numbers must be done strategically, with concrete aims and tangible outcomes for enhanced refugee participation driving that growth. We need actual delivery of pledges, substantive engagement with refugee experts, and comprehensive, whole of society solutions. Meaningful refugee participation serves as a tool to achieve these objectives.

This report sought to critically evaluate the different facets of refugee participation within and surrounding the GRF. Through this examination,

we have identified signs of progress and increased commitment towards the concept of meaningful refugee participation, as well as areas requiring further development, and strategies to harness the practice. On the central question of whether refugee participation within the GRF was actually meaningful, the individual reflections from those we debriefed demonstrate a genuine effort to appreciate each of their respective expertise. However, from a wider structural perspective, there is more work to be done in advance of the GRF 2027.

It is important to acknowledge instances where individuals felt their expertise was appropriately utilized, as this indicates progress, albeit gradual. Unfortunately meaningful refugee participation was inconsistently achieved. Moving forward, we must heed the reflections of those who felt their expertise was valued, while also addressing areas where improvement is needed. This requires an ongoing commitment to refining approaches and ensuring that meaningful refugee participation becomes a central tenet of the GRF and related initiatives.

In our [initial reflections](#) published immediately after the GRF, R-SEAT highlighted lingering questions regarding both inclusion and the absence of diversity in refugee perspectives. It appeared that the agenda-setting process had limited buy-in from refugees across various intersections of identity, and we observed refugees included in sessions for reasons other than their specific expertise. Specifically, we noted the decisive absence of LGBTQI+ issues from the agenda. LGBTQI+ refugees remain an underrepresented group and should be better engaged through both shaping the agenda itself, and be platformed for their specific expertise in follow-up initiatives pertaining to the GRF.

Mere months have passed since the GRF 2023; therefore, all outcomes are yet to be realized. Plans to implement pledges are still being developed, budgets are still being allocated, and consultations are ongoing, underscoring the continued relevance of the Forum. What is

concerning is the lack of clarity and structure for follow-up. Public plans such as the [Roadmap to the High-Level Officials Meeting 2025](#) are useful but lack explicit mention of where and how refugee perspectives will be engaged. Four years is a significant stretch of time during which the conditions of many crises will likely change, highlighting the importance of maintaining momentum and consistently implementing these commitments. R-SEAT acknowledges the increase in pledges made to strengthen this regime, but there will be no real progress without transparent methods for follow-through.

This is not to say that no progress has been made. Meaningful refugee participation is increasingly recognized as a valuable practice, and R-SEAT remains committed to fully realizing the conditions outlined in Paragraph 34 in the GCR. The first crucial step in addressing these trenchant barriers is identifying them, and we are optimistic that the GRF 2027 will build upon these gains in a meaningful and substantive manner. By then, we hope that refugees will not only be seen but also heard. With refugees having sustained, substantive, and meaningful influence over the terms of their own lives, we can enhance responses, policies, and outcomes within the global refugee regime.

**We're All In. Are you?**

**Thank you from the R-SEAT Team!**



Photographs from the GRF can be viewed [here](#).



# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

Please specify whether your question is directed at the entire panel or at one panelist specifically.

All questions (15) ▾

Top voted ▾



10

Why is it vital to include LGBTIQ+ refugees in national systems, and how can we ensure that the outcomes for this community are not only inclusive on paper but also measurable and impactful?

Show more

Answered | Add a comment >



5

Sarah, RCUSA

Rez gave the first part of her introduction in Māori, how can refugee inclusion/welcome be in better relationship with indigenous populations in host countries, and why is it important?

Show more

Answered | Add a comment >



5

If it makes so much sense to include refugees in national systems, why doesn't this happen systematically?

Answered | Add a comment >

## APPENDIX B

COLOR CODE	
	Substantial pledge
	Consultative, limited
	Inclusion, empowerment

	State	Pledge Name	Description	Theme of pledges
1.	Australia	Australian Refugee Advisory Panel	<p>Australia reaffirms its 2019 commitment to support the <b>meaningful participation of refugees</b> and host communities in decisions that affect their lives and pledges to further the 2019 commitment through the establishment of an Australian Refugee Advisory Panel.</p> <p>The Panel will provide a formal mechanism for <b>meaningful refugee participation</b> recognising the importance of lived experience, diversity and inclusion in shaping Australia's policy development and engagement with the international refugee protection system and humanitarian assistance.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Establishment of the Australian Refugee Advisory Panel.</li> <li>● Strengthening the leadership of RLOs.</li> <li>● Funding Women leadership and participation.</li> </ul>
		Localisation – Advancing Localisation in Displacement and Statelessness Responses	The Australian Government commits to strengthening, respecting and recognising the leadership and decision-making of national and local actors in humanitarian action, along with <b>refugee-led organisations</b> , to better address the needs of affected populations. Australia will continue to support innovative localisation practice, including to measure localised humanitarian action in displacement contexts.	
		Gender – Gender Equality & Protection from Gender-based Violence	The Australian Government commits to partner with refugee-led organisations supporting prevention of gender-based violence and response service provision, including those led by displaced and stateless women. We will provide flexible, long-term funding, as directly as possible, to <b>strengthen women's leadership, participation and influence</b> in processes and initiatives related to displacement.	

			<p>The Australian Government, in concert with academia and non-government organisations, will support a series of good practice dialogues from 2024 -25, to exchange perspectives on evidence to eliminate gender-based violence for refugee populations, and good practice in accessible and survivor-centred service provision across Asia. Australia commits to highlight refugee-led efforts to develop, sustain and contribute to national</p>	
2.	<b>Brazil</b>	Promote & expand mechanisms for the direct participation of refugees, stateless persons & people in need of protection.	<p>Brazil will promote and expand mechanisms for the <b>direct participation of refugees, stateless persons, and other people in need of international protection in decision-making processes and forums related to the development of protection and local integration policies.</b></p> <p>The government of Brazil is committed to promoting and expanding mechanisms for the <b>direct participation of refugees, stateless persons, and other people in need of international protection in decision-making processes and forums related to protection and local integration.</b></p> <p>To achieve this, the following actions will be conducted:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Guarantee the participation of refugees, stateless people, and others</b> in need of international protection in the process of developing the <b>National Policy on Migration, Asylum, and Statelessness</b>, to be formalized in 2024.</li> <li>2. Ensure the <b>participation of refugee-led organizations</b> in the National Committee for Refugees – Conare and in the National Council for Migrants, Refugees, and Stateless Persons, which will be created within the framework</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Mechanisms for the <b>direct participation of refugees, stateless persons, and other people in need of international protection in decision-making processes.</b></li> <li>● Forums related to the development of protection and local integration policies.</li> </ul>

			<p>of the National Policy on Migration, Asylum, and Statelessness.</p> <p>3. Support the <b>meaningful participation of refugees</b>, stateless persons, and other people in need of international protection by consulting the affected communities when planning public policies that have a direct impact on their lives.</p> <p>4. Promote the <b>direct participation of refugees and/or refugee-led organizations</b> in state and municipal councils and committees for migrants, refugees, and stateless people. This commitment is deeply intertwined with the holistic approach (whole of society approach) of the New York Declaration and the “Leaving No One Behind” principle of the 2030 Agenda, proving that vulnerable profiles – children, young people, people with disabilities, people living with HIV, elderly, indigenous people, refugees, migrants, and stateless people – need to be at the center of the response and solutions for the crises faced by today's societies.</p> <p>Expected impact of the pledge in one sentence</p> <p>Refugees, stateless people, and other people in need of international protection to be able to access their rights and be empowered to <b>participate meaningfully</b> - individually or through their community and/or collective structures - in decision-making processes and spaces where their lives are affected, such as national and local councils and committees, as well as other public and private initiatives.</p>	
3.	Canada	Meaningful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canada pledges to continue</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advisory Council</li> </ul>



		refugee participation	<p>supporting the meaningful inclusion of refugees in decisions which affect their lives by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The commitment to invite persons with lived experience with Canada's immigration system to join IRCC's forthcoming advisory council of newcomers.</li> </ul>	<p>for Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Refugee advisors in state delegations.</li> <li>• Funding for RAN Canada.</li> </ul>
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canada pledges to continue supporting the meaningful inclusion of refugees in decisions which affect their lives by:</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The practice of inviting persons with lived experience of forced displacement on Canadian delegations to meetings in the international refugee system.</li> </ul>	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Canada pledges to continue supporting the meaningful inclusion of refugees in decisions which affect their lives by:</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Funding to support key activities of the Refugee Advisory Network of Canada in fiscal year 2023-2024</li> </ul>	
4.	Germany	Meaningful Refugee Participation - Refugee Advisory Board	<b>Establishment of a Refugee Advisory Board</b> that enables <b>democratic participation</b> of people with a refugee history in international fora.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establishment of a Refugee Advisory Board.</li> <li>• Partnership with RLOs.</li> </ul>
		Meaningful participation of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons	Amplify the <b>meaningful participation of refugees</b> and other forcibly displaced by stressing the design and implementation of inclusive programs, as well as supporting and strengthening the participation of and partnership with individuals, <b>refugee-led organisations</b> and / or diasporas in program and <b>policy development, and decision-making.</b>	
5.	Mexico	Fostering	Concluir la constitución del	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quadripartite</li> </ul>

		spaces for meaningful and inclusive participation of refugees and asylum-seekers in decision-making	<p>mecanismo cuatripartito entre el Gobierno de México, con ACNUR, las OSC y representantes de las personas con necesidades de protección internacional, con la finalidad de fomentar espacios de <b>participación significativa, representativos e incluyentes</b> de personas refugiadas y solicitantes de asilo para la <b>toma de decisiones</b>, mediante procedimientos claros para su implementación y sostenibilidad.</p> <p><i><b>Translation:</b> Conclude the establishment of the quadripartite mechanism between the Government of Mexico, UNHCR, CSOs and representatives of people in need of international protection, in order to promote spaces for meaningful, representative and inclusive participation of refugees and asylum seekers in decision-making, through clear procedures for its implementation and sustainability.</i></p>	mechanism between state, UNHCR, civil society and refugee representatives.
6.	Netherlands	Support for Localisation and Meaningful Refugee Participation	<p>Through its humanitarian and development funding, the Netherlands commits to support and promote the efforts of all relevant actors, from local to international, in collectively advancing locally led action in displacement and statelessness responses. The Netherlands also aims to actively contribute to reinforcing meaningful participation of refugees in programming and policy decisions that affect them.</p> <p>The Netherlands aims to do this among others by <b>improving access to funding</b> for local and national actors, as part of the Grand Bargain commitment of</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Localization.</li> <li>● Funding to refugee-led actors.</li> </ul>

			<p>disbursing 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national parties in the most direct way possible.</p> <p>To these goals, the Netherlands will in the period 2024-2027 commit EUR 80 million for direct funding of local organizations and intermediaries that are specifically working towards <b>localization</b>. The funding is made available for the explicit purpose of enabling <b>direct funding to local and refugee-led actors</b> in order to further their programming capacity, and helping to ensure that their voices can be heard directly in national, international and institutional processes of policy making, adaptation, implementation and/or</p>	
7.	New Zealand	Meaningful Refugee Participation in New Zealand	Strengthen current, and create new, approaches of meaningful refugee participation in the development of refugees policies, strategies and programmes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Strengthen meaningful refugee participation.</li> </ul>
8.	Switzerland	Meaningful Refugee Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>In accordance with the commitments established under goal 6 of the Grand Bargain to support a “Participation Revolution “; we pledge to support the meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives. Participation should take into account the diversity within communities, including age, gender, and disability. This pledge will support the agency of those we seek to assist while improving the relevance, quality, transparency, and accountability of that assistance. We furthermore commit to share experiences on the implementation of this pledge at subsequent Global Refugee Forums and/or high-level officials’ meetings.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meaningful participation of refugees and host communities.</li> </ul>

9.

**Government  
of the United  
Kingdom of  
Great Britain  
and Northern  
Ireland**

UK support for meaningful refugee participation in policymaking and high-level meetings affecting displaced populations

- In accordance with the commitments established under goal 6 of the Grand Bargain to support a “Participation Revolution”; the UK pledges to support the meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives. Participation should take into account the diversity within communities, including age, gender, and disability. This pledge will support the agency of those we seek to assist while improving the relevance, quality, transparency, and accountability of that assistance. We furthermore commit to share experiences on the implementation of this pledge at subsequent Global Refugee Forums and/or high-level officials’ meetings. In support of this, the UK commits to:  
Embed the spirit and practice of refugee participation across UK pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum by providing opportunities for consultation with refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and accountability to affected populations during their development and implementation. Include two refugees as advisers in our national delegation at the Global Refugee Forum. As part of our wider commitments to localisation,
- we will increase the participation of displaced populations within UK policymaking through deepening our connections with RLOs. This will include through our support to Refugee Women-Led Organisations as part of our co-sponsorship of the “Gender Equality and Protection from Gender-

- Refugee participation in meetings, policy designs and programs.

			<p>Based Violence” multi-stakeholder pledge.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Advocate for reform of the governance of the global refugee regime to include greater refugee participation. We will work towards normalising refugee participation within multilateral structures by continuing support for refugee attendance during</li> </ul>	
10.	Denmark	The World's Biggest Opportunity – with and for young people in humanitarian action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Guided by the Compact on Young People in Humanitarian Action, the Global Compact on Refugees and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee guidelines, Danish stakeholders pledge to work with and for <b>young people</b> affected by displacement to drive their own agendas for change, as well as ensure the <b>systemic, meaningful, and effective participation of young people</b> in all their diversity through a variety of contributions (sub-pledges) aligned by a joint commitment to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure that our work with and for young people is evidence-based and informed by young people's priorities and recommendations.</li> <li>Address systemic barriers that inhibit <b>meaningful, effective and safe participation</b> of young people in decision making processes within our organizations and beyond.</li> <li>Advocate for <b>decision-making spaces</b> at different levels to be <b>safe and inclusive</b> of young people affected by displacement.</li> <li>Towards the HLOM in 2025 (the Danish GCR Coalition will):</li> <li>Establish a <b>funding mechanism for youth-led organizations</b> focusing on displacement to receive grants for activities related to meaningful participation and advocacy efforts. Seed</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meaningful participation of youth affected by displacement.</li> <li>Funding for Youth-led Organizations.</li> </ul>



			<p>funding secured. Potential for scaling and partnerships.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a <b>learning package for youth-led organizations</b> and young individuals to enhance systemic inclusion and structural change, building on good practices and lessons learned. Convene a <b>yearly State-of-the-art event</b> that brings attention to the global youth agenda and ensures a platform for voices of displaced young people.</li> </ul>	
11.	Norway	Norway's contribution to the Refugee Participation Pledge	<p>Norwegian authorities have worked systematically over many years to facilitate the <b>participation and representation of refugees</b> and immigrants in Norwegian society, through the support of civil society's efforts for integration. Participation and representation are important so that refugees are met with the same expectations, and given the same opportunities, as everyone else. The Government holds annual dialogue conferences with representatives of refugees and immigrants, supports the work of civil society and immigrant organizations through grants, and has established structures for enhanced participation. The Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Diversity has established a youth panel which will give input to the authorities' work with integration policy. Norway invites a <b>refugee representative to participate in the official Norwegian delegation</b> to the Global Refugee Forum 2023.</p> <p>Norway thus joins the commitment regarding participation and representation for refugees: the "Refugee Participation Pledge".</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation in Norwegian Society.</li> <li>• Grants for civil society.</li> <li>• Annual dialogue with refugees/migrants.</li> <li>• Refugee participation in the state's delegation.</li> </ul>
12.	Cameroon	Tenir compte	Le Cameroun envisage de	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Including</li> </ul>

		<p>des besoins des réfugiés dans les outils de planification des Collectivités Territoriales Décentralisées</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> Take into account the needs of refugees in the planning tools of decentralized local authorities</p>	<p>prendre en compte les besoins des réfugiés dans les outils de planification des Collectivités Territoriales Décentralisées afin de mieux accompagner la politique de décentralisation en cours.</p> <p><b>Translation:</b> Cameroon plans to take into account the needs of refugees in the planning tools of decentralized local authorities, in order to better support the decentralization policy underway.</p>	<p>refugees needs in decentralization programs.</p>
13.	<b>Ethiopia</b>	<p>Inclusion of refugees into existing national systems</p> <p>Access to Land</p>	<p>Enhance the capacity of the Government of Ethiopia to include 1,000,000 refugees into the national Central Statistics Service and the National Gender-Based Violence Prevention and Response Programs, 814,000 refugees into the National ID Program, refugee secondary schools into the national system and 30,000 refugees and host communities in the TVET system with 70% job opportunities by 2027.</p> <p>Provide access to 10,000 hectares of irrigable land through lease arrangements and promote climate-smart agriculture and livestock value chain contributing to improved food security and socio-economic empowerment of refugees and host communities of which at least 50% being women and 30% refugees.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Inclusion in national programs, education, TVET, GBV.</li> <li>● Socio-economic empowerment.</li> </ul>

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R-SEAT is dedicated to fostering meaningful refugee participation through strategic partnerships, training, and crucially, the development of participatory mechanisms. Should you have any questions about our work, please reach out to us at [info@refugeesseat.org](mailto:info@refugeesseat.org).

