

# Shifting power in forced displacement: the need for internal organisational change

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**Organisational learning, commitment and action focusing on both refugee leadership and localisation are essential if there is to be a shift of power in the forced displacement sector.**

Increasingly, global actors recognise that those with lived experience of forced displacement and their host community allies are sustainably and cost-effectively driving holistic, community-driven solutions in refugee-hosting communities. However, those with lived experience and their allies are too often excluded in the current humanitarian and development system and are least likely to receive financial support or be included in key strategising and decision-making processes.

UNHCR enshrined their commitment to the meaningful participation of refugees within the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees

and continues to promote this objective, such as during the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in 2019 and the follow-up High-Level Officials Meeting in 2021. Many international NGOs appeared to follow suit by signing up to the Global Refugee-led Network's participation pledge (which aims to promote refugee-led organisations (RLOs)) and by increasing the representation of refugee speakers at their public-facing events. There has also been an emphasis on accelerating localisation over the last few years, such as at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 when humanitarian organisations and donors committed to

providing at least 25% of humanitarian funding directly to local and national organisations through the Grand Bargain.<sup>1</sup>

However, these commitments have not materialised. Despite pledges towards localisation, the percentage of humanitarian funding directly provided to local and national actors actually decreased from 2.8% in 2017 to 1.2% in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Even more striking, we estimate that of the US\$31.3 billion in the global humanitarian system, less than 1% of funding goes directly to RLOs.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, despite UNHCR's commitment to the meaningful participation of refugees, fewer than 3% of the over 3000 attendees at the GRF in 2019 were refugees.<sup>4</sup>

The failures of these commitments are not surprising given current practices and power dynamics within our sector. For example, while we increasingly hear of interest in funding and partnering with local organisations (including RLOs) we see a continuing expectation that those partners will conform to standards of practice common within professional 'white dominant culture', which we define as ways that the norms, preferences and fears of white European-descended people overwhelmingly shape our work and institutions, the way we see and interact with ourselves and each other, and how we make decisions.<sup>5</sup> For example, these might include fluency in English, linear thinking and timeline-driven activities. When, inevitably, local partners cannot or will not subscribe to these ways of working, international actors revert to reliance on well-trodden paths. These practices primarily reflect the interests of the international partner, such as sub-contractual arrangements, short-term funding that stymies organisational development, and short-term collaborations with local partners which lack transparency and accountability.

### **Commitment to internal change: a precondition to shifting power**

Our sector must acknowledge, unpack and address the power dynamics that permit international actors to dictate the rules of the game. By engaging with leaders in the Global Refugee-led Network, Network for

Refugee Voices, Adeso Africa and the NEAR Network, since 2018 Asylum Access has identified the critical role that we ourselves can and need to play to begin to shift power to local actors and support the refugee leadership and localisation agendas.

In our journey during the past few years, Asylum Access has found that the necessary precondition for shifting power in the forced displacement sector is a commitment to internal organisational change and ongoing learning focusing on refugee leadership and localisation. To work toward these commitments, we have learned that we must commit to three broad areas.

### **1. Understanding power dynamics**

Firstly, to rectify systemic imbalances within refugee response, we must familiarise ourselves with the historical and ongoing power dynamics present in our sector. The disconnect between international actors' commitments (to localise and elevate refugee leadership) and the reality (that many remain unwilling or unsure how to give up power, control, visibility and space) is predominantly rooted in our sector's colonial past and ongoing structural racism. Many current practices and attitudes derive from the colonial era: aid flows from former colonial powers to formerly colonised regions; pervasive terminology such as 'capacity-building' paints non-white populations as lacking skill; pay scales privilege foreigners over local staff for doing similar work in the same locations; and funding is most often accessed by a small number of prominent actors who have existing relationships with donors.

The starting point to shifting these deep-rooted attitudes and practices is investing in internal knowledge-building in topics such as the prominence of white supremacy, white saviourism and white dominant professional culture in our sector, and the history of colonialism and ongoing neocolonialism in the wider forced displacement, humanitarian and international development systems. At Asylum Access we have a committed budget to support training in these key areas to increase awareness and knowledge internally;

we regularly hold workshops on anti-racism and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) for staff and board members; and we are working towards developing transparent and inclusive decision-making processes. We have also committed further professional development funds to support these processes.

Our learning in these areas has enabled us to change how we work. For example, instead of wrongly assuming local partners 'lack' capacity or expertise, we approach them with the understanding that they have the necessary knowledge, skills and experiences but often lack the resources to strengthen their organisations and expand their projects and programmes. This simple shift in approach results in building partnerships that promote mutual knowledge-sharing, capacity-strengthening and overall impact instead of the perpetuation of one-way, top-down dynamics that prevail in current partnerships.

## 2. Investing in refugee leadership, anti-racism and DEI

Investment in refugee leadership, local leadership, anti-racism and DEI internally is imperative to shifting power in our sector. Organisations should re-examine their leadership, governance and staffing structures to ensure those with proximate knowledge and experience are part of our teams and increasingly dictating the direction of the organisation. At Asylum Access we launched a process to name, analyse and update our strategic and budgetary decision-making practices, with the explicit intention to share power equitably between leadership staff who work in our global headquarters and those who work in the national organisations that make up the Asylum Access family.

We have also taken a deeper look at how to increase the representation of those with lived experience of forced displacement within our organisation. As a result, we have significantly changed our recruitment practices, to ensure people who have experienced forced displacement are always involved in hiring processes and that other staff understand the value of lived experience when making hiring decisions. We have also set internal targets on the

representation of staff with lived experience of forced displacement. Additionally, we began using simultaneous translation more regularly, to ensure that those who do not speak English with native fluency can still communicate nuanced concepts and inform organisational direction.

Externally, we have learned the importance of assessing our power and added value in relation to partners, especially local civil society actors, including RLOs. These reflections have helped us to better identify the best role for us in any given partnership, whether that is co-leading, supporting or standing aside entirely. By investing in refugee leadership, local leadership, anti-racism and DEI within our headquarters and national organisations, we will be better equipped to recognise, celebrate and leverage cultural differences and unique experiences both internally and with partners. In turn, this will enable us to better incorporate real measures of impact based on long-term transformative outcomes that shift power toward refugees and local actors.

## 3. Recognising and implementing trauma-informed practice and engagement

Equitable partnerships are founded on co-design, co-leadership, co-visibility, and trust and transparency with local actors, particularly refugees and RLOs.<sup>6</sup> An important foundation is for organisations to recognise and implement trauma-informed practice and engagement. The systemic exclusion of local actors has resulted in significant amounts of trauma for individuals and organisations with lived experience of forced displacement. The following principles can ensure appropriate trauma-informed engagement: ensuring the safety of all stakeholders; upholding transparency in decision-making processes; valuing lived experience and first-hand knowledge to foster collaboration and mutual benefit; leveraging the strengths of individuals and communities affected by forced displacement; and acknowledging the ongoing impact of historical trauma to challenge systemic and institutional oppression that perpetuates trauma.<sup>7</sup>

### Lessons learned and ways forward

We have learned two main lessons during our short yet significant journey toward shifting power internally at Asylum Access.

First, creating genuine and transformative change on a personal, interpersonal and organisational level requires deep commitment from leadership within all levels of the organisation. This includes identifying internal champions on the Board and among the staff; developing a co-designed process between the board and the organisation; and committing a significant amount of energy, time and resources to the ongoing learning and unlearning process.

Second, the process of creating internal change is difficult, and efforts toward practising inclusion and addressing power dynamics in all elements of our work may be expensive and time-consuming. The extra steps taken on this front (such as arranging for translation, organising meetings across time zones, allocating staff time to co-design agendas, and obtaining everyone's sign-off) can mistakenly be considered 'inefficient', in particular within organisations dominated by white professional culture. However, our experience has revealed that investments in time and resources toward internal change result in improved communication and trust and in partnerships that genuinely leverage the unique skills of those with lived experience of forced displacement and local communities to bring about long-term change.<sup>8</sup>

Internal changes in international organisations not only signal a powerful commitment towards equity and inclusion but also lay the foundation for shifting power across the forced displacement sector. However, internal commitments and actions must not fall into the trap of repeating one-time, tokenistic efforts in the hope of resolving systemic challenges. Investments in internal change over time will be reflected not only in more ethical, effective and sustainable projects but also in how we approach these projects and our overall ways of working.

There is a growing movement toward refugee leadership and localisation, and to genuinely demonstrate solidarity with

these movements, we must fundamentally transform the way we operate as international organisations. We must invest significant energy, time and resources in internal change and hold ourselves consistently accountable to these commitments. We are therefore at a crossroads. Do we want to perpetuate the systemic inequities rooted in colonialism by accepting the status quo? Or do we want to reimagine a new system in which access, power, resources and decision-making are genuinely in the hands of refugees and people with lived experience of forced displacement – by first starting with our own organisations?

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1. [bit.ly/grand-bargain](https://bit.ly/grand-bargain)
2. Development Initiatives (2022) *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report* [bit.ly/humanitarian-assistance-report](https://bit.ly/humanitarian-assistance-report)
3. This figure is estimated using the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2022; we then consulted with RLO partners around the world, who confirm that this is a reasonable estimation.
4. UNHCR (2020). *The Global Refugee Forum at a Glance* [bit.ly/GRF-glance](https://bit.ly/GRF-glance)
5. See Cuyahoga Arts & Culture [bit.ly/white-dominant-culture](https://bit.ly/white-dominant-culture)
6. Asylum Access (2021). *Building Equitable Partnerships: Shifting Power in Forced Displacement* [bit.ly/equitable-partnerships](https://bit.ly/equitable-partnerships)
7. Health & Medicine Policy Research Group (2019). *Trauma-Informed Policymaking Tool* [bit.ly/trauma-informed-policy-making](https://bit.ly/trauma-informed-policy-making)
8. We have seen this first-hand at Asylum Access through our \$10 million award-winning initiative, the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), in which we convened a coalition of five RLOs working toward transferring ownership and resources to RLOs across the globe.

