

Beyond consultation: creating meaningful partnerships through participation

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Due to embedded power inequities, the voices of persons with lived experience of displacement are often minimised or silenced across humanitarian, governance and academic sectors. We propose a model for meaningful partnership that goes beyond consultation.

Researchers, humanitarian and NGO workers, UN agencies and refugee-hosting governments alike increasingly acknowledge the practical and ethical imperatives to meaningfully consult displaced populations.¹ Many of these stakeholders have made significant efforts to expand refugees' participatory access through adopting and implementing the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR). The GCR provides a blueprint for coordinated refugee response strategies to ease pressure on hosting states and promote greater refugee self-reliance. As decisions made in policy and programming directly impact displaced persons' lives, the importance of their inclusion cannot be overstated. Yet how does participation 'beyond consultation' look in practice?

We need to clarify what full and meaningful participation entails, and to establish clear pathways to participation so that all stakeholders can systematically work towards its achievement. The Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) identifies meaningful participation as occurring: *When refugees – regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics – are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies), in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially.*²

We adopt this powerful definition, which we deem appropriate for all displaced groups, not only because of its clarity and usefulness to identify when participation does or does

not occur but also because displaced persons themselves established the definition.

To propose a new framework for meaningful participation beyond consultation, we build from our personal experiences. Specifically, we leverage Christa's experiences as a researcher who frequently consults and partners with displaced persons in academic research, alongside Anila's experiences as a researcher and as a female leader of New Women Connectors (a refugee-led organisation - RLO) who is frequently consulted but rarely considered as an equal partner or as an 'expert' in the projects to which she contributes.

Consultations with displaced individuals and communities often occur too infrequently and too late, if they occur at all. For instance, researchers may recruit refugees as survey participants or as research assistants but rarely consult them to develop the motivating research question or to establish the research agenda. Similarly, NGO actors may observe displaced communities to determine which humanitarian interventions to implement but fail to allow aid recipients to evaluate existing interventions or to propose new ones. When the displaced are not consulted at all stages (from design to implementation to evaluation) many feel their efforts are undervalued. Their voices and expertise become minimised. This insufficient consultation reflects a glaring power gap between global refugee governance actors and the people they seek to assist.

Nothing about us without us

We propose a transformative framework which honours the call made by the GRN and other displaced leaders for "nothing about us without us".³ Our model captures



Participants discussing the impact of COVID-19 on the lives of newcomer women as part of a Diversity Dialogue Forum' (Credit: Rob Godfried, New Women Connectors)

how most actors, despite their best intentions, create research, humanitarian or policy interventions which are based on the concept of 'doing to' – that is, where displaced people are passive recipients of an intervention – or perhaps 'doing for', where there is limited participation but no real agency or power. The goal of true, meaningful partnership requires 'doing with'.

In moving up the levels, from 'doing to' towards 'doing with', consultations become more meaningful because they occur more frequently and allow greater diversity of participation. Moreover, consultations are meaningful when they allow displaced people to express their multiple forms of 'lived', 'expert' and other knowledge,⁴ and when these expressions are recognised and validated by all consulting parties.

'Doing to' occurs when non-displaced humanitarian, research and governmental actors fail to consult with displaced persons, when consultations are superficial or tokenistic and lived experiences are not valued as expertise, or when these consultations serve the interests and priorities of outside actors rather than

reflect those of displaced people. In extreme cases, 'doing to' can include cooptation of displaced voices: where people are represented or their experiences interpreted without acknowledgment of their agency, intellect and capabilities.

The next level – 'doing for' – is an improvement but power asymmetries persist. While ostensibly displaced people are given a larger seat at the table, typically they are only selectively invited to certain high-level meetings, do not contribute towards meeting agenda setting, and are rarely permitted to invite other participants. The lack of full, equal access in turn limits the ability of displaced people to share their knowledge and they fall short of being considered 'experts'.

'Doing with' represents the highest achievement in advancing meaningful participation, though it occurs only rarely. Here, participatory conversations are open-ended with no pre-determined outcomes, and displaced people are involved in agenda setting, project design, implementation and evaluation. This close engagement by displaced people ensures that all research, interventions and programming benefit

and are useful to displaced communities. Individuals are empowered to move beyond being research subjects or 'aid beneficiaries' to being experts and equals: displaced persons' lived and expert knowledge are equally acknowledged. Through co-creating space for knowledge production, persistent power asymmetries begin to weaken.

Practical steps beyond consultation

Anila and her team at New Women Connectors have identified practical questions for stakeholders to evaluate their current participatory approaches. This list of questions is not complete but includes suggestions for how self-reflection can begin.

- How frequently do you consult with displaced persons compared with non-displaced actors?
- In what ways do you consult with displaced persons, and at what stages (for example, research or project design, implementation, evaluation, sharing findings)?
- Can displaced persons decide what responsibilities (for example, research assistant, survey respondent, discussion panellist) they would like to have within a project or are these predetermined? Can they change roles?
- Who decides where to share research or project evaluation findings? How do you communicate findings back to, and discuss next steps forward with, displaced persons who engaged in your project?
- Perhaps most importantly, can displaced people working with you say no? Do you create adequate space not only to hear the opinions, perspectives and knowledge of displaced people but also to take these seriously?

Steps forward to achieve meaningful partnership

The following suggestions are not exhaustive but can be implemented to bolster meaningful participation beyond consultation at any

stage – even after a project has launched. These suggestions aim to narrow the power gaps that minimise or undervalue displaced community voices, ensure interventions are empowering, and help change the way global governance actors engage with the displaced.

Engage early: consultations are most meaningful and productive when engagement occurs as early as possible. If displaced people are not brought into the conversation until after an agenda is set, their ability to share knowledge and achieve more equal power is reduced.

Collaborate at all stages: from design to implementation to evaluation and post-project knowledge dissemination. Consistent, transparent engagement bolsters the likelihood that any intervention will benefit displaced communities as intended.

Expand opportunities for engagement: practitioners and researchers should always explain their projects, including honest discussion of what change displaced people can expect after a project is finished. Consultations must occur with open dialogue where displaced people can choose what roles they are best suited to fill, change roles if desired, and always be able to say no and ask questions.

Consider knowledge and expertise as multi-directional: at all stages of research, programme or policy design, displaced people hold many forms of expertise that can contribute to making external interventions more ethical and more successful. Allow flexible spaces for displaced people to make formal and informal contributions so that they can teach rather than just learn.

Commit to responding to requests for capacity development: researchers and NGOs should provide skills or knowledge-based trainings as directed by their displaced partners. Mutual skills transfer further closes existing power gaps.

For individuals unsure about how to initiate meaningful collaboration, refugee leadership networks and RLOs can help.⁵ Current refugee consortia, including the Global Refugee-led Network, R-SEAT (Canada) or the Refugee-led Organization Network (Uganda) are well positioned to facilitate research connections and project management. We believe responsibility lies with non-refugee actors to ensure meaningful collaboration, but they need not and should not feel alone in improving collaboration.

Conclusion

Creating spaces for displaced people to contribute their many forms of knowledge can help balance the power asymmetries that currently diminish the merit and magnitude of displaced populations' contributions. Our recommendations are intended to inspire new paths to make meaningful partnerships the norm rather than the exception. As these collaborations emerge, it will be necessary to monitor what works well and to attend to areas that are not working well. Taking incremental steps from 'doing to' towards 'doing with' can help advance this agenda for more meaningful partnership. With each step, we affirm the humanity and value of all persons, an affirmation

which benefits everyone regardless of their status as displaced or non-displaced.

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1. We use 'displaced populations' to refer to any person forced from their homes because of conflict, human rights violations or the need to secure a livelihood unavailable where they live: asylum seekers, refugees, internally displaced persons and other migrant categories.
2. GRN and Asylum Access (2019) *Meaningful Refugee Participation as Transformative Leadership: Guidelines for Concrete Action* bit.ly/refugee-participation-guidelines
3. Our model of doing to, for and with is adopted from New Economics Foundation (1998) *Participation Works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century* bit.ly/participation-works and from Cifter A S, Dong H and Cook S (2021) 'Sustaining Inclusive Design Collaborations between UK and Turkey through Co-Design Platforms', *Inclusive Design and Social Innovation*, Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University Publications
4. The typology of lived and expert knowledge is adopted from Shakman-Hurd B (2015) *Beyond Religious Freedom*. Princeton University Press
5. See Alio M, Alrihawi S, Milner J, Noor A, Wazefadost N and Zigashane P (2020) 'By refugees, for refugees: refugee leadership during COVID-19, and beyond', *Forced Migration Review* issue 64 bit.ly/FMR-refugee-leadership