

## The Global Summit of Refugees and the importance of refugee self-representation

The Global Summit of Refugees Steering Committee

**In June 2018, 72 refugee representatives from 27 refugee-hosting countries gathered in Geneva for the first-ever Global Summit of Refugees.**

The Summit was an historic event, bringing together representatives from forcibly displaced populations from all over the globe for the first time to discuss, plan and organise on the subject of refugee self-representation. It was convened and organised by representatives of eight refugee-led networks, including the Network for Refugee Voices, the Australian National Committee of Refugee Women, Network for Colombian Victims for Peace in Latin America and the Caribbean (REVICPAZ-LAC), New Zealand National Refugee Association, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network, Refugee Led Organizations Network (Uganda) and Syrian Youth Volunteers – Netherlands. Support was provided by two non-governmental organisations (NGOs), Independent Diplomat and the Refugee Council of Australia.

One of its thematic discussions focused on participation and agency – how refugees and other forcibly displaced people can participate meaningfully in and exert influence on decision-making processes that affect their lives at different levels (local,

national, regional, global) and in different kinds of forums (for example, those led by governments, NGOs, communities).

Despite recent calls for the increased involvement of refugees in both global processes and local initiatives, there is very little evidence that refugee and other forcibly displaced communities (particularly women's organisations) are better represented. And despite the international community's recognition of participatory policy making, as detailed in the Grand Bargain and embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals' mantra to 'leave no one behind', existing participatory practices fall short.

Refugee participation is mostly welcomed as a way of implementing the agenda of larger institutions and governments rather than as genuine strategic engagement that enables a response based on what people need and want rather than what goods and services can be supplied. Barriers to refugee participation include the high expectations that stakeholders have of refugee-led organisations' ability to participate in



Participants at the Global Summit of Refugees.

decision-making processes despite the limited funding, language barriers and concerns over legal status that these organisations often face. Ensuring diverse and representative refugee voices in global discussions is challenging when much of the dialogue takes place in Geneva or New York, where access is limited to those who are already in Europe or North America or who have documents and the resources to travel. Refugees in detention centres, in protection contexts where the risks of speaking out are significant, who have had less opportunity to develop skills important to policy-making contexts and where daily existence is a struggle have even less opportunity to participate.

Discussions at the Summit around participation and agency focused on questions including: What kind of participation are we speaking about? How can participation be more effective? What kind of organisational/structured process would be viable and successful? What kind of relationship would we like to establish with stakeholders and other actors involved in decision making? How do we transform refugee efforts and their organisational processes into something sustainable over time?

The Summit provided an opportunity for refugee leaders to network and exchange ideas, and resulted in a number of headline outcomes:

- That refugee community organisations, initiatives and change-makers from around the world will establish a representative network – an inclusive international platform for refugee participation and self-representation – before the end of 2018. This global network will work towards the creation of an independent monitoring mechanism which will assess progress towards refugee participation and the fulfilment of rights.
  - That refugee-led organisations and networks should be guaranteed the opportunity to participate at all levels (local, state, regional and international) to represent the concerns of affected populations in policy- and decision-making forums relating to forced displacement,
- in particular at the Global Refugee Forum of 2019 and its subsequent meetings, as well as in other decision-making bodies affecting their lives.
  - That all actors involved in international protection should actively work towards meaningfully including and enabling refugee-led organisations and initiatives as equal partners in the pursuit of solutions to forced displacement. This includes considerations about sustainability through allocation of resources, ways to support leadership within refugee-led organisations and networks and to respond to requests for capacity building, and analysing and addressing barriers to participation.

Detailed recommendations are laid out in the Summit's Policy Discussion and Outcomes Paper.<sup>1</sup> The Global Summit of Refugees Steering Committee welcomes feedback and looks forward to collaborating with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), NGOs and local stakeholders to take these steps towards a more inclusive, participatory, human rights-based approach to refugee policy making. Regional meetings of the Global Summit of Refugees network are scheduled to take place before the end of 2018.

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