

# Power-brokers and gatekeepers as allies: a model for partnership

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**From their experience of working together on refugee education in Indonesia, the authors identify four modes of refugee inclusion and exclusion in decision-making processes and discuss the roles and responsibilities of allies in overcoming the silencing of refugee voices.**

“He’s with me.” Those words were uttered by Tracey, a white researcher, to enable Musa, a Hazara refugee, to enter the UNHCR building in Jakarta, Indonesia, for a scheduled meeting. As Tracey sat inside waiting for Musa, she watched him walk past the metal and wire barricades only to be stopped and refused entry by a security guard. In this instance, Tracey acted as a literal gatekeeper ally for

Musa to access the power-brokers inside the building. Exclusion, however, often manifests in less overt and more complex forms.

The authors’ model of empowering partnerships is based on their reflections of working together on refugee education in Indonesia since 2016. They have identified four forms of refugee inclusion/exclusion in policy advocacy, research and practice,

ranging from explicit exclusion through tokenistic inclusion to equal partnership and, ultimately, to refugee leadership. They also focus on how gatekeeper and power-broker 'allies' can ensure people with lived experience of forced migration are able to influence policy and practice.

Abdullah was a refugee in Indonesia for nearly five years. During that time, he co-founded and later became the principal of the Refugee Learning Center (RLC), which provides education to over 300 refugees excluded from formal education in Indonesia. He was resettled in Canada in 2019. Tracey conducted teacher training and mentoring at the RLC for two years before conducting a longitudinal Participatory Action Research study at the RLC during Abdullah's time as principal. As a result of that study, the first formal education pathway for refugees in Indonesia was established: the General Education Development Support Project (GEDSP). Musa managed the Jakarta GEDSP and was instrumental in the successful implementation of GEDSP in Indonesia.

Both Musa and Abdullah are change-makers. They have successfully advocated for and effected change in the area of refugees' rights to education and formal accreditation in Indonesia. Despite their successes, they both acknowledge significant challenges to inclusion in policy decisions affecting their lives and also highlight the role of privileged gatekeepers and power-brokers as allies, not only in facilitating their place at decision-making tables but also in ensuring their voices are heard at them. As one of those allies, Tracey has also witnessed both explicit and unintended exclusion of refugee voices by the power-brokers in Indonesia, while she herself was welcomed and heard as a privileged advocate for refugee education.

### Explicit exclusion

Abdullah recalls:

*"I saw first-hand when we were excluded from meetings where important decisions about asylum seekers and refugees were made. Much more could be done to improve the situation of refugees in Indonesia if we were given the opportunity to share*

*our thoughts and experiences as forced migrants. At the same time, I can see the difficulties in including forced migrants in discussions. Some may be hesitant to participate for fear of negatively impacting their asylum process."*

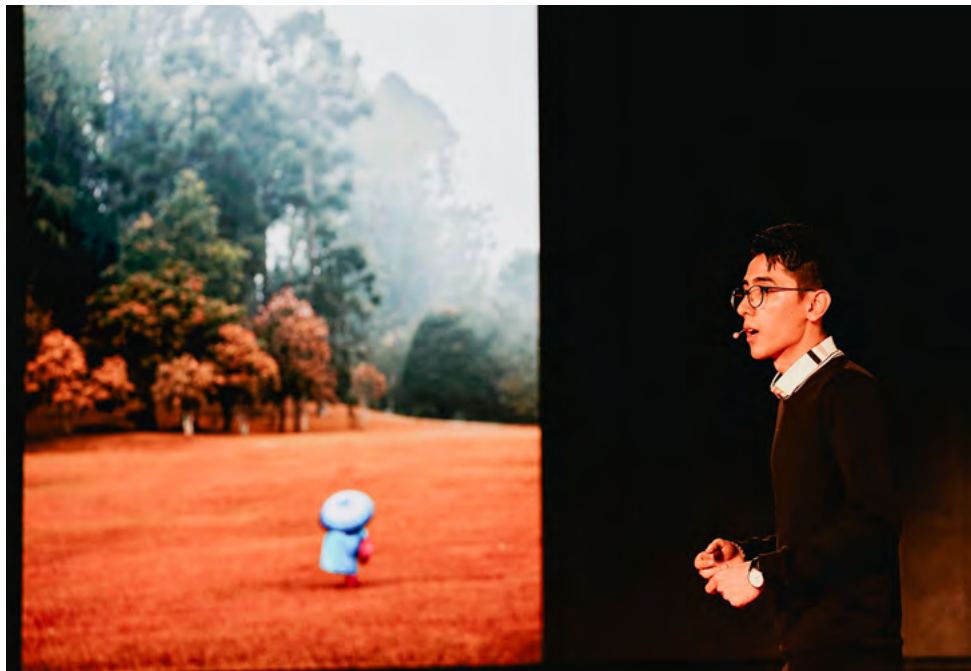
Abdullah raises an important point for potential allies: that refugees in vulnerable situations feel their present and future lives are completely beholden to power-brokers, namely UNHCR and the host government. Refugees need to feel safe in sharing their stories, their grievances and their solutions. Musa notes that he would feel able to contribute more to this article after securing a resettlement place.

Refugee allies must respect the lived experiences of refugees that make them feel unable to raise their voices. Although not ideal, in situations where refugees are excluded due to systemic barriers or their own fears, allies can use their relative privilege to bring refugees' lived experiences to the attention of power-brokers and to advocate on their behalf. Tracey did this often in her meetings with UNHCR. She felt uncomfortable in doing so, as her right to speak was premised on injustice. Nevertheless, in this way, Abdullah and the RLC's interests were brought to the attention of policymakers, and GEDSP gained UNHCR support on a policy and funding level. In speaking for excluded refugees, allies need to ensure they are accurately representing their interests.

Where refugees are willing to speak with power-brokers and advocate for themselves, allies should focus on facilitating that access. Once GEDSP was established, UNHCR regularly invited Musa to meetings. Musa's access to UNHCR was assisted by his allies' knowledge of the 'rules of the game': as a key member of the GEDSP management team, Musa's inclusion in decision-making processes could not be denied.

### Tokenistic inclusion

The authors have also witnessed many examples of tokenistic refugee inclusion at decision-making tables: where refugees are invited or granted the right to participate in fora with power-brokers but their voices are



Abdullah Sarwari presenting his talk “The hidden struggle of refugees” at TEDxUbud, Bali, Indonesia in 2019 (Credit: TEDxUbud 2019)

silenced. This silencing is at times intentional. Musa and Tracey noted this at meetings with UNHCR representatives. Questions regarding the refugee community’s needs and perceptions were consistently directed to Tracey, despite Musa being a member of the community under discussion. As an ally, Tracey would redirect the questions to Musa. Nevertheless, Musa still did not feel heard or validated as an expert at the table. He reflects, “I am human, but to UNHCR I am different, not like other people”.

This was also the case at some conferences Abdullah and Tracey attended together where non-refugee experts spoke to refugees about refugee issues. At one such conference, refugees were not invited to speak even as the non-refugee ‘experts’ openly pondered how refugees felt about certain issues. Again, as a privileged ally with an implicit ‘right to speak’, Tracey redirected questions to refugee participants whom she knew had valuable inputs. Once a few refugee participants had

answered questions, providing much needed and insightful contributions based on their lived experiences, other refugee participants in the room recognised their right to speak and did so freely. This was an example of tokenistic inclusion, albeit unintended, as the conveners failed to acknowledge the power hierarchies in the room which could inhibit refugee participation, as well as different cultural norms of public speaking. The conference in question was also conducted entirely in English, which served to silence many of the refugee participants.

An ally plays two roles in mitigating tokenistic inclusion. Firstly, they can identify the possibility of tokenistic inclusion at the planning stage of a forum and make recommendations to the organisers around the use of interpreters, facilitating anonymous contributions and culturally appropriate modes of participation. Secondly, they can ensure that those in the room know they have the right to speak, if they wish to do so.

### Equal partnerships

Equal partnerships occur where refugee and non-refugee knowledge and contributions are equally valued and reflected in policy advocacy, research and practice. GEDSP is one example of a successful equal partnership. The project arose from a Participatory Action Research (PAR) study with volunteer refugee teachers at the RLC aiming to improve the quality of English language education at the centre. Tracey, as the primary researcher, brought her knowledge on teacher development, additional language acquisition, and research practices, while the participants brought their lived experiences of learning and teaching languages in specific contexts, as well as the educational needs and desires of their students.

The teachers felt that their own levels of proficiency in English were a barrier to the provision of quality education and most of them also felt they could not confidently present themselves as 'teachers' as they had not completed their own secondary education. The solution they desired was to improve their English, preferably through an accredited course of study. At that point in time, no formal secondary education pathways were available to refugees in Indonesia. However, Tracey was aware that the internationally recognised General Education Development (GED) diploma<sup>1</sup> was accessible to refugees in other sites of educational exclusion. In this way, the first formal secondary education pathway for refugees in Indonesia was established.

UNHCR's education policy is focused on host country integration. Garnering UNHCR support for an alternative pathway through the GED required joint advocacy for policy change. Tracey initially conducted that advocacy alone on behalf of her research collaborators; once the GED project was expanded to Jakarta, however, Musa was also involved in advocating for UNHCR support and in developing implementation protocols.

### Refugee leadership

Refugee leadership – the final form of refugee inclusion – is the ideal co-production model in policy advocacy, research and

practice. In refugee leadership, refugees are themselves the power-brokers and gatekeepers. Allies are still supportive of their aims and actions but there is no sense of dependency on outsiders for refugees' voices to be heard and their goals to be achieved.

The RLC in Indonesia is an example of refugee leadership. This informal school was established in 2015, at a time when UNHCR Indonesia was advising refugees not to meet in groups and draw attention to themselves, so as to avoid antagonising the local population. However, as refugee children could not attend local schools, the refugee community chose to disregard this advice and to set up their own school. Abdullah was one of the co-founders and later the principal. The RLC management board, teachers and parent representatives are all volunteers from the refugee community. Together, they provide education for over 300 students. Although the RLC receives vital support from an array of allies, the decision-making power for all RLC concerns resides with the RLC community itself.

Abdullah acknowledges his allies in helping him represent refugee voices in a very different forum: a TEDx event in Ubud in 2019. He recalls, "I was once again blessed with so many amazing people who introduced me to the TEDxUbud team, helped me write and edit my story, practise delivering it, and offering whatever practical help was needed to ensure I did not miss out on this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity." Although allies assisted him, it was Abdullah's story and Abdullah's voice which held the power on that stage. Despite his involvement in numerous refugee events and publishing articles throughout his time in Indonesia, this was the first time he felt that power. His voice and his story were met with a standing ovation and many tears in the audience. Abdullah's talk educating people on the plight of refugees in Indonesia has since been watched by over 6000 viewers in YouTube. His voice has been heard.

Bob Rae, Canada's ambassador to the UN in New York, has said, "We must listen to the voices of refugees, and their victimhood and lack of agency must come to an end. That is the key to the path forward, and it must fuel

both national and international policies.”<sup>2</sup> The authors’ experiences show that even among agencies charged with representing refugees’ interests, refugees’ voices often remain silenced. But they have also found there are ways to overcome barriers to refugee inclusion and leadership in policy advocacy, research, and practices which directly affect the lives of people experiencing displacement, and that allies have an important role to play on the road to refugee leadership. The authors hope that their examples of overcoming refugees’ exclusion, and their resulting successful partnerships, provide guidance to others in ensuring refugees’ voices are heard and heeded.

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1. The US General Education Development diploma is based on an individual achieving a high school level knowledge in five areas: writing, mathematics, reading, science and social studies.
2. [bit.ly/refugees-equal-access](http://bit.ly/refugees-equal-access)

