

## Building Equitable Partnerships An Asylum Access Position Paper

### Key Points

- Research shows that affected communities and proximate actors are more likely to lead responses that are accountable, legitimate, transparent, effective and impactful. However, due to structural racism and bias, proximate actors, especially refugee-led organizations (RLOs), have been systemically excluded within funding streams, as well as strategy development and decision-making processes.
- INGOs and multilateral organizations can help address this by building **equitable partnerships** with local actors, including refugee-led organizations, which we understand *as partnerships where systems, processes and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion*. The principles of equitable partnerships can also apply to donors, as well as host community-led organizations working with RLOs.
- The five foundational elements for building equitable partnerships and co-ownership are:
  1. Implementing the values of **diversity, representation, equity and inclusion**
  2. **Co-designing** projects with local actors, including RLOs
  3. Ensuring **co-leadership** during project implementation and evaluation
  4. Promoting **co-visibility** of local actors to ensure sustainability and impact
  5. Ensuring trust and **transparency** with local partners, specifically RLOs
- As a starting point, we as international organizations can follow these effective and impactful methods towards building equitable partnerships:
  - Verse ourselves in the power dynamics present in our sector
  - Invest in refugee leadership and diversity, equity, and inclusion
  - Educate ourselves on trauma-informed engagement
  - Assume knowledge and expertise by those most proximate
  - Recognize and adapt to cultural differences
  - Seek outcomes over outputs
  - Prioritize relationship-building
  - Facilitate connections (don't gate-keep)
  - Consider joint funding where the local partner is the lead applicant
  - Resource equitable partnerships with time and money

Asylum Access understands that institutions led by those most affected and those most proximate are undertaking foundational and transformative work for and with their communities. In our sector, those most affected are local<sup>1</sup> civil society organizations, especially refugee-led organizations (RLOs).<sup>2</sup>

This understanding stems from our day-to-day engagements, where we see these organizations identifying and breaking down the barriers that prevent dignified life and long term well-being in a cost-effective and culturally aware manner. It is reinforced by our review of available research, which shows those most affected are likely to lead responses that are accountable, legitimate, transparent and ultimately, impactful.<sup>3</sup>

We recognize that structural racism and bias in our sector have led to the systemic exclusion of local civil society<sup>4</sup>—and in particular refugee-led groups—within funding streams, as well as strategy development and decision-making processes. As a refugee human rights organization, Asylum Access believes a key aspect of our mission is to dismantle the structures that enable this exclusion (both within our own organization and in the ecosystem in which we operate) and to support or engender new structures that center people who have experienced forced displacement.

From our recent and ongoing learning, we understand there are many things that must happen in order to achieve this sector-wide reorientation. This paper focuses on one key element of that: **equitable partnerships**, which we understand as *partnerships where systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion*.

Through both our mistakes and our successes in building partnerships, we have learned many lessons. We aim to capture some of those lessons here. This Building Equitable Partnerships position paper sets out the **foundational elements** that we believe define equitable partnerships. It also highlights some **impactful practices** that describe how to enact these foundational elements.

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<sup>1</sup> In this document, we use the definition of “local” referenced in Peace Direct’s “Time to Decolonise Aid” report: “Development, humanitarian aid and peacebuilding initiatives and programmes owned and led by people working in their own context.” Available in: <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PD-Decolonising-Aid-Report.pdf>, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> Asylum Access defines refugee-led organizations (RLOs) as “any formal or informal initiative/organization that is founded and run by people of forced displacement background and/or any formal or informal initiative/organization where people of forced displacement are in major leadership positions and able to influence the work of the organization.”

<sup>3</sup> See the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative’s [evidence base](https://www.refugeeslead.org/evidence) (<https://www.refugeeslead.org/evidence>) for more information on the impact of RLOs.

<sup>4</sup> While in this document we refer to host community-led organizations and RLOs as “local civil society,” we know this is not perfect. Not all refugee-led groups are local civil society organizations, and host community-led organizations do not face the same challenges as RLOs. The exclusion of both groups needs to be addressed, though this exclusion is experienced more acutely by RLOs and with additional challenges.

While this document may be useful to a range of organizations and institutions, we specifically offer these reflections to our peer international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and multilateral organizations. In many places, these principles can also apply to host community-led organizations that engage in funding relationships or partnerships with RLOs.

## Challenges with Creating Change

Thanks to the hard work of the refugee leadership<sup>5</sup> and localization movements, there is a growing recognition by global community actors that those with lived experience and other local actors, including RLOs, are crucially and cost effectively making a difference in the lives of their communities and that these actors are least likely to receive financial support or be included or listened to during key strategizing and decision-making processes.

In response, dominant actors are committing to act in support of refugee leadership, localization, or both. For example, UNHCR enshrined their commitment to the "meaningful participation" of refugees within the 2018 Global Compact for Refugees.<sup>6</sup> Many INGOs appeared to follow suit, signing onto the the Global Refugee-led Network's participation pledge,<sup>7</sup> promoting RLOs on their websites, and increasing the diversity of speakers at their public-facing events. There has also been an emphasis on accelerating localization over the last few years: notably, at the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, humanitarian organizations and donors committed to providing at least 25 percent of humanitarian funding directly to local and national organizations through the Grand Bargain.<sup>8</sup>

However, these commitments have not been met. In the example of the Grand Bargain, the percentage of humanitarian assistance funding provided to local and national actors only rose from 2.8% in 2016 to a meager 3.1% in 2020.<sup>9</sup> The amount of funding going directly to local and national organizations (beyond national governments) actually decreased by volume and as a proportion of total funding between 2019 and 2020.<sup>10</sup> Even more striking, we estimate that of the \$30 billion USD in the global humanitarian system, less than 1% of funding goes directly to

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<sup>5</sup> Advocates of refugee leadership include but are not limited to the [Global Refugee-Led Network](#), [Network for Refugee Voices](#) and [Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table \(R-SEAT\)](#).

<sup>6</sup> Para 106 of the [Global Compact on Refugees](#) declares that "States and relevant stakeholders will facilitate meaningful participation of refugees, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth, in Global Refugee Forums, ensuring the inclusion of their perspectives on progress."

<sup>7</sup> The Global Refugee-Led Network introduced a pledge on refugee participation (pledge ID GRF-00322) at the Global Refugee Forum in 2019. In 2019, the Global Refugee-led Network, in collaboration with Asylum Access, also released the [Meaningful Participation Guidelines](#) with a set of recommendations on the ways in which we can facilitate meaningful participation and inclusion of refugees within our sector ([https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines\\_Web.pdf](https://www.asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Meaningful-Refugee-Participation-Guidelines_Web.pdf)).

<sup>8</sup> *The Grand Bargain: A Shared Commitment to Better Serve People in Need* (2016). Available at: [https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand\\_bargain\\_final\\_22\\_may\\_final-2\\_0.pdf](https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/grand_bargain_final_22_may_final-2_0.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> The absolute volume of international humanitarian assistance given directly to local and national actors increased by 23% between 2016 and 2020 (from USD 615 million to USD 756 million).

<sup>10</sup> Development Initiatives (2021). *Global Humanitarian Assistance Report*. Available at: <https://devinit.org/documents/1008/Global-Humanitarian-Assistance-Report-2021.pdf>

RLOs.<sup>11</sup> Other commitments have also fallen flat: despite UNHCR's commitment to the meaningful participation of refugees, under 3% of the over 3,000 attendees at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum were refugees.<sup>12</sup>

The failure of the Grand Bargain and other commitments is not surprising given current dynamics within partnerships. While we increasingly hear an interest in funding and partnering with local organizations, including RLOs, we see an ongoing expectation that those partners will conform to standards of practice common within white dominant professional culture,<sup>13</sup> such as 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 sub-contractual arrangements, short-term funding that stymies organizational development, training programs, and short-term collaborations with local partners which lack transparency, accountability and ultimately reflect primarily the interests of the international partner.<sup>14</sup>

**We argue that the disconnect between dominant actors' commitments (to localize and uplift refugee leadership) and the reality (that many remain unwilling, or unsure how, to give up power, control, visibility and space) is rooted in our sector's colonial past and ongoing structural racism.** Many current practices and attitudes in the humanitarian sector derive from the colonial era: aid flows from former colonial powers to formerly colonized regions; pervasive terminology such as "capacity-building" paint 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 (e.g. INGOs and multilateral organizations) who know donors well.<sup>15</sup>

**RLOs and refugee leaders experience these dynamics most acutely.** RLOs are often presumed to be small, inexperienced, and lacking "technical capacity." They are labeled as "beneficiaries" rather than service providers, community leaders and innovators who are unlocking impactful solutions for and with their communities, a perception that creates extra work for RLOs to be considered a worthwhile partner. In comparison to other proximate actors, RLOs are also least likely to be operating in—and are not invited to—circles where they may build rapport with decisionmakers and donors.

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<sup>11</sup> As mentioned, only 3.1% of total international humanitarian assistance was given to local and national actors in 2020. Of this figure, we estimate that less than 1% of funding goes directly to RLOs. This figure is estimated using the Global Humanitarian Assistance Report 2021, and gutchecked by consulting with RLO partners around the world, who confirm that this is a reasonable estimation. We recognize this calculation is imperfect due to the constraints of understanding complex funding structures, unavailability of data, and lack of transparency from donors.

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR (2020). *The Global Refugee Forum at a Glance*. Available at: <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/2019%20GRF%20at%20a%20Glance.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> A useful resource on white dominant professional culture is published on the Cuyahoga Arts & Culture website (<https://www.cacgrants.org/assets/ce/Documents/2019/WhiteDominantCulture.pdf>).

<sup>14</sup> In their [paper](#), The Shifting the Power project has also argued that "INGOs have to improve their partnership practices with local and national NGOs to better recognize and respond to their leadership, as well as to adapt accordingly their advocacy, media or fundraising work" (p. 3) ([https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WTT\\_FINAL.pdf](https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/WTT_FINAL.pdf)).

<sup>15</sup> Paige, S. (2021). *Time to Decolonise Aid: Insights and lessons from a global consultation*. Peace Direct. Retrieved from <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/PD-Decolonising-Aid-Report.pdf>.

The impact of these ongoing power dynamics are at least three-fold:

- First, they compound refugee leaders' lived experience with trauma: many refugees have already been oppressed and silenced leading up to and during initial displacement; and then, many experience it again—in new ways—by the very sector created to support those who have been forcibly displaced. For example, RLOs have cited distrust and humiliating treatment by international actors, as articulated in *The Global Governed*,<sup>16</sup> and a 2020 report by RLOs in Indonesia. In the report, RLO leaders explain they were asked to use back entrances and their pens were confiscated at security.<sup>17</sup>
- Second, strategizing and decisionmaking happen far from the experiences of displacement, without the knowledge and experience of local actors, including RLOs. This leads to the funding of expensive and often ineffective responses, rather than important locally-run programs that are proven to work.
- Third, they create competition for limited access and resources amongst excluded groups, hindering organizational sustainability and collaboration amongst local organizations, including RLOs.

### Why Equitable Partnerships

Our sector cannot meaningfully meet its commitments of refugee leadership and localization unless we unpack and address the power dynamics that permit international actors to dictate the rules of the game. Addressing these power dynamics is a complex endeavor articulated well by those who advocate for shifting power within the humanitarian and development sectors.<sup>18</sup> We are committed to this movement and we seek to support it however we can.

Within this paper, we focus on one aspect of addressing structural racism and bias: equitable partnerships. Through equitable partnerships, we can all, through our individual and collective engagements, **begin to shift power to local partners, including RLOs, supporting the refugee leadership and localization agendas.**

Focusing on equitable partnerships is a natural first step to creating change within our sector because we can begin this change right away: after all, many of us are already engaging in partnerships with local organizations, including RLOs. Some collaborate to implement projects, to deploy “capacity-building” programs, to collect input, to carry out advocacy agendas and

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<sup>16</sup> Pincock, K., Betts, A., & Easton-Calabria, E. (2020). *The Global Governed?: Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance* (Cambridge Asylum and Migration Studies). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781108848831

<sup>17</sup> “Country-Level Insights from Refugees-In-Transit Leading Community Organisations in the Field.” (2020). Jakarta, Indonesia. PDF. More information and document available on request.

<sup>18</sup> Individuals who have advocated for shifting power and localizing the humanitarian and development sector include but are not limited to [Arbie Baguios](#), [Degan Ali](#), [Tammam Aloudat](#) and [Themrise Khan](#). Organizations engaged in this work include but are not limited to [Adeso](#), [the Global Fund for Community Foundations](#), [the NEAR network](#), [No White Saviors](#), [Population Works Africa](#) and [the Start Network](#). Several articles on these topics have been featured on [Devex](#) and [The New Humanitarian](#).

more. If we approach such partnerships with an equity mindset, we will see immediate benefits for refugee communities, including:

- Increasing direct rapport between local organizations and donors, leading to greater funding of local groups, including RLOs;
- Foster greater learning, growing and mindset change among those of us with the most privilege, decreasing ongoing trauma for community leaders supporting their communities;
- Better designed projects with more meaningful, community-engaged programs, and therefore, greater impact.

Overall, we believe that equitable partnerships will contribute to the broader movements towards shifting power and resources specifically within the forced displacement sector.

### **Five Foundational Elements for Equitable Partnerships:**

Before engaging in a partnership, we have learned the importance of assessing our power and value-add in relation to external partners, especially in relation to 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 simply standing aside altogether.

Assuming this assessment has been done, and that our unique value-add has been identified, the five foundational elements below underpin and inform our partnership approaches. We believe that these elements contribute to eliminating structural barriers within the forced displacement sector, with **the ultimate goal of local actors, specifically RLOs, being centered in and leading responses to forced displacement.**

### **The five foundational elements for equitable partnerships are:**

- **Embrace DEI values:** Committing to and implementing values of diversity, equity, inclusion and representation are a necessary foundation for equitable partnerships. We define these values as follows:
  - **Diversity:** Teams and partners should represent a variety of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives; when they do, projects and partnerships will be at their strongest and most impactful.
  - **Representation:** Movements are most successful when led by the most affected. Our teams, leadership, and partnerships should reflect that belief.
  - **Equity:** We must actively work to provide fair access, treatment, opportunity and advancement for historically excluded and underrepresented groups, including eliminating the barriers that prevent these groups from participating.
  - **Inclusion:** More so than simply “including,” inclusion is the practice of sharing power in activities, processes, and decision-making to ensure that everyone feels a sense of ownership of an organization, movement, or project.

- **Co-design:** All joint projects must be co-designed by those most proximate. Ideally, INGOs and multilateral organizations offer their services and support based on needs identified by local partners. If INGOs or multilateral organizations bring forth an idea involving local action, they must identify local partners as soon as possible and support and position them to have equal or more say on all aspects of project design (setting agendas, identifying needs, developing plans and grant applications, etc).
- **Co-leadership:** During the life of the project, all partners should enjoy joint leadership over the implementation of the project, including decisions made around strategy, changes in project activities or outcomes, and incorporation of feedback from monitoring and evaluation processes. Partners should develop and implement policies that hold one another accountable to exercising co-leadership, such as procedures for decision-making and conflict resolution. Local civil society partners should receive the resources necessary to carry out co-leadership duties.
- **Co-visibility:** We must ensure visibility for local partners in joint projects, in particular towards donors and other actors who can be influential in channeling funding, supporting progress or building the credibility of local partners. We can ensure co-visibility by facilitating direct connections to influential organizations, giving credit where credit is due in both verbal discussions and written publications (unless local partners request to stay anonymous), yielding platforms to local partners as much as possible, and being mindful to avoid claiming the efforts of local partners as our efforts.
- **Transparency:** A key ingredient in building successful and equitable partnerships is trust. Trust can be most easily built (and conversely eroded) depending on the level of transparency between partners around core issues underpinning the project. Notably, this transparency includes budgets, in particular allocations of salaries and core costs attached to the project. Each organization should also openly discuss their respective values and goals, expectations of roles and outcomes, and organizational risks throughout the project.

When all elements are present, i.e. it is co-designed and co-led by all partners, local civil society is visible in spaces they need to be, and there is full transparency between partners, there is true **co-ownership** of a project or collaboration. Through co-ownership, all partners are invested deeply in both the outcome and the process of the project, and it is more likely to be accountable, sustainable and ultimately impactful.

### **Effective and Impactful Methods of Building Equitable Partnerships:**

Acting on these values and foundational elements, we have gleaned some important insights into approaches that are likely to lead to equitable partnerships. While not exhaustive, this list, separated into three subsections, provides some of our key lessons learned during our journey thus far.

## Section 1: Educate Ourselves and Commit Our Organizations to Change

Asylum Access has found that educating ourselves and our organizations on power dynamics, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), and trauma-informed practice, and by engaging support from professionals with expertise in these areas, is a foundation for building equitable partnerships. Education and commitment to ongoing learning are necessary pre-conditions for forming equitable partnerships: we cannot engage truly equitable partnerships unless we have the baseline knowledge that makes engagement safe for all.

To make such a commitment real, Asylum Access has learned that we as an international organization must:

1. ***Verse ourselves in the historical and ongoing power dynamics present in our sector:*** The first step to rectifying these dynamics is understanding them: important topics to immerse ourselves in include the prominence of white dominant professional culture, the history of colonization, as well as white supremacy and white saviorism in our sector, and decolonial thought and practice.
2. ***Invest in refugee leadership and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI):*** Organizations should re-examine 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 organization.<sup>19</sup> We can achieve better representation and inclusion by changing recruitment practices (e.g. mitigate bias, publicly advertise positions to non-traditional networks, form diverse hiring committees, and promote hiring criteria that value skills and experiences of individuals who have experienced forced displacement); holding regular training on DEI for all staff; and building strong structures (e.g. transparency and inclusive decisionmaking processes, flexible professional development funds, affinity groups, and more) to support and hold our teams accountable to these values.
3. ***Educate ourselves on trauma-informed engagement.*** We must recognize and acknowledge that the systemic exclusion of local actors, specifically refugees and refugee-led organizations, has resulted in significant amounts of hurt and trauma. Refugees and refugee-led organizations are continuously forced to advocate for their self-representation within powerful institutions, such as INGOs and multilateral organizations, which can be a draining and traumatic process.

Asylum Access has begun to identify tools and resources to help us get educated on these issues. One we especially like is the [Trauma-Informed Policymaking Tool](#) developed by The Health & Medicine Policy Research Group, which can be a useful resource for international organizations engaging with refugees and refugee-led

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<sup>19</sup> In countries where refugees are not legally allowed to work, organizations have found creative pathways for meaningful inclusion of refugees within their leadership and programs. Paid arrangements can be complicated in some national contexts but creative options can keep staff and organizations safe. Please feel free to reach out to Asylum Access if you would like any advice on navigating this process.

organizations.<sup>20</sup> We believe that the following principles (adapted from the original tool) can contribute to trauma-informed engagement by international actors:

- ***Safety***: All stakeholders must feel safe (both emotionally and physically) when participating in any engagement process.
- ***Trustworthiness and transparency***: Decisions must be made with transparency, with the goal of building and maintaining trust. There must be transparency about who is involved, how decisions are made, and the intended goals of the engagement.
- ***Collaboration and mutuality***: Individuals who will be impacted by engagement outcomes must have an equal voice throughout the process. Lived experience and firsthand knowledge should be prioritized as much as, or ideally more than, outside professional experience.
- ***Strengths-based approach***: Organizations must recognize, build on, and validate individual and community strengths and experiences, which will result in engagements that are more effective at promoting healing.
- ***Social justice***: Organizations must acknowledge the ongoing impact of historical trauma for individuals and communities and challenge the systemic and institutional oppression that continues to create trauma.

## Section 2: Create Accountability to Learning

While educating ourselves on ideas that may be new to us, we should also challenge old assumptions and preferences. As we engage in equitable partnerships, we must continually question our ways of working and ways of defining efficiency and success: Are they truly “correct” ways of doing things, or rather, are they ingrained cultural and professional preferences? We can create accountability to our learning through the following:

1. ***Assume knowledge and expertise by those most proximate***: International organizations often have valuable experience, but these skill sets do not always apply within every context. Approaching local civil society with humility and assuming they have important and usually more relevant knowledge, skills and experiences to offer is a crucial starting point in an equitable partnership. Too often, international organizations wrongly assume that local actors lack capacity or expertise, exemplified by the problematic usage of the term “capacity-building.” Local actors are not lacking capacity, but rather are systemically deprived of critical resources and access to opportunities. As Arbie Baguios explains, “the task, therefore, is...to connect colleagues to the resources and power they need to implement successful projects — transforming capacity building, into capacity bridging.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Health & Medicine Policy Research Group. (2019). Trauma-Informed Policymaking Tool. Retrieved from <http://d3s8k6ajh82rah.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/policymaking-tool-new.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Baguios, A. (2019). It’s time to decolonise project management in the aid sector. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/aidreimagined/its-time-to-decolonise-project-management-in-the-aid-sector-da1aa30c5eee>

2. **Recognize and adapt to cultural differences:** Because working on responses to forced displacement situations is inherently intercultural work, we must have high cultural intelligence in order to collaborate effectively.<sup>22</sup> To build this intelligence, we make efforts to learn about, and adapt to our partners' cultures and ways of working, such as communication and writing styles, language and translation, formality, and preferences around collaboration. We can carry out basic research about cultural preferences where available, but when in doubt, we can always ask our partners what they prefer. Recognizing and adapting to cultural differences not only increases trust but also reduces friction and miscommunication, which is especially critical in the era of remote partnerships.

Asylum Access has built many successful partnerships, but in one fraught conversation with a prospective partner, we pushed for a culturally-specific way of measuring a project's impact, while ignoring the importance of relationship-building in the prospective partner's culture. The prospective partner ultimately declined to collaborate on the project -- and Asylum Access learned a hard but critical lesson about the importance of prioritizing, building, and utilizing cultural intelligence.

3. **Seek Outcomes Over Outputs:** In our sector, we often focus on achieving predetermined, quantifiable results rather than transformative outcomes; we should focus instead on the development and execution of a shared vision and outcomes over commitments to log frames or activities lists, allowing for changes as needed to achieve transformative outcomes. This is particularly important given that local civil society organizations are likely to recognize, earlier than any international actor, the need to shift strategies or priorities to achieve transformative outcomes or lasting positive impact.

In our partnerships, Asylum Access has become more flexible about what constitutes evidence of impact or change. We conduct early conversations about preferred ways of working and focus less on quantitative knowledge. Of note, donors often dictate how international actors define success through application processes and grant agreements that may prioritize quantitative outputs over harder-to-quantify transformative outcomes. Through honest dialogue, international actors can help donors check their assumptions about the importance of quantitative data and complex logframes. Asylum Access is currently using our position of relative privilege with donors to raise these questions and prompt consideration about more inclusive ways to assess impact.

4. **Prioritize relationship-building:** In order to put into practice the steps above, we must prioritize relationship-building between individuals, groups, organizations and communities as the foundation of equitable and successful partnerships. Forming such relationships often requires an investment of time, energy and resources, including building rapport over multiple conversations, and developing culturally-appropriate processes to ensure that we deeply understand each other's visions, limitations,

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<sup>22</sup> Cultural intelligence (CQ) is "the ability to relate and work effectively with people from different cultural backgrounds and it goes beyond existing notions of cultural sensitivity and awareness." For more information on cultural intelligence, please visit the Cultural Intelligence Center [website](#).

expectations and ways of working. We can also prioritize relationships by practicing flexibility, especially around cultural norms, varying time zones, and resource limitations. When building these relationships, we aim to be not just a resource, but a trusted companion on the journey towards systems change. The end of the project should not be the end of the partnership: we should continue to collaborate with our partners and facilitate opportunities as they arise.

### Section 3: Decenter Ourselves Within the Sector

Our sector has long centered the expertise and skill sets of INGOs and multilateral organizations, leading to the tremendous accumulation of contracts and grants for international actors. In order to transfer power, we should take a step back and center local civil society in designing and resourcing solutions by:

1. **Facilitate connections (don't gate-keep):** INGOs and multilateral organizations often have relationships and access to spaces and opportunities that local partners, specifically RLOs, do not. Centering local leadership means ensuring resources and opportunities are accessible by local civil society. In many instances, there will be opportunities to facilitate direct introductions to donors and other actors without the need to insert ourselves into projects. Where INGOs or multilateral organizations have to be the channel for funding flows (due, for example, to restrictions on RLOs to set up bank accounts or legally register in their countries), visibility and direct engagement with donors remains critical and should not be a cause to take ownership of a project or to avoid supporting RLOs. As requested by a refugee leader in Malaysia: "*Partner with RLOs and let us do it our way.*"<sup>23</sup>
2. **Consider joint fundraising where the local party is the lead applicant:** In joint projects, the default should be to support local partners to be lead applicants within funding agreements with donors. In the lead up to applications, international actors with privilege, connections and resources can support local actors, including RLOs, with the identification of donors, share knowledge about best practices in forging relationships with donors, drafting application materials, and supporting preparations for donor meetings. When supporting the development of budgets, INGOs should ensure they are promoting core and multi-year funding for local actors including RLOs that promote long-term impact and sustainability, and to be cognizant of specific challenges that RLOs face in receiving international funding.

In one recent example, Asylum Access had secured a grant and then engaged a local partner as a collaborator. When we reached out to talk with the donor about a renewal grant, the donor very hesitantly inquired whether Asylum Access would be comfortable making our local NGO partner the lead applicant for the new grant. Our enthusiastic support shifted the balance of power between us and our partner, and we hope encouraged the donor to continue its efforts to shift power and enhance equity in funding relationships.

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<sup>23</sup> Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) consultations, July 2021.

3. **Resource equitable partnerships with time and money:** Like systems change itself, building equitable partnerships takes time and money. The extra steps needed to practice inclusion (such as arranging for translation, organizing meetings across time zones, staff time to co-design agendas and getting everyone's sign-off) can mistakenly be considered "inefficient," in particular to organizations dominated by white professional culture. However, Asylum Access has begun to invest more time in these steps -- and our experience has revealed that investment in inclusive practices pays off in long-term effectiveness. Through this investment, we see improved communication and trust, more impactful, relevant and sustainable solutions, and partnerships that truly leverage the unique skills of those most proximate to bring about change.

### **About Asylum Access' Journey**

Asylum Access has both an international presence (registered as a global organization in the United States), as well as national organizations run by local leaders in Malaysia, Mexico and Thailand. As an international nonprofit and a family of local civil society organizations, we have partnered with other local organizations, including RLOs, in pursuit of refugees' human rights for over 15 years.

Starting in 2018, Asylum Access' staff and board found ourselves in spaces where the movements for refugee leadership and localization were growing louder and more visible. We listened to leaders at the [Global Refugee-led Network](#), [Network for Refugee Voices](#), the [NEAR network](#) and [Adeso](#), and began to ask ourselves how we were supporting or hindering these movements.

We have a long way to go to realize our vision of refugee leadership and localization, but we offer our initial steps below in the spirit of transparency. While each organizational context is different, we share our initial steps as an example for others wishing to shift power within the forced displacement sector. We acknowledge that many of these processes have been challenging and complex and therefore remain works-in-progress at the time of writing.

- At leadership and Board levels, we discussed where we wanted to go and why in terms of committing to refugee leadership and support for local actors, including RLOs, thereby creating a shared vision for the future. We did this with the help of professionals with specific expertise in embedding diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) practices in organizations.
- We overhauled our recruitment and hiring policies to ensure people who have experienced forced displacement are always in hiring pipelines and that hiring managers understand the unique value of lived experience as they vet candidates.
- We set representation targets: by 2024, our Global Leadership Team seeks to ensure 40% of its members have lived experience of forced displacement. By 2026, our global Board of Directors seeks to ensure at least 60% of its members have lived experience of

forced displacement. We also made experience of forced displacement a non-negotiable element of our next co-CEO team.<sup>24</sup>

- We began utilizing simultaneous translation more regularly in our internal engagements, ensuring those who do not speak English with native fluency can still communicate nuanced concepts and inform organizational direction.
- We dramatically increased professional development funds, giving our team the resources to learn and grow. A new policy designed to promote the flexible utilization of those funds—for anything from DEI training, to language acquisition, to professional coaches—is in development.
- We launched a process to name, analyze 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 NGOs that comprise the Asylum Access family. This process will likely take two years to complete, and requires the support of DEI and organizational change professionals.
- We committed to an ongoing budget to support training in key areas. Within the next year, we intend to implement training related to the White Savior Industrial Complex, white dominant professional culture, and gender inclusivity.<sup>25</sup>
- We assessed our power and knowledge in relation to external partners, especially in relation to local civil society actors, including RLOs. Our assessments usually teach us we have more power and less knowledge than originally thought.

We believe these efforts have been crucial in our ability to support localization and refugee leadership movements, and with them, the larger movement of decolonizing the forced displacement sector. Of note, we supported the launch of the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, the recent winner of the \$10 million Larsen Lam ICONIQ Impact Award,<sup>26</sup> and are instigating the funding of impactful local partners in Colombia and Kenya.

## Conclusion

Asylum Access recognizes the power dynamics that exist within our engagements with locally-led civil society, especially RLOs. We know that these power dynamics are damaging our sector by hindering the resourcing of locally-led, proximate solutions that lead to lasting positive change.

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<sup>24</sup> Please find more details on our leadership transition on our [website](https://asylumaccess.org/leadership-transition-emily-message/) (<https://asylumaccess.org/leadership-transition-emily-message/>).

<sup>25</sup> The term White-Savior Industrial Complex was coined by Teju Cole in his [article](https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/) in The Atlantic (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/>).

<sup>26</sup> Please visit the Resourcing Refugees Leadership Initiative [website](https://www.refugeeslead.org/) (<https://www.refugeeslead.org/>) to learn more.

Commitment to change must go beyond verbal and written pledges. As an organization, we hold ourselves responsible to identify and dismantle bias in ourselves; remove structural and systemic barriers in our organization; and build partnerships with local civil society that are equitable, transparent and sensitive to power dynamics.<sup>27</sup> We hope that this document provides concrete guidance for other organizations to join us on this journey.

While we have already learned and grown a lot in our approach towards equitable partnerships, we acknowledge that we have room to improve, and remain open to critique on how we can live out these values better. This document itself is a living document, and we hope to continue to update it as we, our partners, and our sector learn more.

We welcome the opportunity to connect with others who share the commitments and values articulated here, and to collaborate in making equitable partnerships commonplace within the forced displacement sector.

### **Additional Resources:**

*We have compiled a non-exhaustive list of resources that can be relevant to individuals and organizations interested in learning about shifting power within the forced displacement sector.*

1. Alyssa Bovell from the [Racial Equity Index](#) has compiled a wide range of resources on “[addressing racism in development and decolonizing development practice.](#)”
2. Baguios, A. (2021). Localisation Re-imagined: Localising the sector vs supporting local solutions | ALNAP. Retrieved from <https://www.alnap.org/localisation-re-imagined-localising-the-sector-vs-supporting-local-solutions>
3. Barbelet, V. (2018). As local as possible, as international as necessary: Understanding capacity and complementarity in humanitarian action. HPG working paper. London: ODI ([https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/As\\_local\\_as\\_possible\\_as\\_international\\_as\\_necessary\\_understanding\\_capacity\\_and\\_comp.pdf](https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/As_local_as_possible_as_international_as_necessary_understanding_capacity_and_comp.pdf)).
4. Barbelet, V., Davies, G., Flint, J. and Davey, E. (2021) Interrogating the evidence base on humanitarian localisation: a literature study. HPG literature review. London: ODI (<https://odi.org/en/publications/interrogating-the-evidence-base-on-humanitarian-localisation-a-literature-study>).
5. Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative. (2021). Evidence Base for the Impact and Importance of Refugee-Led Organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.refugeeslead.org/evidence>

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<sup>27</sup> See more about our own internal and external efforts on refugee leadership and inclusion: <https://asylumaccess.org/who-we-are/refugee-leadership/>.