

GRF LEGAL COMMUNITY PLEDGE PROGRESS UPDATE 2021 – 2022

GLOBAL OVERVIEW

Since the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) Legal Community Pledge [Progress Update 2020-2021](#) was issued, [UNHCR has reported there are over 100 million people](#) that have either been forced to flee their homes, or have been born into a situation of forced displacement. We have seen the highest number of people displaced within Europe in decades following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. This has starkly highlighted the often discriminatory approach taken by States to those displaced; non-Ukrainians forced to flee in the same time period, and even from the same conflict in Ukraine, have generally not received the same level of generosity and support.

The legal pathways for Afghans that emerged in 2021 immediately after the Taliban takeover have diminished during 2022, leaving many highly at-risk individuals unable to flee at all. At the same time, many States that have welcomed those fleeing Ukraine have paradoxically continued to ramp up efforts to externalize asylum-processing; restrict or push back non-Ukrainian asylum-seekers; and utilize other measures to limit access to fair asylum procedures and **deny access to rights, justice and solutions for those forcibly displaced**. Despite a relaxation of most COVID-19 restrictions globally, some States have continued to claim that such actions are justified on public health grounds.

In this challenging context, signatories to the GRF Legal Community Pledge continued to provide **essential legal information, legal representation, and other legal assistance** to forcibly displaced people and the organizations that work with them, once again exceeding their pledged commitments.

In **2021** signatories to the GRF Legal Community Pledge provided over
146,434 PRO BONO HOURS
of legal help in fulfillment of their pledged commitments.

310,728 PRO BONO HOURS
have collectively been undertaken by Pledge signatories since the GRF.

LEGAL ASSISTANCE

Pledgers undertook a broad range of activities to **increase access to legal assistance** for forcibly displaced people and the organizations that work with them, often **working in new and collaborative ways to increase their impact**. This included the establishment of new legal clinics for asylum-seekers, the development of new private - public sector pro bono models of legal service delivery and the secondment of staff from private sector Pledgers to legal aid NGOs to increase their capacity.

France: The Paris Bar - **Barreau de Paris Solidarité** - launched four new legal clinics for asylum-seekers and refugees in partnership with and hosted by local NGOs, including establishing a specialized clinic on labor law. Through these and other clinics, the Bar provided pro bono legal advice to over 3,000 forcibly displaced people in 2021.

Europe: A collaboration of international law firms, including **Herbert Smith Freehills, Linklaters, DLA Piper** and **Orrick** partnered with an Italian NGO to launch a **Rule 39 Initiative**. Through the project, lawyers assisted in drafting urgent ("Rule 39") requests to the European Court of Human Rights and within the first 8 months had helped over 60 people from 10 different countries secure access to asylum and other basic rights, including safeguarding the human rights of more than 15 refugee children.

Europe: **European Lawyers in Lesvos (ELIL)** worked with both in-house and volunteer lawyers from six law firms, including **Dentons, Orrick** and **Allen & Overy**, as part of the **Greece Pro Bono Collaborative Project**. Now utilizing a hybrid model of legal aid delivery, this pro bono support enabled ELIL to reach over 1,650 asylum-seekers in 2021.

Australia: **Lander & Rogers** was one of a number of law firms who partnered with **Refugee Legal** and other legal aid NGOs in Australia to provide legal assistance to over 3,600 asylum-seekers and refugees in 2021. This included more than 80 of its lawyers and paralegals attending clinics supervised by NGO partners.

United States: **Bloomberg** and other Pledge partners joined a collaborative pro bono project in New York to represent unaccompanied immigrant and refugee youth fleeing violence in Central America and the Congo. Bloomberg volunteers protected many of their clients from deportation by helping them to seek asylum or the Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) classification.



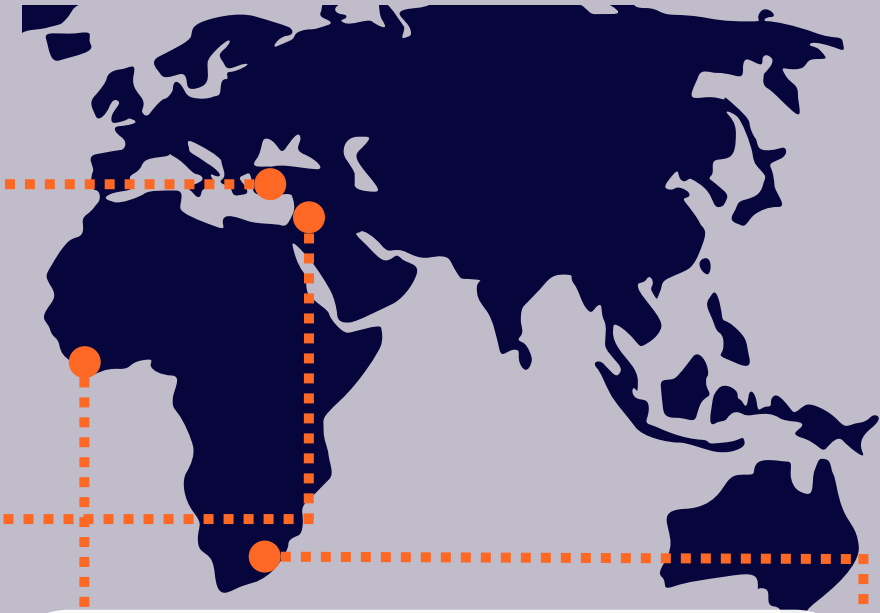
ADVOCACY

Pledgers successfully **advocated for reform to national laws and policies** that would have resulted in the *refoulement* (forced return to a place of harm) of refugees or the denial of due process, access to asylum, or other rights. This included collaborations between pledging law firms and NGO and other partners to **successfully mount legal challenges through the courts**.

At a global level, in December 2021, [Core Group members](#) of the Pledge submitted a joint [Written Statement](#) to the [High-Level Officials Meeting](#) in Geneva calling for greater recognition of the importance of access to justice and legal programming within the refugee response sector, and the need for increased support for local legal actors and community-based legal initiatives.

Turkey: [Microsoft](#) collaborated with [ELIL](#), [Kids in Need of Defense \(KIND\)](#) and other local legal experts to provide country of origin research on the situation facing Syrians in Turkey. This information was used by ELIL in dozens of cases to challenge the assumption, stemming from a Greek Joint Ministerial Decision, that Turkey is a safe third country for Syrians.

Israel: [The Hotline for Refugees and Migrants \(HRM\)](#) successfully advocated for the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in a number of contexts, including persuading the Israeli government to grant protection against deportation to Ethiopians originating from the Tigray region, and to publish a formal procedure to recognize and protect victims of human trafficking.



US & Liberia: [Debevoise & Plimpton](#), in partnership with a national human rights NGO and acting as co-counsel, represented Liberian former-refugees to successfully bring claims against the Colonel responsible for the massacre of approximately 600 internally-displaced civilians at a Red Cross humanitarian aid center during the Liberian Civil War. In August 2022, the court awarded damages totaling \$84 million to the victims.

South Africa: [Norton Rose Fulbright](#) partnered with a national NGO based in Cape Town on a number of critical strategic litigation cases, successfully securing the suspension of certain provisions of the Refugees Act to prevent the return of refugees who had experienced delays in their visa renewals, and petitioning the courts for the inclusion of asylum-seekers and refugees in the legal profession.

United States: [Gibson Dunn & Crutcher](#) obtained a preliminary injunction postponing a new rule that would have increased -- up to eightfold -- the immigration court fees for individuals defending themselves against deportation from the United States. This nationwide injunction protected the rights of refugees and all immigrants facing deportation in the country.



PRO BONO IN RECENT CRISES

In response to the overwhelming legal needs of those impacted by the Taliban takeover of **Afghanistan in 2021** and the Russian invasion of **Ukraine in 2022**, members of the Pledge **quickly mobilized both legal and non-legal resources** to provide a broad range of legal information and assistance for those displaced. Often working directly with refugees or community-led organizations, members of the Pledge advocated for increased legal pathways for those at risk. They also established collaborative platforms, coalitions and models to share information and **maximize resources and expertise** to increase the scope and reach of their work.

AFGHANISTAN



United Kingdom: In collaboration with the **Immigration Law Practitioners' Association** and specialist asylum-law barristers, **DLA Piper** created a centralized triaging platform to provide Afghans with legal advice directly or to connect them to relevant legal advisors. The project mobilized hundreds of lawyers across the UK, including from many Pledging firms, to respond to more than 5,100 requests for legal support from Afghans.

Switzerland: **AsyLex**, a Swiss legal aid NGO that utilizes various online platforms to provide legal advice, established a dedicated Afghan emergency legal team and built 24/7 online chatbots in both Farsi and English that automatically generate **humanitarian visa applications** to Switzerland and **respond to legal queries** about other potential legal pathways for Afghans.

Australia: In partnership with Afghan-led organizations based in Australia, the **International Commission of Jurists Australia** lobbied for the resettlement of a group of Afghan women, directly leading to the increased intake of Afghan refugees by the Australian State.

United States: **Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher** dedicated over 10,000 pro bono hours -- worth more than four million USD -- to support over 300 Afghan refugees between August and December of 2021. The firm also partnered with several NGOs, including an Afghan-led foundation in America, to found the **Welcome Legal Alliance**. The Alliance created a centralized system to connect Afghans in need of legal representation with volunteer attorneys.

In Europe, [Orrick, Allen & Overy](#), [Ashurst, Debevoise & Plimpton](#), [Gibson Dunn & Crutcher](#), [Reed Smith](#), [DLA Piper](#), [White & Case](#), [Morrison & Foerster](#), [Dentons](#), and [Dechert](#), partnered with other international law firms and legal aid NGOs to establish [collaborative pro bono projects in the UK, France, Italy and Germany to assist Afghans](#) with humanitarian visas and family reunification applications. The firms involved in the projects fund specialist asylum and immigration lawyers to sit within the hosting NGOs and provide training and supervision to the pro bono lawyers involved, increasing the financial and human resources available to the NGO as well as the number of people they can provide assistance to.



UKRAINE

Drawing on lessons learned and good practices identified during the legal community's response to Afghanistan and other crises, the legal community mobilized quickly in response to Ukraine. Pledge actors worked nimbly and collaboratively to tweak many existing models and tech platforms, while also developing new ones, to increase access to legal information and assistance for those fleeing the situation in Ukraine. [AsyLex](#) developed another [online chatbot](#) for those fleeing Ukraine -- in both Ukrainian and English -- and [DLA Piper](#) built on technology and systems developed for Afghan refugees to set up the [Ukraine Advice Project UK](#), which has supported over 3,500 Ukrainian people and their families.

Born out of the need to further bolster cross-border legal aid coordination, knowledge-exchange and programming among legal aid providers responding to Ukraine, members of the Core Group established a [Ukraine Working Group on Cross-Border Legal Aid](#) in May 2022. A Working Group member, the **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)**, is developing a **Cross-Border Legal Aid Platform**, which will allow people in need to directly connect with legal aid providers from an array of countries, including Ukraine. To provide a space for cross-border knowledge sharing and to collect feedback on the platform, the Working Group is organizing a series of events, starting with a [Roundtable Discussion and Presentation of DRC's Platform](#).



Dentons developed an online [Ukraine Support Hub](#), containing relevant information and useful tools prepared by their lawyers for refugees fleeing the Ukraine war, as well as for Ukrainian businesses that are affected by the changing legal landscapes as a result of the war. The tools on the Hub offer information on the required documents needed to allow Ukrainians to cross borders and gain access to asylum and other key rights such as education, healthcare, and the right to work.

Blue Dots Hubs

PILnet, in coordination with **UNHCR**, worked with a range of legal actors, including lawyers who had been displaced from Ukraine, **ELIL**, and Pledge member law firms, to scope a collaborative pro bono project that is being piloted in two of the UNHCR-UNICEF coordinated [Blue Dot Hubs in Poland](#). The project provides in-person legal information and assistance to those who were forced to flee Ukraine, with a specific focus on supporting non-Ukrainians. In the first two months of operation, the project supported over 700 people through one-on-one consultations.



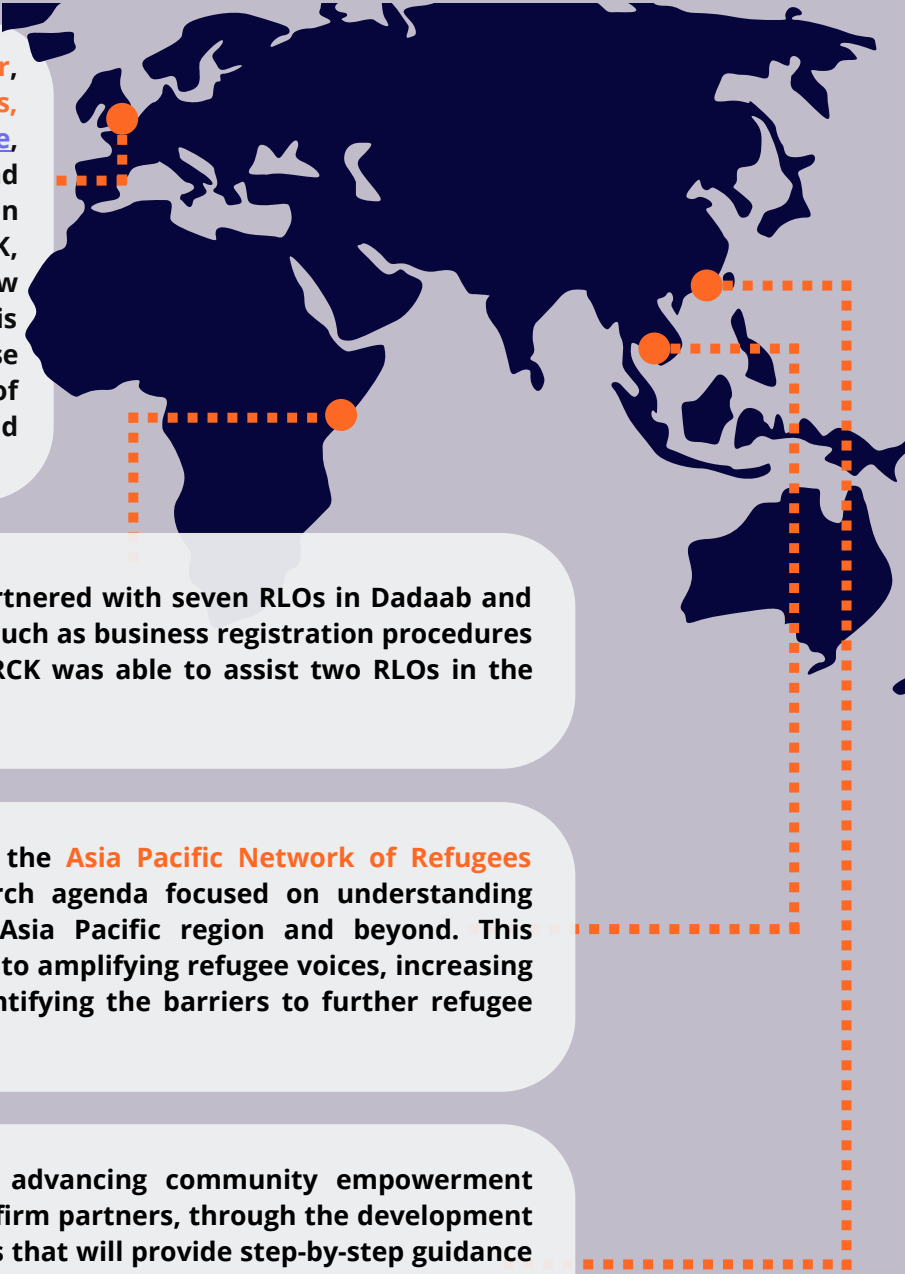
PILnet also worked with **DLA Piper** and other legal partners to obtain legal assistance and [develop a variety of new resources](#), including [country-specific guidance](#) for people coming from Ukraine on access to legal status, documentation, and registration as well as social, medical, housing, education, and other services. These resources have been downloaded 13,400 times and have also been referred to by UNHCR in its virtual [Blue Dots Hub](#).



REFUGEE PARTICIPATION

Since the GRF, there have been significant advancements in the meaningful refugee participation agenda, with refugees and others directly impacted by forced displacement increasingly being recognized as critical and legitimate actors within the refugee response sector. But **the road from exclusion to inclusion of refugees and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) is a long one**, with RLOs continuing to come up against many barriers to greater refugee leadership within the sector. Many of these barriers are legal; **RLOs are frequently required to operate in gray areas of the law**, often lacking legal registration, which may limit their ability to independently apply for and disburse funds, establish a formal office, or legally hire staff.

In addition to supporting individual refugees to claim their rights, enabling more refugees to take up leadership roles, **there is much more that the global legal community can do to strengthen and empower refugee leaders and RLOs**. Pledge members have increasingly sought to find ways to support greater refugee leadership within the global refugee response system, and to center refugee leadership within legal aid and access to justice programming specifically.



United Kingdom: Dechert and DLA Piper, together with Talent Beyond Boundaries, established a **Displaced Legal Talent Initiative**, which supports employers in identifying and hiring at-risk lawyers and judges. In addition to creating legal pathways to a life in the UK, by providing employment opportunities in law for those affected by displacement, this initiative also strengthens the agency of those involved and increases the number of displaced people working in the legal and access to justice sectors.

Kenya: Refugee Consortium Kenya (RCK) partnered with seven RLOs in Dadaab and Kakuma to share knowledge around issues such as business registration procedures and the work permit application process. RCK was able to assist two RLOs in the Kakuma Refugee Camp to legally register.

Asia: Act for Peace -- in partnership with the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) -- developed an extensive research agenda focused on understanding meaningful refugee participation in the Asia Pacific region and beyond. This research is part of their larger commitment to amplifying refugee voices, increasing visibility of refugee-led initiatives, and identifying the barriers to further refugee participation in global advocacy.

Hong Kong: Justice Centre Hong Kong is advancing community empowerment resources in partnership with pro bono law firm partners, through the development of a mobile app and legal information videos that will provide step-by-step guidance to refugees on topics such as applying for legal aid or judicial review. The mobile app was translated and updated with the support of refugee leaders, who will also lead on promoting the resource among the refugee community in Hong Kong.

In June 2022, **PILnet**, in its own capacity and as the Coordinator of the Pledge, signed on to the [2019 Global Refugee Forum Refugee Participation Pledge](#) coordinated by the **Global Refugee-Led Network**. In doing so, PILnet pledged to mobilize the legal community to partner with RLOs to address refugees' legal needs, strengthen the organizational capacity of RLOs, and support the centering of refugee leadership and participation within access to justice initiatives. PILnet also committed to embedding meaningful refugee participation in the governance and activities of the Pledge and to mobilize the legal community to support those with a displacement background to study and advance a career in the field of law, as well as to develop the capacity of refugee leaders and lawyers, including through scholarships, mentoring, employment opportunities and placements.

COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

Each pledging organization makes its own unique commitment to advance access to justice when joining the Pledge. But, given its multi-sectorial nature, the Pledge itself has started to catalyze both a more connected legal community, and a legal community that increasingly works directly with displaced individuals and communities themselves to identify needs, share information, and develop collaborative ways of working. For example, in the days after the Taliban took control of Kabul, PILnet worked with **APNOR** and the **Global Refugee-led Network (GRN)**, as well as a number of legal actors to co-convene an [Urgent Consultation](#) attended by close to 300 legal and refugee rights actors. This provided a platform for Afghans to share their needs with the legal community and for the legal community to connect and share information live during the consultation, and following it. **The Ukraine Working Group on Cross-Border Legal Aid** also includes lawyers that have been displaced from Ukraine that are involved in providing pro bono support to others displaced.

Local and Cross-Border Collaboration

In addition to facilitating countless connections between actors within the refugee legal ecosystem and supporting with the development of multiple collaborative pro bono projects, **PILnet** also made **49 law firm to NGO/RLO matches since the GRF**. This includes matches to support a broad range of pro bono projects – from legal assistance for RLOs seeking to secure legal registration, to cross-border legal assistance to secure complementary pathways and legal research on a variety of topics, including to support the scoping of advocacy around alternatives to detention in Europe for a global network.

Matching Highlight

PILnet was able to match **Dongcheon Foundation** -- a South Korean legal aid organization -- with an Egyptian lawyer within the Pledge network to secure a legal opinion on the ability of Koreans to seek damages under Egyptian law. **This collaboration, facilitated through the Pledge, contributed to a landmark strategic litigation victory** for all refugees who had been wrongfully rejected by the Ministry of Justice due to fabricated refugee interview records. In South Korea, damages can only be awarded to foreigners if a South Korean citizen would equally be eligible for damages in the foreigner's country of citizenship. As such, a finding on this was essential for the case to proceed and **the judge expressly referenced the legal opinion facilitated through the Pledge** before proceeding to consider the case and award damages.

Building Partnerships in Asia

Localizing the Pledge in Thailand

In line with commitments made through the Pledge to support the development of stronger pro bono culture and national-level legal capacity, in 2021, **PILnet** and other **Core Group** members worked with a Thai lawyer to facilitate **6 workshops** with local legal and refugee actors to co-design a collaborative refugee rights pro bono project in Thailand. The resulting collaborative model, launched in **February 2022** is hosted by the [Refugee Rights Litigation Project \(RRLP\)](#), and guided by an advisory council drawn from the Thai legal and refugee sector. The Project aims to **enhance coordination and partnership building among the legal community and the refugee community at a national level**; it will test the impact that providing financial and technical support for the development of a national level coordination mechanism has on the localization of Pledge commitments.

The initiative has already developed a roster of lawyers from national, regional, and international firms and **facilitated 13 pro bono matches**. Matches have included cross-border legal research to support proceedings for clients of **RRLP**, such as on Moroccan family law, as well as support for the organizational needs of RLOs and NGOs, including assistance to register RLOs as local foundations in Thailand.



In September 2022, **30 pro bono lawyers** from the roster participated in the first of a series of practical training sessions, where they had a chance to test their new knowledge and skills through case studies. The next training will be held in October 2022.

The 2022 Asia Pro Bono Legal Community Roundtable

Following the success of the [2020 Asia Pro Bono Legal Community Roundtable](#), on 30 August 2022, PILnet partnered with **UNHCR**, **Thomson Reuters Foundation**, and **Core Group members**, including **APNOR** to hold a second pro bono pitching roundtable: the [2022 Asia Pro Bono Legal Community Roundtable](#). The event took place online and brought NGOs and RLOs working in refugee rights together with over 30 legal actors interested in taking on pro bono projects to address the legal needs of refugees and others forcibly displaced. **9 NGOs and RLOs** pitched **13 pro bono projects**, all of which received interest from at least one law firm. Following the Roundtable, PILnet worked with the NGOs and RLOs to match them with a suitable pro bono provider or build collaborative pro bono projects, which would allow the organizations to harness the resources of multiple firms for the benefit of a wider range of asylum-seekers or refugees.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED ?

As the number of people displaced around the world continues to grow at an alarming rate, it is more important than ever that legal actors work with those affected by displacement to build a global refugee legal ecosystem that enables those displaced to secure their rights, justice, and solutions to their displacement. Pledge members' **responses to Afghanistan and Ukraine have highlighted the diversity of knowledge, resources, and expertise** that Pledgers' can contribute towards this ecosystem. Enhanced collaboration, partnership, and coordination is integral to harnessing these resources.

PILnet and others involved in implementing and coordinating the Pledge have learned:

01 The value of collaborative pro bono projects in times of crises

Collaborative pro bono projects can be an effective way to maximize resources within the refugee legal ecosystem, including in times of crises. In response to Afghanistan and Ukraine, the **legal community came together to build a wide range of collaborative pro bono models to provide additional capacity to the refugee legal ecosystem.** Private sector law firms, each committing human, technological, financial, and/or other resources, partnered with specialist asylum and immigration legal aid lawyers or NGOs to identify gaps in legal assistance, which private sector lawyers could provide. Where legal aid actors were overwhelmed by high numbers of case enquiries, some projects equipped private sector lawyers to undertake triage support, which freed up specialist lawyers to take on more complex cases. Other projects provided legal assistance in areas where legal aid was not readily available, such as for family reunification or humanitarian visas. **Some models of pro bono legal assistance developed for Afghanistan were refined for Ukraine** and can be further developed to expand capacity within the refugee legal ecosystem in a targeted way now and ahead of future crises.



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02 The need to prioritize the centering of refugee voices within access to justice

While the principles of refugee participation, leadership and self-representation **may be emerging norms within the refugee response sector**, to many in the global legal community these concepts are new. Even when legal actors are familiar with them, **there is still a lot of uncertainty around how these principles should be applied to legal work**. Some Pledge members have begun increasing refugee participation and leadership within their own programs and partnering with displaced communities and RLOs to develop legal empowerment and other programs that center refugee leadership.

Nevertheless more should be done to document and share examples of good practices and to **encourage a greater understanding about the importance of increasing refugee participation and leadership within the legal community**, as well as to explore ways in which these principles can be embedded within legal aid, pro bono and other access to justice programming.



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03 The importance of strengthening the Pledge's coordination and governance framework

In recent years we have recorded the impressive commitment of pledging organizations' towards the Pledge, but we have simultaneously observed that the Pledge's potential to provide a platform for greater collaboration, partnerships, and coordination amongst the refugee legal ecosystem **requires resources and a governance structure that does not currently exist**. Born out of the initiative of Pledge members, a deliberately informal, largely voluntary coordination and governing structure has developed through the **Core Group** and a **subset of working groups**. Those involved in these groups recognize the need to address the weaknesses of the current governance framework, including limited refugee representation, dominance of Global North actors, loose governance by a [Terms of Reference](#), and a lack of sufficient resourcing or secretariat support to sustain a global initiative. The upcoming GRF in December 2023 provides Pledgers with an opportunity to address these fundamental limitations and explore how to harness the potential of the Pledge.



WHAT NEXT ?

The Pledge initiative is in a crucial point of transition. While those involved in the Pledge will continue to meet their own existing commitments in the run up to the next GRF in December 2023, they will also need to revisit these commitments and the broader purpose and scope of a joint legal community pledge. Ahead of the next GRF, Pledgers will need to come together to **make decisions about the value of the Pledge as a platform to enhance collaboration, coordination and partnerships** within the refugee legal ecosystem, as well as to make decisions about how such a platform will be coordinated, governed and resourced in the future.

Ahead of the next GRF, PILnet and the Core Group will:

1 Expand awareness of the pro bono resources available through the Pledge and facilitate partner matching

through the [GRF Legal Community Matching Portal](#) and additional pro bono project pitching roundtables. To achieve this, we will partner with **Pledging RLOs, GRN and APNOR** as well as other RLOs to support them to identify their legal needs, and to match them with members of the legal community who can provide the necessary support.

2 Create more opportunities for mutual learning between different members of the global legal community

and between the global legal community, refugees and members of the broader refugee response sector. This will involve creating spaces for the sharing of good practices and lessons learned around partnership building, refugee leadership within access to justice, collaborative pro bono projects, and other legal assistance models.

3 Develop further resources and guidance to increase the availability of legal information to forcibly displaced people

by sharing information on existing legal aid available, expanding the Refugee Rights Pro Bono Tool Kit, and providing guidance to organizations looking to build collaborative pro bono models of legal assistance delivery.

4 Engage existing Pledgers and other relevant stakeholders to re-envision the Pledge

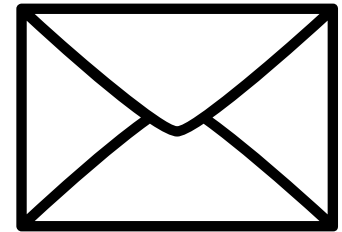
ahead of the next GRF. Host workshops with Pledgers and other stakeholders to critically reflect on the value and impact of the Pledge and engage an external monitoring, evaluation and learning organization to undertake an independent review of the Pledge.

5 Propose alternative coordination and governance models for the Pledge

and actively seek resourcing to ensure sustainability of the Pledge. Work with the **GRF Legal Community Pledge Governance Working Group** to review the existing governance and coordination structure. Design and implement an inclusive process to collectively re-envision the Pledge, and agree to how it will be coordinated, governed, and sustained.

HOW TO GET INVOLVED?

You can [join the Pledge here](#), sign up for our [Pledge newsletter here](#), or reach out to us at grfpledge@pilnet.org to **learn more**.



If you are a **RLO, NGO, or legal service provider** and would like to be matched with free legal help, you can learn more about our **matching portal** [here](#).



Connect with us on **social media**.



Over 100 legal and refugee rights actors have joined the Pledge, each working together to implement their pledged commitments.

This progress update was compiled by **PILnet** and the other members of the **Core Group** that supports the implementation and sustainability of the Pledge. It covers the period **1 January 2021 to 30 September 2022**.

JUSTICE | HONG
CENTRE | KONG

HIAS

Welcome the stranger.
Protect the refugee.

Asia Pacific
Refugee Rights
Network



StARS
SAINT ANDREW'S
REFUGEE SERVICES

REFUGEE SOLIDARITY
NETWORK

Refugee Legal:
Defending
the rights of
refugees.

ACT FOR PEACE
CONFRONTING INJUSTICE TOGETHER
THROUGH THE **actalliance**



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