

## Summary note

### Side event “Meaningful Refugee Participation in Practice: Scaling Impact and Shaping the Path Forward”

*Global Refugee Forum Progress Review, 16 December 2025, CICG*



*Side event on meaningful refugee participation, held during the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review 2025.  
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The Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) 2018 recognizes the importance of meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless people in decisions that affect them. In paragraph 34, the Compact emphasizes that “responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist.” The side event held during the Global Refugee Forum (GRF) Progress Review 2025 reaffirmed that meaningful participation is both a fundamental right and a strategic necessity for effective responses to forced displacement and statelessness. Bringing together governments, regional organizations, municipalities, refugee- and stateless-led organizations, civil society, and philanthropic actors, discussions highlighted tangible progress since GRF 2023 while identifying opportunities to further advance meaningful participation across decision-making and leadership spaces.

The event opened with a keynote address by UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, Ms. Ruvendrini Menikdiwela, who reaffirmed that refugee participation, formalized as a principle in the GCR, must move beyond symbolic consultation toward shared decision-making. She emphasized that interventions led by displaced and stateless people result in more impactful and sustainable outcomes and how the GCR process is opening such opportunities.

The first panel focused on progress and impact, showcasing experiences from governments, regional bodies, and refugee-led organizations on how meaningful participation strengthens trust, accountability, and policy effectiveness.

The second panel examined remaining gaps and the way forward, with panelists from foundations, cities and local authorities, and refugee-led networks and organizations, identifying the need for predictable, long-term resources for refugee- and stateless-led organizations, stronger enabling legal environments, and more deliberate efforts to ensure gender-responsive and disability-inclusive participation.

The event also featured statements of support from a government representative, a refugee advisor to a government, an IDP-led network, a workers' rights organization, and an organization representing refugees with disabilities, reinforcing broad-based commitment to advancing meaningful refugee participation.

The discussion concluded with a closing keynote by the Government of Switzerland during which the speakers emphasized that while progress on meaningful participation is evident, it must now be further institutionalized, adequately financed, and protected from tokenism. Meaningful refugee participation must become a systemic practice, with refugees recognized as partners in decision-making, policy development, implementation and accountability processes.

## Key outcomes & stocktaking

### 1. Expansion of representation in decision-making spaces

Since the GRF 2023, a growing number of States and regional bodies have taken steps to formalize refugee participation. Examples shared during the side event included institutionalized dialogue platforms in Mexico, the IGAD Refugee Engagement Forum (REF) enabling a structured space for refugees to contribute directly to regional policy processes, and local governance models such as Koboko Municipality in Uganda, where refugees are formally represented in municipal governance structures. These initiatives contribute to the GCR's aim of embedding refugee participation within governance and decision-making systems rather than relying on ad hoc engagement.



Anila Noor from New Women Connectors moderates the first panel of the side event on meaningful refugee participation at the GRF Progress Review 2025 © UNHCR/Pierre Albouy

### 2. Growth of networks and coalitions of forcibly displaced and stateless people

Regional and global networks led by forcibly displaced and stateless people are playing an increasingly influential role in shaping policy and advocacy. Regional RLO networks such as the *Grupo Articulador de las Organizaciones lideradas por personas Refugiadas y desplazadas en América Latina y el Caribe* ([GARLOS](#)) in Latin America, the Africa Women Refugee-led Network ([AWRNET](#)) in Africa, as well as global networks such as the Global Network of Refugees with Disabilities ([GNRD](#)), are increasingly contributing to global and regional policy processes.

### 3. Strengthening partnerships and financing

Participants highlighted encouraging examples of donors and philanthropic actors moving toward longer-term and more equitable partnerships with refugee-led organizations.

Examples included direct multi-year funding arrangements, institutional capacity support, and the integration of refugee leadership throughout programme design, implementation and evaluation processes. These approaches were recognized as critical for strengthening sustainability, accountability and local ownership.

#### 4. Strengthening trust, accountability and policy effectiveness

Participants highlighted growing evidence that meaningful participation contributes to more effective, accountable and sustainable responses. Examples shared during the discussion demonstrated that refugee participation can strengthen trust between communities and institutions, improve policy relevance, support social cohesion, and enhance accountability by ensuring that programmes and policies reflect lived realities.

#### 5. Advancing participation as a right

Efforts are emerging to further articulate participation as a right. The development of the [\*Independent Declaration on the Right of Persons with Experience of Forced Displacement or Statelessness to Participate in Decisions that Affect Them\*](#) reflects broader efforts to establish participation as a structural standard rather than a voluntary practice.

#### 6. Persistent gaps and challenges

Despite strong normative recognition of meaningful refugee participation, participants highlighted that institutional change has not kept pace with the ambition. Progress remains uneven and highly context-dependent, often reliant on political will, individual champions, and short-term funding. Without systemic reforms, predictable financing, and enforceable frameworks, participation risks remaining episodic rather than transformative.

Key challenges include:

- **Limited and uneven institutionalization:** Participation mechanisms often remain ad hoc rather than embedded in legal and policy frameworks. Institutionalization does take place but not evenly and at all levels.
- **Unpredictable funding:** Short-term and intermediary-driven funding constrains the sustainability of organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people.
- **Access to rights and legal certainty:** Refugee participation is difficult to sustain where refugees face legal uncertainty, restrictions on civic space, barriers to employment, education and healthcare, or limited opportunities to establish and operate organizations.
- **Gender inequality:** Forcibly displaced and stateless women remain underrepresented in decision-making due to harmful gender norms, limited access to power holders, and chronic underfunding of women-led organizations.
- **Restricted civic space:** Legal and administrative barriers limit the ability of organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people to operate effectively.
- **Risk of deprioritization:** In resource-constrained contexts, meaningful participation is often treated as optional rather than integral to effective responses.

## Key recommendations

Participants called for accelerated and coordinated action to embed meaningful participation across systems and processes:

- **Institutionalize meaningful participation** across governance structures and programme cycles at global, regional, and local levels.
- **Provide multi-year, flexible funding** directly to organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people to strengthen leadership and sustainability.
- **Ensure participation throughout the full policy and programme cycle**, including needs assessments, planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation and learning.
- **Embed co-design and co-implementation** in pledges and broader refugee responses.
- **Protect meaningful refugee participation from being sidelined** by humanitarian funding pressures.
- **Prioritize inclusion**, with targeted investments to ensure gender equality and disability inclusion.
- **Establish standards and safeguards** to prevent tokenistic engagement and work towards meaningful influence.
- **Invest in data on the impact of participation on outcomes.**



Xadeni Méndez Márquez representing the Government of Mexico at the side event on meaningful refugee participation at the GRF Progress Review 2025 © UNHCR/Pierre Albouy

## Speakers

### Opening keynote

- **Ms. Ruvendrini Menikdiwela** – Assistant High Commissioner for Protection, UNHCR

### Panel 1 – Progress and Impact

#### Governments

- **Ms. Xadeni Méndez Márquez** – Coordinadora General, COMAR, Government of Mexico
- **Mr. Olaf Henrickson-Bell** – Director, Migration, FCDO

#### Regional organizations

- **Ms. Gisela Esperanza Serrano Barco** – Vice President, Fundación Mahuampi Venezuela; Member of GARLOS
- **Ambassador Moussa Ali Meigague** – Director of Health and Social Development, IGAD

### **Refugee-led organizations**

- Ms. Anila Noor – Managing Director, New Women Connectors
- Dr. Murtaza Sarem – Capacity Development Officer and Head of Migration Research Committee, Afghanistan Hazaras Culture and Solidarity Association (AHCSA)

### **Panel 2 – Remaining Gaps and the Way Forward**

#### **Foundations**

- Ms. Dina Randrianasolo – Director, Strategic Partnerships & Innovation, Mastercard Foundation

#### **Cities and local authorities**

- Dr. Sanya Kirk Wilson – Mayor of Koboko Municipality, Uganda

#### **Refugee-led networks and organizations**

- Mr. Muranga Kandanda – Managing Director, Youth Initiative for Development (YID)
- Ms. Liliane Mukidi – Director, Umoja Skills Development; Member, African Women's Refugee-Led Network (AWRNET)
- Ms. Najeeba Wazefadost – Executive Director, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR); Member, Working Group on the Independent Declaration on the Right to Participate

#### **Statements of Support**

- Mr. Victor Corso Semple – Director of Migrations, Ministry of Justice, Government of Brazil
- Mr. Joseph Youhana – Refugee Advisor to the Australian Government delegation
- Ms. Valeriia Vershynina – Executive Director, Stabilization Support Services, Ukraine
- Mr. Paulo Méndez Alvarado – Central Autónoma de Trabajadores del Perú (CAT Perú), ILO delegation
- Mr. Julius Mvenyi Ntobuah – Chair, Global Network of Refugees with Disabilities (GNRD)

#### **Closing interventions**

- Ambassador Patrizia Danzi – Director-General, Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC)
- Mr. Emirhan Darcan – Refugee Representative, Swiss Government delegation; Board Member, AsyLex

The side event was organized by the co-leads of the [Multi-Stakeholder Pledge on Meaningful Refugee Participation](#) (Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), New Women Connectors (NWC), Youth Initiative for Development, Oxfam International, and Independent Diplomat), with support from UNHCR.