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**REFLECTIONS ON MEANINGFUL REFUGEE
PARTICIPATION AT THE GLOBAL REFUGEE
FORUM PROGRESS REVIEW 2025**

FOLLOW UP TO OUR 2023 “WE WERE SEEN, BUT
WERE WE HEARD” ASSESSMENT REPORT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2025 Global Refugee Forum Progress Review (GRF PR) marked an important midpoint in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) cycle, providing an opportunity to assess progress toward the commitments made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and to consider how implementation can be strengthened ahead of the next GRF in 2027. For R-SEAT, the Progress Review also provided an important opportunity to assess the evolution of meaningful refugee participation within the GCR cycle.

Since the adoption of the GCR in 2018, meaningful refugee participation has become increasingly recognized as an emerging norm for more effective, responsive, and accountable refugee policy. This progress was visible at the 2025 GRF PR. Of the 1,486 participants, 260 had lived experience of forced displacement, representing approximately 17.5% of total attendance—more than double the 8% recorded at the GRF in 2023. Refugees and refugee-led organizations (RLOs) participated in a range of roles, including as advisors, speakers, moderators, trainers, and partners. Dedicated advisory mechanisms have also continued to emerge at national, regional, and global levels.

Yet increased presence and access in global convenings does not necessarily equate to meaningful influence.

This report finds that refugee participation at the GRF PR remains uneven and is not yet consistently embedded within decision-making processes, institutional structures, or resource allocations. While refugees and RLOs are increasingly present and active within global refugee spaces, significant barriers continue to limit their ability to shape agendas, access decision-makers, influence resource allocation, and contribute to implementation and accountability. Participation therefore risks remaining event-based or consultative rather than becoming a sustained mechanism for shared decision-making.

Participants highlighted a range of structural barriers. Financial constraints remain particularly significant for RLOs, many of which face limited and unstable funding and difficulties accessing traditional funding mechanisms. Visa restrictions and administrative barriers continued to prevent some refugee leaders and RLO representatives from attending global events.

Language and accessibility barriers also limited participation beyond formal sessions, restricting access to informal conversations and networking spaces where relationships, partnerships, and influence are often developed. Participants further described informational and institutional barriers, including limited familiarity with Geneva-based processes and difficulties accessing governments, donors, foundations, and other decision-makers.

These barriers point to a broader challenge: meaningful refugee participation cannot be assessed solely by counting how many refugees attend international meetings or how many are included in formal participation formats. The more important question is whether participation enables refugees and RLOs to exercise influence over the decisions that affect them.

The report therefore argues that while the international refugee system is making measurable progress in expanding participation opportunities, these gains must now be deepened by strengthening refugees' sustained influence over policy, implementation, and decision-making.

Refugees and RLOs should be meaningfully involved not only at global events, but throughout the full pledge cycle—from agenda-setting and pledge development through implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. Participation must also be supported by the resources and conditions required to make it meaningful, including funding, preparation and capacity-building, language access, visa facilitation, accessibility measures, and transparent information about decision-making processes.

This shift requires action across the refugee response ecosystem. UNHCR should strengthen opportunities for refugees and RLOs to co-lead consultations, pledges, working groups,

and policy discussions, while establishing clearer indicators and accountability measures for progress from participation to influence and shared leadership.

States also have a critical role to play. National refugee advisory mechanisms can create sustained channels through which refugee expertise informs government policy and connects national engagement to international processes. More broadly, Member States and other stakeholders should recognize meaningful refugee participation as a core component of effective and accountable refugee responses, invest in long-term partnerships with RLOs, while addressing barriers that continue to restrict participation.

INGOs and NGOs, should leverage their networks, platforms, and resources to create equitable partnerships, strengthen localization efforts, and improve the effectiveness and relevance of humanitarian and development responses.

At the global level, NGOs and INGOs should also ensure to include refugee experts in their delegations to global convenings and ensure invitations are shared well in advance to enable meaningful in-person participation, with six months' notice recommended where possible.

The Progress Review also demonstrates the importance of connecting global participation to national and regional structures. Global engagement has limited impact when it is disconnected from the policy environments in which refugees experience protection, inclusion, and displacement. Sustained participation therefore requires stronger linkages between global refugee governance and country-level decision-making, implementation, monitoring, and accountability.

Ultimately, meaningful refugee participation should be understood not as an end in itself, but as a tool for strengthening the effectiveness, sustainability, and responsiveness of policies by bringing refugee lived experience and expertise into decision-making.

The fulfillment of commitments under the GCR will be judged not only by what is pledged, but by who is empowered to shape, implement, and sustain those commitments.

INTRODUCTION



From 15-17 December 2025, the [Global Refugee Forum Progress Review \(GRF PR\)](#) was co-hosted in Geneva by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the Government of Switzerland, and co-convened by Colombia, France, Japan, Jordan, and Uganda. Positioned at the midpoint between the [Global Refugee Forum \(GRF\) 2023](#) and the forthcoming GRF in 2027, the Progress Review is a key moment within the [Global Compact on Refugees \(GCR\)](#) cycle to take stock of progress towards the goals of the GCR with specific attention to pledges, identifying gaps, and assessing implementation.

In this report, R-SEAT ([Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table](#)) approaches the GRF PR not as a standalone event, but as a **diagnostic moment within a broader refugee system**. It asks a central question: *what does the Progress Review reveal about the evolution —and the limits—of meaningful refugee participation within the GCR cycle?*

Since the adoption of the GCR in 2018, meaningful refugee participation has increasingly been recognized as an [emerging norm](#) for more effective, responsive, and accountable refugee policy. This recognition has translated into visible progress across

successive global events, including increased presence and participation of individuals with lived experience of forced displacement in international fora, expanded roles for **refugee-led organizations (RLOs)**, and the development of dedicated mechanisms such as national, regional, and international refugee advisory bodies.

At the same time, this report finds that the development of meaningful refugee participation remains uneven. While refugee participation is becoming more **visible, normalized, and expected**, it is not yet consistently **embedded within decision-making processes, institutional structures, or resource allocations**. The GRF PR illustrates this tension clearly: participation has expanded in scope and format, yet questions remain regarding the extent to which this participation translates into sustained influence over policy design, agenda-setting, and implementation. Ultimately, for R-SEAT, the objective is not participation as an end in itself, but rather participation that contributes to more effective and sustainable policies, grounded in the lived realities of refugees and host communities.

R-SEAT's institutional engagement at the Progress Review spanned multiple roles, including co-facilitating training for participants with lived experience in advance of the event; as a member of the [Advisory Board to the UNHCR Task Team on Engagement with Organizations led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons](#); providing financial and logistical support to

five RLOs to enable their participation in Geneva; and participating as speakers and moderators across several official side and linked events. This report combines R-SEAT's practical implementation experience with firsthand insight into how meaningful refugee participation is structured, experienced, and operationalized across the GRF cycle.

This report builds on R-SEAT's 2023 analysis of the GRF, ["We were seen, but were we heard?"](#) and our initial reflection on the GRF PR ["Beyond Presence who Shapes Decisions in Global Refugee Governance"](#), by extending the inquiry towards a more systemic examination of power, access, and implementation. It argues that while the international refugee system is making measurable progress in expanding participation opportunities, these gains must now be deepened by strengthening refugees' sustained influence over policy, implementation, and decision-making. This requires building on growing participation in global forums and connecting it more systematically to sustained and institutionalized engagement at national and regional levels.

R-SEAT defines meaningful refugee participation as occurring ["...when refugees from diverse backgrounds have sustained influence in all fora where decisions, policies, and responses that impact their lives are being designed, implemented, and measured in a manner that is accessible, broad, informed, safe, free, and supported."](#) As in all of its work, R-SEAT uses the term "refugee" as a general, unifying descriptor that may not align

strictly with its legal definition under international law. Throughout this report, the term is used to refer to individuals who have experienced, or are currently experiencing forced displacement and statelessness.

As the GCR cycle moves toward its next global milestone in 2027, the findings of this report suggest that the central challenge is not only ensuring refugee participation in global processes, but securing the necessary political will, resources, structures, and champions for meaningful participation and for its sustainability. This includes moving toward a system that is prepared to systematically share power and decision-making authority, so that participation is adequately resourced and can translate into tangible outcomes.

It also requires a broader shift in how meaningful refugee participation is understood: not as an end in itself, but as a practical tool for improving the effectiveness, sustainability, and grounding of policies in lived realities. This means moving beyond a procedural framing of participation toward recognising refugees' lived experience and technical expertise as essential inputs that strengthen policy design and implementation.

METHODOLOGY



This report draws on R-SEAT’s institutional engagement across the GCR cycle, complemented by qualitative and internal data collected in the lead-up to, during, and following the GRF PR 2025. The analysis is informed by three primary sources, in addition to R-SEAT’s own participation before, during and after the event:

- **Semi-structured interviews with stakeholders with lived experience.**

From early 2026, R-SEAT conducted semi-structured interviews with stakeholders with lived experience of forced displacement who participated in the GRF PR in a range of capacities. Interviewees included individuals serving as advisors within state delegations (“refugee advisors”), representatives of RLO delegations, and members of advisory mechanisms, including the [Advisory Board to UNHCR](#). The sample of eighteen focused primarily on participants based in East Africa and Latin America, reflecting R-SEAT’s major areas of active engagement.

- **Structured feedback from supported participants**

R-SEAT provided financial and logistical support to five individuals participating in the GRF PR as part of RLO delegations. Feedback was collected through pre- and post-engagement forms, enabling a comparative assessment of participant expectations and experiences.

- **Internal reporting on the efficacy and relevance of training**

R-SEAT reviewed internal assessments of the training programme which was held in partnership with the International Institute for Humanitarian Law (IIHL or Sanremo Institute) and in collaboration with UNHCR. These reports, developed by IIHL and UNHCR respectively, draw on participant survey data collected following both the training programme and the GRF PR, providing insight into preparedness, accessibility, and perceived relevance.

While this methodology prioritizes depth of insight over statistical representation, the combination of these sources enables a grounded assessment of how meaningful refugee participation is experienced across different roles in global refugee meetings. Findings should be interpreted as indicative.

KEY FIGURES ON REFUGEE PARTICIPATION AT THE GRF PR 2025

According to UNHCR's Report, [Outcomes of the Global Refugee Forum Progress Review 2025](#):

- Of the **1486** participants that attended the GRF PR, **260** have **lived experience of forced displacement**, representing around 17.5% of total attendance.
 - This is greater than the [8% of total attendees](#) who held lived experience that attended the GRF 2023.
- **100% of the 27 side events** and spotlight sessions featured speakers with lived experience, including 46 speakers, an increase from the GRF 2023.
- Through pledging, **\$2.6 billion USD** had been disbursed up until the GRF PR.
- Financial contributions from **Switzerland and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland** enabled UNHCR to sponsor 127 forcibly displaced and stateless persons, representatives of the organizations they lead, and other local actor representatives to participate in the GRF Progress Review 2025.

- 7 State delegations included refugee advisors: Australia, Canada, Germany, Norway, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom.
- Currently, at the global level, 27 out of 47 multi-stakeholder pledges engage people with lived experiences or their organizations in their pledge architecture – some through formal advisory mechanisms, some through co-leadership of a pledge, and others through less formalized reference or advisory groups.

Notably, the Progress Review took place at a moment of significant transition for the global refugee system, shaped by growing displacement, funding shortfalls, geopolitical instability, and increasing pressure on humanitarian responses worldwide:

- [117.3 million people remain forcibly displaced around the world](#)
- [UNHCR closed 2025 with approximately 25% less funding than 2024](#)
- [Between 2024 and 2025, ~30% of all humanitarian funding has been eliminated](#)

REFUGEE PARTICIPATION IN THE GRF PROGRESS REVIEW

Across the development of the event, refugees were involved through several entry points that varied in structure. UNHCR's Meaningful Refugee Participation report on the Progress Review: [From Access to Influence? How forcibly displaced and stateless people participated in the GRF Progress Review 2025](#), can provide more detail on how refugees participated at each stage of the process. This initial section provides a brief overview to situate our following analysis.

Pre-event

- **Training**

The official Training for Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons attending the GRF PR, was provided by R-SEAT in partnership with the Sanremo Institute and in collaboration with UNHCR. The training ran for six weeks in advance of the GRF PR and was formed of six different language groups coordinated across time zones, including one Arabic language group, one Spanish language group, one French language

group, and three English language groups, welcoming 152 participants in total. Topics covered included principles which guide humanitarian responses, the functionality and the power of the global refugee system, meaningful refugee participation as an emerging norm, how to engage in Geneva advocacy spaces effectively, and a thematic session on the GRF PR and the pledging process. The asynchronous materials provided by UNHCR on Pledging and Modes of Engagement bolstered R-SEAT's existing knowledge base and ensured comprehensive understanding from both perspectives.

- **Consultation before the GRF PR by UNHCR**

In July of 2025, UNHCR in partnership with the Advisory Board of Organizations led by Forcibly Displaced and Stateless Persons hosted an online consultation process for forcibly displaced and stateless leaders involved in GCR processes. The two sessions were held in English, with translations available over Zoom and allowing for written interventions in other languages. For one of the sessions, live interpretation in Spanish was organized through the UNHCR Regional Bureau for the Americas. The consultation focused on three key areas: identifying priority themes for the official programme, exploring participation formats and modalities that can strengthen meaningful refugee participation, and generating recommendations to enhance the engagement of forcibly displaced and stateless persons throughout the event and its processes.

Drawing from a list of preliminary themes provided by UNHCR, a registration survey completed by 70 participants (59 affiliated with refugee-led organizations and 11 non-affiliated individuals) identified the pledge framework and matching process, support platforms, leveraging regional institutions, economic inclusion, and inclusion in national systems as the top priorities for consideration at the Progress Review.

- **Orientation session**

UNHCR and its Advisory Board designed and held an in person Orientation Day which sought to equip this same pool of leaders with practical guidance on engaging in the event. Interactive sessions were held by APNOR (the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees) and a consortium of US-based organizations (United States Refugee Advisory Board, Refugee Congress, Refugee Council USA).

Event

- **Formal sessions**, such as Strategic Dialogues and Speakers' Corner, all saw the inclusion of refugees as speakers, with 100% of all Side Events including at least one speaker with lived experience. Side events ranged in theme, but all largely retained the same format of panel discussion followed by planned interventions. Speakers' Corner sessions were solely allocated to speakers with lived experience of forced displacement and statelessness sharing their work and initiatives.

- **R-Space and other linked events**, offered additional sites for engagement around Geneva. R-Space is an independent, refugee-led initiative created to amplify refugee leadership and ensure refugee perspectives set the agenda in global displacement issues. Other linked events ranged in scope, with the official list of [linked events published by UNHCR](#) including 29 different events. Some linked events were also held digitally, increasing the ability of other actors outside of Geneva to join these conversations.
- **The Global Refugee Statement**, drafted in advance of the event by the Advisory Board to UNHCR and subsequently shared with global refugee networks for consultation, provided an important opportunity for refugees and refugee-led organizations to collectively articulate their priorities for the Progress Review. UNHCR, in collaboration with the Advisory Board, convened two sessions to gather guidance and priorities on the draft, which informed the final statement delivered during the opening plenary. The statement underscored shared priorities across refugee communities, including the diversity of displacement experiences, the importance of durable solutions, and the need for more meaningful and sustained refugee participation throughout the GCR process.

Post-event

- **UNHCR disseminated a post-event survey**, following the GRF PR to gather feedback from forcibly displaced and stateless participants regarding accessibility, inclusion, participation experiences, and recommendations for future engagement processes. The survey findings contributed to broader reflections on barriers to meaningful participation and areas for improvement across future GCR-related convenings.
- **UNHCR also facilitated regional debrief sessions**, throughout January and February 2026. A total of 166 participants attended these sessions and consistently highlighted a perceived gap between participation and actual influence within decision-making processes. These discussions were important in helping capture perspectives across the broader GCR cycle rather than limiting engagement to isolated global events. According to UNHCR, the reflections gathered through these sessions will help inform future efforts to address barriers to meaningful refugee participation.

From Presence to Policy Impact: Refugee Participation as a Tool for Strengthening Policy



The GRF PR reflects continued progress in expanding the access and presence of individuals with lived experience of forced displacement within global refugee policy spaces. [According to UNHCR](#), approximately 17.5% of participants at the GRF PR identified as having lived experience, representing a notable increase from the [~8% of attendees](#) at the GRF in 2023. In addition, all official sessions included at least one speaker with lived experience, and refugees were represented across a range of roles, including as members of state delegations, representatives of RLOs, individual refugee leaders, and contributors to advisory mechanisms.

Another notable shift during the Progress Review was how collaboration and solidarity amongst actors, particularly with RLOs, has moved closer to the center of the conversation. While often expressed indirectly, there was broad recognition across partners that in moments of crisis and contraction, RLOs are frequently among the first (and most severely) affected, while remaining the most relied upon to sustain community trust, continuity of response, and adapt solutions. This growing recognition is welcome, but it must translate into a sustainable approach: **equal partnership with RLOs should not intensify during moments of crisis, but be institutionalized as a consistent way of working in both stable and crisis contexts.**

These developments signal a broader shift within the GCR framework toward recognizing refugees as key stakeholders within international refugee responses. The diversification of roles, particularly the inclusion of refugee advisors as members of official state delegations, also reflects an emerging effort to integrate lived experience and expertise into formal decision-making structures.

Importantly, this recognition should also extend to how refugee participation is understood within policy processes **as a practical tool to strengthen the effectiveness, relevance, and sustainability of policy itself rather than a matter of inclusion or representation.**

Refugees' lived experience and technical expertise should be leveraged to improve policy design, ensure responses are grounded in operational realities, and enhance the quality of decision-making across the system.

However, the findings of this report suggest that this expansion in presence has not been matched by a corresponding shift in influence. While refugees are increasingly visible across formal and informal spaces at the GRF PR, their ability to shape outcomes, such as agenda-setting and the design of engagement modalities, remains limited. Some side events were co-organized and designed with RLOs, however this was not the norm.

This dynamic is evident across several dimensions of the event. Although refugees were consistently included as speakers in side events, these interventions were largely confined to pre-defined roles within structured formats, with limited opportunity to influence the direction or substance of discussions beyond individual speaking points. Similarly, while participation in state delegations represents a promising avenue for engagement, this practice remains dependent on the willingness of individual states, and limited to the particular event if the state has not established a refugee advisory mechanism to ensure sustainability and connection to the national level.

More broadly, participation at the GRF PR appears to be concentrated at the level of representation and consultation, rather than co-design and decision-making. Even where it can be argued that there was some level of co-design and co-decision-making, it remained ad hoc throughout all phases, with sessions/event organizers maintaining a monopoly over decision-making and follow-up. Refugees are present in the room and increasingly recognized as contributors, but are not yet systematically positioned to shape how the agenda is organized, how decisions are taken, or how priorities are set.

As a result, meaningful refugee participation risks being operationalized as inclusion without corresponding shifts in power. While progress in expanding access and representation should be acknowledged and sustained, the central challenge for the GCR moving toward 2027 is to build on this progress by enabling participation to generate sustained influence within institutional processes, decision-making, and implementation.

Side Events: Entry Points for Dialogue and Intersectional Approaches



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Another key aspect is to deepen the intersectional approach within the forum, ensuring the active and safe participation of historically excluded groups within the refugee population, such as LGBTIQ+ persons, women, youth, and persons with disabilities. This implies not only their presence, but their inclusion in leadership and decision-making roles.

The GRF PR featured a series of official side events addressing critical and timely contexts, including developments in Syria, the protracted displacement of the Rohingya population, and the humanitarian crisis in Sudan. These thematic priorities reflected an awareness of pressing geopolitical and operational realities within the global refugee response.

However, across many of these side events, the format of engagement limited the depth and quality of interaction among participants. Panels were typically structured around a sequence of short, pre-decided interventions delivered by multiple speakers, leaving limited space for sustained discussion, exchange, or collective reflection. While this format enabled broad representation and the inclusion of diverse perspectives, it often constrained the development of more substantive, interactive dialogue.

Opportunities for engagement between panelists and audiences—including participants with lived experience of forced displacement—were particularly restricted. Question-and-answer segments were either minimal or absent, and in some cases replaced by pre-selected or highly managed interventions. As a result, participants outside of formal speaking roles had limited avenues to contribute to discussions in real time, reducing the potential for reflexive exchange and critical engagement.

This dynamic reflects a broader tension in how participation is operationalized. When spaces are structured primarily for presentation rather than dialogue, participation risks becoming procedural and ticking box exercise rather than substantive. Refugees may be present within discussions, but they are not consistently able to influence their direction, challenge assumptions, or contribute to the co-creation of solutions.

The GRF PR also revealed continued gaps in intersectional inclusion, particularly regarding the visibility and participation of LGBTQI+ refugees and refugee-led groups. Despite growing recognition across the humanitarian sector that displacement experiences are shaped by intersecting forms of vulnerability and discrimination, LGBTQI+ perspectives remained limited both within the official agenda and across broader participation spaces. This reflects concerns already identified during the GRF 2023, where LGBTQI+ participants and organizations reported insufficient representation and limited opportunities to shape discussions affecting their communities.



The continued marginalization of LGBTQI+ leaders illustrates how political sensitivities within multilateral spaces can influence whose experiences are prioritized within global refugee discussions. While convening actors such as UNHCR must navigate complex political dynamics and maintain engagement across a diverse range of Member States, the limited visibility of LGBTQI+ displacement issues risks reinforcing existing patterns of exclusion.

Strengthening meaningful refugee participation therefore requires not only expanding overall opportunity, but also ensuring that participation frameworks more consistently reflect the diversity of refugee experiences and create space for groups that remain structurally underrepresented and marginalized.

Moving toward more meaningful participation of refugees will require a shift in how engagement spaces are designed, away from formats that prioritize curated interventions and limited dialogue to those that enable exchange, responsiveness, and shared deliberation. Without such adjustments, the expansion of participation risks remaining limited to visibility, rather than translating into deeper forms of influence.

Participation across the pledge cycle

The GCR is operationalized through a continuous cycle of pledging, implementation, monitoring, and review. Within this framework, the GRF and its Progress Review serve as key moments for mobilization, visibility, stocktaking, and renewed commitments. However, meaningful refugee participation within this cycle remains uneven, with engagement concentrated around high-level events rather than embedded across all stages of the process.



Our findings from the GRF PR indicate that participation is most visible in the lead-up to and during global convenings. Preparatory processes such as consultations, training programmes, and advisory engagements offer entry points for refugees and RLOs to engage with the system. These mechanisms play an important role in equipping participants to navigate complex policy spaces and in signaling institutional commitment to inclusion.

Beyond these moments, participation becomes less consistent. Opportunities for refugees to engage in the design, implementation, and follow-up of pledges remain limited and unevenly distributed. While some actors have involved RLOs as implementing partners or advisors, this practice is not yet systematized across the pledge framework, and progress on

pledge involvement lags in the implementation and follow-up phases. As a result, there is often a disconnect between participation at the global level and influence at national and local levels, where pledges are ultimately operationalized.

This disconnect is further compounded by limited accessibility and understanding surrounding the pledging process itself. Many participants identified this gap between refugee participation and the pledging architecture underpinning the GCR process. While the GRF PR was intended as a stocktaking moment for pledges and implementation, several interviewees described the pledging system as opaque, difficult to navigate, and insufficiently connected to national-level realities. Many respondents reported uncertainty regarding how pledges are developed, how to engage with them, and how progress is tracked over time.

While targeted training initiatives have helped to address this knowledge gap, they also highlight the extent to which participation currently depends on access to specific, and often limited, capacity-building opportunities, and informational access. One participant remarked that there was “not enough sharing of progress on pledges,” present at the GRF PR, while another observed that pledges often “feel like they are at a global level and do not translate to that country level.” Participants additionally raised concerns regarding limited transparency around how pledges are monitored, archived, implemented, and linked to funding allocations over time.

The result is a model of participation that is intensive but episodic. Refugees and RLOs are brought into the process at key moments of visibility like global events, but are not consistently engaged across the full lifecycle of commitments. This limits the potential for participation to shape outcomes in a sustained way, and reduces opportunities to align lived experience with implementation realities.

Strengthening meaningful refugee participation within the GCR will therefore require building on the progress achieved through global convenings by connecting this engagement to cycle-wide participation. This includes involving refugees and RLOs more systematically in the design of pledges, supporting their roles in implementation and monitoring, and establishing stronger links between global engagement and sustained national and regional processes. Without these connections, the pledge system risks maintaining a gap between global commitments and their delivery, with the participation achieved at major convenings not fully carried through into the processes that determine implementation and impact.

Meaningful refugee participation needs to operate along two parallel and mutually reinforcing tracks. It is essential that refugees are present in global forums and occupy speaking roles that help shape high-level narratives, decisions and priorities. At the same time, participation must extend beyond these moments to encompass follow-up at the national level — including pledge implementation, policy dialogue, monitoring, and accountability

across a full pledging cycle of the GCR. Without this sustained continuity, representation at global events risks remaining disconnected from concrete influence in practice.

Systemic Participation barriers

While participation at the GRF PR was expanded in terms of visibility and representation, access to meaningful engagement remained challenging. Refugees were physically present in rooms but most remained structurally peripheral. A range of structural barriers including **linguistic, financial, institutional**, and access to **travel documents**, continued to shape who could participate effectively, how engagement was experienced, and whose perspectives were present.

Language remains a significant determinant of access within global humanitarian spaces. The dominance of English as the language of humanitarianism makes it difficult to engage for leaders that do not speak English proficiently or technically. While interpretation was available in the plenary sessions and official side events, most linked events and informal networking spaces operated primarily in English. Participants who were not fluent in English reported difficulties engaging fully in discussions, building relationships, and accessing information shared outside formal sessions. This challenge is particularly relevant in multilingual regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean, where participation often requires engagement across Spanish, Portuguese, English, French, and Haitian Creole-speaking

contexts. Language accessibility should therefore be understood not only as a logistical consideration, but as a core condition for equitable participation and influence.

One participant shared that they accompanied a Spanish-speaking colleague throughout much of the event because, although interpretation services were available in formal sessions and at several R-Space events, they did not provide comprehensive access to the broader discussions occurring throughout the week. As a result, the colleague was frequently excluded from informal conversations and networking opportunities taking place between sessions—spaces widely identified by participants as critical for establishing partnerships, visibility, and future collaboration.

Informational asymmetries further reinforced this dynamic. Participants frequently described uncertainty around how to navigate Geneva-based processes, engage with pledging mechanisms, or connect with key stakeholders. In advance of the Progress Review, R-SEAT, in partnership with IIHL and in collaboration with UNHCR, facilitated preparatory training for participants with lived experience of displacement. Following the training, 71% of the 52 respondents reported feeling more prepared to engage in the GRF PR, while 29% indicated that they still did not feel fully prepared. While the findings demonstrate the value of preparatory initiatives, they also underscore the complexity of navigating global humanitarian and policy spaces, particularly for first-time participants.

Despite increased representation of refugees and refugee-led organizations at global events, many participants continued to experience global refugee spaces as institutionally hierarchical and difficult to navigate. **Interviewees repeatedly emphasized the challenges associated with accessing certain decision-makers, arranging bilateral meetings, and establishing relationships with decision-makers such as donors, foundations, and state representatives.**

One participant noted that “it is often difficult for us to arrange bilateral meetings with foundations and governments,” emphasizing the continued reliance on intermediaries to facilitate access to influential actors. Another participant serving within an advisory mechanism shared that they had requested introductions to government representatives through UNHCR counterparts during the event, but these connections did not materialize. These experiences suggest that even participants already embedded within formal engagement structures may still encounter barriers to accessing informal channels of influence and strategic advocacy.

Financial constraints remain among the most significant barriers facing refugee participation in global policy processes. Many RLOs continue to operate with limited and unstable funding, while simultaneously being excluded from traditional funding streams such as grants from philanthropic actors due to legal, administrative, and registration requirements that are often difficult to meet in displacement contexts.

These constraints affect not only attendance at international events, but also the ability of RLOs to sustain engagement across the broader GCR cycle. Participants also raised concerns regarding the disconnect between public commitments to refugee inclusion and the continued inaccessibility of many funding mechanisms. One individual involved in the development of a pledge noted that resources anticipated to support implementation had yet to materialize, while existing pooled funding mechanisms continued to inadequately reach RLOs despite repeated commitments to localization.

Visa access continued to pose a significant barrier to participation at the GRF PR, particularly for refugee leaders and representatives of RLOs based in the Global South. While UNHCR and the Government of Switzerland implemented efforts to facilitate visa processing, multiple invited participants reportedly still faced delays, administrative obstacles, or visa denials that ultimately prevented their attendance. Although the total number of affected participants remains unknown, these challenges continue to undermine efforts toward equitable participation by disproportionately impacting individuals already navigating precarious legal and mobility conditions. We continue to recommend enhancing complementary modes of engagement through leveraging digital technologies, creating regional events to de-emphasize the centrality of Geneva, as well as extending invitation and corresponding support timelines to at least six months in advance, enhancing visa application support, and continued collaboration and dialogue with the Government of Switzerland.

The Humanitarian Reset: A Test of Participation, Localization and Partnership



The GRF Progress Review took place against the backdrop of a rapidly evolving humanitarian landscape marked by significant funding reductions, donor fatigue, and growing political pressure on refugee responses. These developments have prompted what many actors describe as a "humanitarian reset"—a reassessment of priorities, partnerships, and approaches across the humanitarian sector. Yet rather than diminishing the importance of meaningful refugee participation this moment reinforces its urgency.

Discussions throughout the Progress Review frequently emphasized the need to do more with fewer resources. However, relatively limited attention was given to how refugees and RLOs could be systematically integrated into the governance, prioritization, and resource allocation decisions that will increasingly shape the future of refugee responses. While refugee participation was visible throughout the event, the humanitarian reset raises a more urgent question: **how can participation evolve into a mechanism through which refugees shape the difficult policy and funding choices facing the sector?**

This tension is particularly striking given the growing recognition of refugees as key partners in humanitarian action. Across the sector, there is increasing acknowledgment that responses are more effective, accountable, and sustainable when affected communities are involved in their design and implementation. [A recent ODI report](#) reflects this disproportionate allocation of funding between refugee-led organizations and international NGOs. While the figures illustrate the scale of the disparity, the deeper challenge is one of power: who decides, and how funding decisions are made. The result is a paradox in which refugees are increasingly invited into policy discussions, but remain unevenly included in the decisions that determine priorities, trade-offs, and the allocation of funding and resources.

If the humanitarian system is indeed entering a period of reform, meaningful refugee participation should be understood not as a

complementary objective, but as part of the solution. As difficult decisions are made regarding funding, prioritization, and implementation, systematically integrating refugees and RLOs into these processes can help ensure that limited resources are directed toward the most pressing needs and grounded in community realities. The humanitarian reset is therefore not only a funding challenge—it is a governance test.

LOOKING FORWARD



R-SEAT welcomes the plan set out by UNHCR for the GRF 2027 (Annex 1), particularly the shift towards a structured four-year cycle that positions the GRF and the GRF Progress Review as milestones within a continuous process of engagement, policy development, and implementation. This longer-term framing represents an important evolution in the architecture of the GRF, strengthening the link between global dialogue and regional and country-level implementation of the GCR.

Within this framework, we also welcome the emphasis on early and inclusive preparation as a foundation for meaningful participation across the full cycle. We further support the proposed balanced approach to participation, combining continuity through the engagement of actors with lived experience active in the GCR process with the inclusion of new participants. This dual approach appropriately can preserve institutional memory while broadening and renewing the range of perspectives within the GRF ecosystem. Its effectiveness will depend on consistent implementation in practice, ensuring that continuity does not become exclusionary and that new participation is supported through sustained pathways of engagement, capacity building of global processes and pledge

frameworks, regional balance, and enabling connections with key stakeholders at the different levels. The engagement of the incoming Advisory Board to UNHCR in the selection processes can be important in shaping transparent and credible participation mechanisms.

We also welcome the development of a four-year meaningful participation roadmap and strategy, including strengthened focus on regional and country-level implementation, as well as peer-to-peer exchanges and capacity building on the pledge framework. Overall, this approach provides a more coherent structure for GRF 2027 and beyond, with potential to strengthen both the strategic coherence and operational grounding of the process. Its impact will depend on the extent to which the four-year framework is consistently translated into practice, ensuring that participation is not only broadened but effectively integrated into decision-making and implementation throughout the full cycle.

A wide range of stakeholders including refugee-led and community-based organisations, states, local authorities and cities, international and national NGOs, civil society, and financial institutions each have distinct roles in ensuring that pledges and progress are not only made but sustained. A truly holistic, whole-of-society approach requires moving beyond coordination towards shared responsibility with clearer linkages between pledge design, implementation, and accountability. Within this ecosystem, the added value of the GRF lies in its ability to structure accountability across actors and ensure that affected

populations are systematically involved not only in participation formats, but in decision-making processes around pledging, shaping priorities, and assessing progress throughout the implementation cycle.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS



The Global Refugee Forum Progress Review 2025 demonstrated that meaningful refugee participation has become an increasingly established feature of the GCR process. Refugees and RLOs were engaged throughout the event—as advisors, speakers, moderators, trainers, and partners—and their contributions continue to shape global discussions on refugee protection. Yet the Progress Review also highlighted that participation remains uneven. While participation has expanded, opportunities to influence agenda-setting, connect with donors, influence decision-making, resource allocation, and implementation remain more limited. The next phase of the GCR should therefore build on the progress achieved through refugee participation at global events by embedding meaningful participation more consistently throughout the refugee response ecosystem and connecting global engagement with sustained national and regional structures.

This opportunity to consolidate and expand progress comes at a pivotal moment for UNHCR. The Progress Review marked the conclusion of Filippo Grandi's ten-year tenure as High Commissioner and the beginning of Barham Salih's leadership. As a former refugee who has reaffirmed the agency's commitment to meaningful refugee participation, High Commissioner Salih's appointment together with initiatives such as [UNHCR's 50 by 35](#) agenda presents an opportunity to further embed refugee leadership across policy, programming, and partnerships. Realizing this ambition will require participation to be viewed not as a consultative exercise, but as a core component of how refugee governance is designed and delivered.

As preparations begin for the Global Refugee Forum 2027, the challenge is no longer whether refugees should have a seat at the table. It is whether the international refugee system is prepared to share influence, resources, and responsibility with the people whose lives and expertise are central to its success. The fulfillment of the commitments made under the GCR will ultimately be judged not only by what is pledged, but by who is empowered to shape, implement, and sustain them.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are drawn from our GRF 2023 assessment report, and have been updated and further developed to reflect emerging priorities within the GRF 2027 cycle.

Recommendations for All Stakeholders

- Meaningful participation is a collective responsibility. Support the GCR community in building on meaningful refugee participation at global events by sustaining connection at national and regional levels.
- Support the GCR Community's transition from event-based participation to a cycle-wide approach across the four-year GRF cycle.
- Recognize meaningful refugee participation as a core component of effective, accountable, and sustainable refugee responses rather than an optional or event-based activity.
- Embed refugee leadership and RLO participation at all levels across the full pledge cycle, including agenda-setting, programme design, decision-making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and accountability processes.
- Ensure that participation mechanisms are accompanied by adequate financial, technical, linguistic, and administrative support to enable meaningful engagement.
- Commit to transparency by clearly communicating participation opportunities, decision-making processes, funding mechanisms, and demonstrating how refugee inputs are incorporated into outcomes.
- Invest in long-term partnerships with refugee-led organisations and community-based actors rather than relying on ad hoc engagement around major events or crises.
- Support the development and strengthening of national and regional refugee participation mechanisms that create sustained, two-way

linkages between global refugee governance spaces and country-level policy development, implementation, monitoring, and accountability.

- Prioritize accessibility and inclusion by addressing barriers related to language, disability, digital access, mobility, visa restrictions, and unequal access to funding.
- Ensure that participation frameworks reflect the diversity of refugee experiences, including women, youth, LGBTQI+ refugees, persons with disabilities, older persons, and other groups that face compounded structural barriers to participation.

Recommendations for UNHCR

- Ensure that participation is assessed not only by the number of refugees involved, but by the extent to which refugee perspectives influence decisions, resource allocation, policy outcomes, and implementation priorities.
- Define concrete indicators and accountability measures for assessing progress from participation to influence and shared leadership across the GCR cycle.
- Increase opportunities for refugees and RLOs to co-lead consultations, pledges, working groups, and policy discussions at national, regional, and global levels.
- Close the knowledge gap and create a better understanding of the pledging framework for improved engagement across the pledge cycle.
- Ensure that continuity in participation does not become exclusionary by establishing sustained pathways for new engagement, including capacity-building on global processes and pledge frameworks, promoting regional balance, and facilitating structured connections with key stakeholders across local, national, regional, and global levels.

Recommendations for member states:

- Establish, engage, and sustain refugee advisory mechanisms at the national level to affect change both internationally and domestically. These mechanisms maximize meaningful refugee participation by creating a consistent, working relationship between a transparently selected group of refugee experts and a respective government entity. They also provide an entry point for better data collection and impact measurement. In the case that a mechanism already exists, ensuring its sustainability and continued enhancement is crucial. This form of meaningful refugee participation can institutionalize refugee engagement to advise the government on target areas and priorities.
 - Engage the mechanism in all the phases of the pledging process. Refugee advisory mechanisms are equipped to participate in each phase of the pledging process, from defining thematic priority areas to language, commitments, mobilization, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. Post-global convenings of the GCR process these mechanisms should be involved in defining appropriate follow-up processes. This includes contributing to pledge implementation plans, monitoring frameworks, stock-taking discussions, and serving as implementing partners if applicable.
 - Define concrete indicators and accountability measures for assessing progress from participation to influence.
- Include a refugee advisor openly and transparently selected from said mechanisms as an official member of the state delegation. For convenings of the global refugee system, at least one member of the mechanism should be selected to accompany the state delegation based on their relevant expertise to the convening at hand. This advisor can be used to source insights in real-time and connect the domestic work of the mechanism to the international sphere.

- Engage RLOs, refugee advisory mechanisms, and refugee leaders as strategic and key actors in in-country and regional pre- and post-GRF planning meetings, as well as throughout the implementation of pledges. Where possible, delegate and share roles and resources to RLOs to support the implementation of national policy frameworks and plans as part of meaningful refugee participation.

Recommendations for RLOs and refugee experts

- Participate in training and prepare in advance of the event. This should include developing an advocacy strategy, clearly defining goals, and a stakeholder engagement plan. Navigating the context of the global refugee regime and relevant protocol can be difficult. Taking advantage of the training opportunities available to refugee advocates well in advance of the event can equip advocates with the necessary tools and skills to complement their thematic expertise and effectively engage at the meeting.
- Seek mentors, allies, or other refugee leaders who have previously attended global refugee convenings. Not only are these connections valuable in providing context during the specific meeting, but trusted partners can also advise on speaking points and potential issues. Connecting with refugee leaders who expect to be in attendance can help make the event less stressful.
- Be prepared to advocate for yourself. As preparations for global meetings can be demanding for every actor, some important items may be missed and will require RLOs and refugee leaders to consistently follow up to ensure they are completed appropriately. This can include regularly following up with UNHCR to issue documents for visas in a timely manner, understanding the specificities of funding opportunities available to RLOs and refugee leaders, clearly outlining potential barriers to travel (such as protection concerns regarding certain transit countries), and requesting

further information for sessions (such as other panelists and objectives) well in advance of the event.

For NGOs and INGOs:

- Invite refugee delegates well in advance of the event to ensure their in-person participation is feasible. We recommend six months of advance time.
- Identify barriers to equitable partnerships with refugee-led organizations and use skills, platforms, and networks to find solutions to address them. NGOs and INGOs with existing working relationships with refugee leaders and refugee-led organizations should work to identify barriers that keep refugee-led organizations from accessing resources, high-level decision-makers, and decision-making power. This process of assessment should be done in partnership with experts who have lived experience of forced displacement to identify potential shortcomings. Subsequent plans to address these barriers should also be done in true partnership.
- Strengthen collaboration and build genuine partnership with refugee-led organizations, and create opportunities to elevate perspectives of refugee leaders, utilize their expertise and bolster their skills as needed. Many NGOs and INGOs are in a position to share resources, engage meaningful refugee participation in decision making processes, and collaborate with RLOs in humanitarian and development responses. NGOs and INGOs should work to identify new ways to partner with RLOs, and strengthen existing collaborations. RLOs are essential actors in these responses, offering unique insights, responses, and capabilities. Despite this, RLOs face significant challenges in securing funding and operational support and are often marginalized from the conversations regarding localization.
- Actively engage in the practices of meaningful refugee participation at international convenings, including GRF and GCR initiatives. Engage refugees in all phases of pledge development and related processes.

This includes implementation, follow-up, meaningfully engaging refugee experts in official delegations, sharing speaking opportunities in plenary statements and at side events, and providing access through documentation or sponsorship for partner RLOs into high-level spaces like the GRF.

For Donors

- Continue to advance meaningful refugee participation and localization as an effective tool for the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of projects and programmes.
- Include clear requirements and incentives within funding agreements for NGOs and INGOs to partner with RLOs, ensuring the meaningful involvement of RLOs in project design through implementation where appropriate.
- Work with RLOs to co-design localization priorities, targets, and accountability measures, while building trust and regular dialogue between donors and RLOs to improve access to funding opportunities.
- Continue to provide multi-year, flexible, predictable, and quality funding to RLOs, while encouraging and influencing other donors to expand direct support to RLOs.
- Consider creating a co-financing mechanism in solidarity with refugee leaders and RLOs participating in global convenings.
- Champion reforms to funding systems and due diligence requirements that unintentionally exclude RLOs from accessing funding, and promote approaches that are proportionate to the position of RLOs.
- Support efforts to exceed the Grand Bargain target of directing at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national actors. Encourage NGOs and INGOs to progressively increase the proportion of funding

reaching RLOs, particularly where current allocations remain minimal. Support capacity strengthening initiatives that respond to priorities identified by RLOs themselves.

Annex 1

UNHCR PROPOSED ACTIONS AND COMMITMENTS TOWARDS THE GRF 2027

Participation and Planning

- Begin planning for GRF 2027 immediately.
- Ensure early and inclusive preparation for the GRF process.
- Identify and support a new cohort of participants with lived experience.
- Seek a balance between continuity and renewal in participation: Maintain institutional memory through continued engagement of current leaders and organizations involved in the GCR process, while working with 2025 participants and the incoming Advisory Board on participant selection and engagement.

Long-Term Participation Framework

- Shift towards a four-year approach to meaningful participation.
- Position the GRF and GRF Progress Reviews as milestones within a broader policy and implementation cycle.
- Develop a four-year strategy for participation leading up to GRF 2027.

Support and Capacity Strengthening

- Provide support to both existing & new participants throughout the 4-year cycle
- Increase focus on regional and country-level implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees.
- Expand learning opportunities for RLOs.
- Facilitate peer-to-peer exchanges on pledging and implementation.

Roadmap Development

- Work with current participants and other interested stakeholders to develop:
 - A meaningful participation roadmap.
 - A four-year participation strategy for GRF 2027.

Barriers to Participation

- Continue addressing barriers such as:
 - Language barriers.
 - Digital divides.
 - Visa restrictions.
 - Unequal access to funding.

Sustaining Participation and Leadership

- Advocate for predictable, long-term investment in participation.
- Encourage donors & partners to continue supporting meaningful participation efforts.
- Consolidate gains made through the Progress Review process.
- Move beyond participation towards greater influence and shared leadership for people with lived experience and refugee-led organisations.
- Offer support and guidance to help reduce the disconnect between the GRF and other global processes and their translation to the regional, national, and local levels, and vice versa, throughout the GCR cycle.

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R-SEAT advances meaningful meaningful refugee participation through strategic partnerships, capacity strengthening, and the co-design of refugee advisory mechanisms to inform and enhance refugee policy and responses. For questions or to learn more about our work, please reach out to us at info@refugeesseat.org.

