

# Five Organisational Pathways for Enabling Meaningful Refugee Participation: A Step-by-Step Implementation Guide

**COHERE**

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Commissioned by Cohere

# Acknowledgements

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Cohere acknowledges that it is on its own equity learning journey, and believes in the value of collective learning. With this in mind, it hosted the Interactive Workshop Series “Building Organisational Pathways Towards Meaningful Participation and Refugee Leadership” and commissioned this report. For this work Cohere takes on the role of a host rather than positioning itself as a model organisation, and has sought to learn from the experts consulted for this initiative alongside peer institutions.

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# Terminology

The following definitions establish the authors' understanding and use of key terms, groups and concepts used throughout this report.

## Allyship

Allyship in the context of refugee response refers to leveraging personal advantages, such as social status or connections, to promote inclusivity and equity. This includes actively redistributing power and resources and coaching peers to do the same. Allyship involves stepping back from positions of privilege and facilitating access for people of forced displacement to positions of influence and decision-making. The ultimate goal is to hold organisations and systems more accountable to the needs and priorities of people affected by forced displacement.

## Decolonisation

Refers to the process of challenging and dismantling colonial structures, power dynamics, and ideologies that influence and shape humanitarian practices and policies. It involves recognising and addressing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonisation on refugee communities, including issues such as displacement, marginalisation, and cultural erasure. Decolonisation in refugee response seeks to centre the voices, agency, and self-determination of people of forced displacement and affected communities, while also promoting equity, justice, and solidarity in humanitarian action. This may include efforts to decolonise knowledge production, decision-making processes, resource allocation, and partnerships within the humanitarian sector.

## Equity Learning Journeys

Equity Learning Journeys (ELJ) are strategic, integrated learning programs that enable individuals and institutions to establish and enshrine equitable mindsets and build strategies and practices that align with those mindsets.

## Equitable Partnerships

This paper uses the definition provided by Asylum Access: Partnerships where “systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion.”<sup>1</sup>

## Experts

Refer to the contributors to Cohere's workshop series, who are recognised for having operationalised Meaningful Refugee Participation strategies within and beyond their institutions.

## Lived Experience<sup>2</sup>

Refers to the distinctive knowledge, perspectives, and insights acquired through personal encounters, especially in relation to specific social or cultural contexts, challenges, or circumstances. It underscores the firsthand understanding gained by individuals from their own direct experiences. This paper recognises lived experiences in an intersectional manner, recognising the diverse array of experiences among people of forced displacement and allies. Many of these experiences are essential in the pursuit of more equitable approaches.

## Localisation

The process of shifting power, resources, decision-making authority, and responsibility to local actors, including Refugee-led Organisations (RLOs), host communities, and local civil society organisations. It involves recognising and valuing the expertise, knowledge, and capacities of these local actors in humanitarian action, rather than primarily relying on external or international actors. Localisation aims to enhance the effectiveness, sustainability, and relevance of humanitarian assistance by ensuring that it is driven by the needs, priorities, and voices of

1 Asylum Access (2024) [Position Paper on Building Equitable Partnerships](https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-EP-Position-Paper-V2-2.pdf) p. 9. <https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-EP-Position-Paper-V2-2.pdf>.

2 For the origins of the theory of "lived experience" see David Macey, 'Fanon, phenomenology, race', *Radical Philosophy* 095, May/Jun 1999 p. 8-14. Retrieved from <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/fanon-phenomenology-race>.

affected communities.

## International organisations

Institutions headquartered or based in one country that aim to support people of forced displacement residing in other countries. This includes both International Non-Governmental Organisations, donors and United Nations (UN) bodies who may fund (including as intermediaries) or implement programs, or both.

## Meaningful Refugee Participation

This paper uses the definition provided by the Global Refugee-led Network:<sup>3</sup> “When refugees — regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics — are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies), in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially.”

## People of forced displacement

Refers to individuals who have been compelled to flee their home countries due to various factors such as conflict, persecution, violence, human rights abuses, or environmental disasters. This term emphasises the involuntary nature of their departure from their country of origin. Importantly, it does not specify whether these individuals have legal status in their host countries, focusing instead on their shared experience of being forcibly displaced from their homes.<sup>4</sup>

## Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs)

Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) are defined as organisations led by people of forced displacement, regardless of their location, legal registration status, or operational structure. This paper does not impose strict criteria for determining what qualifies as an RLO based on staffing composition. The experts consulted for this series recognise that such rigid definitions tend to exclude rather than include the diverse range

of refugee-led organisations worldwide.

## Trauma-Informed Engagement

The process of creating environments and interactions that prioritise safety, trust, choice, collaboration and empowerment for those involved in response to the complex and often traumatic experiences of individuals. In the context of refugee response, trauma-informed engagement requires the acknowledgement and impact of experiences such as violence, loss, persecution, and displacement on mental, emotional, and physical well-being. Trauma-informed engagement promotes resilience, recovery, and dignity for individuals and communities affected by forced displacement. Trauma-informed engagement is foundational to effective support of Meaningful Refugee Participation.

<sup>3</sup> GRN (2019). Meaningful Refugee Participation as Transformative Leadership: Guidelines for Concrete Action, p.7.

<sup>4</sup> This paper has chosen to use the term “people of forced displacement” over ‘refugee’ in order to avoid distinctions based on legal status, and to focus on the humanity of the people forced to flee their home countries.

# Acronyms

<b>APNOR</b>	Asia Pacific Network of Refugees
<b>APRRN</b>	Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
<b>CWS</b>	Church World Service
<b>DEIB</b>	Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging
<b>ELJ</b>	Equity Learning Journeys
<b>GIRWL</b>	Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders
<b>GRN</b>	Global Refugee-led Network
<b>INGO</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>IRAP</b>	International Refugee Assistance Project
<b>IRC</b>	International Rescue Committee
<b>IWS</b>	Cohere's Interactive Workshop Series
<b>LGBTQ</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer
<b>MRP</b>	Meaningful Refugee Participation
<b>NGO</b>	Non-Governmental Organisation
<b>ODI</b>	Overseas Development Institute
<b>RAIC Indonesia</b>	Refugee & Asylum Seeker Information Center Indonesia
<b>RRLI</b>	Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative
<b>SPF</b>	Safe Passage Fund
<b>StARS</b>	St. Andrew's Refugee Services
<b>TGEU</b>	Transgender Europe
<b>UNHCR</b>	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>YVC</b>	Youth Voices Community

# Expert contributors

These experts contributed specific insights to each pathway and implementation guides, both in the Interactive Workshop Series and report. In the report, each expert's name is linked with the pathway they contributed to the most.



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Hane Alrustm is the Director of Programs at Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), the third largest RLO intermediary funder in the world. As a person of forced displacement, Hane believes that solutions come from within the displaced communities. Hane co-founded the SHiFT Social innovation hub in the north of Lebanon, and founded the SADA troupe for playback theatre, providing a safe platform for communities to express their narratives, memories, fears, and aspirations alive on stage. Hane is also a board member of the International Playback Theater Network and has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in theatre studies.



## Baqir Bayani

Mohammad Baqir Bayani, a refugee leader from Afghanistan, has been establishing and supporting RLOs in the Asia Pacific region and beyond for over seven years. He is an advocate, and passionate about refugee leadership, power and resource shift to RLOs and national NGOs, RLO capacity strengthening, grassroots-led movements, and system change. Currently working as the Partnerships Coordinator at Asylum Access Global, Baqir also supports the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) to train INGOs and governments on Meaningful Refugee Participation and helps Act for Peace with [research](#) on RLOs' role in the Asia Pacific Region.



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Chris Eades, a human rights lawyer, has worked with Amera, Saint Andrew's Refugee Services (StARS) in Cairo, Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) in Thailand and Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN). Currently, he serves as the Asia Representative at Church World Service (CWS). As an Executive Director of StARS, Chris oversaw its growth from a small organisation with Western managers to one with over 400 staff, 85% of which with forced displacement background and led majoritarily by refugee and women members. Similarly, as Secretary General, Chris supported APRRN's transition to a co-leadership model, inclusive of people with forced displacement backgrounds.



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Samara Hakim, JD is the President and Founder of CulturGrit, LLC. An international culture, equity, and inclusion thought leader, she's also a data strategist, keynote speaker, writer, coach, and facilitator. For over a decade, Samara has equipped leaders to work effectively with those who are different from them, by mitigating bias and integrating culture into organisational practices and metrics. Samara is also a member of several international committees and associations focused on equity and inclusion.



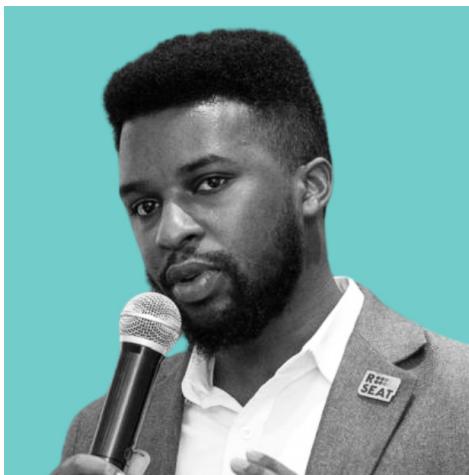
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Mahrukh ‘Maya’ Hasan is the founder of Fearless Project, an online education start-up advancing leadership, innovation, and inclusion in the global non-profit workplace. Maya is also the facilitator of [Shifting Power Accelerator](#), a cohort-based online course for non-profit and philanthropic professionals to gain the skills and confidence to foster equitable partnerships, empower local leaders, and shift power to the communities they serve. Maya is the child of Pakistani immigrants and Indian refugees.



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Mozghan Moarefizadeh is the Founder and Executive Director of the RLO Refugee and Asylum Seeker Information Center (RAIC) in Jakarta. As a trained paralegal with ten years of experience, she provides accessible resettlement pathways and holistic support to displaced communities. Mozghan fled Iran to Indonesia as a political refugee, before finding resettlement in Canada. Based between Indonesia and Canada, Mozghan is also a founding member of the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), co-host of the award winning 'The Wait' podcast, and is an advocate for refugee rights and leadership.



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As Director of Partnerships at Asylum Access, Deepa Nambiar, fosters building equitable partnerships transferring power to local civil society organisations through inclusive advocacy, campaigns and strengthening initiatives. With a focus on accountability and equity, her goal is to reshape the refugee response sector towards greater refugee human rights and proximate leadership. Deepa was the founding Director of Asylum Access Malaysia, has worked and consulted with the International Detention Coalition, UNHCR, and Statelessness Network Asia Pacific, and practised as a corporate litigator in Malaysia.



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Lublanc Prieto, a Venezuelan refugee, a feminist lawyer, champions the topic of self-representation of displaced Venezuelans in Colombia. As Executive Director of Refugiados Unidos, she provides legal and community-based services to displaced Venezuelans, and advocates for their human rights locally and internationally. Lublanc is a member of Germany's Action Network on Forced Displacement, a representative of Refugiados Unidos for the RRLI, co-founded the Global Refugee Litigation Strategy Council, and was the first Latin American to be nominated for the Elevate Prize.



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Barri Shorey leads the Refugees Initiative and Disaster Relief and Recovery program at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. Barri spent 16 years at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) overseeing economic programs supporting displaced populations through cash assistance, access to employment, entrepreneurship and financial services. At IRC, Barri worked in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, with a specific focus on curriculum development and private-sector partnerships. Barri received a Master's degree in international education from George Washington University and a bachelor's degree in philosophy and religion from Colgate University.



## Hafsa Tameesuddin

Hafsa Tameesuddin is a former Rohingya refugee from Myanmar, the co-secretary General at APRRN and one of the co-founders of Rohingya [Maiyafoinor] Women's Collaborative Network. Previously chairing APRRN, Hafsa is also a Steering Committee Member of Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), trustee of [Refugee Leadership Alliance](#), a member of the Global Refugee-led Network (GRN), and interim working group member of the Global Movement of Statelessness. Hafsa also served as an interim Advisory member of the UNHCR Advisory Group.



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Najeeba Wazefadost is a co-founding member of the GRN, Global Independent Refugee Women Leaders (GIRWL) and APNOR. Najeeba has contributed to developing regional and global refugee-led networks, enabling refugee leadership in proposing solutions for refugee policies. Najeeba has consulted with UNHCR, and founded an Afghan women business network in Asia Pacific. Najeeba fled Afghanistan and sought asylum in Australia by sea. She spent months in mandatory immigration detention before being recognised as a refugee. Najeeba holds a Bachelor of Medical Science.

# Executive Summary

The *Five Organisational Pathways for Enabling Meaningful Refugee Participation* report is structured as a practical guide for implementing internal changes that support the realisation of Meaningful Refugee Participation (MRP). It is a companion to Cohere's five-part Interactive Workshop Series (IWS) that took place between October 2023 and April 2024, which can be found on [Cohere's YouTube channel](#).

This initiative stems from Cohere's interest in highlighting essential internal changes that international organisations must undertake to support MRP effectively. Drawing on insights from sector leaders (the initiative's "experts"), this report offers recommendations for mindset shifts, behavioural changes, and structural adjustments crucial for realising MRP, leading to a more equitable and impactful sector.

This paper is a **practical tool** for established international organisations (such as NGOs and UN actors) headquartered or based in one country that support people of forced displacement who are residing in other countries. In some cases, the intended audience also includes international donors.

**While international organisations and donors are the primary audience, local civil society organisations and Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) may also find relevant insights.**

The report presents five, often intersecting pathways that when pursued holistically, can result in MRP:

## Organisational Pathway 1: Equity Learning Journeys.

Equity Learning Journeys (ELJ) are integrated learning processes for institutions that aim to foster equitable mindsets and build strategies essential to MRP. These journeys involve understanding and dismantling systemic barriers to refugee participation and leadership, thereby challenging power dynamics. ELJs vary in format and participants, often including broad stakeholder engagement and specialised training on topics like trauma-informed engagement, anti-racism, and cultural competency. In addition to training, organisations often undergo self-assessment and goal-setting, addressing areas such as institutional culture, decision-making structures, human resources (including talent acquisition and development practices), fundraising, and communications. Experts note that ELJs are often the starting point for successfully embarking on the other pathways in this document, as they foster the minds of mindsets crucial for fully embracing and enabling MRP.

"Our vision for a better world starts at the end of our comfort zone: Donors and NGOs, fund with no string attached, in a way that is at least as flexible as possible, keep pushing the boundaries and understand that the process will be uncomfortable."

Maya Hasan,  
Shifting Power Accelerator  
and Fearless Project, Founder.

The steps to embark on an ELJ include:

1. Assess your organisational mindset and practices, and build roadmaps for change.
2. Build internal support and champions for the initial implementation of the plan.
3. Sustain and refine the journey through continuous reflection and learning for key stakeholders.

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## Organisational Pathway 2: Recruiting, Hiring and Onboarding of People of Forced Displacement.

Recruiting, hiring and effectively onboarding people of forced displacement enables MRP not only because it leads to greater employment of people of forced displacement, but also because it often engenders more community-centred programming and community-centred recruitment strategies.

Steps include:

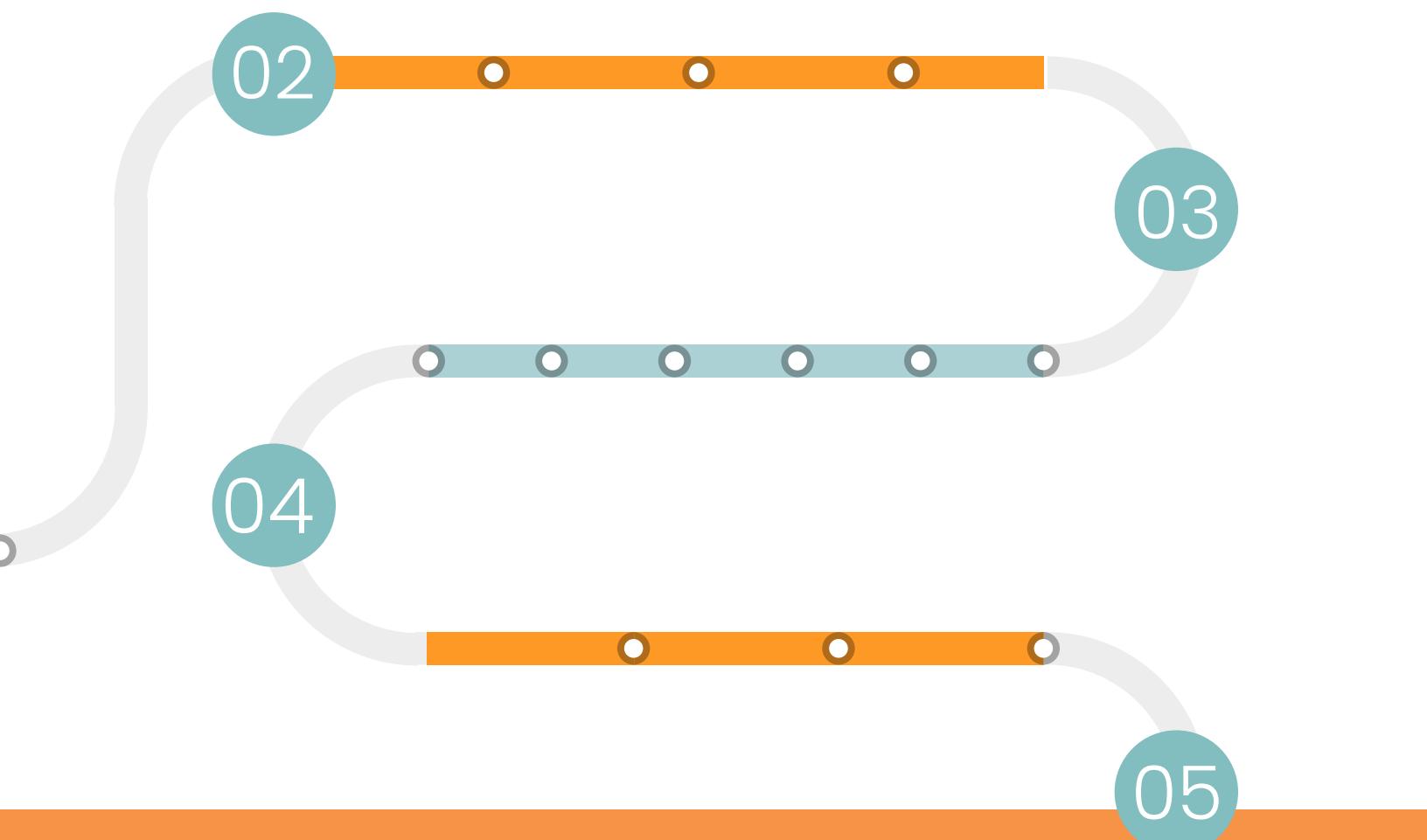
1. Start conversations about the “why” of representation to engage in the “how” successfully.
2. Work on compliance and legal risk management to hire people with varying lived experience.
3. Address biases in recruitment and advancement of talents.
4. Recruit relationally and in collaboration with affected communities.
5. Be intentional about workplace inclusion, onboarding, and mentorship.
6. Advocate for change and growth among peer organisations to expand job opportunities.

## Organisational Pathway 3: Equitable Partnerships with RLOs.

Equitable partnerships between international organisations and historically excluded actors like RLOs are pivotal to shifting power to forcibly displaced communities through their organisations, enabling MRP at scale. These partnerships yield numerous additional benefits, such as enhanced program effectiveness, sustainability for RLOs, the reduction of leader burnout, and the development of champions of MRP within privileged/advantaged institutions.

Steps include:

1. Establish a shared understanding of context, culture, and power dynamics.
2. Foster trust and transparency among partners and donors.
3. Co-design projects for mutual ownership and voice.
4. Maintain flexibility in working relationships with RLOs.
5. Strengthen mechanisms for mutual learning and accountability.



## Organisational Pathway 4: High-Quality and Equitable Funding for RLOs.

Access to high-quality and equitable funding is one of the strongest levers the international community can pull to enable MRP because it helps to overcome the systemic barriers that exclude participation and hinder the growth of community programs. What constitutes “high-quality and equitable” can be tricky and may require significant changes by international donors. By funding RLOs in a high-quality and equitable manner, RLOs can design projects aligned with their vision of change, enhance their organisational capacity, and develop donor and political networks – all leading to organisational and work sustainability.

Steps include:

1. Embrace an equity mindset and update strategy accordingly.
2. Enable relational, accessible, flexible and sustainable funding.
3. Build bottom-up accountability mechanisms that foster community ownership.

## Organisational Pathway 5: Support for Localised Refugee-led Advocacy.

Support for localised refugee-led advocacy enables MRP because it leads to the kinds of policy changes that promote people of forced displacement’s participation in society at scale. This pathway broadens the participation agenda to emphasise people of forced displacement’s involvement at all levels, particularly within endeavours directly contributing to their well-being in practice.

Step-by-step implementation guides for supporting localised refugee-led advocacy include:

1. Orient to a localised mindset, preparing to shift power.
2. Focus on power transfer and power building in local settings.
3. Fund movements and advocates, including those that are considered “political”.
4. Use positions of power to advocate for a safer and more enabling environment for local advocates.

These pathways should be interconnected in practice, with readers mindful of their interrelated nature to realise MRP at scale and in practice.

# Introduction

As an organisation committed to uplifting Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs), Cohere is deeply invested in promoting Meaningful Refugee Participation (MRP) for both ethical and impact reasons. Cohere believes it is morally imperative that people of forced displacement have the autonomy to make critical decisions about their lives, aligning with the principle of self-determination.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Cohere recognises that when people of forced displacement lead the responses that impact their lives, the resulting work is stronger, more legitimate, and accountable to communities, leading to greater overall impact.

Cohere recognizes that its convictions about MRP are shared across its network of partners. However, through its own organisational challenges and conversations with partners, it has become clear that the concrete steps needed to implement MRP practically *within* organisations (as opposed to externally) are often unclear, confusing, or appear too difficult to meaningfully pursue. To address this lack of clarity, Cohere commissioned consultants to collaborate with experts (many of whom have firsthand experience of forced displacement) to develop a five-part virtual Interactive Workshop Series (IWS) titled “Building Organisational Pathways towards Meaningful Participation and Refugee Leadership.” This series, which ran between October 2023 and April 2024, is available on [Cohere’s YouTube channel](#). The consultants and experts collaborated to **explain and detail the mindsets, behaviours, and actions necessary to overcome internal barriers to MRP**.

This paper is a companion to each of the five IWS sessions. The topics focused on are (1) Equity Learning Journeys (ELJs), (2) Recruiting, Hiring and Onboarding People of Forced Displacement, (3) Equitable Partnerships, (4) High-Quality and Equitable Funding for RLOs, and (5) Localised Refugee-led Advocacy. These pathways were selected because their implementation enables organisations to genuinely promote MRP, moving beyond rhetoric. While this paper delineates five distinct pathways

to MRP, they are intricately linked in practice. For example, ELJs (Organisational Pathway 1) provide a foundational understanding of the nuances of the other approaches. Similarly, Equitable Partnerships (Organisational Pathway 3) are crucial for issuing High-Quality and Equitable Funding (Organisational Pathway 4) and for Supporting Localised Refugee-led Advocacy (Organisational Pathway 5). Readers should be mindful of the interconnectedness of these pathways to see MRP realised at scale and in practice.

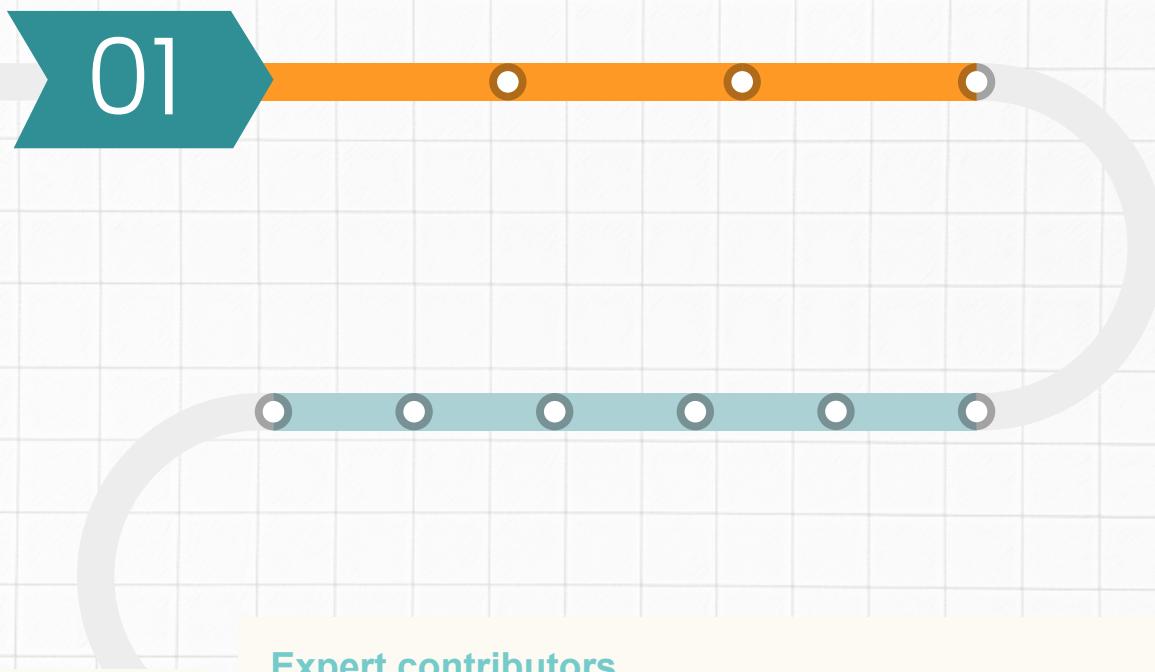
This paper is primarily intended for international organisations, referring to institutions headquartered or based in one country that aim to support people of forced displacement residing in other countries. When the recommendations below use ‘you’ and ‘your’, they address individuals working within international organisations. For Organisational Pathway 4, the intended audience also includes international donors. **While international organisations and donors are the primary audience, local civil society organisations and RLOs may also find relevant insights.**

<sup>5</sup> Self-determination refers to the right and ability of individuals or groups to freely make choices about their own affairs, without external influence or coercion. It encompasses the autonomy to determine one's own political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental development, as well as the right to pursue and protect one's own interests and identity. This concept is fundamental to human rights and is recognised internationally as a key principle in promoting dignity, equality, and freedom for all individuals and communities.

“[We need] journeys beyond Diversity and Inclusion. It needs to center on access, identity and strengths, so that we are able to support Meaningful Refugee Participation and leadership in decision making. A big piece of the journey is [...] working to redistribute power in a culturally responsive and intelligent way.”

Samara Hakim  
CulturGrit, International Inclusion and Equity Strategist

# Organisational Pathway 1 - Equity Learning Journeys



## Expert contributors



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## Introduction: What is the value of an Equity Learning Journey?

ELJs are strategic, integrated learning programs that enable individuals and institutions to establish and enshrine equitable mindsets and build strategies and practices to act in alignment with those mindsets. ELJs are typically centred around understanding and seeking to address historical, systemic and structural barriers to the meaningful participation of marginalised and underrepresented groups. ELJs acknowledge and seek to break down power dynamics that prevent underrepresented groups from participation, influence, and leadership.

ELJs come in many forms. They often involve a broad set of internal and external stakeholders, focus on a clear vision for change, with defined goals, strategies and roles for all in the change implementation, and include dedicated and contextualised learning.

Interactive training is often part of the first step. It closes knowledge gaps, making it easier to adjust ways of working. Training can cover topics and terminology such as trauma-informed engagement, anti-racism, leadership styles, cultural intelligence, cultural humility, conflict transformation, feminism, decolonisation, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB), localisation and beyond.

Beyond training, ELJs often include an organisational assessment that results in recommendations for how to integrate equity across key areas, internally and externally.

The following is a list of the various areas that the recommendations could cover:

- **Institutional culture:** Cultivating new ways of working to promote cohesion, inclusivity and belonging.
- **Decision-making and organisational structure:** Shifting decision-making towards people of forced displacement and their organisations, and away from outsized international organisations with large centralised teams.
- **Human resources and talent practices:** Reshaping recruitment, hiring, and onboarding practices and procedures for talent, including contractors and vendors, to enable the participation of those with lived experiences and to foster

greater diversity.

- **Fundraising strategies:** Aligning fundraising efforts and donor selection with core values.
- **Programmatic approaches and operations:** Adapting or removing some existing programs as well as implementing innovative new programs.
- **Internal and external communications:** Adapting messaging and communications strategies.
- **Partnership approaches:** Fostering Equitable Partnerships resulting in greater collaboration, trust and relational ways of working with communities.

In most cases, it is recommended that organisations seek external consultants to embark on an ELJ to foster spaces for open, honest discussions and to mitigate biased perceptions. Experts recommend transparently exploring options with consultants to discover the best approaches for any organisation. Asylum Access has produced a [Roster of Consultants](#) who may support organisations in their ELJs. Searching on LinkedIn, and exploring through networks can also provide organisations with other options for professional support.

Though external support helps to launch equity thinking and equitable ways of working, an ELJ is a life-long journey for all involved. When embraced meaningfully, the work would continue on far beyond engagement with external consultants, and become an integral part of an organisation's people, policies, and practices.

## Rationale: Why are Equity Learning Journeys Important to Meaningful Refugee Participation?

Although the MRP movement has growing attention in certain global spaces, experts have noted the frequent disconnect between what is said and what is done. Tokenism and gatekeeping are common, and despite calls for MRP, very few institutions have implemented it in their teams, organisational structures or partnership approaches. ELJs can be an important starting point to close the gaps between interest and action in the following ways:

**ELJs help us to see our work contextualised within systems:** Experts argue that humanitarianism is a neo-colonial system that tends to prioritise maintaining the established institutions and staff, over benefitting the communities it generally intends to support. Consequently, we see ineffective responses, and the further disenfranchisement of forcibly displaced communities, among others. Without an intentional ELJ, this reality can be hard to see and truly understand – especially for those who have had access to privileges in identity, systems, and processes.

**ELJs can provide clarity on the differences and connections between “Meaningful Refugee Participation,” “Shifting Power,” “Decolonisation,” “Localisation” and other equity principles:** There is evident confusion in the refugee response space regarding what constitutes MRP and how it relates to other equity concepts. Singular leadership hires and panel participation are being used to signal the success of the MRP agenda when in reality, far-reaching MRP requires additional reflection on how to shift power, consider and deconstruct coloniality within our organisational structures, and localise our work. ELJs are a way to investigate the intersection of these principles and set goals toward them.

**ELJs enable the development of roadmaps for change:** Once recommendations are formulated, ELJs often culminate project plans for change in key areas of an organisation’s operations and practices, both internally and externally. In the context of MRP, those roadmaps enable concrete steps to implement various sets of recommendations on the areas previously covered (such as institutional culture, decision-making and organisational structures,

human resources and talent practices, fundraising strategies, programmatic approaches and operations, internal and external communications, partnership approaches).

**ELJs support leaders to learn and self-assess in safe spaces:** Experts perceive a pervasive discomfort with some people admitting gaps in comprehension of equity concepts, and how they may be experiencing pressure to appear knowledgeable. This furthers collective confusion around MRP and other related concepts. ELJs provide safe and brave learning spaces where organisations can be challenged to acknowledge and ameliorate their positionality and role as international actors, including, but not limited to, concerns related to gatekeeping, power hoarding, fear of job loss, inconsistent inclusion, and beyond. Experts note that everyone, regardless of background and starting point, stands to benefit from safe learning spaces.

“DEI journeys are not about celebrating our diversities or focus on our similarities. It requires a roadmap, acknowledging what is going wrong, where you are now, and where you want to be”.

Dr. Hourie Tafech,  
Refugees International, Program Manager for Refugee Leadership

**"I can't tell you how many times I've seen vision statements that have said they're working towards a world where every refugee has a voice or every woman has a choice, or every community is able to make decisions for their own futures. But let's be honest, is it really the world that we are building as intermediaries, or are we building a world on our own terms, with some inputs, sometimes?"**

**Maya Hasan,  
Founder of Shifting Power Accelerator  
and Fearless Project**

**"Many organisations are committed to engaging refugees, but coming through this process with the whole team is where the disconnection lies. For example the HR team or operations team perhaps are not in sync with the advocacy team. In this case you find for example that an organisation wants to take a refugee to the GRF, and perhaps someone else is an obstructionist so they don't see the need of that. This kind of difficulty in understanding how to come together towards this collective implementation becomes a hindrance."**

**Jean Marie Ishimwe, YVC, former Director**

## **Self-Assessment Tool: Should I encourage my organisation to embark on an ELJ?**

In order to understand if embarking on an ELJ is relevant to you and your organisation, consider the following questions. If you have observed many of these statements to be present within your organisation, consider collaborating with fellow leaders to launch an ELJ.

- ✓ Confusion between concepts of 'meaningful refugee participation,' 'power shifting', 'localisation', and 'decolonisation'.
- ✓ Varying degrees of staff interest, learning and buy-in within the same organisation; the presence of champions genuinely interested in enabling MRP to operate alongside unknowing obstructionists.
- ✓ Inability to identify and address privileged fragility (such as pervasive fear of job loss and status loss) causes discomfort and avoidance in internal discussions around stepping back and gatekeeping.
- ✓ A focus on concepts of impartiality, objectivity, and legitimacy of people of forced displacement, over reflection on positionality, lived and learned experience, strengths, and community connectedness.

- ✓ Lack of clarity on the degree of equity of various initiatives and little agreement on how to address these.
- ✓ Lack of internalisation of equity concepts, impacting collective decisions and causing wheel-spinning, resistance to change, push and pull delays, and a default to maintain the status quo.
- ✓ Difficulty identifying and addressing tokenisation and obstructionist behaviour when they happen.
- ✓ Sweeping over generalisations based on identity such as "all refugees are experts in refugee response" or "white people should leave the space" (both are problematic).
- ✓ An inclination to repeatedly bring the same person with lived experience to public spaces, or other "representation box checking" exercises.
- ✓ Relying on consultations and creation of advisory boards with limited authority to signal the success of an MRP agenda.
- ✓ Restricted authentic engagement and partnership with RLOs, despite operating alongside them.

## Step-by-Step Implementation Guide: How to Embark on an Equity Learning Journey?

The following three steps will launch and sustain an Equity Learning Journey. They are adapted from experts' contributions to Cohere's Interactive Workshop 1: "[Launching Equity Learning Journeys](#)", and from expert Samara Hakim's "[CulturGrit, Pathways and tools to navigate an ELJ. Refugee Support Sector Version.](#)"

### Step 1: Assess your organisational mindset and practices, and build roadmaps for change.

Step 1 Outcomes	Step 1: Implementation guide
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarity on where your organisation is now, and where it wants to be, in pursuit of MRP.</li> <li>2. By gaining clarity, you increase the likelihood of securing funding for your journey.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Secure financial commitments.</b> The journey requires resourcing. Work with leadership and donors who align with your organisational values to secure and earmark initial financing.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Select an external consultant(s) and communicate intent internally.</b> Working with external consultant(s) can help mitigate bias in institutional reflection. Communicating the nature of the work with key internal and external stakeholders generates buy-in/support for the journey, and showcases your commitment to equity.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Conduct an organisational assessment &amp; learn along the way.</b> Work with external consultant(s) to conduct an internal assessment of your organisation's capabilities to operationalise specific goals related to your MRP commitment.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>During the assessment, address knowledge gaps</b> through intentional training on topics most relevant to your journey. Importantly, approach the assessment and training as a learning opportunity rather than a test or an evaluation.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Set clear goals for change.</b> Use assessment findings to discern where to prioritise subsequent action steps. By recognising where you are at and setting clear goals for where you want to be, you can recognise the starting point of your learning journey and develop a plan to reiterate and tackle challenges along the way. Ensure that data points go beyond diversity and representation to support sustained meaningful participation in decision-making processes.</li> </ul>

## Step 2: Build internal support and champions for the initial implementation of the plan.

Step 2 Outcome	Step 2: Implementation guide
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Leaders across the organisation understand and champion needed changes.</li> <li>2. The journey is contextualised around relevant cultural, identity, and power dynamics.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Present assessment findings and institutional goals in a way that builds trust and avoids defensiveness.</b> Focusing on moving forward rather than blame or guilt while providing information enables everyone to more readily accept the findings and start taking ownership to implement the necessary changes.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Identify actors who need to champion the pursuit of goals, and build rapport.</b> List key individuals who need to support the journey to be successful (consider internal leaders and key staff, donors, key partners, board members and beyond). Identify what may encourage each to join the journey and appeal to those interests. Motivators could include ethics, reputation, legacy, time efficiency, and impact.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Localise the journey and embrace cultural responsiveness.</b> What works for one region and culture may not work for another. Encourage teams to initiate and lead the journey for their localities.</li> </ul>

## Step 3: Sustain and refine the journey through continuous reflection and learning for key stakeholders.

Step 3 Outcomes	Step 3: Implementation guide
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Clarified long-term strategies.</li> <li>2. Accountability of allies and a reiteration of the agency we all have to implement this on an individual and a collective/ organisational level.</li> <li>3. A roadmap to realistic action at all levels of the organisation, and alignment with our organisational objectives.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Nurture a commitment to continuous learning and dedication:</b> Through intentional leadership, nurture a mindset that recognises the importance of consistently challenging and changing ways of working. Focusing on fairness and collective accountability can help demonstrate dedication to the spirit of ELJs.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Celebrate incremental progress on individual and institutional levels.</b> Making sure that learning feels like both a personal and collective journey can greatly prevent tokenisation and promote the sustainability of the journey. Change cannot happen overnight – it requires small wins along a learning journey that ultimately contributes to new and deeper understandings of how we can operationalise equity and enable meaningful participation in far-reaching ways.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Iterate upon goals.</b> As you learn, your understanding of what needs to happen to operationalise equity can change. Anticipating this need can prevent frustration and help everyone to understand the work is never done. Building in key stopping points to reflect on progress and adjust goals can help set a tone of continuous learning and refinement.</li> </ul>

## Acknowledging Common Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

ELJs often contain a set of predictable challenges that can stymie the pursuit of an ELJ. Below is a list of challenges and suggested mitigation strategies. Whether you are a staff member, organisational leader, partner or donor, these mitigation strategies can help to instigate a successful ELJ.

Leadership Support	
Common Challenges	Mitigation Strategy
Equity and inclusion might be perceived as an “extra” or not core to the work objectives.	Appeal to the connection between core organisational objectives and the expected outcomes of the journey.
Staff are stuck in the mindset that remaining in a particular role is the definition of success.	Shift the lens to the impact you could have and the legacy you want to leave behind, regardless of title or function.
Those in positions of influence and power do not see the vision, and they can't make sense of it for their own career pathways.	Depending on your positionality, you may be forced to ask if you or they are still a good match for the organisation given a possible mismatch in values. It may be important to acknowledge the need for a staffing transition. Regardless of values impasses, it is important to find ways to support staff transitions with care and empathy.
Misperception about the financial needs of such a project.	While there will be an upfront budget for consultants or internal resources, some steps can be sustained at minimal cost. Effective consultants leave organisations with actionable recommendations, ensuring that the recommendations are achievable and can be integrated into daily operations and practices.

## Allyship

Leveraging personal advantages (status, connections, etc.) to promote inclusivity by redistributing power and coaching peers to do the same.

Allyship roles can also include:

- **Advocates:** Amplifying messages and taking up the space when explicitly requested.
- **Subverters:** Navigating and enabling inclusive structures behind the scenes.
- **Healers:** Creating space for community, recovery, and identity affinity.
- **Facilitators:** Providing platforms for people to share across differences and balance power dynamics in communication.

Fragility and Accountability	
Common Challenges	Mitigation Strategy
Supporting allies and addressing fragility and role confusion is prioritised over accountability to people of forced displacement.	Allyship means leveraging personal advantages (status, connections, etc.) to promote inclusivity by redistributing power and coaching peers to do the same. This involves stepping back and facilitating access for individuals with lived experiences to positions of power. It results in greater accountability to people of forced displacement.
Fragility around whiteness, socio-economic status, nationality, and other identities.	Invite anyone experiencing fragility to assess how they can play a crucial role in building equity (see Beginning to Overcome Fragility Self-Reflection Tool, below). If they cannot operate in true allyship from their current position, assist them in exploring “what’s next” to alleviate the fear of stepping away. Institutions can support transitions through career counselling, job placement support, severance packages and long runways. Many skills developed in the humanitarian space would be transferable to other sectors like foundations, government, local non-profits, and socially-conscious businesses.

## Beginning to Overcome Privileged Fragility Self-Reflection Tool

ELJs can awaken fragility (or the emotional and psychological discomfort or defensiveness that individuals, particularly those from privileged backgrounds, may experience when confronted with issues of inequality, bias, and systemic injustice) hindering the process. If you have personally had frequent access to historically privileged/advantaged identities, reflecting on this set of questions can help you move beyond initial anxiety and into a space of allyship:

- How does MRP connect to my career pathway, to the growth of the organisation and the sector itself?
- What does MRP mean for my role in the organisation, and how can it be adapted?
- How have I already benefited from the advantages and statuses I have had?
- What does this mean for dominant cultures or those who have not experienced forced displacement? Where is their place in this journey and what might be their interests?
- How can I not see allyship as a personal threat? How do I reframe it as an opportunity to learn, grow, and yield/share power?
- How can I redefine what success looks like to me?

Implementation and Integration	
Common Challenges	Mitigation Strategy
Leaders and staff might not own the journey using the roadmap and tools created, and consequently, they may not operationalise recommendations in their areas of work.	Encourage each department to identify ways to infuse equity into its work, including setting specific goals. This is important for each function/field and geography, where cultural dynamics and values may require different considerations and approaches.
Repetitive conversations and debates, wheel-spinning, and/or reverting to routine.	The journey is often not linear and you will need to reiterate and respond to new learnings and awareness. Your proposed steps might morph with ongoing developments and discoveries. Build space for feedback loops. Shine a light on your progress for stakeholders to see the impact of their efforts clearly. This helps sustain a level of motivation to get through unexpected barriers. When feedback is given, explore how to address it; otherwise, stakeholders will lose faith and trust in the process.
Trainings lack immediate implementation, making the exercise feel theoretical rather than practical.	Learning is best done when the purpose is clear to all involved. Ideally, training and learning include spaces to explore and co-design tailored implementation.
The learning journey, and new ways of working leads to burnout, and complaints about time constraints.	Rather than halt the process in the face of capacity constraints, consider slowing or pausing to allow people time to catch-up and process. They still have other aspects of their work to do. In the meantime, emphasise small wins everyone can enable, including thinking about whom else to invite to meetings and into the process, especially those who represent the organisation publicly. Reconsidering your approach to partnerships (see above) can help you be agile and tap into the expertise of various partners to be growth partners for your staff.

## Resources

- APNOR. Meaningful Refugee Participation Index Score Card and Guidelines.
- Asylum Access. (2023). Roster of Equity Consultants. Retrieved from [https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Roster-of-Equity-Consultants\\_EP2023\\_v2.pdf](https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Roster-of-Equity-Consultants_EP2023_v2.pdf)
- CulturGrit. (2023). Pathways and tools to navigate an ELJ: Refugee Support Sector Version. Retrieved from [https://www.wearecohere.org/static/media/Three\\_Pathways-Internal\\_Equity\\_Learning\\_Journey.bfd27ee2f4117fff27c5.pdf](https://www.wearecohere.org/static/media/Three_Pathways-Internal_Equity_Learning_Journey.bfd27ee2f4117fff27c5.pdf)
- Fearless Project. The Shifting Power Accelerator. Retrieved from <https://www.fearlessproject.co/shifting-power-accelerator>
- The New Humanitarian. (2024). Rethinking Humanitarianism | How to step aside to promote change [Audio podcast]. The New Humanitarian Podcast. Retrieved from <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/podcasts/2024/01/18/rethinking-humanitarianism-western-leaders-how-to-step-aside-promoting-change>

“We could have many employees from refugee background but with a still very colonized structure within the organization that doesn’t give them power [...] Are you examining your internal structure to see where power really centers? [...] It’s not about how many you are hiring it’s about what kind of power they have [...] and do you have a plan to give more decision-making to the people who work for you.”

Dr. Hourie Tafech, Refugees International - Program Manager for Refugee Leadership

## Organisational Pathway 2 - Recruitment, Hiring and Onboarding of People of Forced Displacement

02

### Expert contributors:

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## Introduction: What is the Value of Recruiting, Hiring and Onboarding People of Forced Displacement?

The inclusion of people with relevant lived experiences is shown to enhance the practical implementation, comprehensiveness, and sustainability of efforts to respond to affected communities' needs. This is not only true in refugee response but is a hallmark of any diversity initiative around the world. Research that underpins this claim is expansive. A few compelling studies are named in the footnote.<sup>6</sup> Research that underpins this sentiment specifically within refugee response has been collected by the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI), and can be found at <https://www.refugeeslead.org/evidence>. Their body of research asserts that leaders of forced displacement are intimately connected to relevant issues and communities, and are best positioned to lead their own change effectively.

Recruiting, hiring and onboarding are crucial ways to enable diversity and representation within humanitarian response.

## Rationale: How is Recruiting, Hiring and Onboarding People of Forced Displacement Relevant to Meaningful Refugee Participation?

Recruiting, hiring and onboarding people of forced displacement is arguably one of the most practical ways to ensure MRP within humanitarianism and effective responses. By increasing lived experience on teams, and providing proper onboarding, community inclusivity in organisational decision-making grows, recruitment strategies become more community-centred, and staff turnover is reduced. These benefits are illuminated below:

- 1. Practically, this is one way to ensure community members benefit from the humanitarian system.** Hiring from affected communities ensures MRP in humanitarianism, addressing inequities in access to career opportunities. Recruitment opens up career paths to people of forced displacement, mitigating disruptions caused by displacement and fostering trust in programs.
- 2. It makes the work naturally more inclusive of communities.** When community members lead refugee responses, it enhances community inclusivity by leveraging relationships and cultural insights. This closeness facilitates genuine community partnership, moving beyond consultations to shared leadership of refugee responses. Effective recruitment processes acknowledge the diversity of lived experiences (for example, of women, young adults, men, people of different gender identities and sexual orientations, differently abled people and across ethnicities) at all organisational levels. Integrating diverse lived experiences ensures genuine representation and intersectionality, ultimately enriching responses.
- 3. It can lead to more hiring of people of forced displacement.** Hiring people of forced displacement expands community recruitment reach through their networks, tapping into overlooked candidates. Their firsthand insights enable targeted and culturally sensitive outreach, fostering trust and inclusivity. This approach leads to more effective recruitment outcomes.
- 4. Onboarding helps to prevent turnover, ensuring longevity and success in hires.** Effective onboarding ensures smoother integration and higher retention rates among employees of forced displacement. By providing comprehensive onboarding, organisations equip employees of forced displacement with the tools and support necessary to understand their roles and adapt to the workplace culture. This process fosters a sense of belonging and facilitates meaningful connections with colleagues.

<sup>6</sup> McKinsey & Company's "Delivering Through Diversity" Report (2018). This report includes data from more than 1,000 companies across 12 countries. It highlights the benefits of the relationship between diverse leadership teams and financial performance on a global scale.

McKinsey & Company's "Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters" (2020). This report suggests that organisations can benefit from leveraging the unique perspectives and insights that individuals with diverse backgrounds bring to the table.

Baljeet Sandhu's "The Value of Lived Experience in Social Change" (2017). This report explores the significance of incorporating firsthand experiences of individuals directly impacted by social issues into decision-making processes and advocacy efforts, emphasising the transformative power of lived experience in driving more effective and equitable solutions.

## The value of representative and participatory boards: A Safe Passage Fund (SPF) case study.

Safe Passage Fund is a funder focusing on supporting movements for migrant justice. SPF's Board of Directors includes activists with community connectedness and/or lived experience, some of whom are also former or potential RLO grantees. Through its participatory approach, SPF's board serves as a practical model for integrating community connections into shaping international institutions, even in the absence of open staff positions.

IWS expert Emmy Fu shares why their participatory board creates value and impact for Safe Passage Fund:

- Clarified strategic focus.** Programs benefit from a deeper understanding of impacted communities, informed by close analysis and critique of policies and contextual factors. This enables a more comprehensive and meaningful institutional strategy, focused on voiced community challenges.
- Deeper and longer-term relationships with communities.** When those with community connectedness sit on Boards, they may be more likely to encourage long-term support, promoting the sustainability and impact of RLOs.
- Enhanced tolerance for and flexibility in navigating the legal and political realities faced by RLOs.** Because there is an understanding of the legal and political realities, boards with community connectedness may take on a more realistic risk appetite for funding RLOs. They may also be more likely to embrace the kinds of flexibility necessary to sustain RLO support and promote leader safety, particularly in restrictive contexts.
- Strengthened networks.** Board members' relationships with communities foster trust and provide connections to a wide network of RLOs. This also promotes the dissemination of information about funding to potential grantees left unfunded by traditional philanthropic approaches.

## Acknowledging Common Misconceptions and Missteps in the Pursuit of Representation

Despite the clear value-add of recruiting, hiring and onboarding people of forced displacement, few organisations have embraced deeply community-centred practices. Performative representation including tokenistic hires, inadequate transfer of power to advisory groups, and reliance on external engagements do not lead to enjoying the benefits of representation.

Experts believe that this disconnect may be caused by common misconceptions and missteps during the recruitment, hiring and onboarding process. By acknowledging erroneous beliefs and problematic approaches, institutions are more likely to avoid them.

### Common Misconceptions:

- The legal risk is too great to hire people of forced displacement.** Many institutions are concerned that hiring people of forced displacement may pose legal risks for the organisation, especially when prospective employees lack the legal authorisation to work. Organisations may worry that implementing unique employment structures and solutions could lead to external repercussions from governments or internal resistance from other employees. Experts suggest that these concerns often stem from bias, inflexibility, and a rigid risk aversion, rather than a willingness to manage reasonable and addressable risks. When such approaches guide recruitment and hiring practices, forcibly displaced workers are frequently overlooked for employment opportunities.
- People of forced displacement cannot be impartial or fully trusted.** Some institutions, including UN agencies in some locations, have expressed concerns about people of forced displacement's ability to hold leadership positions because of perceived shortcomings in impartiality, financial integrity and confidentiality – a set of stereotyped beliefs about identity and community affiliation, rather than any individualised assessment of fittedness. Experts argue that these beliefs are biased, potentially

“I have seen INGOs have had people of forced displacement in some ways or another although there has been this barrier of being able to recruit them legally and openly but there has been recruitment. One thing that I've been always curious is that now you have these people on board, you do need them, and I acknowledge that you can't openly recruit them but there is an element of not paying them equally to others who are being recruited legally.”

Hafsat Tameesuddin,  
APRRN, Co-Secretary General.

“Now that we are talking about this Meaningful Refugee Participation, people feel: if we are going to have all this forcibly displaced people, where do the people without lived experience going to go? There is a little bit of inevitable resistance to this meaningful participation although there is overwhelmingly positive support.”

Hafsat Tameesuddin,  
APRRN, Co-Secretary General.

“I'm sick of seeing the same leaders everywhere. It is crucial that we ensure diversity in representation and that create spaces for others so this work is sustainable and meaningful.”

Hafsat Tameesuddin,  
APRRN, Co-Secretary General.

born of a problematic desire to protect the role of international humanitarianism.

- 3. Community representation can be achieved through a few “global” hires.** International organisations that span work in many countries can erroneously believe that singular hires in high-profile positions achieve representativeness for the whole organisation. However, representation can only be achieved when relevant lived experience is influencing strategic direction; this means different life experiences must be present. When institutions expect individuals to represent the whole of the forced displacement experience<sup>7</sup>, that person is being tokenised.
- 4. People of forced displacement can't perform the roles that trained international workers can.** International organisations are inclined to export “Western” recruitment models to other regions, leading to assessing the ability to perform against qualifications such as advanced degrees or extensive sector work experience. Experts argue that this recruitment mindset is grounded in neocolonial metrics and lacks awareness of culture-specific needs and professional standards.
- 5. The qualifications of “lived experience” are sufficient by themselves.** A common misconception is that the qualifications of lived experience are sufficient on their own. However, recent statements asserting that “refugees are the experts” may have caused confusion among some organisations. These statements suggest that the identities and lived experiences of forced displacement are sufficient qualifications by themselves. This approach risks tokenisation and falling short of expectations.

Lived experiences and identities provide essential perspectives that ensure tactical and technical job skills are adapted effectively to affected communities. They equip individuals with unique knowledge, characteristics, and strengths crucial for the job. Still, various capabilities are needed for success in any role. It is important not to reduce candidates with

forced displacement experiences to just that aspect. To achieve MRP, it is vital to recognise their additional skills, strengths, and capabilities that make them the best match for the job.

#### Common Missteps:

- 1. The pursuit of representation lacks corresponding investment in power-shifting goals and strategy.** Recruitment often occurs without considering the overall colonial structures that dominate the humanitarian response sector. While staffing composition may change, representation on its own cannot lead to true power-shifts toward communities. Adjusting coloniality will require simultaneous investment in enabling inclusive ways of working, investigating institutional structure, and ensuring there are equitable decision making processes, among other institutional reflections.
- 2. Pursuing representation through governance bodies only.** There is a recent increase in institutions creating advisory bodies to have people with lived experience influence their strategic decisions. While these types of groups are not inherently missteps, they often fail to leverage the skills and leadership of their members, risking tokenisation. An inadequate advisory body would be characterised by occasional consultations on predetermined agendas, lacking nuanced understanding of local dynamics, inadequate training, communication and acknowledgment, position insecurity, insufficient trauma-informed engagement, low or no compensation, and representation in global forums without strategies for tangible outcomes.

<sup>7</sup> Hafsat Tameesuddin's quote is extracted from the Refugees International, The New Humanitarian and Asylum Access GRF 2023 side-event. [“From refugee inclusion to shifting power: Building a global refugee sector that puts refugees first”](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wht_G380-6A). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wht\\_G380-6A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wht_G380-6A).

“Oftentimes advisory boards are not trained and coached so it requires a lot of appetite and willingness from the side of the INGOs to invest in it, to really make it meaningful, not just having an advisory body or an advisory group for the sake of having it [...] I was a part of the interim advisory group of UNHCR but I haven't had a very sustainable way of contributing and ability to contribute to how this big organization shapes the landscape of meaningful participation. I want to acknowledge the little milestone that they have come so far but [...] it is just the tip of the iceberg, we still have to do a lot of internal work and reflection.”

- Hafsat Tameesuddin  
 APRRN, Co-Secretary General

- 3. Emphasis on recruitment for low-level positions or “gig” employment.** Staff of forced displacement are often treated as inexpensive labour during responses, leading to recruiting and hiring efforts that are focused on low-level positions far from decision-making. These positions, while potentially useful for immediate income generation, will not lead to MRP on a systemic level, as gig employment generally lacks stable compensation, access to professional development, and the promise of upward trajectory. Emphasis on inclusion at the lowest rungs of an institutional hierarchy only will fail to promote community ownership of programs.
- 4. Lack of effort to acknowledge and address bias in recruitment, hiring and onboarding.** Because of the pressures to embrace MRP, many institutions are pursuing the recruitment and hiring of people of forced displacement. However, without a simultaneous effort to acknowledge and address institutional and personal biases toward specific, often White-dominant professional traits, candidates of forced displacement may be overlooked for consideration, or quick to leave their

employment situations. Unless the specific needs of forcibly displaced workers' needs are taken into account (such as documentation issues, mental health support, professional development needs, travel permissions and more), forcibly displaced hires may be less likely to be successful. It must be acknowledged that people hold biases born of their life experiences; embracing cultural humility and curiosity is important to overcome them.

- 5. Under-investment into new recruitment strategies.** Merely stating “We welcome refugees to apply” in job postings is insufficient to increase applications of people of forced displacement. Organisations often fail to inspire sufficient confidence that an application will be fully considered. Intimidating qualifications lists, educational requirements, and years of work experience are often present in leadership role job descriptions. Moreover, information about job opportunities often lives in online spaces and/or are circulated amongst existing humanitarian networks, rather than relationally within communities.
- 6. Recruiting RLOs' leaders without supporting them to backfill.** International organisations wishing to embrace MRP often recruit staff from prominent RLOs. While experts note it is beneficial to offer opportunities to prominent leaders of forced displacement, organisations should, and rarely do, take steps such as funding to mitigate any institutional destabilisation of the RLO.

## Step-by-Step Implementation Guide: How to Recruit, Hire and Onboard People of Forced Displacement?

The following six steps serve as a set of strategies to transform institutions and to uplift lived experience within organisations. They provide a roadmap for impactful recruitment, hiring and onboarding strategies for people of forced displacement. They are adapted from experts' contributions to Cohere's workshop 2: ["Recruiting, Hiring and Onboarding of People of Forced Displacement"](#).

<b>Step 1: Start conversations about the “why” of representation to engage in the “how” successfully.</b>	
<b>Step 1 Outcome</b>	<b>Step 1: Implementation guide</b>
By setting a shared, foundational value, you move together with far-reaching buy-in and intentionality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Engage in honest institutional conversations before initiating the process.</b> Discussing the value of lived experience for specific roles will ensure institutional understanding and buy-in to recruitment processes.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Prioritise senior-level positions for people with lived experience.</b> These positions matter the most in connecting representation to shifting power and creating meaningful change.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>If you don't have positions open at the moment,</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Include people of forced displacement in spaces that confer power</b>, such as a Board of Directors.</li> <li>2. <b>Start working on your preparedness</b> to inclusively and effectively employ people with lived experience so that you're ready when a job becomes vacant.</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
<b>Step 2: Work on compliance and legal risk management to hire people with varying lived experience.</b>	
<b>Step 2 Outcome</b>	<b>Step 2: Implementation guide</b>
People of forced displacement can lead programs impacting them in countries where they lack access to work rights.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Challenge your assumptions and adjust your appetite for organisational risks.</b> Engage in risk mitigation strategies training with relevant local and international legal experts to gain a balanced perspective of organisational risks. Experts note that anecdotal evidence across various challenging work settings has demonstrated that risks of office closure or police interference due to hiring people of forced displacement are generally low.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Gain insights from your operating context to strengthen risk minimisation strategies.</b> Study practices of INGOs, local and national NGOs and RLOs operating in environments with restricted work rights for people of forced displacement.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Explore opportunities for employment and compensation</b> through consultancy agreements, international labour programs, work visas, stipends and appearance fees. Creative and strictly legal opportunities for employment may exist.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Engage in informed consent before hiring people of forced displacement.</b> Ensure employees understand the legal realities and risks when an employment offer is made, and before any employment agreement is signed.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Build safety plans with staff of forced displacement in mind.</b> Develop targeted strategies to mitigate and respond to safety risks in restrictive legal environments. Collaborate with staff and partners, including RLOs, to identify the most effective responses in the event a risk is realised. Best practices include implementing regular safety sessions and providing staff access to legal representation 24/7 in case of arrests.</li> </ul>

## PILNET

### A broker for legal assistance on assessing organisational risks

If you are seeking to hire staff of forced displacement in challenging legal settings, are uncertain about risks, struggle to agree on risk appetite, and/or need legal advice, PILNET can match you with a law firm to address risks and explore alternatives to traditional employment structures. Through a dedicated legal matching platform, led by a legal professional with lived experience of displacement, PILnet can help you to scope out your legal queries and find free legal assistance within its global network. To reach out and access their matching services, fill out their [legal assistance intake form](#) or contact Yusra Herzi, Program Officer - Forced Displacement at [yherzi@pilnet.org](mailto:yherzi@pilnet.org).

#### Step 3: Address biases in recruitment and advancement of talents.

Step 3 Outcome	Step 3: Implementation guide
Workplace culture enables individuals with community connectedness to access strategic jobs.	<p>Once values and legal concerns are addressed and standard hiring modes are established, you can start building inclusive recruitment and onboarding practices.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Articulate the essential skills necessary to achieve the role.</b> Brainstorm the essential attributes, personality traits, and skills required for this specific role. For instance, strong English oral communication skills may be crucial for certain positions, while strong written communication may be less necessary.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Note where lived experience signals an essential skill for the position.</b> Where lived experience or community connectedness is an essential skill for position success, note it within the vacancy. This encourages confidence among applicants, signalling that their experiences are valued.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Remove formal education or work experience requirements from your vacancy announcements and communicate what additional support will be available for the staff person.</b> This will challenge applicant's assumptions about their eligibility and increase applications. Allocate a budget for professional development to help individuals improve once in the role, set clear goals and discuss expectations from the outset.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Be mindful of the potential impact of power imbalances in the recruitment process.</b> Creative approaches to addressing power imbalances can include providing interview questions ahead of time, sharing what to expect from the recruitment process, and offering reassurance.</li> </ul>

#### Step 4: Recruit relationally and in collaboration with affected communities.

Step 4 Outcomes	Step 4: implementation guide
<p>Increased applications from those with lived experience.</p> <p>Once you have more staff of forced displacement, finding more qualified candidates is easier.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>In partnerships with relevant RLOs and community leaders, develop outreach strategies.</b> Encourage applications through relevant social media, networks, and partnership meetings.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Creatively revamp your application process to open doors for those typically excluded from traditional recruitment.</b> Encourage applications of those without CVs or resumes, offer support for building CVs and resumes, and provide greater opportunities to verbally discuss or video record experience and interest.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Reinvest in RLOs if staff are recruited to work with you instead.</b> If RLO leaders are recruited away from their roles at RLOs, consider investing in that RLO so that its role in the community is protected.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Open your existing pathways for individuals with lived experience.</b> Create an outreach plan with input from partners and RLOs and deliberately plan to reach out when positions open.</li> </ul>

#### Step 5: Be intentional about workplace inclusion, onboarding and mentorship.

Step 5 Outcome	Step 5: Implementation guide
<p>Organisational culture aligns with recruits' needs, improving staff's ability to influence and lead the work.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Examine your receiving environment to align your organisational culture with the expectations of newly hired staff.</b> Acknowledge and consider the implications of current workplace culture (e.g. certain familiarity with technology, written communication, pace, project management and beyond) to understand who can thrive and who cannot. Make intentional adjustments to promote the inclusion of those from different backgrounds.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Reshape your onboarding and training approaches to include any new staffer.</b> Before launching a standard onboarding, check the level of familiarity with the working culture in a non-patronizing way, and adapt your onboarding process to address and change any alienating or unclear elements.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Do not expect less, support more.</b> From the beginning of an employment relationship, set high expectations for new staff while simultaneously providing robust support systems that recruits can easily access such as peer support and specific paid training opportunities.</li> </ul>

“Recruiting refugees is not going to achieve any goals on its own. It needs to be accompanied by a range of measures and support but also incredibly importantly by self-examination within the organization setting out on this journey, involving all staff and stakeholders about what we are trying to achieve.”

Christopher Eades  
former StARS Executive Director, former APRRN Secretary General, current CWS Asia Representative

“To create an environment where refugees can realize their full potential, onboarding has to go beyond conventional processes. It requires patience, empathy, sensitivity, and proactiveness [...] Value their learning process, and do not make them feel inferior while they learn”

Adior Ibrahim, Cohere Equity and Inclusion Program Assistant

## Step 6: Advocate for change and growth among peer organisations to expand job opportunities.

Step 6 Outcome	Step 6: Implementation guide
Allies contribute widely to the movement for internal meaningful representation.	<p><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Identify and share best practices with like-minded partners, fostering a generally more welcoming employment environment.</b> Engage with partners about the importance of internal meaningful representation to increase employment opportunities in general. Consider documenting and sharing good practices. Where needed and safe, consider advocating together for legal changes that promote refugee work rights.</p>

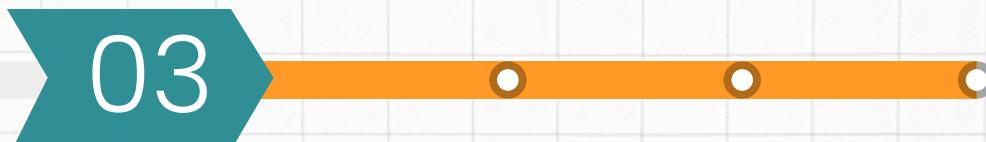
## Resources

- Baljeet Sandhu. (2017). The Value of Live Experience in Social Change. Retrieved from <https://knowledgeequity.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-Value-of-Lived-Experience-in-Social-Change.pdf>
- McKinsey & Company. (2018). Delivering Through Diversity. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/delivering-through-diversity>
- McKinsey & Company. (2020). Diversity Wins: How Inclusion Matters. Retrieved from <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/diversity-wins-how-inclusion-matters>
- RRLI. Evidence. Retrieved from <https://www.refugeeslead.org/evidence>

“[Equitable Partnerships are] a collaborative effort where from the very first initial introductory email that you send to the very final meeting to conclude the whole project, and every systems and processes in between like communications, guidelines, agreements, SoPs, project plans, strategies, budgets, timelines, visibility and leadership, all actions that directly or indirectly affect partners, are carried out with equal contribution of the local actors. In an Equitable Partnership, every partner has an equal say in all decisions and the primary goal is to empower the local actors.”

Baqir Bayani, Asylum Access,  
Partnerships Coordinator.

## Organisational Pathway 3 - Building Equitable Partnerships



### Expert contributors:



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## Introduction: What is the Value of Equitable Partnerships?

International organisations are increasingly partnering with historically excluded actors, such as RLOs, largely thanks to the movements for localisation and MRP. But the complexity of power dynamics between privileged and historically marginalised groups, the confusion around how to operationalise concepts such as trust and transparency, and the deep entrenchment of a White-dominant working culture in international organisations, make attempts to develop close, long-standing, and relational partnerships difficult. More often than not, partnerships are surface-level and transactional.

Partnerships between international organisations and RLOs often include requests to engage in additional capacity-building, short-lived and project-based funding packages, and requirements to align with standards of accountability defined by larger, more-established institutions, rather than communities.

Experts assert that through Equitable Partnerships these challenges can be overcome, resulting in partnerships that enable far-reaching participation. Asylum Access defines Equitable Partnerships as “Partnerships where *systems, processes, and daily interactions help to rectify the power imbalances that enable exclusion.*<sup>8</sup> Asylum Access’s definition of equitable partnerships is informed by the work of several other organisations that have reflected on the importance of equitable partnerships.<sup>9</sup>

Through Equitable Partnerships, RLOs can enjoy greater influence, voice, and ultimately ownership over the strategies and decisions that affect their lives. Embracing equitable partnerships frameworks can bring benefits such as:

- Programs are co-designed and centred around community accountability making them more legitimate, transparent and ultimately building dignified lives and long-term community well-being.
- Programs are more sustainable and more impactful because they bring together a wider range of perspectives and knowledge sets,

particularly from proximate actors, leading to more creative and effective solutions.

- Community leaders experience inclusion and support, rather than exclusion and barriers, lessening exhaustion and harm for community leaders, and promoting their retention within refugee response efforts.
- Staff working in privileged spaces gain profoundly empowering insights and experiences that help to illuminate what it means to operate in allyship, including their specific value add and when they need to de-centre themselves in a partnership.
- Donors who embrace equitable partnerships maximise the benefits of their funding by supporting cost-effective, culturally aware, and locally-run programs.



## Rationale: How are Equitable Partnerships Relevant to the Pursuit of Meaningful Refugee Participation?

Equitable Partnerships between international and local actors – including RLOs – can be a powerful starting point for embracing MRP for the following reasons:

1. **Equitable Partnerships shift power, ownership and resources to RLOs so that they can lead solutions in their own communities and contexts.** Equitable Partnerships de-centre those operating from distant and privileged spaces, and centre those who are proximate and affected. This means that entire groups of people of forced displacement gain greater control over the programs that impact their lives, and how they are implemented.

<sup>8</sup> Asylum Access (2024) *Position Paper on Equitable Partnerships* p. 9. <https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-EP-Position-Paper-V2-2.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Page 10.

- 2. Enacting Equitable Partnerships helps organisations begin to operationalise their commitments to MRP relatively quickly.** At times, the pursuit of operating equitably can feel overwhelming, especially during ELJs where concepts of decolonisation, representation, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging, and beyond can introduce complex change initiatives. The frameworks of Equitable Partnerships – which are often about behavioural changes – can be explored and implemented more quickly than other aspects of change that require deeper structural changes.
- 3. Engaging in Equitable Partnerships helps staff at international organisations to experience and internalise the moral and impact imperative of MRP, enabling a deeper institutional commitment.** Equitable Partnerships immediately help those working in privileged settings to see the benefits of MRP clearly. This creates internal champions for equitable ways of working, supporting institutions to continue with more complex institutional reflections.
- 4. Equitable Partnerships help sharpen organisational agility, creativity, and cultural competency required to enable MRP in other ways.** Through Equitable Partnerships, staff within international organisations earn skills and knowledge necessary for engaging with local partners – including flexibility and cultural competency – which is part of the learning necessary to move away from bureaucratic, rigid, expensive, or inefficient practices.
- 2. Donors defer to those actors they know well – often larger and more established institutions.** Ideally, donors would forge deep and close working relationships with RLOs around the world; however, donors often default to continuing and deepening partnerships with organisations they know well – most of whom are larger and more established. Overcoming these preferences for known entities requires a time-intensive upfront investment in relationship-building with RLOs, but donors may struggle to make this space. Experts note this struggle may be due to bias and assumptions about competence and trustworthiness, and/or pressure to keep work moving and funding flowing.
- 3. Organisations attempt Equitable Partnerships without prioritising an ELJ.** Equitable partnerships are most successful when concepts of equity are deeply understood – a knowledge set often gained through an ELJ on the exclusion of historically marginalised groups in the sector, and the existence and manifestations of power dynamics. Through this learning, the principles of Equitable Partnerships are better understood and embraced.
- 4. Organisations do not operationalise accountability to Equitable Partnerships.** As articulated in the Asylum Access position paper, “*Building Equitable Partnerships*” (“Asylum Access’s Position Paper”), Equitable Partnerships have many components. These components are best deployed when deeply understood internally. Enshrining the ‘how’ of Equitable Partnerships through frameworks and standard operating procedures (such as MEAL frameworks, SOPs) creates accountability to them across an organisation. Without this standardisation, attempts to build Equitable Partnerships can be unevenly applied by the organisation.

## Acknowledging Common Challenges within Equitable Partnerships

Organisations that seek to build Equitable Partnerships often hit some roadblocks. By anticipating such challenges, organisations can better prepare to avoid or overcome them. Experts identified the following as standard challenges:

- 1. Organisations don’t acknowledge the need for staff time and financial resources.** Equitable Partnerships often require coordination across time zones, slower and more deliberate communication, time and space for building trust, using interpreters, and participation in longer processes such as co-design and mutual accountability design. Organisations often underacknowledge the need for staff time and dedicated resources to build Equitable Partnerships.

## Step-by-Step Implementation Guide: How to Enable Equitable Partnerships with RLOs?

The following five steps serve as a set of strategies to operationalise Equitable Partnerships with RLOs, and enable organisations to overcome the challenges articulated above. These steps are drawn from Asylum Access's Position Paper and Cohere's workshop 3: "[Building Equitable Partnerships with Refugee-Led Organizations](#)". Asylum Access also has developed a [Joint Partnership Assessment Tool](#) designed to support international organisations and their RLO partners jointly assess their partnership, and an [Equitable Partnership Self-Assessment Tool](#), designed to help privileged actors assess their own behaviours. Guidance on how to use both these tools can be found in the [Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit](#).

The steps listed below are primarily suggested for multilaterals, INGOs, donors and international/regional intermediaries, although lessons can be extrapolated for national NGOs as well.

### Step 1: Establish a shared understanding of context, culture and power dynamics.

Step 1 Outcome	Step 1: Implementation guide
Agreement amongst partners on best approaches to partnership given context and positionality.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Dedicate time and resources at the start of the partnership</b> to sustain principles of Equitable Partnership throughout the relationship, and to ground approaches in relevant cultural realities.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Engage in discussions with the partner to understand and address potentially imbalanced power dynamics</b> within a partnership, and how to best address them through actions, processes, systems, and communication approaches.</li> </ul>

### Step 2: Foster trust and transparency among partners and donors.

Step 2 Outcome	Step 2: Implementation guide
The partnership is sustainable due to relational resiliency.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Prioritise relationships, transparency, and clarity around values and expectations.</b> Invest time and resources in developing meaningful relationships through regular, flexible, culturally appropriate communication, and joint activities. This means planning for significant synchronous time together.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Develop and document mutual agreements</b> for clarity and conflict avoidance, and have open discussions on aligning values, goals and expectations, including those related to how partners will manage funding. This may require developing standard operating procedures along the way to enshrine commitments.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Where there is a coalition of partners</b>, consider institutionalising shared decision-making and co-leadership through working group models for different areas of responsibility (e.g. finance, governance, program implementation).</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Practise fiscal transparency.</b> Share budgets transparently, especially when applying for joint funding. Request feedback on allocations so that concerns are surfaced and important amendments are possible.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Carve out space for feedback and honest dialogue.</b> Proactively ask for and make time for feedback. Consult Asylum Access's <a href="#">Joint Partnership Assessment Tool</a> to institutionalise and remove the onus on local partners to raise concerns spontaneously.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Normalise and engage in difficult but kind conversations with donors.</b> Leverage privileged positions to practise trust and transparency in engagements with donors. By calling attention to the ways in which funding practices make co-design and trust and transparency difficult, the overall ecosystem moves toward enabling Equitable Partnerships and their resulting benefits. Even if donor practices don't change, the act of advocating for alternative approaches builds trust between partners.</li> </ul>

### Step 3: Co-design projects for mutual ownership and voice.

Step 3 Outcome	Step 3: Implementation guide
<p>Local RLO partners own and lead programming, gain prominence, and build relationships with donors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Ideally, the project is proposed by the RLO</b> who then chooses its own partners, rather than the other way around. This scenario ensures the highest chance of proximate ownership and local leadership. INGOs who propose ideas should consult with RLOs <b>as early as possible, before deep program designing or donor engagement</b>.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Start co-design at the very beginning of the project.</b> This includes setting vision, priorities and goals, decision-making structures, budget allocation, risk assessments, and donor engagement. Consider a review of Asylum Access's <a href="#">EPSAT tool</a> for a list of critical questions during the co-design phase.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Fund local partners from your own core or unrestricted funding</b> to participate in co-design before the grant is obtained.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Avoid pursuing grant applications that do not allow for co-design.</b> This can be due to short timelines, fast-approaching due dates, strict requirements and beyond. Reflecting on what funding to pursue is an opportunity to assess your motivations. Funding urgency is often tied to perpetuating one's own role and prominence and about protecting existing programming over co-designed efforts.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Co-design until the end.</b> Ensure your partners co-design iterations of program and exit strategies, including when it's time to identify a privileged partners' role post-project.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Recognise all partners as equal in all public spaces and communications materials</b>, with partner consent. This is especially important when engaging with donors. Through donor engagement, RLOs build their own ongoing relationships, lessening the need for intermediaries and international brokers.</li> </ul>

“The first step that we needed to take in order to get the grant was to talk to Asylum Access [...]. We decided together that we could be the main applicant [...] They trusted us so we could take that step be the ones that received the grant so we were the ones making the application as a main applicant”

Lublanc Pietro,  
Refugiados Unidos, Executive Director

“As an INGO, if we see a short timeline and you want to go ahead, ask ourselves: why are we doing it? What are our motivations? Do we need to consistently grow or do we need to rethink our metrics for success where it’s about how much of funding and support and leadership of local partners has, as opposed to perpetuating our own existence?”

Deepa Nambiar,  
Asylum Access, Director of Partnerships

## **What if we're mid-project and we realise we didn't co-design?**

In this situation, it is crucial to create space for input, critique, and direction change. This can look like:

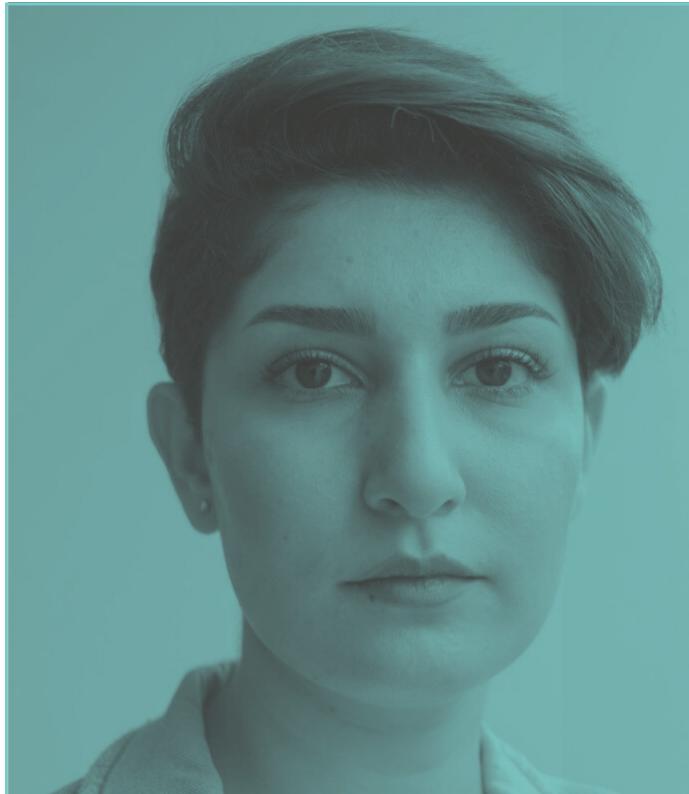
1. Openly acknowledge failure to co-design and commit to co-design moving forward.
2. Consider the need for an external facilitator to redesign any goals and priorities on equal footing.
3. Based on such consultations, adjust deliverables and budgets where possible. This may require advocating with donors for longer timelines and seeking amendments to grant deliverables and budgets.

### **Step 4: Maintain flexibility in working relationships with RLOs.**

<b>Step 4 Outcome</b>	<b>Step 4: Implementation guide</b>
The relationship is adapted to the local partners' preferred ways of working and needs, leading to more impactful programming.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Approach work with flexibility and curiosity.</b> Make space to adjust work plans when recommended by an RLO, given limited resources, ever-changing organisational needs, and evolving community needs.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Embrace different working styles</b> and communication approaches to build a collaborative environment. For example, investigate which synchronous and asynchronous platforms and approaches are easiest and best for the most proximate context.</li> </ul>

### **Step 5: Strengthen mechanisms for mutual learning and accountability.**

<b>Step 5 Outcome</b>	<b>Step 5: Implementation guide</b>
Shared learning and accountability are collaborative ensuring strategic shifts in programmatic approaches are properly informed by important perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Co-establish standards and processes for partners to share responsibility and hold each other accountable</b> for achieving goals and upholding partnership commitments, both formally and through open communication.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Create bi- or multidirectional learning opportunities in which</b> all partners are equally involved in reviewing, evaluating, sharing, and learning throughout the collaboration.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Actively involve all partners in data collection, analysis, and reflection,</b> sharing their perspectives and insights with other partners.</li> </ul>



## A Case Study in Equitable Partnerships: International Refugee Assistance Project and Refugees (IRAP) and Asylum Seekers Information Center (RAIC)

Mozghan Moarefizadeh, Executive Director of RAIC in Indonesia, highlighted the transformative impact of their Equitable Partnership with INGO, IRAP. She notes that trust, mutual sharing, and flexibility fostered a collaborative environment where communication was strong and the work was community-centred.

Unlike many of RAIC's other partnership experiences, IRAP actively listened to RAIC's expertise, leading to a mutual exchange of knowledge and a shared understanding of each other's work and areas of expertise. RAIC was especially pleased with IRAP's budget and reporting flexibility, and their dedication to relational ways of working, which Mozghan believes has dramatically increased the program's impact.

## Resources

- Asylum Access. (2024). Equitable Partnerships Accountability Toolkit. Retrieved from <http://asylumaccess.org/ep2023toolkit>
- Asylum Access. (2024). Position Paper on Building Equitable Partnerships. Retrieved from <https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2024-EP-Position-Paper-V2-2.pdf>
- Asylum Access. (2024). Position Paper on Building Equitable Partnerships, Two Pages Summary. Retrieved from [https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Equitable-Partnership\\_Doc1\\_v4.pdf](https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Equitable-Partnership_Doc1_v4.pdf)
- Peace Direct. (2023, January). The nine roles that intermediaries can play in international cooperation. Retrieved from <https://www.peacedirect.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/The-nine-roles-that-intermediaries-can-play-in-international-cooperation-2.pdf>
- The New Humanitarian. (2022). Decolonising Aid: A reading and resource List. Retrieved from <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2022/08/12/Decolonising-aid-a-reading-and-resource-list>

“[Equitable and high-quality funding processes] turn traditional philanthropy on its head. It brings the community and community leaders in the closed-doors decisions about ways funds will be utilized.”

Najeeba Wazefadost

APNOR, Founder and Executive Director, GRN and GIRWL Co-Founder.

## Organisational Pathway 4 - Enabling High Quality and Equitable Funding for RLOs

04

### Expert contributors:

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**Barri Shorey,**

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Senior Program Officer, Refugees Initiative and Disaster Program.



## Introduction: What is the Value of High Quality and Equitable Funding for RLOs?

Access to high-quality and equitable funding is one of the strongest levers the international community can pull to enable RLOs' institutional and programmatic successes. This paper defines high-quality and equitable funding as financial agreements that are substantial, accessible, unrestricted and long-term. Through high-quality and equitable funding, RLOs can:

- Design projects aligned with their organisational vision and community priorities, free from the constraints of conforming to donors' and intermediaries' predetermined agendas.
- Enhance their organisational capacity and establish sustainability in their operations.
- Develop the donor and political networks needed for securing more funding and influencing policy over time.
- Demonstrate their fund management abilities to risk-averse donors. This enables them to bolster their financial track record and enhance their credibility as key actors.

However, as articulated by the 2022 ODI report "*The failure to fund Refugee-led Organisations: Why the current system is not working, and the potential for change.*"<sup>10</sup> ("ODI Report") RLOs face tremendous barriers when attempting to access high-quality and equitable funding. In 2022, ODI found that RLOs received only \$26.4 million USD,<sup>11</sup> while the broader humanitarian system allocated over \$6.4 billion to 10 UN-Coordinated Refugee Response Plans. The median grant size for RLOs was \$26,657 USD, ten times lower than grants given to local NGOs and twenty times lower than grants to INGOs. Furthermore, RLOs often receive small, project-specific, and restricted grants that hinder their growth and do not cover their operational costs adequately.

This section articulates pathways for overcoming this reality to enable high-impact and equitable funds to RLOs.

## Rationale: How is Equitable and High-Quality Funding Relevant to the Pursuit of Meaningful Refugee Participation?

Endorsing and enabling equitable and high-quality funding for RLOs leverages MRP at community, national, regional and global levels. More specifically, equitable and high-quality funding enables MRP in the following ways:

- 1. High-impact and equitable funding to RLOs confers power over the design and implementation of responses deemed most important.** In any system, money is the strongest vehicle of power – those with funding can set agendas, access important decision-making spaces, fundraise and communicate effectively, and resource their chosen programs. Without sufficient funding, refugee leaders and their constituencies are unable to drive the responses that impact their lives, nor participate in relevant national, regional and global decision-making processes that inform policy decisions. In contrast, when RLOs have access to adequate resourcing, their agendas can be prioritised, driving community participation at scale.
- 2. High-impact and equitable funding practices (as opposed to any other funding approach) ensure MRP and community accountability.** Even though there has been an increase in funding of RLOs in the last few years, the ODI Report highlights that **most RLOs funding arrangements do not achieve MRP**. Intermediaries, including UNHCR, INGOs, UN agencies, pooled funds, RLOs/RLO networks, can be driven by different intentions and therefore utilise different approaches – many of which maintain the status quo of exclusion. Many approaches are driven by convenience, perpetuate disconnects between RLOs and donors, and utilise highly top-down and bureaucratic application, reporting and accountability processes. In contrast, high-quality and equitable funding mechanisms presented here are driven by impact, result in strong relationships between donors and RLOs, and enjoy community accountability – a combination that can result in the meaningful participation of large numbers of forcibly

<sup>10</sup> Sturridge, C., Girling-Morris, F., Spencer, A., Kara, A., and Charet, C. (2023). *The failure to fund refugee led organisations: Why the current system is not working, and the potential for change. HPG report*. London: ODI [www.odi.org/en/publications/the-failure-to-fund-refugee-led-organisations-why-the-current-system-is-not-working-and-the-potential-for-change](http://www.odi.org/en/publications/the-failure-to-fund-refugee-led-organisations-why-the-current-system-is-not-working-and-the-potential-for-change).

<sup>11</sup> Primarily in Ukraine, Colombia, Lebanon, and Jordan, Identified by ODI, though the actual global funding to RLOs is likely higher and not fully tracked.

displaced individuals.

## Acknowledging Common Challenges for Enabling High Quality and Equitable RLO Funding

- 1. Politics define funding and agenda-setting is arduous.** Donor governments and philanthropists are driven by interests and politics that most often do not align with the needs and interests of forcibly displaced communities around the world. In other words, privileged actors, not affected communities, define how much funding goes where. Within the system of response, some philanthropies are paving the way to embrace high-impact and equitable funding approaches; however, donor governments and UN agencies embrace deeply risk-averse mindsets that will take time and internal champions to change.
- 2. There's a major question about the will of donors and international organisations to shift toward community accountability.** Experts suggest that prevailing practices serve to safeguard the institutional interests and influence of those who are already privileged. Despite extensive discussions in international forums and resulting commitments, funding mechanisms consistently prioritise well-established, larger organisations and seldom consider grassroots approaches and systems of accountability. This situation leads many to question whether there is sufficient internal political will to facilitate meaningful change.
- 3. Inadequately assessing one's role as a financial gatekeeper.** Financial gatekeeping refers to situations where actions taken by funding organisations intentionally or unintentionally hinder or delay RLOs from accessing high-quality and equitable funding. Often, international organisations may not realise they are in a gatekeeping position because they measure success based on their perceived impact and achievements. Without adopting a critical analysis mindset – often gained through an ELJ – institutions may impede the flow of essential funding to RLOs. This lack of awareness can also lead to uncertainty within organisations about their role in facilitating funding—whether they should continue as intermediaries, what their involvement entails, and when they should step back.

“A lot of my time at International Rescue Committee (IRC) was spent on business development and fundraising. That was a large part of how success was measured - more grants, more share of the global work. While at the same time the voice over is that ultimately INGOs should be trying to run themselves out of business. This is a huge cognitive dissonance.”

Barri Shorey,  
Conrad N. Hilton Foundation,  
Senior Program Officer, Refugees  
Initiative and Disaster Program.

“Would at some point UNHCR decide to give up its power in Africa, transition, and leave the Africa response to RLOs? I'm not sure, because of all the political, economical questions attached to the work they are doing there. This is standing in the way of change”

Hane Alrustm, RRLI, Director of Programs.

“The question really shouldn't be if we are gatekeepers or if we are engaging in gatekeeping behavior, it should be how are we gatekeeping, when are we gatekeeping [...] The key thing is assuming that you have some form of power, that you are gatekeeping. It's how can you stop, how can you give it up, how can you step aside when needed ”

Maya Hasan, Shifting Power Accelerator and Fearless Project, Founder.

## Step-by-Step Implementation Guide: How to Enable High-Impact and Equitable Funding?

The following three steps are strategies to operationalize high-impact and equitable funding. They are culled from experts' contributions to [Cohere's Interactive Workshop 4](#).

<b>Step 1: Embrace an equity mindset and update strategy accordingly.</b>	
<b>Step 1</b>	<b>Step 1: Implementation guide</b>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Donors and intermediaries understand to what extent they are acknowledging and uplifting the comparative advantage of RLOs.</li> <li>2. Donors and intermediaries become champions for high-quality and equitable funding practices internally and externally.</li> </ol>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ <b>Acknowledge that participation cannot be achieved without shifting power and update your internal strategy accordingly.</b> Before analysing your funding practices, ensure shifting power is an internal institutional goal. This may be best done as a part of an ELJ. For intermediaries who do programming, the process should include consideration of exit strategies where international organisations intentionally plan to step away from local contexts, having worked intentionally to place local organisations in positions of power and influence.</li> <li>□ <b>Analyse power within your funding practices.</b> Understand, identify and challenge power dynamics in your funding relationship with RLOs.</li> <li>□ <b>Don't assess if you are gatekeeping, but rather how and when you're gatekeeping, and ways to stop.</b> Ask yourself how your activities control who gets access to a particular resource, power, or opportunity. Reflect on what it looks like, what needs to be done to stop, and how you can step aside. Use your positionality to point out and address gatekeeping when you see it elsewhere.</li> <li>□ <b>Turn down new opportunities to be an intermediary.</b> Instead, advocate with donors to directly fund RLO partners. Support RLO partners to engage with donors and absorb funding through organisational strengthening initiatives when explicitly asked. If necessary, consider providing fiscal sponsorship for an RLO without legal standing to receive funding.</li> <li>□ <b>If there is a necessity to be an intermediary, increase the use of equitable partnership and funding practices.</b> In order to prevent replicating problematic power dynamics, reflect on ways your role as an intermediary can be done more equitably. Options include recommending refugee-led intermediaries rather than yourself, institutionalising Equitable Partnerships with RLOs, providing unrestricted funding to RLOs partners to participate in co-design, engaging in participatory grant-making, and advocating for the handover of funding relationships directly to RLOs over time.</li> </ul>

“This is the first step and cannot be skipped, especially when inequalities are so great.”

Maya Hasan, Shifting Power Accelerator and Fearless Project, Founder

**“In an ideal world, there would be no need for brokers. There would be direct funding for RLOs without intermediaries. While acknowledging the importance of brokers like Asylum Access, and the need for more organizations to facilitate RLOs relationship with donors, we should be careful about who the brokers are and how they shift power. We should also keep in mind that, while brokers are important for now, the end goal is for donors to prioritize openness, knowledge, recognition, and direct work with RLOs. RLOs should be participating in the calls for proposals, processes, without INGOs opening the door for their participation.”**

**Lublanc Pietro,  
Refugiados Unidos, Executive Director.**

## Self-Assessment Tool:

Analysing power in funding practices:

A list of self-reflection questions for donors and intermediaries who support RLOs:<sup>12</sup>



Are we giving short-term funding that creates dependency, or are we giving multi-year, unrestricted funding, embracing trust-based sustainable funding?



Are we relying on RLOs to spend time and money on educating us or are we doing our own homework on the issues that RLOs face so we can better support them?



Are we being transparent and responsive to RLOs?



Are we offering organisational support beyond just a chat and funding?



Are we shifting power to RLOs or do we have power over them?



Are we asking RLOs for excessive paperwork to qualify for funding or are we simplifying and streamlining these processes as much as possible?



Are we soliciting and acting on feedback?

<sup>12</sup> Compiled by Maya Hasan, Expert Speaker in Workshop 3 and Shifting Power Accelerator and Fearless Project, Founder, from: Partos. (n.d.). Power Awareness Tool. <https://cnxus.org/resource/mutual-capacity-strengthening-learning-event-sas/>

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Larson, C. P., Plamondon, K. M., Dubent, L., Bicaba, F., Bicaba, A., Minh, T. H., Nguyen, A., Girard, J. E., Ramdé, J., & Gyorkos, T. W. (2022). The Equity Tool for Valuing Global Health Partnerships. Global Health Science and Practice, 10(2), e2100316. <https://doi.org/10.9745/GHSP-D-21-00316>.

## Step 2: Enable relational, accessible, flexible and sustainable funding.

### Step 2 Outcomes

1. Funding is based on and tailored to RLOs' needs and insights.
2. RLOs become more sustainable.

### Step 2: Implementation guide

#### On funding package characteristics:

- Directly fund RLOs, and if relevant, let them choose subgranting partners.** Wherever possible, fund RLOs directly rather than redistributing through an intermediary. If the RLO needs support, allow them to identify trusted subgranting partners.
- Increase the amount of funding given to RLOs.** Consider the minimums suggested by RRRI: a minimum of 25,000 USD annually for newer, smaller organisations who still need to grow their systems, and a minimum of 100,000-200,000 USD annually for larger organisations with the potential to scale their impact.<sup>13</sup> Resource RLOs with substantive budgets to allow them to step into traditionally INGO advocacy-led spaces about RLO funding.
- Provide multi-year funding.** Issue funding packages with funding in excess of 3 years to enable RLOs to grow their fundraising systems, which in turn enables sustainability.
- Provide unrestricted funding.** This ensures funds can be allocated to core costs to cover general operations, which means not tagged to specific thematic outcomes dictated by the donor.
- Provide flexible funding.** Enable RLOs to adjust budgets and timelines to accommodate their changing needs and the environments they work in.

#### On the application processes:

- Fund co-design phases for shortlisted applicants.**
- Provide longer application periods** and processes to enable co-design and trust-building between all stakeholders.
- Create accessible and inclusive application processes aimed at reducing the burden on applicants.** Consider language access, application phase support, written or verbal submissions, and the minimising of paperwork requirements.
- Do open calls:** Disrupt the practice of only inviting identified or sourced groups to apply for funding. Open calls enable more equitable access and build new relationships.
- Creativity and flexibility around language.** There's a widespread recognition of the necessity to use "the right" vocabulary in applications. By discarding preconceived ideas about language norms, avoiding unnecessary jargon and providing the option for applicants to submit proposals in their own languages, community-based applicants can express themselves authentically without fear of being disqualified due to culture-specific word choices.

#### On funding relationships:

- Foster Equitable Partnerships and relational ways of working.** Follow the guidance provided in Organisational Pathway 3 – especially related to trust, transparency, relationship development, and flexibility, to build effective funding relationships.
- Provide capacity strengthening in addition to high-impact funding.** Offer support beyond financial assistance, but always defer to the leadership of the RLO to ensure the support offered is appropriate. Refrain from implementing pre-packaged capacity-building initiatives unless they have been thoroughly reviewed and approved in advance.

13 RRRI. An Open Letter to UNHCR. <https://www.refugeeslead.org/unhcr-open-letter>.

**"We actually strongly want to honour the emotions and the analysis politically of people who are directly impacted. We think that emotions like anger, frustration, grief, are transformative emotions [...]. For us, we are definitely not looking to be trapped in a specific vocabulary or requiring it from people, and actively trying to be much more creative and flexible around that."**

**Emmy Fu, Safe Passage Fund, Project Manager.**

### Case Study - Conrad N. Hilton Foundation - A philanthropic journey acknowledging power dynamics

Barri Shorey of Hilton Foundation shares: "The Hilton Foundation offers flexible, multi-year funding, and simplified application and reporting processes, which allows us to directly fund locally-led and refugee-led organisations – many which are often underfunded. Within the Refugees Initiative and Disasters Program, staff seek to acknowledge the inherent power dynamic that exists between the Foundation as a funder and the implementing organisation and tries to create a relationship that is built on open dialogue and about providing organisations with what they say they need. We consulted people with lived experience of displacement when creating the Refugee initiative strategy and continue to seek feedback on our programmatic investments to help inform how we spend our annual budget. We have also invited refugee leaders to speak with our Board so that Board members can hear directly from community leaders the opportunities and challenges that they face within the current aid system and better understand the impact and importance of directly funding RLOs at scale."

### Step 3: Build bottom-up accountability mechanisms that foster community ownership.

Step 3: Outcomes	Step 3: Implementation guide
<p>1. Community members experience a sense of ownership over the philanthropic process.</p> <p>2. Initiatives genuinely reflect the needs and aspirations of communities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Develop participatory grantmaking approaches.</b> Build processes for communities to influence where and how funding is distributed. Refer to the SPF case study in Organisational Pathway 2 on participatory Boards, and to the RRRI case study in this section for useful examples of participatory grantmaking approaches.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Include community members in donor-facing advocacy.</b> If you are advocating to a donor for changed ways of working (including around political issue areas) include and position affected community members to lead or contribute to the conversation. This promotes urgency and clarity in the ask for changed ways of working.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Share expertise with international peers on participatory grantmaking</b> to support data-driven refugee-led advocacy for systemic changes in funding mechanisms.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Seek to support people with lived experience and community connectedness to lead or influence funding decisions.</b> Foster community representation in all decision-making bodies impacting funding decisions.</li> </ul>

## A Case Study in Participatory Grantmaking: How RRLI's RLO coalition members and RLO grantees make funding decisions.

The Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) is a coalition of six RLO members. Member organisations together identify funding processes based on their knowledge of their respective RLO communities. Their application processes are jointly designed through an internal working group, and implemented by RRLI staff. Coalition members use other working groups for different streams of work and use and have documented decision-making processes.

Grantees are also involved in deciding how RRLI distributes resources. For instance, grantees themselves lead the review process for grantee renewal and selection of new grantees, employing a peer-to-peer review system to score and select grantees.

RRLI shares that this approach fosters two-ways capacity-strengthening. While grantees contribute to RRLI's community learning, they gain insights into the philanthropic process useful for their fundraising beyond RRLI.

## Resources

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## Organisational Pathway 5 - Supporting Localised Refugee-led Advocacy



05

### Expert contributors:

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## Introduction: What is the Value of Localised Refugee-Led Advocacy?

Advocacy led by people of forced displacement within their own communities, tailored to their specific context, is crucial for fostering inclusive social structures that promote community well-being. This localised approach often prioritises the pursuit of refugee human rights, such as permissions to live, work, access school, and travel freely; space to engage in civic and political activities; and freedom to rebuild lives in a host country. When backed by support from international organisations and host community civil society organisations, these advocacy efforts gain visibility, influence, and resilience, increasing their chances of achieving success.<sup>14</sup>

More specifically, localised refugee-led advocacy leads to:

- **Deeper focus on the national- and local-level policies that concretely impact people of forced displacement's wellbeing.** Through localised refugee-led advocacy, access to work, rights, healthcare, documentation, and problematic encampment policies, are brought into focus. This sits in contrast to the emphases of humanitarian systems and agencies, which often perpetuate their own role rather than long-term solutions, inadvertently supporting the confinement of affected people to non-dignified conditions for generations.
- **Informed and targeted advocacy strategies, with the potential to be very impactful.** Local refugee-led activist groups have lived experience of the specific and complex challenges communities face, and therefore can provide a straightforward and impassioned articulation of local needs in a manner that acknowledges relevant power dynamics and cultural codes. Evidence shows that when those most affected are leading movements for change,<sup>15</sup> efforts are more likely to instigate policy reform, programming, and changed

ways of working that communities find relevant, legitimate and ultimately impactful.

- **Stronger civil society, which is healthy for all communities.** Civil society can hold governments accountable to their various commitments to protect and support people of forced displacement. By supporting localised refugee-led advocacy, civil society focused on promoting the interests of communities is strengthened.
- **Considering and addressing root causes of displacement.** People experiencing forced displacement advocate not only for issues in their host countries but also for concerns in their countries of origin, a focus that is often overlooked by refugee response. For forcibly displaced communities, who typically maintain strong ties to their homelands and communities, addressing these root causes is naturally significant. While conventional refugee responses tend to concentrate on conditions in asylum environments for practical reasons, supporting refugee-led advocacy initiatives inherently acknowledges, and sometimes directly addresses, these root causes.

## Rationale: How is Supporting Localised Refugee-led Advocacy relevant to the pursuit of Meaningful Refugee Participation?

Throughout the IWS, experts consistently emphasised the importance of **broadening the participation agenda to include an emphasis on people of forced displacement's involvement at all levels, particularly within endeavours directly contributing to their well-being in practice**. For many experts, this entails adopting a highly localised and political perspective when advocating for MRP, and should lead to supporting RLOs that are engaged in local advocacy.

More specifically, supporting Localised Refugee-led Advocacy contributes to MRP in the following ways:

1. **It enables the kinds of policy changes that lead to societal participation at scale, helping to overcome humanitarian dependencies.** While other aspects of meaningful participation may focus on supporting individuals to be “levers for change” in major global spaces, localised refugee-led advocacy is a way to support the enablement of people of forced

<sup>14</sup> As highlighted in the Understanding RLO Impact Metasynthesis by Diana Essex-Lettieri, “successful partnerships with international entities, including donors, enable RLO impact,” p. 27. [https://www.refugeeslead.org/\\_files/ugd/3cae8\\_429d\\_194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a6.pdf](https://www.refugeeslead.org/_files/ugd/3cae8_429d_194c6e1149e797b654a3257436a6.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Crutchfield, L. R. (n.d.). *How change happens: Why some social movements succeed while others don't*. John Wiley & Sons.

displacement's participation at a societal level – within civic, political, economic, and social spaces.

**2. It supplements global calls for meaningful participation, contextualising cultural, political, economic and social realities.**

While the concept of MRP does not explicitly prioritise global initiatives and humanitarian endeavours, most notable efforts to promote MRP have indeed concentrated on participation within these spheres. Calls are often dominated by generalities, guidance, and calls for commitments that lack accountability mechanisms. By investing time and resources in localised refugee-led advocacy, it's possible to translate broad calls for change into concrete local work streams.

**3. It focuses on participation in society, not just participation in humanitarianism.**

Global advocacy for MRP often focuses on representation in global, particularly humanitarian spaces, as the ultimate goal. While valuable, overly focusing on this approach can reinforce the narrative of humanitarianism as a viable response system, despite its inherent coloniality. By supporting localised refugee-led advocacy efforts, the focus shifts from participation in humanitarianism to participation and integration in society.

**4. It clarifies how MRP and localisation reinforce one another.** MRP and localisation are two ideas rooted in equity, but their intersection isn't always clear. In reflecting on the role of localised refugee-led advocacy, the reinforcing intersection of these ideas becomes clear: outcomes for forcibly displaced communities are especially poignant when both MRP and localised approaches are present and supported.

cultural, social, and economic contexts. In order for global advocacy to be relevant in any given practical setting, deep contextualised work by local advocates (inclusive of refugee and host community NGOs) is necessary, effectively translating global initiatives into local ones.

- **Donor apprehension or aversion to political involvement.** Local refugee-led advocacy is inherently political as it aims to address obstacles imposed by governments and host communities. Donors, typically supportive of humanitarian efforts, may feel uneasy about engaging in political matters. This necessitates advocacy directed towards donors to ensure funding is available for refugee-led advocacy.
- **Gatekeeping by INGOs can hinder genuine grassroots advocacy.** The control exerted by INGOs can impede genuine grassroots advocacy efforts. NGOs often underestimate their own influence and struggle to determine when to step back, resulting in superficial and inconsistent support for refugee-led advocacy. This control is sometimes framed as risk management, with NGOs advocating on behalf of communities rather than alongside them to shield them from potential repercussions from local authorities. Local activists also risk becoming entangled in advancing INGO agendas to participate in relevant discussions, veering away from their original goals to engage in surface-level activities.
- **Efforts labelled as 'capacity-building' by foreign actors often fail to deliver on their promises, leading to frustration and stagnation for local advocates.** Experts observe that while support from INGOs and local entities may be theoretically welcomed, it typically consists of short-term, minimal, and contextually irrelevant assistance lacking self-awareness. Rarely do these efforts address the bureaucratic hurdles stemming from legal status or facilitate access to funding opportunities and decision-making forums with government officials, the UN, and other intergovernmental partners. Without such support, local refugee-led advocacy efforts are unlikely to realise their full potential and effect desired change.

## Acknowledging common challenges for enabling Localised Refugee-led Advocacy.

- **There is an evident assumption that the act of recruiting those with lived experience onto global advocacy teams will translate directly into local outcomes.** Yet as outlined in Section 2, there is a practical need for advocacy to be deeply embedded in local

## Step-by-Step Implementation Guide: How to Support Localised Refugee-Led Advocacy?

The following four steps serve as a set of strategies to support localised refugee-led advocacy. They are culled from experts' contributions to [Cohere's workshop 5: "Enabling Localised Refugee-Led Advocacy."](#)

<b>Step 1: Orient ourselves to a localised mindset, preparing to shift power.</b>	
<b>Step 1 Outcomes</b>	<b>Step 1: Implementation guide</b>
Organisations are more prepared to localise their commitments to MRP.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>□ <b>Anticipate role change for international organisations.</b> Imagine the future role of international organisations in a liberated society, where forcibly displaced leaders and communities have the autonomy to guide responses as they see fit and seek support from selected partners.</li> <li>□ Then, envision how this future state might impact the role of your organisation. As international actors, recognise the potential necessity to step back or even withdraw, redirecting efforts towards supporting locally-led initiatives. This transition could be facilitated through an ELJ. It's crucial to also contemplate the need for an exit strategy and address concerns about relevance by exploring viable roles for allies (see Section 1). Such change should be carefully conceived and considered alongside impacted communities.</li> <li>□ <b>Receive critique.</b> Critique is a feminist practice born of the notion that we cannot grow and change without surfacing concerns. When receiving critique from another entity, especially from an RLO, seek to learn from it rather than take it as a personal attack.</li> <li>□ <b>Incorporate community representation into your team.</b> By hiring individuals from the communities you serve, you ensure that relevant lived experiences influence strategic decision-making, potentially easing power shifting efforts. Recognise community connectedness as a valuable skill. See Section 2.</li> </ul>

**"We work one on one with them to prepare for those high-level engagements to better prepare their policy-making. This has led to incredible changes."**

Ana María Diez, CpV, President.

**Coalición por Venezuela (CpV) supported local activists in Colombia who were previously ignored by municipal authorities. CpV traveled to cities with these activists, introduced them as specialists, accompanied them to meetings with authorities, and ensured ongoing support for follow-up. This approach has significantly improved how the government perceives the activists and their work.**

## Step 2: Focus on power transfer and power building in local settings.

Step 2: Outcome	Step 2: Implementation guide
<p>Local actors and refugee advocates are positioned to access funding and decision-making tables without support from outside actors.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li data-bbox="474 255 1537 424"><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Build Equitable Partnerships with local refugee-led advocacy organisations</b>, incorporating practices like two-way mentoring and co-designing advocacy projects. Foster honesty and trust in relationships, and practice flexibility including by supporting RLOs to refuse your suggestions. See Section 3.</li> <li data-bbox="474 424 1537 677"><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Facilitate the development of relationships between local advocates and decision-makers</b>. Help refugee community activists and their host community allies connect with government officials and access venues where policy discussions take place. If safety is a concern, provide accompaniment. If invited, attend engagements as a supportive gesture, ensuring that the refugee advocates remain in the lead role. It is crucial not to overshadow the local advocate's agenda by dominating the conversation.</li> <li data-bbox="474 677 1537 889"><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Offer local refugee advocates contextualised learning opportunities and mentorship</b>. Consider collaborating with local RLOs to design and offer training in policy, advocacy, diplomacy, and communications. Ensure relevance by co-designing the learning opportunity with the intended recipient. Do not use pre-packaged support. Mentorship can include offering support to draft advocacy documents, reports, etc.</li> <li data-bbox="474 889 1537 1036"><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Provide complementary logistical and administrative support, and visibility for support to refugee-led advocacy groups</b> such as providing meeting space, and endorsing initiatives and campaigns including by formally endorsing and co-sponsoring advocacy materials.</li> <li data-bbox="474 1036 1537 1142"><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Publicly address instances of racism or bias when witnessed</b>. Operate in solidarity with RLOs by using privilege/advantage to call out racism or bias when witnessed.</li> <li data-bbox="474 1142 1537 1311"><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Support activists' well-being</b> by investing in mental health resources and implementing respite programs for those facing exhaustion, stress, or violence. Consider allocating funds for initiatives delivering such programs<sup>16</sup>, and integrate well-being activities into RLO funding, covering areas such as team-building, psychological support, and flexible working hours.</li> </ul>

“Co-create projects that create jobs”

Miles Tanhira, GRN European Chapter,  
Member and TGEU, Senior Programme  
Officer.

“Always stick behind and sit next to the  
local NGO and the community leaders”

Ana María Diez, CpV, President.

<b>Step 3: Fund movements and advocates, including those that are considered “political”.</b>	
<b>Step 3 Outcomes</b>	<b>Step 3: Implementation guide</b>
<p>1. Funding reaches activities that lead to long-term sustainable outcomes for forcibly displaced communities.</p> <p>2. MRP is achieved at scale by supporting societal inclusion.</p>	<p><b>When finding localised refugee-led advocacy:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Adhere to the principle of “resistance needs alliance”</b> by abstaining from dictating how RLOs organise their efforts. RLOs are in a better position to recognise the root causes of issues and to navigate the power structures perpetuating the problems they advocate against. Allow them to decide the most effective approach for their advocacy agenda while fostering connections and collaboration in their endeavours. Advocate for the acknowledgement and response to their narratives, needs, actions, emotions, and perspectives by the philanthropic community.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Recognise the importance of safety in funding activism, particularly in regions where oppressive politics hinder activist work.</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protect the identities of grantee partners when necessary and with their consent.</li> <li>• Utilise the expertise of community-connected staff, board members, and RLOs when designing strategies.</li> <li>• Leverage networks to connect grantees with strategic and legal consultants as required, including to more established organisations with greater resources, to facilitate funding and/or to ensure the safety of grantees.</li> <li>• Embrace the necessary degree of flexibility to prioritise safety above all else.</li> </ul> </li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Anticipate and plan ahead to capture early indicators and insights from grassroots movements,</b> predicting political developments and immediate needs. This ensures that your grant-making initiatives are shaped by the movements themselves. During periods of relative calm, dedicate ample time to dialogue with staff and board members with lived experience, grantee partners, and grassroots collectives. Assess their anticipated needs thoroughly to ensure that your funding calls are both responsive and tailored directly to those needs.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Embrace long-term funding strategies</b> (and other strategies mentioned in Section 4, Pathway 2) to ensure the success of advocacy agendas.</li> </ul>

“During the rising violence between Poland and Belarus, the board heard murmurs of the events happening before it reached the media, so we started resourcing movement building before it even got international intention.”

Emmy Fu, Project Manager at Safe Passage Fund

## Step 4: Use your position of power to advocate for a safer and more enabling environment for local advocates.

Step 4 Outcomes	Step 4: Implementation guide
<p>1. Local governments, the private sector, and academia engage and uplift people of forced displacement.</p> <p>2. Forcibly displaced advocates enjoy greater access and safety in their efforts.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Systematically invest in risk mitigation strategies and protection for activists.</b> Engage local experts for legal advice, collaborate with community leaders to co-design risk mitigation strategies, and advocate for the establishment of safer spaces for engagement. Ensure that the approach to designing risk mitigation strategies is trauma-informed to prevent harm.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Facilitate or establish connections and partnerships between RLOs and stakeholders</b> such as governments, universities, boards, and businesses, beyond the scope of humanitarian aid. These relationships enable movement leaders to participate in pertinent advocacy efforts, paving the way for widespread meaningful partnerships.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Work together with RLOs to raise awareness among local stakeholders</b>, particularly governments, on how to support people of forced displacement from diverse backgrounds, experiences and abilities, with the aim of fostering inclusivity in engagement. Special attention should be given to language use, choice of words, and funding requirements.</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Emphasise intersectionality in RLO engagements</b> by fostering connections between diverse RLOs and influential stakeholders, ensuring the representation of multiple historically marginalised and underrepresented refugee communities.</li> </ul>

## Resources

- Asylum Access. (2023). The Only Real Protection Is Local: Position Paper. Retrieved from [https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Only-Real-Protection-Is-Local\\_Dec11.pdf](https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/The-Only-Real-Protection-Is-Local_Dec11.pdf)
- International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. (2018). Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps. Retrieved from <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/political-participation-of-refugees-bridging-the-gaps.pdf>
- Milner, J., Alio, M., & Gardi, R. (2022, December). Meaningful Refugee Participation: An Emerging Norm in the Global Refugee Regime. *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 41(4), 565–593. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdac007>
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- Resilience Amplified: Refugees Collectively Redefining Inclusivity and Reimagining Europe's Future. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.cjipa.org/post/resilience-amplified-refugees-collectively-redefining-inclusivity-and-reimagining-europe-s-future>

# Conclusion

The five organisational pathways listed here are actionable starting points for institutions who wish to operate in allyship with people of forced displacement and their organisations.

If this document represents far-reaching change for your institution, Cohere recognizes it may be an overwhelming starting point. Experts encourage starting with an Equity Learning Journey and building a roadmap for change that responds to specific organisational realities. Uplifting meaningful refugee participation requires change, but that change doesn't have to happen all at once. As Session 1 expert Samara Hakim specified "ELJs are life-long."

While embarking on an ELJ, consider starting with smaller behavioural and practical adjustments (such as equitable partnerships). These initial steps can help build internal support for more comprehensive institutional changes, and in a manner that reflects specific institutional mission, culture and reality.

We extend our gratitude to the experts whose insights shaped this series and report and those who have dedicated their time to educating allies and champions of MRP, so they may better support forcibly displaced communities worldwide.

## Authors' Reflections on Power and Appetite for Change

Throughout Cohere's IWS, many experts consistently expressed three frustrations. First, they lamented the lack of systemic, sector-wide investment in MRP, characterising progress as slow and inadequate. Second, when community leaders inquire as to why major and influential international institutions have not taken significant action, they are often told that "internal barriers" cannot be overcome or addressed quickly, perpetuating a false mindset that they are eternal and cannot be transformed. Lastly, community leaders criticised the tokenization of MRP, like greenwashing or false solutions, where symbolic gestures like global hires or advisory boards lack substantive impact, serving to placate rather than empower advocates.

The combination of these frustrations leaves RLOs and other community leaders to understandably question: What is creating this dynamic? What is causing this ongoing disconnect between commitments and action?

The hypothesis behind the IWS initiative was that many allies want to embrace MRP, but lack the know-how. This series and report aim to address this hypothesis by outlining the mindsets, behaviours, and actions necessary to overcome internal barriers hindering MRP. We understand this is an aspect of the solution.

Yet, as we embarked on this initiative, it became clear that guides like this would not alone respond to the ongoing disconnect. Despite providing clear pathways, many experts worry there will be ongoing resistance to change and a reluctance to redefine and shift power held by major, well-established institutions. This resistance suggests a fundamental tension: prioritising community-centred responses requires stepping back from entrenched power structures, and potentially necessitates a significant overhaul of the international humanitarian and the UN systems.

Relinquishing power can awaken institutional fragility, leading to what expert Barri Shorey in Session 4 described as a "cognitive dissonance" among well-established institutions, torn between supporting MRP and maintaining their own access to opportunities. To resolve this dissonance, institutions and their workforces must either reassess their relationship with power or abandon the pursuit of MRP altogether. We hope there are more who will choose to do the former. Investigation of how to name and manage options for reassessing one's relationship with power can be supported through an ELJ. With this in mind, we recognize the importance

of initiatives like [RINGO](#) that are unpacking decolonised organisational structures as a way to enable this complex power redistribution.

Relinquishing power can also awaken personal fragility for those wishing to uplift MRP, but who do not personally have lived experience of forced displacement. Exploring the allied roles as presented in Session 1 can help to refocus energy on positive contribution. We walk away from this series and from this report understanding there can be a role for anyone who wishes to support displaced communities, regardless of identity and positionality, assuming there is a genuine dedication to the full implementation of meaningful participation. However, these roles will look different than previously conceived, and will require many humanitarian and development workers to decenter themselves.

While some concepts in this paper required extensive explanations, we also received straightforward messages urging all of us to “do better.” This serves as a reminder to heed the wisdom we often hear from people of forced displacement worldwide, urging response institutions to prioritise impactful refugee responses over institutional growth or longevity.

Though there is work left for us all to do, we are inspired by the over six hundred people who participated in this series and sought guidance from experts to inform their approaches to MRP. As we move beyond agenda-setting and into a more nuanced and complex conversation about the ‘how,’ there is an ongoing need to learn from one another’s challenges and successes. Though much work remains, the collective wisdom and commitment of this community inspire hope for significant advancements in MRP.<sup>17</sup>

“Meaningful refugee participation is not optional; it is what guarantees more and better policies in less time; it depends on when States and organisations decide to make this decision and realise that it is the right thing and the most practical way to achieve good results in less time, since there is nothing to supplant lived experience.”<sup>17</sup>

Ana María Diez, CpV, President

<sup>17</sup> Quote retrieved from: UNHCR. (2023, November 27). Meaningful participation of refugees and stateless people in the Global Refugee Forum 2023 and beyond. <https://globalcompactrefugees.org/news-stories/meaningful-participation-refugees-and-stateless-people-global-refugee-forum>.