



# Meaningful refugee participation in the governance of the global refugee regime **at the state level**

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# What.

“**Meaningful refugee participation**” is achieved when refugees have substantial and sustained influence in fora where decisions and policies that affect them are taken. While such influence can and should be pursued in local, national, and regional contexts, the focus of this note is the pursuit of meaningful refugee participation in the decision-making mechanisms of the global refugee regime.

While the governance of the refugee regime is diffuse, there are discernable contexts in which decisions are made that are intended

to affect all refugees, regardless of their location. Such moments include the making of new examples of global refugee policy, decisions of UNHCR’s Executive Committee, agreements in coordination meetings, such as the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, and the outcomes of thematic and political gatherings, such as the High Commissioner’s Dialogue and the Global Refugee Forum. While these meetings are all held in Geneva, additional opportunities may exist in the context of New York, such as meetings of the UN General Assembly’s Third Committee.

There are various ways that refugees can participate in such contexts, including as members of NGO delegations, as representatives of refugee-led organizations or initiatives, or as part of regional or global networks. Such forms of participation allow refugees to advance shared areas of interest and engage informally with a wide range of other actors.

# Where.

**R-SEAT** believes that one of the most influential forms of refugee participation, however, is the active, substantive and sustained inclusion of refugees in state delegations to meetings of the international refugee system. This belief is predicated on the fact that the rules governing decision-making on refugee issues gives greatest power to states. It is states that vote on UNHCR’s annual budget and Conclusions of UNHCR’s Executive Committee.

While other actors have observer status in official meetings, it is only states that participate in official decision-making. Participating within national delegations and influencing the behavior of states, is therefore the most critical way that refugees can influence outcomes in the global refugee regime.

It is for this reason that **the central objective of R-SEAT is to encourage states to develop mechanisms to include refugees in a meaningful way in their delegations to meetings of the global refugee regime.**

The simple presence of refugees in meetings, however, does not necessarily constitute meaningful participation. Instead, R-SEAT believes that meaningful refugee participation involves actions before, during and after official meetings of the global refugee regime. In addition, given the importance of informal decision-making spaces, meaningful refugee participation should also extend to participating in informal meetings on the margins of official meetings.



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# How.

**Meaningful refugee participation must also be substantive.** It is not sufficient for a refugee advisor to be present in a meeting but not given a role in the meeting and not trained or equipped with the background information necessary to ensure that their participation can influence outcomes. To this end, R-SEAT supports initiatives to provide training to refugee advocates with lived experience of displacement to help them better understand the political context of meetings in Geneva, the protocol and procedures of such meetings, and the interests and priorities of diverse actors participating in such meetings. In addition, refugee advisors on state delegations should have access to the background and briefing information

required to enable them to make informed and substantiated contributions to the crucial business of state delegations at meetings of the global refugee regime. It is on this basis that refugee advisors can also make the greatest contribution to their own delegation.

Given this understanding of the scope and potential impact of meaningful refugee participation, R-SEAT has identified the following areas of action and best practices as necessary elements that together define meaningful refugee participation in the context of state delegations:

## A- Creating a supportive context:

- ✓ Support domestic refugee leadership ecosystem within the state. Mechanisms such as the Refugee Advisory Network of Canada (RAN Canada), the New Zealand Refugee Advisory Panel (NZRAP), and the US Refugee Advisory Board (USRAB) provide support for meaningful refugee participation by establishing a group of refugee advocates with lived experience of displacement who are independently selected to engage that state on its engagement with the global refugee regime. Refugee advisors can then be selected from these groups, ensuring that individual refugee advisors are connected to a wider range of refugee perspectives.
- ✓ Provide capacity-strengthening and professional development to future refugee advisors on issues relating to the political context of meetings of the global refugee regime, the protocol and procedures of such meetings, and the issues, interests and priorities of diverse actors participating in such meetings. This will ensure that refugee advisors within delegations are better equipped to make substantive contributions.
- ✓ Support linkages between refugee advisors and researchers working on global refugee issues and encourage academic partners to support refugee advisors with background materials on issues on the agenda of the global refugee regime that are of interest to the refugee advisor.
- ✓ Facilitate open and on-going dialogue between state officials and refugee advisory bodies on how best to advance the priorities the state in question seeks to advance within the refugee regime and to enable refugee advisory bodies to raise new issues and priorities to be pursued.



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## **B- Before the meeting:**

- ✓ Provide the refugee advisor with an agenda of the meeting and side events, along with knowledge of the delegation's goals and objectives in the meeting.
- ✓ Include the refugee advisor in preparatory strategy meetings of the delegation, introduce the refugee advisor to other members of the delegation, clarify roles and responsibilities during the meeting, and seek input from the refugee advisor on positions the delegation can take on specific agenda items.
- ✓ Seek input from the refugee advisor on actors with whom the delegation could usefully engage with on the margins of the meeting.

## **C- During the meeting:**

- ✓ Assign specific tasks and responsibilities to the refugee advisor during the meeting.
- ✓ Include the refugee advisor in as many formal and informal meetings as possible.
- ✓ Maintain an on-going channel of communication with the refugee advisor during the meeting, especially to include the refugee advisor in the delegation's strategizing process

## **D- After the meeting:**

- ✓ Request a final report from the refugee advisor to be discussed as part of the delegation's debriefing session following the meeting.
- ✓ Engage in a conversation with the refugee advisor on ways that the meaningful participation of refugees in future delegations could be enhanced.
- ✓ Acting on these steps will help ensure that refugee participation is meaningful and substantive, thus realizing the potential of refugee participation as substantively useful for both refugees and states.



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