

Module 8: Background Reading on Meaningful Participation

The Conundrum of Meaningful Participation

One size does not fit all! But the principles do apply

Cross-cutting concepts - the intersection of meaningful participation, partnership, social inclusion, a human rights approach and incorporating all levels of lived experience.

An important component to the implementation of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) has been the process of refugees meaningfully participating in decision making about their futures. Refugee groups are now demanding to be heard and involved. [“Nothing about us, without us”](#) is the slogan of the Global Refugee Led Network (GRN) who have been working on developing approaches to support [the meaningful participation of refugees at all levels](#). They have progressively been supported in this demand by some NGOs, INGOs, donors and UN bodies, in particular UNHCR. It is included as a key principle in the GCR and the AGD Policy and Framework. However, there is not a clear definition of what meaningful participation means in a refugee context, nor how it can be achieved. Several times while working in Geneva, members of government delegations commented that while they agree in principle on many of the commitments outlined in the GCR, such as participation, age, gender and diversity and refugee led, they were not sure how to achieve this either as host or donor governments. The phrase “one size does not fit all” became a catch phrase, and one we adopted as a key challenge to be addressed in our project. We worked on the hypothesis that it should be possible to fulfill key principles using different approaches, which were suitable to local circumstances. This is the approach we took with regard to analysing the potential applications of the term of ‘meaningful participation’ in the context of work with refugee women. So far we have identified at least three models, particularly in the context of refugee led work. They are:

1. Fully refugee led, which means that refugee groups are able to receive and manage their own funding.
2. A collaborative model, where RLOs work in partnership with trained supportive local service providers, including UNHCR, but design and deliver the services themselves.
3. Refugee Informed, where RLOs are consulted about the services to be provided and are **involved in service delivery as far as the local conditions allow**.

One of the key learnings from the project is that it is important to determine which model is feasible in any given site before developing a project. This will guard against disappointment, and sadly, even “refugee blaming” if the programs are not successful. It will also highlight areas which need to be addressed through advocacy and activities, to provide the maximum opportunities for RLOs and WRLOs to develop and succeed in different contexts.

For more detail see [Three Different Countries, Three Models of ‘Participation’ in the Background Readings for the Introductory Module](#)

A Flexible Model

Building on a substantial volume of work on participation in community management and development studies, we have developed a flexible model for use when designing models of meaningful participation and analysis of local contexts. The major difference between notions of participation used in development studies and projects and in a refugee situation, is that **participation in development is predicated on the concept of citizenship and rights, such as the right to work, which the majority of refugees do not have.**

Acknowledging this caveat as well as the different forms and levels of partnership (Arnstein 1969; Cornwall 2008), definitions we have drawn of so far include that 'participation' is a process during which individuals, groups and organizations are consulted about and may have the opportunity to become actively involved in a project or program of activity. This is often described as 'participation as consultation'. Moving beyond consultation is the notion of 'participation as partnership' This describes an approach in which communities take a lead role identifying problems and proposing possible projects and programs but work in partnership with service providers to develop and implement these. The highest level of participation, is 'participation as self-mobilisation and ownership'. In this approach communities initiate, implement and own the whole process (Kenny and Connors 2017:193)

Building on Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (1969) [Partnerships Online](#) suggests the following five levels of participation:

- Provision of information about a proposed project or solution.
- Consultation whereby a number of options are provided for feedback but the decision making is not in the hands of the refugees.
- Service providers and refugees deciding together about outcomes.
- Acting together to implement the projects or solutions.
- Supporting independent community initiatives.

(We also include participation of refugees in advocacy, at a local and international level).

For the purpose of this project, these definitions are used to describe the different approaches that have been supported in the different contexts in which we have worked. Most importantly we acknowledge that rather than fitting neatly into one of these levels of participation the models actually implemented often have some elements of all levels. Thus rather than being a clear hierarchy that can be used to assess the levels of participation it provides a useful framework to explore the different dimensions of what participation might entail in diverse contexts.

Social inclusion refers to the **active and meaningful participation of refugees** in the social, economic, cultural, and political aspects of the host society. It takes a **human rights approach**, treating refugees with respect, fostering a sense of belonging and empowering them to contribute positively to society at a local national and international level, through their inclusion and advocacy (Kenny and Connors, 2017: 30). Jennifer Hyndman refers to **social inclusion** as the process whereby immigrants or refugees become **participants** in particular sub-sectors of society: education, labour market, welfare system, political representation etc. The emphasis is on active and conscious processes: that is policies of public agencies or employers, as well as on the role of the newcomers themselves (Hyndman 2011, p. 36). **Social inclusion** allows people to **fully**

participate in their community and fosters peaceful societies. UNHCR *Social Inclusion of Refugees* <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5fc126354.pdf>

These goals are aspirational, and there are a number of barriers to their implementation. These include the political context at a host country level; the capacity of humanitarian staff; resistance from some humanitarian agencies, staff and donors; and tokenism in the use of the approaches.

Key things which must be reflected in developing participatory approaches with refugee communities:

When designing models of participation, the following questions have to be considered.

- International politics – how much support is there for the particular refugee crisis at the time?
- Is the host government supportive or hostile?
- Local politics – is the host community supportive or hostile?
- Are authorities supportive or hostile?
- What is the level of commitment to participation by the most powerful stakeholders?
- Do the values, attitudes, capacity and resources of the local staff support participatory approaches?
- What role does ideology and culture, of refugees, hosts and service providers play in particular in sensitive issues such as human rights, including gender equality, and SGBV.
- Are international agencies willing to co-operate together and work with local NGOs and refugee led groups as equal partners or does funding competition get in the way?
- What is the level of trust between refugee communities, UN agencies and other service providers?
- Is there fear that refugee-led groups are ‘too political’ and/or failure to accept that they can be both political advocates and rights-based service providers?
- What political constraints are faced by local academic partners?
- Are Donors willing to provide flexible funding?
- ... and more?

These are significant challenges and many are outside the control of any one body, or service provider. The major challenge is how to address these external issues, or at least get around some of them.

Potential responses to these challenges include:

- More focused and context-sensitive training materials developed and delivered.
- Collaborative work with partners and stakeholders already on side to publicise successful refugee-led projects, and build on the visible success of community led project during COVID-19.
- Increased and targeted advocacy, especially by refugees e.g., at relevant UN meetings.
- Production of workable and achievable policy and programming models.
- Advocacy to, and education of donors – presenting successes and accessible tools.
- Targeting governments with evidence of some of the benefits of refugee involvement and the contributions they can make in host communities.

- Funding and support for ethical participatory academic research in partnership with host country academics.

It is exciting to see that many of these steps are being taken by refugee led organisations and other supportive key stakeholders around the world. If you have a successful example in this area, please send it for posting on the Material from Other Practitioners, Good Practice section of the website.

References and Further Reading

Cornwall, A (2008) Unpacking 'Participation': models, meanings and practices, *Community Development Journal*, Volume 43, Issue 3, July 2008, Pages 269-283, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn010H>

Hyndman, J (2011) [*Research Summary on Resettled Refugee Integration in Canada*](#). Toronto: Centre for Refugee Studies, York University).

Kenny, S & Connors, P (2017), *Developing communities for the future* Fifth edition., Cengage Learning, South Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.