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Rhetoric vs. reality: The meaningful participation of migrants in humanitarian action

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Cover image: A mother carrying her daughter watches as a boat docks at the shores of a shelter for people in transit in Central America. © Adriana Loureiro Fernandez / Save the Children

Abstract

While there is extensive support by the humanitarian sector for the meaningful participation of migrants in theory and rhetoric, the gap between commitments and action is wide. Migrant voices and the unique expertise, experience and knowledge they bring continues to be recognised and articulated on paper but is still often undervalued in practice. Drawing on an analysis and evolution of terminology and models around meaningful participation in the context of migration-related work in the humanitarian sector, as well as insights and learnings from the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, this paper argues that concrete action on the meaningful participation of migrants, including refugees, is not keeping pace with words and intentions. For meaningful participation of migrants to become a reality, it requires systems change to break down persistent barriers in humanitarian policy and processes and enable a rebalance of power.

Leadership relevance

While there is ample rhetoric asserting that meaningful participation of migrants is essential to the design and delivery of humanitarian action, a real shift in power is yet to occur. The focus of many stakeholders – including States and humanitarian organisations – is often on the passive participation of migrants. This type of participation allows input only into pre-defined projects and interventions, instead of active leadership, wherein migrants set priorities, make decisions and share power. The content discussed herein can help inform strategies to enable this power shift and ensure that the meaningful participation of migrants in humanitarian action is not just rhetoric but is a reality.

The views presented here are the authors' own, and do not reflect the institutional view of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement or any of its components.

Introduction: Why meaningful participation matters

As the scale of humanitarian need around the world grows, so does the number of people who migrate in search of safety and/or better opportunities. As of mid-2024, there were 304 million migrants, representing about 3.7 percent of the world's population (UN DESA, 2024), while 239 million people were estimated to be in urgent need of humanitarian assistance and protection at the start of 2026 (OCHA, 2025). Add to this the fact at the end of 2024, an estimated 123.2 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced - an increase of 6 percent compared to the end of 2023 (UNHCR, 2025). And all at a time when significant cuts in global aid have further constricted the already limited support available to migrants, including refugees, in vulnerable situations. Indeed, research conducted by the Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab (RCRC GML) indicates that across all regions of the world, migrants' humanitarian needs remain largely unmet throughout their journeys, with many requiring assistance and protection but not receiving it, often due to barriers linked to awareness, availability, and eligibility for support (RCRC GML, 2022).

In the context of this increasing humanitarian need and the realities of ongoing migration, the meaningful participation of migrants, including refugees, is not a panacea, but it is a critical component to saving lives and ensuring that humanitarian interventions (whether delivered by States, humanitarian organisations or a combination thereof) are relevant and accessible to migrants. An inclusive process to humanitarian action and policymaking drawing on the unique insights of affected communities contributes to greater transparency around decision-making, and increases efficiency (US Refugee Advisory Board, 2023). Migrants have firsthand knowledge of the challenges faced throughout their journeys and meaningful participation builds trust with migrants and their communities, enabling and supporting access to and delivery of humanitarian protection and assistance (RCRC GML, 2022 and 2024). Indeed, the State of the Humanitarian System report - the only independent, longitudinal study of humanitarian aid performance - found a significant correlation between participation and better programming (ALNAP, 2022). And yet, many organisations working with migrants still struggle - in practice - to place the meaningful participation of migrants at the centre of their work.

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How meaningful participation is defined in the humanitarian sector

One of the earliest definitions of participation in humanitarian action is “the engagement of affected populations in one or more phases of the project cycle” (ALNAP, 2003). The Grand Bargain (2016) expanded on this to note that “effective participation of people affected by humanitarian crises puts the needs and interests of those people at the core of humanitarian decision-making, by actively engaging them throughout decision-making processes”. With specific regard to a migration context, the Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN) more recently defined meaningful participation as “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... in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe, and supported financially” (GRN, 2019).

This GRN definition has been endorsed by Refugees Seeking Equal Access at the Table (R-SEAT) - an international initiative working to enhance the effectiveness of global refugee responses by co-designing mechanisms to amplify refugee leadership and increase participation (R-SEAT, 2022). R-SEAT (2024a) has gone on to explain that “meaningful participation requires actors to listen to refugees, and for refugees to have the power to have tangible influence over the priorities and outcome of the policy process”. This description touches on a critical point that must be addressed to ensure meaningful participation: power.

There is often a significant power imbalance between humanitarian organisations and migrants accessing their services. Likewise, there can be a significant imbalance between policymakers involved in migration governance and people with a lived experience of migration engaged in policy processes. At its heart, meaningful participation of migrants is about sharing power more equally with migrants; it is about a ceding of power and control to migrants, from the local to global level (Act for Peace, 2022).

Models of meaningful participation

Several models are used to describe meaningful participation. For refugee participation, Harley and Hobbs (2020) draw on Catt and Murphy's (2002) framework to outline four levels:

1. Agenda setting - refugees identify the issues they want decision makers to consider.
2. Proposing solutions - refugees suggest ways forward, even if they cannot change the overall agenda.
3. Decision making and refinement - refugees help shape or adjust parts of an existing plan.

4. Implementation and delivery – major decisions are already made, but refugees influence how policies or programs are carried out in practice.

Ramazani (2023) further identifies three main ways refugees are often involved in decision making. The light touch approach invites many refugees to share views occasionally. The advisory approach involves regular input through advisory boards or advisory roles, and the professional approach places refugees in paid staff or leadership positions, giving them more influence from within organisations.

Another widely used model is the participation ladder. The GRN's eight step ladder outlines a progression from minimal to *meaningful* participation, with higher steps reflecting greater power sharing with refugee leaders (GRN, 2022). The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies' (IFRC) most recent guidance takes a similar approach, based on the IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (2014), which represents a continuum from informing and consulting with communities to involvement, collaboration and empowerment (IFRC, 2025).

These models reflect only a fraction of the approaches found in the literature but despite their differences, they all recognise that participation can occur at different levels and that meaningful participation requires increasing influence, agency, and power for people with lived experience.

Evolution of thought versus action – what progress has been made?

Meaningful participation has increasingly been recognised as a priority in the humanitarian sector, but the transition from intention to action has been less evident.

The past decade has seen an important shift in the sector from the stated goal being to simply *consult* with affected communities to one which aims to ensure their views genuinely shape decisions. The 2014 Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) on Quality and Accountability listed participation as the fourth of nine commitments for humanitarian actors (CHS Alliance, 2014). By 2024, the updated CHS placed *meaningful* participation as the first commitment and called for whole of organisation efforts to embed it in practice (CHS Alliance, 2024). This move from using the language of participation to that of meaningful participation reflected an acknowledgement by the sector of the need to interrogate how participation happens and to ensure participation is not tokenistic.

Another shift in rhetoric in recent times has been a move from justifying participation on moral grounds (migrants should be involved in decisions affecting them) to demonstrating its pragmatic rationale and impact (their participation improves the relevance and

effectiveness of policies and programs) (Ramazani, 2023). This is reflected, more broadly, in the evolution from the original Grand Bargain—which included a workstream on the Participation Revolution that aimed “to integrate meaningful participation in practice...” (IASC, 2016) – to the Grand Bargain 2.0 which made localisation and participation enabling priorities and established National Reference Groups led by local and national actors, aiming to ensure they had a seat at the decision-making table (IASC, 2021). The 2023 Grand Bargain Framework maintained localisation and participation as key enabling priorities, with a vision to “ensure greater participation of affected populations in decision-making at all stages of the program cycle” (IASC, 2023). These developments signalled stronger commitments by donors and humanitarian organisations alike to enabling meaningful participation.

However, despite this progress in language and guidance, evidence suggests action on the ground has not kept pace. The fifth independent review of the Grand Bargain highlighted a “consistent lack of political interest in participation” and weak incentives to advance it (HPG/ODI, 2021). An earlier evaluation similarly found “no evidence of a system wide move towards a transformative approach” that gives affected people real influence over aid decisions (HPG/ODI, 2020). And a more recent independent review concluded that although organisations had improved communication with affected people, there was still “no evidence of a substantive shift” in how much influence communities hold over the design, planning, and delivery of aid at the country level (HPG/ODI, 2023).

Meaningful participation in global migration governance

In the migration context, there is also a clear gap between commitments and practice. The 2016 New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants called for a multi stakeholder approach that included input from migrants and refugees (UNGA, 2016). Although States invited refugee and migrant led organisations to support implementation, they did not commit to involving migrants in shaping or developing these commitments (Milner et al, 2022). As a result, while migrants were recognised as relevant actors, their participation was not given any greater priority than that of other stakeholders.

Likewise, the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) endorsed by States in 2018 both place meaningful participation on the global agenda but have also been criticised for falling short in terms of impact.

The GCR affirms that States should recognise refugees as active participants and stresses that responses are more effective when they meaningfully engage the people they aim to support. It also requires States and other

stakeholders to involve refugees in its follow up and review processes, including through the Global Refugee Forum (GRF). While this shows a clear commitment to refugee participation, implementation has been uneven. At the 2019 GRF, refugees made up only about 2% of attendees (70 of 3,000) (UNHCR, 2019). By 2023, more than 320 stateless and forcibly displaced delegates participated (out of around 4,000), which is progress but still below the 10% target set by the GRN (UNHCR, 2023). However, the Refugee Participation Pledge, launched in 2019 to promote meaningful involvement in policymaking did reach 100 signatories (by organisations and States) by the 2023 GRF.

Similar to the GCR, the GCM promotes a people centred, human rights based, whole of society approach – with a focus on migration governance rather than refugees. It emphasises the human dimension of migration and encourages partnerships that include migrants, diasporas and local communities among others. However, although the GCM refers to participation throughout the text, it does not explicitly commit to the meaningful participation of migrants in decisions that affect them, whether at local or global levels. This gap, along with limited migrant representation in GCM monitoring processes, was criticised at the first International Migration Review Forum (UNNM, 2022), with organisations calling for stronger efforts to ensure meaningful participation for migrants regardless of their status (QUNO, 2022). In response, States pledged in the 2022 IMRF Progress Declaration to promote the meaningful participation of migrants in policy discussions as part of advancing GCM implementation (UNGA, 2022).

Overall, while these agreed global migration-related frameworks acknowledge the importance of meaningful participation, they do not offer a clear or consistent definition or guidance as to what it should involve in practice. Much of the strongest advocacy for meaningful participation has, instead, come from people with lived experience. Refugee led organisations have long promoted the principle of *nothing about us without us* (Mustafa, 2018) and have created their own platforms to advance this agenda, including the Network for Refugee Voices (established in 2017) and the first Global Summit of Refugees in 2018 (Harley and Hobbs, 2020). Groups such as the GRN and R-SEAT have all continued to push for stronger, clearer commitments to meaningful refugee participation and offered guiding principles and practical guidance on how to make this possible, most notably, in governance forums. Indeed, a key example that people with lived experience are continuing to advocate while also acknowledging risks of exclusion is the recent creation of the *Independent Declaration on the Right of Persons with Experience of Forced Displacement or Statelessness to Participate in Decisions that Affect Them*. Led and drafted by displaced and stateless communities themselves, the Declaration sets out a rights based framework for ensuring meaningful participation and

seeks to strengthen international law by clearly stating that people with lived experience have the right to take part in decisions that affect them. It also outlines the procedural safeguards needed to make this participation effective (Kaldor Centre, 2025).

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Barriers to the best of intentions – why commitments are falling short

Despite good-faith commitments to uphold meaningful participation in migration governance and within the humanitarian sector more widely, persistent barriers in practice exist, with migrants continuing to be excluded from decision-making and leadership opportunities from the local to global level.

The 2018 Global Summit of Refugees discussed informal and formal barriers to meaningful participation, including language barriers, visa and mobility constraints, security fears over visibility, funding issues, and even the absence of invitations to contribute (Network for Refugee Voices, 2018). The Network for Dialogue (2022) also cited barriers to the engagement of migrant- and refugee-led organisations in public policymaking as: only non-binding legal requests to include migrants and refugees; a lack of knowledge about and trust in public policymaking processes; involvement seen as an add-on; and limited awareness of how to get involved. In addition, debates over terminology and inadequate funding, alongside issues of access, resources (time, financial and capacity), representativeness, legal frameworks, institutional culture, safety and security, and tokenism present challenges to meaningful participation.

Access shapes whether migrants can meaningfully influence policy. Even when organisations commit to meaningful participation, these commitments have little effect without practical changes to processes and procedures. Migrants often face barriers such as visa constraints, lack of remote IT support, limited logistical assistance to attend meetings, and insufficient interpretation services (GRN, 2019). Opportunities for participation also differ by policy area: refugees may be involved in protection or humanitarian programming, but more politically sensitive areas—especially those linked to security and sovereignty—tend to be closed to meaningful migrant input (Alrihawi, 2022).

Representation also matters. Policymakers must consider who is included and whether diversity within migrant

groups is reflected. For example, under the GCR, States commit to consulting refugees and host communities, but not other categories of forcibly displaced people (Harley & Hobbs, 2020). Selecting individuals with lived experience for high level events can be contentious, with questions over legitimacy influencing how their views are received (Bahram, 2020). Conflicts of interest, unclear selection methods, or the privileging of certain groups can also hinder participation (Coher, 2022). In global forums, migrants may be expected to follow certain norms, and those who can—often English speaking migrants in the Global North with legal status and technological access—are more likely to be seen as ‘legitimate’ representatives (Jones, 2019; Klassen, 2022).

As noted, there is currently no comprehensive and explicit coverage in international law for the participation of migrants, including refugees, in decisions that affect them (Harley and Hobbs, 2020)—only non-binding frameworks such as the GCM and GCR that acknowledge its value. As a result, the extent to which migrants and migrant-led organisations can engage varies widely. Limited awareness of available entry points can also reduce participation (Network for Dialogue, 2022).

National regulations further restrict involvement, for example through work-permit rules or limited access to rights, which can discourage organisations from hiring migrants (Coher, 2022). Even when policies emphasise participation, humanitarian organisations often focus on process-level activities, while strategic planning, funding, and decision-making remain disconnected from participation goals (HAG, 2021). Leadership buy-in is also frequently weak, limiting progress (Holloway & Lough, 2020).

Meaningful participation also depends on access to practical resources—funding, information, time, and training. Migrants may lack financial and technical support to organise collectively or prepare informed contributions, and policy timelines rarely accommodate wide consultation (Ramazani, 2023). Lack of compensation is also a key concern: many migrants are not paid for their time in consultations or advisory groups, even though participation often requires forfeiting paid work (GRN, 2019; Bahram, 2020).

Safety concerns present further barriers. Migrants without legal status, asylum-seekers, and refugees may face detention, deportation, surveillance, threats, harassment, or reprisals for engaging in advocacy. Without safeguards, some may be unwilling or unable to participate meaningfully.

Finally, tokenism remains a major challenge. Participation can be reduced to personal storytelling rather than substantive policy engagement (Jones, 2019). Refugees have reported being asked to ‘share their story’ while being sidelined from actual decision-making (LERRN & IDRC, 2020). After the 2023 Global Refugee Forum,

R-SEAT summarised this dynamic pointedly: “We were seen, but were we heard?” (R-SEAT, 2024b).

Tokenism remains a major challenge. Participation can be reduced to personal storytelling rather than substantive policy engagement

Lessons from the frontline: Meaningful participation of migrants in practice

Despite significant barriers and the limits of global commitments, actors working closest to migrants—especially at the local level—are taking concrete steps to strengthen meaningful participation with real results, underscoring the importance of directing humanitarian funding to local organisations that maintain trusted relationships with migrants and communities.

To better understand what meaningful participation looks like in practice on the ground—and to understand how global agendas are translating (or not) into local action—RCRC GML interviewed National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (National Societies) involved in migration related humanitarian programming across 13 countries. Through conversations with key informants—40% of whom had lived migration experience—the GML gathered real-time insights that point to the need for more deliberate and better resourced approaches to ensure meaningful participation of migrants moves from words to action (RCRC GML, 2024).

In line with the literature, the most common barriers to meaningful participation of migrants identified by National Societies included: resource constraints – financial, human and time; language barriers, cultural concerns and trust issues; lack of leadership and institutional support; administrative, legal and policy constraints; and lack of clarity of the definition and approach. Despite this, National Societies were actively taking steps to ensure meaningful participation.

For example, when introducing the RedSafe platform in refugee camps, the Zambia Red Cross Society partnered with trusted actors already active in the camps and local leaders to demonstrate the app, address concerns about digital communication, and build confidence. Local leaders and refugee volunteers were trained to promote the platform directly within their communities.

Similarly, Australian Red Cross used a co-design model for its Work Right Hub, an online tool helping migrants identify modern slavery at work. People with lived experience shaped the platform’s design, accessibility

and content, with materials adapted directly from their feedback. Their expertise and insights—not personal stories—guided development.

In the Americas, Colombian Red Cross identified tensions between two migrant communities living near each other. With guidance from their Community Practitioner (a paid staff member with lived experience), they co-designed activities to foster cultural exchange and social interaction. Through dialogue and joint initiatives, communities overcame resource-related concerns and now collaborate on recreational events and improving shared spaces such as classrooms and community centres.

Beyond this, National Societies are also working to address barriers related to access and representation. The Gambia Red Cross Society mapped and partnered with migrant associations in the country to ensure migrants could access ongoing support beyond the National Society's initial assistance. Similarly, Argentine Red Cross co-designed programs with migrant led organisations, including workshops on rights, regularisation, and access to health services, and routinely assesses its capacity to respond to needs identified by migrants in collaboration with migrant-led organisations. Such examples show that barriers can be overcome through partnership with migrants and migrant-led organisations.

National Societies highlighted that the absence of a unified definition of meaningful participation across the humanitarian sector and within organisations creates confusion and inconsistency in interpretation and practice. Moreover, terms like 'meaningful participation' and 'lived experience' do not translate easily for non English speakers, complicating implementation and guidance.

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In taking steps to address this, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (the Movement) established a Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC), composed of staff and volunteers with lived experience of migration who also work on migration programming to inform the development of its 2024-2030 migration strategy. The LEAC provided ongoing input and feedback on the drafting of the strategy, including in shaping a clear definition of meaningful participation of migrants for the Movement.

However, it's recognised that defining meaningful participation is not enough and that participation cannot be stand-alone or ad hoc to be impactful. It must be institutionalised and integrated into strategies, policies and plans so it becomes a systematic and consistent way of working, at every stage of programming, advocacy, or emergency response. Indeed, the Movement's migration strategy attempts to articulate this, stressing that meaningful participation is not possible without an organisational commitment to strengthening accountability to migrants, or without adequate funding, staff time and leadership support. The strategy thus includes accountability and meaningful participation as its first enabler for successful implementation (RCRC Movement, 2024).

But even with strategies on paper and global frameworks within the sector, National Societies note there is much to be done to enable meaningful participation at all levels. Interviewees confirmed migrants were most often involved as volunteers in humanitarian programming, with fewer engaged as staff, and even fewer in paid leadership roles. However, several positive examples show progress.

For example, at New Zealand Red Cross, around half of the migration team's staff had lived experience of migration. The National Society employed a Lived Experience Manager, Community Engagement Lead and Settlement Leads, all of whom contributed to decision making. Community Champions also engaged people with lived experience to support refugee employment pathways and the National Society's Migration Advisory Group and national and local Migration Consultant Groups provide safe spaces for staff with lived experience to shape programming and policy and raise concerns. The Maldivian Red Crescent Society had engaged migrants as volunteers to reach vulnerable communities and support health service delivery with some migrant volunteers serving on the National Society's governing board and complaints committee. At Turkish Red Crescent, community advisory boards for migration programs include migrant representatives who help shape activities and decisions.

A major challenge raised by National Societies in conversations with the RCRC GML are the administrative, legal and policy barriers. Migrants may face restrictions based on their status, lack of identity documents or visa conditions, making formal employment difficult. Some may also risk losing government benefits if they receive payment for participation. These constraints limit efforts to diversify workforces even where willingness exists. Nonetheless, National Societies have found innovative approaches. Italian Red Cross has engaged migrants with medical training—whose qualifications were not yet recognised in Italy—as volunteers in health-related programs, enabling them to contribute skills while seeking employment. The National Society has also

run mentorship programs connecting migrants with community members for professional development and hosts an online platform where former migrants share experiences with new arrivals.

While these examples underscore how meaningful participation of migrants can be initiated and strengthened in humanitarian action at the local level, thereby contributing to global commitments, greater investment—in funding and in institutional will—is necessary within the sector to generate change. And while the language and talk around meaningful participation is progressing in a positive direction among stakeholders, the investment in and action around meaningful participation of migrants is not necessarily keeping pace.

Closing the gap between rhetoric and reality

It is easy to talk about the importance of meaningful participation of migrants in humanitarian action, but far harder to chart a path to achieving it, especially when it necessitates a rebalance of power and a shift to structural norms and processes that have historically excluded migrants from the decision-making table. Although promising efforts are emerging at local and global levels, much more is needed to ensure that the meaningful participation of migrants is not only valued in principle but is sustainably and strategically embedded in humanitarian programming, policy and practice.

Cohere (2024) recently mapped out organisational pathways for those in the sector to enable meaningful refugee participation, including guidance for recruiting and hiring people with lived experience of forced displacement, building equitable partnerships with refugee-led organisations and support for localised refugee advocacy. Likewise, the IFRC (2025) guide on meaningful participation provides points on recruitment, compensation and measuring meaningful participation of migrants. These resources complement existing global frameworks advocating for and articulating commitments on meaningful participation of migrants by offering initial steps for humanitarian organisations and other stakeholders to make it a reality.

As demonstrated in the literature and insights gathered by the RCRC GML, there are critical success factors for creating an environment that fosters the meaningful participation of migrants, including institutional change, political will and adequate resourcing. Without these factors, guidance on the practical 'know-how' of

meaningful participation among stakeholders can and will only be taken so far.

Indeed, sector-wide investment in meaningful participation is not where it needs to be for practical impact. And there is a risk that tokenistic approaches—like ensuring migrants are represented on advisory boards but without real opportunity to influence or direct policies—become the norm, rather than substantive and sustained participation at all levels. In addition, the current global cuts to humanitarian aid and the pressure on organisations to do more with less has the potential to sideline meaningful participation further. In this context, the gap between rhetoric and reality is at risk of widening. Until organisations turn to migrants first and foremost to design and deliver relevant humanitarian interventions and policy, until migrants' voices are not just listened to but heard, until their expertise, knowledge and experience is equally valued and recognised, power cannot shift. And without power shifting, the commitments to meaningful participation championed in global frameworks and rhetoric will remain just that: words without action.

Until organisations turn to migrants first and foremost to design and deliver relevant humanitarian interventions and policy, until migrants' voices are not just listened to but heard, until their expertise, knowledge and experience is equally valued and recognised, power cannot shift.

Central to transformative change and addressing power imbalances in humanitarian action and global governance related to migration is ensuring migrants have the capacity to drive and influence programs and policies at all levels—from the local to the global. All organisations engaged in humanitarian responses related to migration must place migrants and their views and perspectives at the centre of interventions and facilitate meaningful participation in decision-making processes. To do this, we need to not only listen to what migrants are saying, but to act on their recommendations, follow their guidance and acknowledge the need to rebalance power. And we need to make sure that local actors, those closest to migrants and communities, are resourced to build trust and engage migrants in a meaningful way.

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