

## 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



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 a number of barriers to their implementation. These

- 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