RRLI at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum
**purpose**

This paper aims to share insights and experiences from our engagement as a community of refugee-led organizations (RLOs) at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF). It highlights our collective journey before, during, and after the forum.

**acknowledgements**

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Cover photo: participants following proceedings in the R-Space at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum. ©Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative, 2023

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In this paper, the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) reflects on its advocacy role in the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF), underscoring our continued commitment to meaningful refugee inclusion. The RRLI team members in the GRF comprise 15 participants representing 10 RLOs from six countries: Colombia, Egypt, Lebanon, Indonesia, the USA, and Uganda.

Prior to the GRF, RRLI provided varied support to participants attending the forum, and organized informative webinars about the GRF. Our strategic stakeholder mapping further facilitated meaningful connections for our cohort of RLOs during the event.

At the GRF, RRLI team members contributed as speakers in seven official events and organized or co-organized five additional events. The R-Space (in the Refugee Hub), a dynamic, informal platform, stood out as a significant and warmly-received gathering point for refugee leaders and diverse sector representatives, marking a highlight of the GRF. This space (R-Space) was created by refugee leaders to engage with donors, allies, and other stakeholders, and to showcase their initiatives and aspirations beyond the confines and formalities of the main GRF event.

However, challenges were present. Travel issues, including visa denials and residency or legal restrictions, hindered around 12 members of the RRLI community from attending. This community is composed of 16 RLOs across different regions in the world. Additionally, the limited support from UNHCR in travel documentation and delayed invitation letters posed significant obstacles. Furthermore, the GRF’s allocation of only 8% of its seats to refugee leaders underscored the ongoing struggle for adequate and meaningful representation.
pre-GRF preparations

**WEBINAR SERIES**

- RRLI conducted two webinars for our GRF participants:
  - The first focused on engaging effectively at the GRF, offering insights into Geneva’s role as an advocacy hub, and introducing the history and objectives of the GRF.
  - The second webinar guided participants on developing tailored advocacy goals and strategies for impactful engagement with key stakeholders during the GRF.

**FINANCIAL & LOGISTICAL SUPPORT**

With the support of our partners the Swiss FDFA and the Robert Bosch Foundation, we managed to finance flight tickets, per diem, and visa expenses for RLO representatives to attend the forum. These funds also supported translation services.

**ADDITIONAL LOGISTICS**

- A comprehensive calendar for GRF events was provided.
- We conducted stakeholder mapping to help participants strategically connect with relevant stakeholder representatives based on thematic and regional priorities.
- Pre-GRF, there were lots of meetings and discussions among the RRLI delegation and those within the RRLI team who could not make it to Geneva. The groups exchange knowledge and useful information about the GRF that were helpful to the delegation.
- Development of two key documents:
  - “Funding Refugee-led Organizations” guide, addressing funding barriers and grantmaking best practices.
  - “Trauma-Informed Guidelines” for creating supportive environments for people affected by forced displacement attending meeting spaces.
EVENT PARTICIPATION

RRLI team members were speakers in seven official GRF events and organized or co-organized five events.

Events organized by our team:
- The Only Protection is Local (12 Dec 2023)
- Fostering Collaboration between the Donor and Refugee-Led Organization Communities (12 Dec 2023) *(highlighted more below)*
- Playback Theater Performance (15 Dec 2023) *(highlighted more below)*

Events co-organized by our team:
- Venezuelan Refugees in Latin America: Protection Gaps (12 Dec 2023)
- From refugee inclusion to shifting power (15 Dec 2023)

Events where members of our team officially spoke:
- Shifting power, decision-making, and funding - refugee leadership in humanitarian response (13 Dec 2023)
- Funding for Change: RLOs Leading the Way (13 Dec 2023)
- Driving Feedback and Leadership from those with lived experience within refugee and migrant rights projects (13 Dec 2023)
- Leadership of RLOs in Latin America (14 Dec 2023)
- Nothing About Us Without Us: Brainstorming Multilateral Reform to Systematize Accountability to Affected People in the Global Refugee Response (14 Dec 2023)
- Access to protection (14 Dec 2023)
- Meaningful refugee participation (14 Dec 2023)
Within the Impact Hub in Geneva, the R-Space (Refugee-led Space) was a dynamic and inclusive space from December 12 to 15, 2023. The space was convened on the sidelines of the main GRF event by a number of organizations: Asylum Access, Global Refugee-Led Network (GRN), Hilton Foundation, IKEA, Open Society Foundation (OSF), Porticus, Refugees International, Robert Bosch Stiftung, RRLI, R-SEAT, Women Connectors, and Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR).

The space served as a dynamic platform for crucial dialogues and interactions. Over four days, it played host to over 35 events organized by RLOs, marking a significant gathering of refugee leaders and representatives from various sectors. The discussions were not just dialogues, but hopefully catalysts for change, discussing crucial topics like fostering meaningful refugee participation, recognizing the significance of refugee leadership in the sector, and the resourcing of RLOs. The conversations extended beyond mere rhetoric, exploring the creation of equitable partnerships between diverse entities, all united in their commitment to enhancing the global refugee sector.

“Meaningful work was happening in the R-space, it provided a conducive environment for open discussions on crucial issues.”

–R-Space participant–

However, the true spirit of the R-Space was most visible in its informal interactions. During lunch or coffee breaks, individuals from varied backgrounds and nationalities socialized, sharing stories and ideas. This informal setting, a contrast to the GRF formality (e.g., strict security checks), provided a ground for spontaneous discussions. It was over shared meals and relaxed conversations that seeds of future collaborations were planted. Participants exchanged contact information, creating some bonds and fostering connections and understanding across different cultures and experiences. There appeared to be a notable absence of engagement from UNHCR within the R-Space, suggesting that their presence, if any, was seemingly minimal or unnoticeable by attendees.
We want to highlight two important events that happened at the R-Space.

**EVENT 1**

**Fostering Collaboration between the Donor and Refugee-Led Organization Communities (12 December, 2023)**

RRLI, in collaboration with the Hilton Foundation, hosted a pivotal event aimed at bridging the gap between donor communities and RLOs. Attendees, including government representatives from Switzerland and Belgium, alongside INGOs like Robert Bosch Stiftung, Porticus, Oxfam, and the Open Society Foundation (OSF), joined with independent researchers and inspiring refugee leaders. The event started with heartfelt introductions, encouraging a deep understanding of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Participants engaged in thought-provoking exercises to unravel the challenges faced by RLOs, such as feeling unrecognized by donors or struggling to access adequate resources. In a unique setup, attendees sat on the ground, symbolizing equality and openness, and were divided into diverse groups. These groups delved into discussing challenges and emerged with concrete commitments to enhance refugee leadership and foster trust and relationships.
In a collaboration between PAX for Peace, SADA Playback Theatre, and RRLI, a transformative playback theatre performance was staged at the GRF’s R-Space. This emotive and transformative performance highlighted the significant underrepresentation and exclusion of refugees in the event’s discourse. Despite the GRF’s draw of over 4000 attendees, the strikingly low participation of about 320 refugees this year highlighted issues of exclusion and the dominance of the global north in discussions on refugee matters. The performance, attended by around 50 participants from various backgrounds and countries, provided a platform for refugee leaders to share their stories, frustrations, and aspirations, turning a spotlight on the challenges they face within UNHCR-governed spaces and the broader political and humanitarian systems that often overlook meaningful solutions to the refugee crisis.

Participants conveyed feelings of invisibility and superficial inclusivity at the forum, contrasting this with the warmth and representation found at the R-Space at the Impact Hub. The event stood as a testament to resilience and resistance, where personal stories of hardship transformed into a collective call for systemic change. This playback theatre performance not only facilitated a rich tapestry of narratives but also served as a powerful reminder of the necessity to integrate refugee voices into the fabric of global refugee response strategies, ensuring their experiences and insights shape the future of humanitarian efforts.
PROMISING PARTNERSHIPS EMERGE FROM GRF TALKS

During the GRF side events, the RRLI team met with representatives from several governments and foundations, marking the beginning of some promising dialogues. Among these, our discussions with high-profile stakeholders such as the Swiss FDFA and German governments, the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO), and the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) stand out for their potential. These dialogues, which continued post-GRF, mark significant steps towards what we believe to be impactful partnerships.

Equally, we have engaged with entities where the outcomes look promising, though their future directions remain to be fully seen. This includes our interactions with the Drosos Foundation, the Irish mission, and the Greengrant Fund. Their unfolding dynamics signal potential paths for collaboration that we are keen to explore further. Simultaneously, the event served as an important moment to strengthen bonds with our existing partners, including Choose Love, Porticus, Oxfam, the Hilton Foundation, and the Open Society Foundation.

Advocacy for Venezuelan Refugees in Colombia: A key meeting between our partner Refugiados Unidos (RU) from Colombia and the German Minister of Economy and Development took place at the margin of the GRF and addressed critical refugee policies. This vital dialogue promises ongoing engagement and discussions around policy change at high governmental levels.
Travel Issues: Around 12 individuals from RRLI’s community couldn’t make it to the GRF because of either visa rejections or residency and legal status concerns. We were hoping to assist 31 people to get to Geneva, but only around 19 were able to make it.

- For example, the two representatives of our partner, Young African Refugees for Integral Development (YARID), were denied visas to Geneva. They were supposed to co-organize the event “Africa Refugee Participation at GRF: Free Movement and Free Trade,” on 12 December, and organize another event, “Measuring impact: tools for RLOs,” on 15 December.

Lack of Support from UNHCR: Promised assistance with travel documentation was not provided by UNHCR, resulting in additional non-participants. Additionally, the delayed issuance of invitation letters by UNHCR impacted the visa application process for some participants. Due to this delay, some participants missed their appointments with embassies and consequently were unable to secure their visas.

Representation at the GRF: The limited allocation of only 8% of GRF seats to refugee leaders and participants highlighted a significant issue in terms of representation. This was further exacerbated by the travel and legal challenges mentioned above.
feedback about the GRF from participants

**General impression of the GRF:** The general impression among the RRLI delegation was mixed. Participants appreciated the increased role and visibility of refugee delegates, especially in the R-Space, where they could participate actively in side events and panels. The GRF was also seen as an essential opportunity for advocacy, networking, and dialogue. However, critiques emerged about the overall structure and atmosphere of the event. The official proceedings were felt to be too formal and rigid, and not allowing for much meaningful engagement or input from refugees. For example, all comments and questions had to be submitted beforehand, so there was really no room for participation from anyone who hadn’t been pre-selected. Marginalization and tokenization were also felt outside the R-Space at the Palexpo, where the main sessions took place. One delegate summed up the GRF as having a split personality: lively and inclusive in the R-Space, but cold and impersonal at the Palexpo.

**Content expectations:** Feedback indicated that expectations around content were met to varying degrees. The R-Space was lauded as a positive environment where open discussions and meaningful conversations on critical issues were had. Participants also felt their experiences were enhanced through access to GRF preparation materials created specifically for refugee leaders. Nonetheless, there were calls for more involvement of refugee leaders in main event panels, and criticism emerged regarding the dominance of large actors and decision-makers in formal events who took up space to showcase their perceived successes rather than as an opportunity to listen and learn directly from refugee leaders and RLOs.

**Level of participation from various stakeholders:** The level of participation was seen as robust in the R-Space but varied across the Forum, with concerns about the tokenistic use of refugee leaders and a reluctance among some non-refugee stakeholders to engage in meaningful conversations. This indicates a need for more inclusive practices and genuine engagement across all Forum spaces, such as having more refugee leaders be part of the decision-making committees and co-chair or co-facilitate the main sessions.
Representation and inclusion of refugee voices: Participants highlighted inadequate representation and inclusion of refugee voices in discussions, pointing out instances of tokenism and the late provision of essential information that prevented meaningful refugee attendance and participation. Some felt that the Forum did not center refugees or their voices effectively, as only a handful of refugee leaders were given the platform to speak, but only for a very limited amount of time. While the R-Space offered a platform for excellent inclusion, the broader Forum still needs significant work to ensure meaningful participation of refugee voices.

Opportunities for networking and forming new collaboration: Though the occasion of the GRF was a good place to meet and dialogue, the forum in and of itself did not offer much support for networking and collaboration. It was up to the individual RLOs to create their own opportunities and connections. Networking was only impactful in so far as individual organizations were able to organize it themselves. Challenges were also noted in the Palexpo’s less conducive environment for meaningful discussions, it was cited as being too formal, crowded, and noisy.

“Everything felt very controlled – it was like everything was planned and decided beforehand, and they didn’t want people veering away from these designated talking points.”

–participant–

Challenges regarding the forum’s structure: Participants pointed out the dominance of INGOs and a controlled environment that limited open dialogue. One participant said: “Everything felt very controlled – it was like everything was planned and decided beforehand, and they didn’t want people veering away from these designated talking points.” Suggestions for improvement include giving leading roles to RLOs at the Palexpo (main event), in terms of planning and participation in events.
Impact on perceptions of global refugee affairs: The GRF left participants with mixed feelings on the state of global refugee affairs, from encouragement at the increased number of refugee leaders to sadness and frustration over the persistent exclusion and superficial engagement with refugee issues, the slow pace of meaningful change in the sector, and the power dynamics at play. The dominance of INGOs and State interests continues to overshadow grassroots refugee leadership despite calls for equal footing. This reflects the complex emotional impact of global refugee policy discussions on those with lived experience of forced displacement and working directly with displaced communities.

Emotional moments and additional reflections: Emotional and moving moments were reported, ranging from feelings of exhaustion and intensive learning to positive experiences in organizing and participating in the R-Space events. Stringent security measures and cumbersome processes to access the Forum at Palexpo were cited as distressing experiences. The Playback Theatre session at the R-Space was highlighted as a particularly moving experience. Participants were grateful to be part of refugee-led movements that enabled their participation, emphasizing the importance of such spaces for learning, discussion, and connection among RLOs.
Based on the feedback received from participants, RRLI proposes that UNHCR implement the following recommendations to enhance the effectiveness, inclusivity, and impact of future GRFs.

**Streamline Formal Proceedings:** Simplify the formal structure of the GRF to allow for more fluid, organic interaction between participants. This might involve reducing the number of plenary sessions in favor of more interactive formats such as, side events, workshops, roundtables, and open forums.

**Embrace Inclusivity in Event Planning:** Involve refugee leaders and RLOs in the planning for the GRF at all levels, including the main event at the Palexpo. This could mean establishing more advisory committees or co-chair positions comprised of refugees and representatives from RLOs.

**Increase Refugee Leadership Visibility:** Ensure more substantial representation of refugee leaders in main panel discussions, not just in side events. This includes providing opportunities for refugee leaders to co-facilitate the majority of sessions alongside high-level officials.

**Content Diversity:** Shift the focus from showcasing successes of large actors (such as UNHCR and UN agencies) to facilitating discussions that prioritize learning from the experiences of refugees and RLOs. Encourage more panels to include diverse voices, such as grassroots activists, refugee entrepreneurs, and young leaders.

**Address Tokenism:** Implement clear guidelines to prevent tokenistic inclusion of refugee voices. This should include ensuring meaningful participation time for refugee speakers and integrating their perspectives throughout the forum’s programming. It could also involve granting RLOs the autonomy to independently organize and lead their official sessions at the GRF, without any influence or censorship from UNHCR or non-refugee bodies. Non-RLO attendees should focus on listening and learning from these direct experiences.
Collaboration Platforms: Establish a dedicated section of the forum for showcasing successful collaborations between RLOs, NGOs, governments, and private sector partners. This could take the form of a collaborative project showcase or a partnership incubator session.

Improve Access and Logistics: Address logistical challenges that hinder participation, such as stringent security measures and complex access processes. This includes providing clear information well in advance, assistance with visa applications, travel arrangements, accommodation, and on-site support for navigating the event.

Emotional and Well-being Support: Recognize the emotional toll of participating in discussions about forced displacement. Offer well-being and support services, such as quiet rooms, emotional support staff, and debriefing sessions for refugee participants.

Mandatory Refugee Consultations: Advocate for mandatory consultations with refugees and RLOs by donors and states, shaping the agenda and outcomes of the forum. This could be before, during, and after the GRF.
In conclusion, the 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) was a pivotal moment for the Resourcing Refugee Leadership Initiative (RRLI) and the broader refugee-led organizations (RLOs) community. Our active engagement before, during, and after the forum underscored the power of collective advocacy and the importance of meaningful refugee inclusion in global dialogues. Despite facing logistical and systemic challenges, including travel restrictions and limited representation, our participation illuminated the resilience, leadership, and invaluable insights that refugees bring to the conversation on global displacement.

The R-Space emerged as a beacon of inclusivity and collaboration, showcasing the potential for genuine dialogue and partnership between refugees, donors, and stakeholders. This dynamic platform facilitated crucial conversations and laid the groundwork for promising partnerships. However, the journey does not end here. The mixed reception of the GRF’s structure and the clear areas for improvement underscore the need for a more inclusive, participatory, and refugee-led approach in future forums.

As we reflect on our experiences and the feedback received, it is evident that the global community must prioritize the voices and leadership of refugees in shaping policies and responses to displacement. Moving forward, our recommendations aim to ensure that future GRFs embody the spirit of collaboration, diversity, and equity, reflecting the true potential of engaging refugee communities at every level of decision-making in the sector. Together, we can forge a path toward a more inclusive and impactful global refugee response, one that truly embodies the principles of solidarity and shared responsibility.