

Title of Event: Building Bridges: Advancing Refugee Protection in a Divided World

Notetaker: Brynn Duggan, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team

Host of Event: UNSW Sydney and UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

Date: 23-10-2025

Toplines:

- We must ensure refugee participation is enforceable, measurable, fundable, sustainable, and embedded as a right, not a project.
- Not all forms of refugee participation are meaningful or result in positive outcomes:
 - Effective refugee participation must involve power-sharing, delegation, and partnerships.
- While the increased prevalence of advisory boards has been a positive development, they can not be the only means of refugee participation.
- Compensating refugees for their time and expertise is essential.
- Allyship means creating radical spaces of openness, walking alongside refugees (not in front of them), listening, understanding gaps, being open to being held accountable, and creating trust.
- Representation must be diverse as all experiences are different.
- A draft declaration on refugee participation was released recently. Organizations are urged to endorse it.
- An [Equitable Partnerships Toolkit](#) has been developed for organizations.

Panel Session:

- From Rhetoric to Reality: Centering the Meaningful Participation of Refugees

Moderator:

- **Frances Voon**, Executive Manager, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

Presenters:

- **Dor Akech Achiek**, Interim CEO, Western Sydney Migrant Resource Centre
- **Dr. Renee Dixon**, Executive Director, Forcibly Displaced People Network
- **Dr. Tristan Harley**, Senior Research Associate, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law
- **Najeeba Wazefadost**, Executive Director, Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

Circulated Materials: [Full Conference Live-stream](#) (Session begins at 4:27:00)

Key Points:

Panel Question and Answer Session

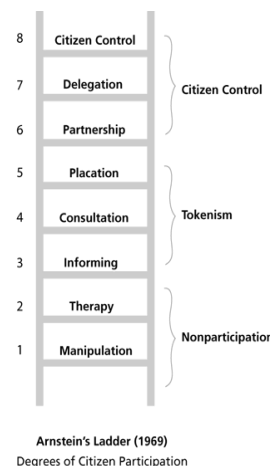
1. **Moderator's question:** *What is the current state of play and the growth of the meaningful refugee participation movement until now?*
 - **Najeeba**
 - For a long time, **refugee participation was seen as a moral ideal rather than as a right or as a governance norm.** The New York Declaration and, subsequently, the Global Compacts on Refugees allowed us to move from aspiration to action.
 - APNOR (Asia Pacific Network of Refugees) created the first refugee-to-refugee funding mechanism in the Asia-Pacific region.
 - APNOR also built the first Refugee Advisory Group, followed by another advisory body at the UN level.
 - **The movement's next frontier is about system change. We want to embed participation as a right, not as a project.** We want to make sure it is enforceable, measurable, and fundable.
2. **Moderator's question:** *What does it mean to bring an intersectional lens to this work?*
 - **Renee**
 - Without experience, you cannot notice, interpret, or understand fully.
 - Academia is responsible for creating norms that deem research valid only if it is objective and neutral, which, for a very long time, devalued the work of people with lived experience. This damage must be undone.
 - How does experiential blindness translate into everyday life?
 - ❖ A Global Philanthropy Project report in 2022–2023 found that in the Asia-Pacific region, LGBTQ migrants and refugees received less than 1% of funding.
 - ❖ UNHCR only started doing refugee status determination for LGBTQ people in 2008.
 - Refugees are not a homogeneous group.
 - Without an intersectional lens in policy frameworks and models, you are reproducing systems of oppression. **We must create spaces and policies that center the most systemically discriminated.**
3. **Moderator's question:** *What are the current challenges and ways forward in meaningful refugee participation?*
 - **Dor**
 - **We have moved from representation to influence, but we have not yet reached sustainability.**
 - People with lived experience must be granted dignity and the power to influence.
 - We need to establish a remuneration process for sharing lived experiences.
4. **Moderator's question:** *What role, if any, does law play in systemic change?*
 - **Tristan**

- **International law can play an effective role in advancing meaningful refugee participation** through guiding state behaviour, articulating best practices, influencing local enforcement, and fostering accountability mechanisms.
- The 1951 Convention, the 1967 Protocol, and the 1950 UNHCR Statute are largely silent on the subject of participation. Even the Global Compact on Refugees, which recognizes the role of refugee participation, does not articulate how to do so.
- A global working group has developed an independent declaration on the right of people with lived experience of displacement or statelessness to participate in decisions that affect them.
 - We hope all stakeholders consider endorsing this.

5. **Moderator's question:** *One of the mechanisms by which we have seen attempts to implement refugee is the growth of advisory panels. What is their potential? Do we need to be more creative about advancing meaningful participation?*

○ **Renee**

- Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation (see image to the right) shows that **not all forms of participation are meaningful or have good outcomes for community members.**
- **The ultimate goal of meaningful refugee participation is power sharing, delegation, and partnerships.** The rest is a variety of tokenism and therapy. Empowerment and visibility, like offering a free gig for exposure, can be exploitative and often traumatizing.
- It is crucial to have an independent secretariat for advisory boards.
- Without governance, training, and support, you cannot expect people with lived experience to contribute meaningfully. Not everyone has the privilege to translate their lived experience into policy language that others can comprehend and apply.



○ **Najeeba**

- We must move beyond representation and toward redistributing decision-making power effectively.
- Advisory boards are important, but are increasingly seen as the only form of participation, despite not being accessible to everyone. **Other forms of participation must be explored.**
- It is important to bring ideas of dismantling power dynamics to the local level.
- We must ensure that connectivity and access to decision-making processes are available for those who do not speak English.
- We need to prepare refugees so that when they engage, they are prepared to speak about decisions.

○ **Dor**

- **I call for a resourced framework to engage diaspora groups or refugee-led organizations.** For example, funding specifically for community engagement, so diaspora groups can be empowered to support communities and mainstream service delivery.

- **Tristan**
 - Advisory panels can encourage thoughtful reflection, but they are not always efficient, as they require time and resources, which can be hard for busy communities.
 - Virtual mechanisms like online voting, polls, and surveys can reach broader audiences quickly but may lack the space for thoughtful deliberation and information-sharing. Multiple methods must be used.
- 6. **Moderator's question:** *What are the pain points and potential of resourcing participation?*
 - **Najeeba**
 - Resourcing is often short-term, project-based, and externally-controlled.
 - APNOR has co-created the Refugee Leadership Alliance, a refugee-led pooled fund where refugees decide where the funds go.
 - ❖ We have funded over 40 refugee-led initiatives. Many have received funds without having access to bank accounts or registration papers. Some donors say this is not possible. Through our model, we show that it is.
 - State governments, philanthropic institutions, and other donors define impact and investment differently.
 - Funding must be sustainable.
 - **Renee**
 - LGBTQ people have limited access to funding, as it can be difficult to find donors who are interested in supporting them.
 - **Dor**
 - Organizations should allocate a consultancy fee for lived experience.
 - The participation of people with lived experiences tends to fall to the bottom of the list of priorities. This must change.
 - **Najeeba**
 - Funding to RLOs must be untied, multi-layered, dignified, and multi-year.
 - RLOs reported difficulty in communicating with donors due to a lack of computer access, so we created a system in which grant recipients report back in their own language through WhatsApp.
 - Refugee communities are busy. Consultation times need to be up to them.

Floor Question and Answer Session

1. **Audience question:** *What role do you see for allies? What makes for a good ally?*
 - **Renee**
 - Book recommendation: *Allies Behaving Badly: Gaslighting as Epistemic Injustice* by Rachel McKinnon.
 - Allies must be open to feedback and being held accountable.
 - Allyship is support and belonging, not just inclusion for performance. It is understanding the gaps, reflecting, and changing your behaviour.
 - Create radical spaces of openness; opportunities to deeply and meaningfully listen.
 - Ask, "How can I help you achieve what you want to achieve?"

- **Dor**
 - Walk with us, not in front of us or on our behalf.
 - Create comfortable spaces that foster trust.
 - Sustain allyship. Your main motive must be a true interest in the person you are an ally for, not rewards.
 - Always remember the mission of your allyship does not live with you; it lives with the person.
 - **Najeeba**
 - True allyship is about equitable partnership and collaboration.
 - Two tools:
 1. [An equitable partnership toolkit.](#)
 2. We deliver meaningful refugee participation training to entities.
2. **Audience question:** *I see "refugee" being blocked into one thing, but refugees come from different places with different backgrounds. For those who are even deeper in the hole, how is the lived experience going to work in uplifting them so their voices are not left behind?*
- **Najeeba**
 - Representation needs to be diversified.
 - Often, the most well-resourced, well-worked, privileged refugees attend conversations.
 - We could address this by creating local hubs.
 - **Dor**
 - If you do need to speak on behalf of a group, make sure you have the group's authority and the group's voice to be able to do that. Otherwise, it becomes nullified.
 - **Renee**
 - For the LGBTQ community, we must understand that safety continues to be an issue when they come to Australia, and build up safety mechanisms and support so the community can advocate for themselves.