

Meaningful involvement?

How refugee participation can improve policy and research

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Bonn, 5 February 2024. Displacement worldwide is on the rise due to multiple crises, increasing the need to develop solutions. Therefore, political decision-makers and researchers have to do more to actively involve refugees in policy and research. Even if the crucial role of refugees is increasingly recognised, their involvement needs to be enhanced further. If the voices and perspectives of refugees themselves are not included more thoroughly in the development of sustainable solutions to displacement, the legitimacy of policies and their successful implementation remain questionable. This requires political will of policy makers and careful ethical considerations in research.

Demands from refugees about their participation in political processes and research are growing. Over the past years, the number of refugee-led organisations (RLOs) around the world has risen substantially, with the Global Refugee-led Network and Refugees

Seeking Equal Access at the Table being prominent international examples in the policy field. In forced migration research, scholarly attention and meaningful refugee engagement has led to a growing number of critical analyses and publications on the topic. Many researchers and refugees call for more participatory approaches and active roles for refugees in policy and research.

Refugees in global decision-making fora

At the second Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in Geneva/Switzerland in December 2023, over 300 out of over 4.200 participants were refugee delegates. This is a considerable and welcome increase from the 2019 GRF where only about 70 refugees participated. However, conference spokespersons have rightfully criticised that visas for 23 of 25 invited refugee delegates from the Africa Refugee-led Network were denied. Also, considering the total participation numbers, refugee representation remained low with only 7% in 2023 (and 2% in 2019). This is mainly due to legal frameworks that hinder broader refugee participation in political decision-making.

Therefore, linked to the Forum, RLOs and refugees organised the Refugee Leadership Multipurpose Space where they held over 40 public events to address issues of participation and representation. Here, the German Federal Commissioner for Migration, Refugees and Integration Reem Alabali-Radovan introduced Kava Spartak as the first Refugee Advisor to the German Delegation.

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As RLOs are often the first responders to crises in their communities, e.g. during COVID-19, their expertise is paramount for good policy and has to be included more systematically. A step in this direction is the recent establishment of a Refugee Advisory Board in Germany. Germany thus followed Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States of America,

which already have such boards. This is a positive contribution to foster the moral, political and legal mandate for refugee participation in policy-making.

Refugees in research

Involving refugees more actively in research, especially if it is related to their experiences, is crucial. It not only promotes a more inclusive and ethical approach to research but also ensures that the narratives and perspectives of those directly affected are more accurately represented. Undoubtedly, refugees themselves possess the best knowledge and insights into the challenges they face, and their coping mechanisms and aspirations for the future. By actively engaging refugees in research, they can be empowered to contribute to knowledge creation, fostering a more authentic and comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges and opportunities they face.

Participatory approaches not only enhance the credibility and relevance of research, but also promote a sense of agency and dignity among refugees, recognizing them as active stakeholders in shaping policies and interventions that directly affect their lives. However, researchers need to make sure that power imbalances are properly addressed and refugees not put at risk. This is particularly important in an increasingly politicised, complex and insecure environment across the globe where public spaces for refugee participation and research are shrinking.

An IDOS research project conducted by the authors of this column together with others is working to further illustrate this issue. Due to a trusting partnership, research could be continued during the COVID-19 pandemic in cooperation with refugees, stressing the crucial value of their insider view and collaborative research, but also prompting reflections on how research can be localised further.

Locally grounded research, conducted in a participatory manner, is crucial for humanitarian and development endeavours. It strengthens local research capacities and, through appropriate local participation throughout the research process, leads to context-specific solutions that enable more tailored policies. More thorough refugee participation in both policy and research is essential for addressing the challenges of displacement situations worldwide.