



How to ensure a meaningful participation of experts-by-experience in policy conversations: a case study of the VOICES Network

The VOICES Network are a UK-wide group of experts-by-experience of forced displacement (mainly refugees, asylum seekers and migrants), who have expressed a desire to share some of their experience to change minds (through engaging with the media), change practice (through engaging in advocacy) and change practice (by shaping and influencing services). Funded by the EU transnational AVAIL Project and supported by the British Red Cross, VOICES Ambassadors receive training, ongoing mentoring and psychosocial support to best amplify their voices. They speak from their personal lived experience, as well as on behalf of the VOICES network and other refugees and asylum seekers collectively. VOICES Ambassadors are independent and do not represent the views of the British Red Cross or any other organisation.

To contribute to a change in policy, the VOICES Network are active partners in national-level campaigns including Lift the Ban (advocating for the rights of people seeking asylum to work in the UK) and Families Together (advocating for a relaxation of the family reunion rules). As well as public campaigns, the Network have been engaging in advocacy through stakeholder meetings, high-level roundtables and panel discussions to shape policy conversations. Ambassadors advocate on a range of issues, including: detention, accommodation, barriers to accessing rights, entitlements and healthcare, accessing services and vulnerability, including a trauma-informed approach to migration management.

This case study draws on previous engagements of the VOICES Network, and discusses the value of the participation of experts-by-experience in policy conversations that are taking place throughout senior-level meetings, providing learning on how to achieve meaningful engagement.

Why should experts-by-experience be involved in policy conversations?

Human impact: Ambassadors are at the receiving end of policies; therefore, they know the personal impact both physically and mentally. They are in the best position to reflect on their experiences and emotions, providing compelling evidence of vulnerabilities that might be unforeseen by policy-makers or stakeholders. There is no expectation of progress in an ambassadors' individual asylum or immigration case, but this might happen in the long term en masse if there is action resulting from the suggestions of the ambassadors.

Credibility: From an organisational perspective, meaningfully sharing power with affected populations increases our credibility. It signals that we are living our values and can credibly speak with (not for) our main stakeholders, the communities that we serve.

How do VOICES Ambassadors prepare?

Selection of ambassadors is the first important task as there are often limited places and tight agendas in these meetings. Although there are different ways to approach an opportunity to discuss an issue with key stakeholders, the main aim is to ensure we can achieve the greatest impact. Having a database of the interests and lived experience of ambassadors is very helpful to identify who is best placed to speak. If there is no ambassador who has relevant experience at all, then sometimes participation is declined as there possibly will not be a meaningful contribution.



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Once interested and available ambassadors are briefed about the opportunity, they are informed that they are representing the whole VOICES Network and other refugees and asylum seekers, which helps them to think broadly and link their experiences and expertise to the core policy issues. They often consult other ambassadors to consolidate and strengthen their input. Ambassadors are also expected to report back to the group.

Before the meeting ambassadors study the participants, topic, chair and the method of conversations (presentation or interventions). They study similar previous engagements by the network. The style of the meeting, and the familiarity of the ambassador is important for the ambassador's preparation – is this a regular stakeholder's meeting or a one-off event? Can their input include in-depth conversations or presentations into the lived experience which might create a better impact in changing the conversations?

Ambassadors study the agenda and try to see where they can contribute to the conversations. If the style is a discussion of a certain topic to draw policy recommendations, starting with the ambassador's views has proved very effective in shaping the conversations afterwards, as it highlights the human impact. For example, at a roundtable about migrant vulnerabilities in Global Compact on Migration, it was fascinating to see all stakeholders referring to the ambassador's intervention in the beginning of the meeting.

The ambassadors study their role and understand the purpose of the meeting. It is often very useful to speak with the chair in advance, to go through the meeting and to make sure the chair is aware of the intentions of the ambassadors, so they can give voice to ambassadors during the actual meeting.

During the meeting, it is not often easy for ambassadors to intervene in the conversations due to language barriers or the unfamiliarity of the setting. Stakeholders may use acronyms and jargon in the policy language which might not make any sense for ambassadors. It is important to include these words in the previous preparation sessions.

If ambassadors are sharing their experience, it is worth keeping in mind that this might bring traumatic memories back. Ambassadors are supported by the British Red Cross to give informed consent, and discuss beforehand how some emotions might appear when they speak. It is essential that a VOICES Participation Officer attends the meeting with them, so that they can support and guide speech, changing the direction of the audience's attention if an ambassador becomes emotional. If there is more than one ambassador giving a speech, it is worth arranging the speech in small paragraphs, so the ambassadors take turns in giving their views.

After the meeting, the ambassador is debriefed to discuss how the meeting went and asked for feedback on how to improve their participation next time. All reports, outputs, comments (even those on social media) are conveyed to the ambassador to show the impact of what they did. The ambassadors feed back to the network, and are offered continual psycho-social support as needed.



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