



**Global
Migration
Lab**

Hosted by



**Australian
Red Cross**

Meaningful Participation of Migrants: From Words to Action

A Discussion Paper for the Movement



The [Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab](#) hosted by the Australian Red Cross, is an initiative of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement designed to strengthen the Movement's capacity to harness operational research and data for evidence-based humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy. The Global Migration Lab also seeks to amplify the voices, expertise and lived experience of migrants to guide and inform policies and programs and to promote a humanitarian agenda in global migration governance.

Contents

Executive Summary	4
Key insights	4
Recommendations	5
Introduction	6
Methodology, scope, and limitations	7
Section 1: What is Meaningful Participation? Why is it important?	8
Evolution of the notion in the humanitarian sector: from participation to meaningful participation	8
Meaningful participation in global migration governance	9
Frameworks and policies within the Movement	9
Typologies of participation within the Movement	11
Section 2: How does the Movement apply Meaningful Participation in practice? What are some of the challenges?	13
Practical examples from across the Movement	13
Embedding meaningful participation at institutional level	13
Incorporating meaningful participation into projects and programmes	14
Meaningful participation in humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy efforts	15
Insights on meaningful participation from across the Movement	16
Barriers and risks associated with promoting the meaningful participation of migrants	18
Section 3: How can the Movement improve meaningful participation?	20
Annex 1	22

ACRONYMS

AAP	Accountability to Affected People
CEA	Community Engagement and Accountability
FGD	Focus Group Discussions
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
The Movement	International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement
KI	Key Informants
NS	National Societies
The Lab	Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab

Executive Summary

The concept of involving affected communities and populations in humanitarian action has evolved over time throughout the humanitarian sector. In recent years, there has also been a push for the meaningful participation of those with lived experience of migration in global migration governance.

Frameworks and policies of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement reflect this changing discourse. They demonstrate an increasing recognition that the meaningful participation of migrants, or affected people, has the potential to strengthen the efficiency, relevance, impact, and quality of the Movement's work. However, the way the concept is described, interpreted and implemented by Movement actors working with and for migrants varies widely and demonstrates a gap between rhetoric and practice.

This discussion paper aims to stimulate reflection and dialogue and to strengthen efforts to promote the meaningful participation of people with lived experience of migration across the Movement. It is based on a literature review, key informant (KI) interviews with 18 members of staff from 13 National Societies, and two focus group discussions (FGD) with global and regional representatives of the ICRC and IFRC. Research took place between June and October 2023

The paper identifies both the perceived benefits of meaningful participation as well as the key barriers. Its recommendations highlight the need for clearer commitments, guidance, and capacity strengthening to bridge the gap between words and action on the meaningful participation of those with lived experience of migration across the Movement.

... the meaningful participation of migrants, or affected people, has the potential to strengthen the efficiency, relevance, impact, and quality of the Movement's work.

Key insights

▶ **Meaningful participation is necessary for effective policies and programmes**

KI agreed that meaningful participation is necessary for effective policies and programmes: both in terms of building trust with migrant communities, and in ensuring the relevance and sustainability of programmes. Further, KI saw the benefits of meaningful participation for migrants themselves as empowerment, a sense of belonging and ownership, as well as professional and skills development.

▶ **The absence of common terminology is affecting implementation**

Most KI expressed that the lack of a unified and explicit definition of meaningful participation led to challenges in interpretation and, therefore, implementation. They agreed that clear, contextualised descriptions of meaningful participation and co-design or co-production would help to strengthen action on meaningful participation at all levels across the Movement – from staff and volunteers through to leadership.

▶ **Efforts fall short of genuine and sustained co-production and co-design**

While all KI noted that meaningful participation was important throughout the entire project cycle, 10 out of 18 mentioned that, in practice, this only took place during the initial design and the final evaluation phase. FGD echoed these views and highlighted the limited and tokenistic nature of the participation of migrants and refugees in advocacy and policy forums.

▶ **A gap between rhetoric and action**

When invited to share their views about the institutionalisation of meaningful participation of migrants through their involvement as volunteers, staff members and leaders, all KI noted that migrants were primarily involved as volunteers in migration-related programming. Only 10 out of 18 KI noted migrants' inclusion as staff members, and even fewer (one third) stated that migrants held paid leadership positions.

Commenting on migrants' inclusion in formal frameworks, policies and strategies, KI responded that their National Societies had not taken formal commitments or developed strategies explicitly addressing meaningful participation, but that efforts were underway to address this, at least at the operational or programmatic levels.

Recommendations

Moving from words to action will require adequate infrastructure and resources, leadership buy-in, sustained commitment and training, and technical capacity strengthening for staff and volunteers. It is recommended that Movement actors take the following steps to ensure that the meaningful participation of migrants is valued and sustainably and strategically incorporated into Movement strategies, policies, programming, and advocacy:

- ▶ **Create opportunities for those with lived experience to join the Movement at all levels** by conducting internal mappings and surveys on staff and volunteer diversity and analysing structural barriers to meaningful participation related to human resources policies and practices. Beyond recruitment, recognise and value the diverse skills, knowledge, and expertise of staff and volunteers with lived experience of migration and increase efforts to support and equip them to engage effectively in programming, advocacy, and policymaking.
- ▶ **Institutionalise meaningful participation from the ground up, as well as top-down** by ensuring opportunities for meaningful participation at the local level, as well as in leadership positions and high-level advocacy fora aimed to influence advocacy and policy-making. Further, documenting the positive impacts of meaningful participation of migrants at the policy and programme levels should be undertaken to encourage the replication of such practices across the Movement and beyond.
- ▶ **Allocate sufficient resources to create spaces and platforms for meaningful participation** by supporting migrant representatives to access and participate in physical and remote meetings and activities and consider compensating them for the time they contribute.
- ▶ **Ensure that meaningful participation is as representative as possible** by considering the full diversity of migrants' lived experiences and engaging with those from different backgrounds and with different experiences, levels of vulnerability, areas of expertise, interests, and skill sets to include a broad range of perspectives.
- ▶ **Reduce risks for those with lived experience** by providing migrants with clear information about how their information and insights will be used and how their data and privacy will be protected and obtain their consent for this. At the same time, Movement actors should actively work with those with lived experience to understand the safety risks, including psychosocial safety, of participation and how best to mitigate these risks with adequate safeguards.
- ▶ **Strengthen technical capacity across the Movement** by sharing existing resources, providing training, and creating peer-to-peer platforms for learning and development on meaningful participation at the programming and advocacy level. This should include the provision of support to develop tools and resources that are locally adapted and reflect migrants' preferred methods of engaging.
- ▶ **Ensure sustained engagement, be clear, and manage expectations** by analysing decision-making processes and power dynamics to consider how these impact migrants' ability to engage meaningfully and participate.
- ▶ **Ask migrants to provide feedback in order to adapt interventions and approaches on meaningful participate** by ensuring sustained (rather than ad hoc) engagement with migrant representatives and asking for regular feedback to adapt and improve ways of working to foster more genuine participation.

Moving from words to action will require adequate infrastructure and resources, leadership buy-in, sustained commitment and training, and technical capacity strengthening for staff and volunteers.

Introduction

This discussion paper aims to stimulate reflection and dialogue and to strengthen efforts to promote the meaningful participation of people with lived experience of migration and displacement across the Movement. It provides an overview of relevant frameworks and how the concept is described,

interpreted, and implemented by Movement actors working with and for migrants. Although this paper draws on practice and evidence related to cross-border migration, it contains insights that equally apply to people with lived experience of displacement or internal migration.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

There is no single, commonly accepted definition of the terms “meaningful participation” or “lived experience” - they are described and interpreted differently both within and outside the Movement. Developing a shared understanding of these concepts, and what they entail, is an important first step in strengthening the concrete implementation of meaningful participation within the Movement. The following useful descriptions can be found within Movement documents.

Meaningful participation: The forthcoming Movement Migration Strategy (2024-2030) describes meaningful participation as “creating and ensuring accessible opportunities for people with first-hand, lived experience of migration to engage in and substantially influence all aspects of the Movement’s migration programming and advocacy, from initial design and discussion to implementation, monitoring and ultimately decision-making”.¹

Migrant: The forthcoming Strategy describes migrants as “...all people who flee or leave their habitual residence in search of safety, opportunities, or better prospects - usually abroad. This includes, among others, asylum seekers, refugees and stateless migrants, labour migrants, and migrants deemed irregular by public authorities”. This description is based on the 2009 IFRC Policy on Migration.

Lived experience: A Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC) of Movement staff and volunteers who self-identified as having lived experience of migration in situations of vulnerability was set up to inform the development of the Movement Migration Strategy. For the LEAC, people with lived experience were described as having “first-hand experience of moving across a country’s border... and being in need of humanitarian assistance and/or protection at some point during their journey...” The Lab report [Migrants’ Perspectives: Building Trust in Humanitarian Action](#) offers further insights, as follows: “Those with lived experience understand the realities of migrants’ journeys and have significant knowledge to share which can inform the operations of humanitarian organisations.”²

Community engagement: is defined in the Movement-wide Commitments as “ways of working collaboratively with people and communities to ensure that Red Cross and Red Crescent actions are effective, inclusive, sustainable and accountable, and that they contribute to supporting and enabling people and communities to lead and shape positive, sustainable changes in their own lives and on their own terms.”³ The IFRC builds on this in its [CEA Strategy](#) (2023-2025), underlining that community engagement and accountability involves recognising and valuing community members as “equal partners”.⁴

Accountability: is defined in the [Movement-wide Commitments for CEA](#) (2019) as “the mutual responsibility of all components of the Movement to use their power and resources ethically and responsibly to put the interests of people and communities they aim to serve at the centre of decision-making, thereby ensuring that humanitarian actions lead to the best possible outcomes and results for them while protecting and preserving their rights and dignity and increasing their resilience to face situations of vulnerability and crisis.”⁵

1 This description of meaningful participation was elaborated by the Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC), established specifically to advise on the development and content of this Migration Strategy.

2 [Migrants’ Perspectives: Building Trust in Humanitarian Action](#), The Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab, 2022 (page 40)

3 [Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability](#), 2019 (page 4)

4 [Community Engagement and Accountability Strategy](#), IFRC, 2023 (page 5)

5 [Movement-wide Commitments for Community Engagement and Accountability](#), 2019 (page 4)

Methodology, scope, and limitations

This discussion paper was developed through a literature review⁶, KI interviews with 18 members of staff from 13 NS⁷ and two FGD with global and regional representatives of the ICRC and IFRC (organised between June and October 2023).

KI were selected based on suggestions from IFRC and ICRC regional and global migration focal points and through the Lab's prior research projects. Unfortunately, not all KI contacted were available to participate in the interviews, which limited the geographical scope of the practical examples provided in this paper. Finally, this paper does not constitute an evaluation of the effectiveness or quality of different approaches to the meaningful participation of migrants across the Movement, and the insights and recommendations should not be taken as such.

This paper is divided into three sections.

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The Gambia Red Cross Society operates mobile and fixed Humanitarian Service Points to offer humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants in transit throughout the country. Credit: The Gambia Red Cross Society

- ⁶ This literature review covered various Movement strategies, reports and guidance on participation, Community Engagement and Accountability, migration programming and advocacy; external participation models, strategies, research and project documents from other organisations; academic materials and policy documents related to participation.
- ⁷ Australian Red Cross, Argentine Red Cross, British Red Cross, Canadian Red Cross, Colombian Red Cross, Gambian Red Cross, Italian Red Cross, Maldivian Red Crescent, New Zealand Red Cross, Polish Red Cross, Slovenian Red Cross, Turkish Red Crescent, and Zambian Red Cross.

Section 1:

What is Meaningful Participation? Why is it important?

Evolution of the notion in the humanitarian sector: from participation to meaningful participation

The notion of consulting those who receive humanitarian action and seeking their input has its origins in the development sector in the 1990s.⁸ One of the earliest definitions of participation in humanitarian action appears in the 2003 handbook [Participation by Crisis-Affected Populations in Humanitarian Action](#): “the engagement of affected populations in one or more phases of the project cycle: assessment; design; implementation; monitoring; and evaluation...”⁹

The [2014 Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability](#) (CHS)¹⁰ list participation as number four of nine commitments for humanitarian actors: “Communities and people affected by crisis know their rights and entitlements, have access to information and participate in decisions that affect them.”¹¹ To operationalise this commitment, humanitarian actors are encouraged to ensure that “Policies are in place for engaging communities and people affected by crisis, reflecting the priorities and risks they identify in all stages of the work.”¹²

A decade later, in the [revised CHS \(2024\)](#) we see that participation has grown in importance - it is higher on the “agenda” (commitment number one)¹³ and it is coupled with the term “meaningful”. This conveys that people and communities should not merely be *listened to*, but also *heard* and that their voices *influence and shape concrete outcomes*.

To do this, the 2024 CHS calls on humanitarian actors to go beyond establishing *policies* for engaging with affected people and to *institutionalise* meaningful participation through whole-of-organisation approaches. It requires humanitarian actors to “Establish a coherent organisational approach to ensure transparent information-sharing, communication and meaningful participation of people and communities in the actions and decisions that affect them.”¹⁴

The [Participation Revolution](#) workstream, which was created as part of the 2016 Grand Bargain,¹⁵ also underlines the need for “permanent and sustainable change” in the way humanitarian actors operate, to integrate meaningful participation in practice.

... people and communities should not merely be listened to, but also heard and that their voices influence and shape concrete outcomes.

8 See [Engagement of crisis-affected people in humanitarian action](#), ALNAP, 2014 (page 8) and [Historical Perspectives of Participation in Development](#), Andrea Cornwall, Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (page 1).

9 [Participation by Crisis-Affected Populations in Humanitarian Action](#), ALNAP/Groupe URD, 2003 (page 20).

10 The CHS (2014) was the outcome of the Joint Standards Initiative (JSI) in which the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership (HAP) International, People In Aid and the Sphere Project joined forces to seek greater coherence for users of humanitarian standards.

11 [2014 Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability](#) (page 13).

12 Ibid.

13 [Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability 2024 Edition](#) “People and communities in situations of crisis and vulnerability can exercise their rights and participate in actions and decisions that affect them” (page 6).

14 Ibid.

15 The [Grand Bargain](#), launched during the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, is a unique agreement between some of the largest donors and humanitarian organisations who have committed to get more means into the hands of people in need and to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action.

Meaningful participation in global migration governance

In recent years, there has also been a push for the meaningful participation of those with lived experience in global migration governance. For example, the [2018 Global Compact on Refugees](#) (GCR) is underpinned by a multi-stakeholder and partnership approach, recognising that “responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist”¹⁶. The GCR tasks States and other stakeholders with ensuring that refugees are involved in its follow-up and review process, including through the Global Refugee Forum (GRF).¹⁷ The [Refugee Participation Pledge](#) was launched in 2019 in anticipation of the first GRF, to foster cooperation for the meaningful participation of refugees in policymaking processes. The pledge reached 100 signatories reached at the 2023 GRF¹⁸. Refugee participation in the GRF has also reflected the push for meaningful participation in global migration governance. Over 320 refugee representatives attended the 2023 GRF, over four times more than the 2019 GRF. 14 states and many civil society organizations brought refugee advisers on their delegations in 2023.¹⁹

Strengthening the meaningful participation of refugees has also been an ongoing discussion in the Consultations on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways (formerly the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement/ATCR). Meaningful refugee participation – ranging from consultation to partnerships and co-design with refugees – was a cross-cutting approach in the [Three-Year Strategy on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways \(2019-21\)](#) developed by the ATCR. Today, refugee representatives are co-leading and engaged in decision-making on the consultations through the Refugee Advisory Group²⁰.

Meanwhile, the whole-of-society principle of the [2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration](#) (GCM) envisages “broad multi-stakeholder partnerships to address migration in all its dimensions by including migrants... in migration governance”.²¹ However, in contrast to the GCR,

there is no explicit mention of “meaningful participation” in the GCM. This absence and limited migrant representation throughout the GCM implementation and review processes were criticised²² at the International Migration Review Forum (IMRF) in 2022, and calls were made to facilitate the meaningful participation of migrants – irrespective of migration status.²³ In the [Progress Declaration of the 2022 IMRF](#), States commit to “promoting the meaningful participation of migrants in policy discussions on issues affecting them” as part of the recommendations to accelerate the implementation of the GCM.²⁴ More recently, the UN Network on Migration has encouraged the engagement of migrants and those with lived experience in the second round of regional reviews of the GCM in 2024 and 2025.

Frameworks and policies within the Movement

There are multiple frameworks, policies, and strategies for strengthening the participation of affected people and communities in the Movement’s work. These documents use different names to describe the process of community engagement and accountability, but are essentially describing the same thing, i.e. “...the process of working in a transparent and participatory way with communities that improves the quality of programmes and operations”.²⁵

Participation (or meaningful participation) is generally considered one of three main components of such approaches, along with clear and open **communication** (about the Movement’s mandate and activities, lifesaving information, and how affected people and communities can be involved) and mechanisms to seek, listen to and act on **feedback** from affected people and communities. Within these documents - some of which date back twenty years – terms used range from “engagement” and “involvement” to “participation” and - more recently - “meaningful participation”.

16 [2018 Global Compact on Refugees](#) (paragraph 34, page 14)

17 Ibid. “States and relevant stakeholders will facilitate meaningful participation of refugees, including women, persons with disabilities, and youth, in Global Refugee Forums, ensuring the inclusion of their perspectives on progress”. (Paragraph 106, page 42)

18 Signatories include governments, refugee-led organisations, international and national NGOs, private sector actors, philanthropic foundations and international organisations – including IFRC. The full list can be seen [here](#)

19 [Meaningful participation of forcibly displaced and stateless persons in the Global Refugee Forum 2023 | The Global Compact on Refugees | UNHCR](#) (globalcompactrefugees.org)

20 Established in 2020, the Refugee Advisory Group is the main representative body of regional, national and global refugee representatives influencing policy decision-making on resettlement and complementary pathways at the Consultations on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways (CRCP), formerly the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR).

21 [2018 Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration](#) (Paragraph 15, page 5)

22 See for example, the concept note from the side-event at the International Migration Review Forum (May 2022) “[By Migrants, For Migrants: Advocating for migrants’ meaningful participation in IMRF and the GCM processes](#)”

23 QUNO, [Migration Justice: Delivering on the promise of the Global Compact for Migration](#)

24 [Progress Declaration of the 2022 IMRF](#) (paragraph 51, page 9)

25 See [A Red Cross Red Crescent Guide to Community Engagement and Accountability](#), IFRC (2021) page 13 “What’s in a Name”

In the 1994 [Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations \(NGOs\) in Disaster Relief](#), the Movement recognised the need for community participation in the design, management, and implementation of relief and rehabilitation programmes.²⁶ The 2013 edition of the [Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Humanitarian Assistance](#) refers to beneficiary engagement i.e. ensuring that disaster-affected people are involved in assessments and decision-making so that assistance is appropriate to their needs and priorities.²⁷

More recently, in the 2019 [Movement-wide Commitments for CEA](#), all components commit to "...facilitating greater participation of local people and communities, including National Society volunteers, and helping them to apply their knowledge, skills and capacities to find appropriate and effective solutions to their problems."²⁸

Meanwhile, the [ICRC AAP Institutional Framework 2020](#) recognises "the importance of obtaining affected people's views on their own needs to find and design their own solutions while acknowledging the diversity of the people who form a community and the range of their needs and abilities."²⁹

The recent [IFRC CEA Strategy 2023–2025](#) sets out its strategic goal whereby the active and meaningful participation of communities "...strengthens the relevance, impact, and quality of our work while enabling them to drive change for themselves, their communities, and the world."³⁰

... these frameworks and policies all recognise that the meaningful participation of migrants or affected people has the potential to strengthen the efficiency, relevance, impact, and quality of the Movement's work.

In terms of the *meaningful participation* of migrants, specifically, the [IFRC Global Migration Strategy \(2018-2022\)](#) evokes the need to "...make a space for migrants to be heard and to ensure that their needs and concerns guide our humanitarian action".³¹ It goes a step further, stipulating that a priority action for National Societies should be to "conduct recruitment in a way that specifically targets and encourages the participation of migrants and minorities."

The forthcoming Movement Migration Strategy (2024-2030) builds on this through its cross-cutting enabler³² on Accountability and Meaningful Participation, which aims to ensure that the "diverse capacities, experiences, needs, and vulnerabilities [of migrants] inform and drive the Movement's work". To achieve this, the Movement resolves to "Invest in those with first-hand, lived experience of migration, creating, and ensuring accessible opportunities to participate meaningfully in all aspects of the Movement's work, including as leaders, staff members, and volunteers, according to their aspirations and capacities."

Despite their differences, these frameworks and policies all recognise that the meaningful participation of migrants or affected people has the potential to strengthen the efficiency, relevance, impact, and quality of the Movement's work. Furthermore, all acknowledge the need to engage with affected people in their diversity (including age, gender, and disability) – rather than considering them a homogenous group. Finally, all point to the need for deep, structural transformation in the way the Movement works³³ – including how it is led and staffed – to ensure that meaningful participation is an operational reality for the Movement.

26 [Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organisations \(NGOs\) in Disaster Relief](#), 1994 (commitment 7, page 4: "Disaster response assistance should never be imposed upon the beneficiaries. Effective relief and lasting rehabilitation can best be achieved where the intended beneficiaries are involved in the design, management and implementation of the assistance programme. We will strive to achieve full community participation in our relief and rehabilitation programmes".

27 [Principles and Rules for Red Cross and Red Crescent Humanitarian Assistance](#), 2013 edition (page 13)

28 [2019 Movement-wide Commitments for CEA](#) Commitment 3 (page 6)

29 [ICRC Accountability to Affected People Institutional Framework](#) 2020 (page 1)

30 [IFRC CEA Strategy 2023–2025](#) (page 12)

31 [IFRC Global Migration Strategy 2018-2022](#) (page 9)

32 The Enablers reflect the cross-cutting approaches, capabilities, and resources that are vital for delivering on this Migration Strategy and in which the Movement commits to invest.

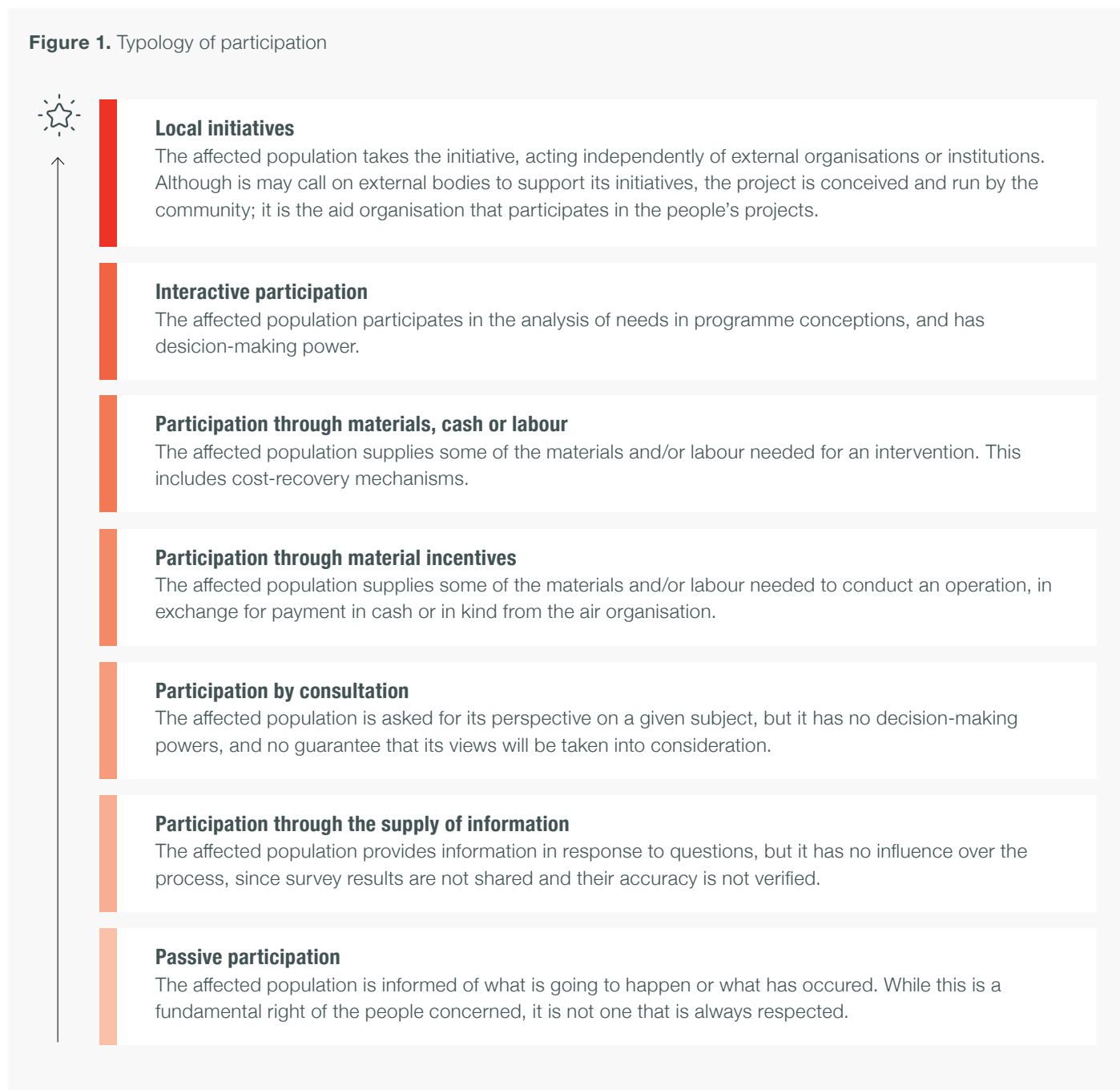
33 The [IFRC 2030 Strategy](#), for example, proposes "... an urgent shift of leadership and decision-making to the most local level – placing local communities at the very centre of change so that our actions are effective, inclusive, and sustainable." (page 6). Meanwhile, the [ICRC 2019-2024 Strategy](#) states that facilitating meaningful participation "... will require time, new approaches, practical tools and techniques, and a deeper transformation of traditional structures. This will include a shift away from a culture of top-down operational control to one of genuine engagement with populations and communities affected and the local actors and influencers within their environment."

Typologies of participation within the Movement

Movement actors use various tools to promote understanding and concrete implementation of participation, including visual tools that illustrate different types of participation. For example, Figure 2, the Ladder of Co-Production³⁴, was used by the Lab to develop the present discussion paper: KI were asked to evaluate the type of participation used by their NS and to situate this on the ladder (see below). In the Ladder of Co-Production, the terms “co-design” and “co-production” – which refer to working in equal partnership with affected people and communities – align with some conceptions

of meaningful participation. Figure 1 is a Typology of Participation used in ICRC’s AAP Framework.³⁵ Here, “interactive participation” is the most similar to meaningful participation, as it describes an approach whereby the affected people and communities participate in needs assessments, programme design, and - most importantly - decision-making. Figure 3 - used in IFRC training materials - illustrates levels of community participation.³⁶ The term, “collaborate” – whereby communities and NS plan and decide together - aligns most closely with meaningful participation.

Figure 1. Typology of participation



34 Ladder of Co-Production, used by the Co-production and National Co-production Advisory Group of the UK organisation [Think Local Act Personal](#)

35 [AAP Institutional Framework \(2020\)](#) page 7. This comes from [Groupe URD’s Participation Handbook for Humanitarian Field Workers](#) (Chapter 1)

36 Taken from IFRC CEA E-Learning “Participation for People on the Move”. The diagram is based on [IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum](#)

Figure 2. Ladder of co-production

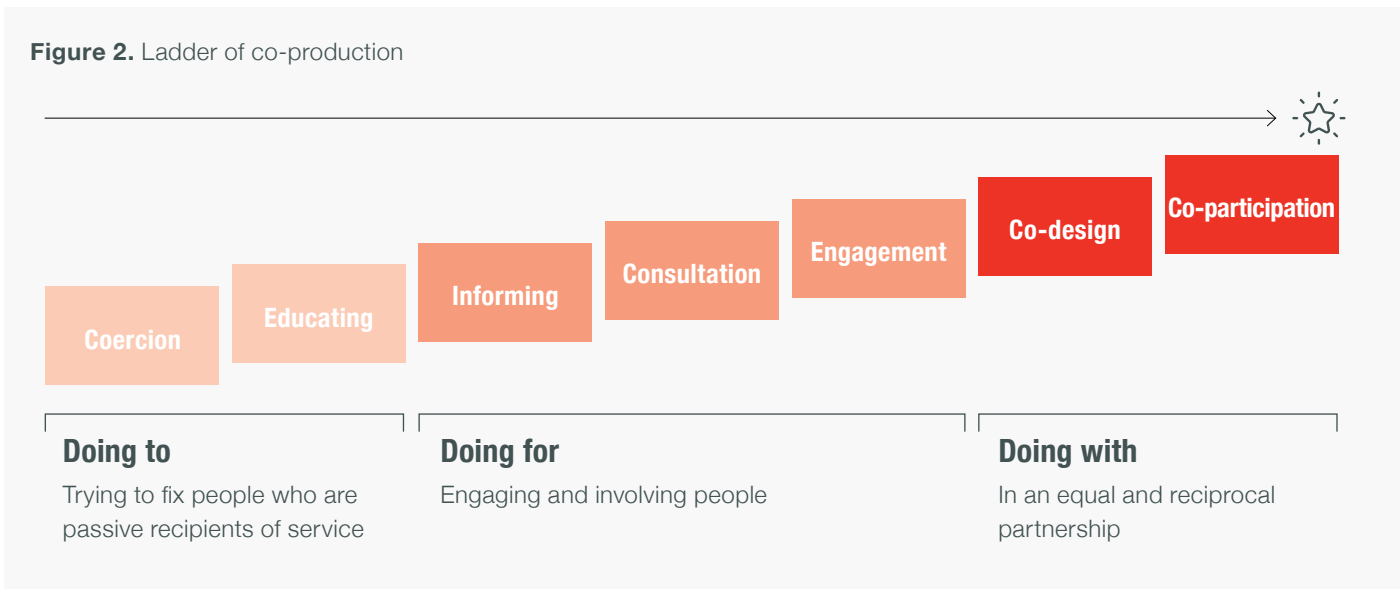
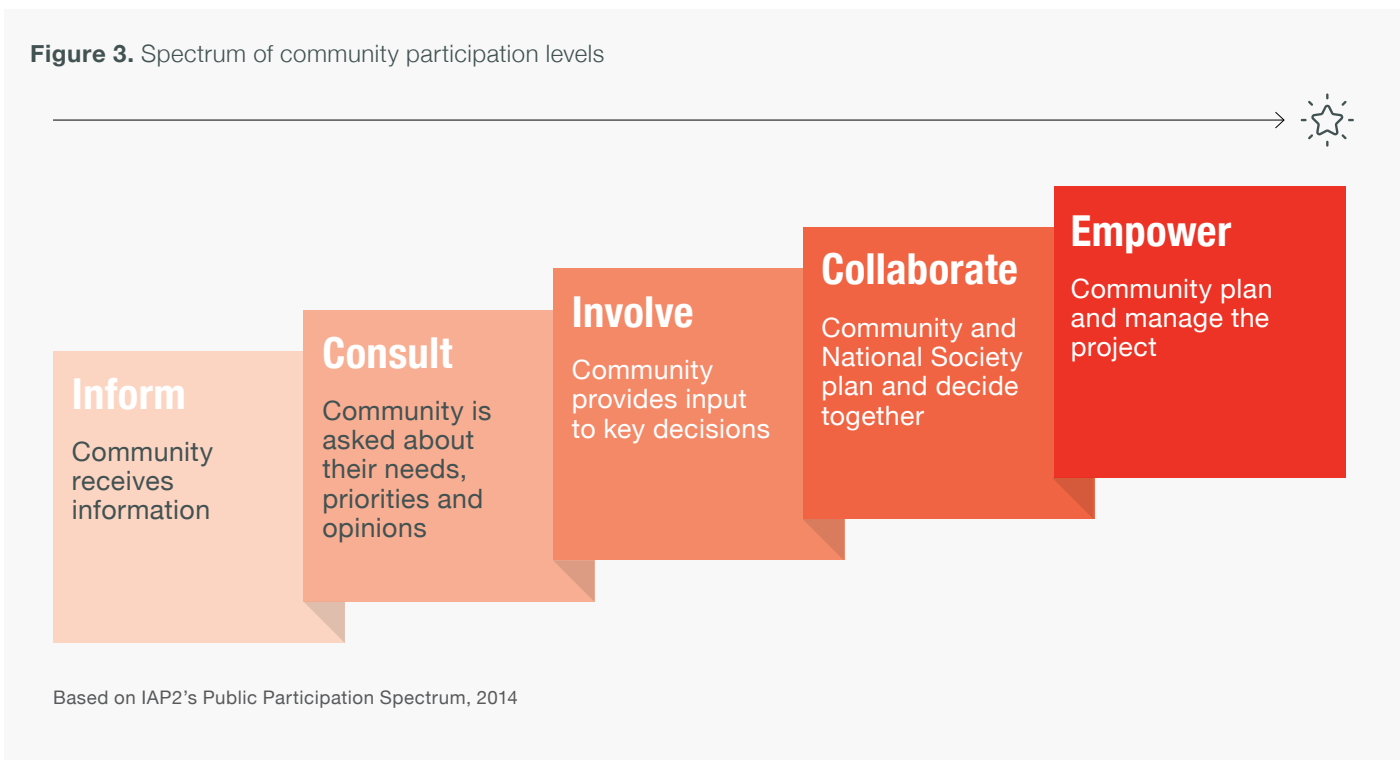


Figure 3. Spectrum of community participation levels



Section 2:

How does the Movement apply Meaningful Participation in practice? What are some of the challenges?

Practical examples from across the Movement

The following examples demonstrate how NS, the IFRC, and the ICRC have operationalised meaningful participation, by incorporating it into projects and programmes, embedding it at the institutional level, and into humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy efforts.

► Embedding meaningful participation at institutional level:

LEAC

Informing the Movement Migration Strategy: The Lived Experience Advisory Committee (LEAC)

In 2022, the LEAC was created to guide and inform the development of the Movement Strategy on Migration. The LEAC consisted of staff and volunteers with lived experience of migration in situations of vulnerability, who were also practitioners working on and supporting migration-related programming within the Movement. The LEAC met regularly in 2023 to provide feedback on the text and terminology and share reflections and recommendations on how to improve the application of meaningful participation in the Movement's migration-related work.

FRANCE

The French Red Cross: strategic engagement through peer migration advisors

The French Red Cross (FRC) recruits "Ex-peer" (Expert and Peer) Migration Advisors to improve the quality of its migration-related work by sharing their lived experience to guide and advise the NS. Ex-peers help select migration-related projects for FRC funding, test new tools, and contribute to the FRC's influencing strategy. FRC has also worked to ensure that migrants selected are from different backgrounds, mirroring the diversity of migrant communities in France.

NEW ZEALAND

The New Zealand Red Cross: participation of staff with lived experience in decision-making processes

At the New Zealand Red Cross (NZRC), approximately 50% of staff within the migration team are people with lived experience of a refugee journey. NZRC employs a Lived Experience Community Engagement Lead and Settlement Leads, all of whom have lived experience and participate in decision-making processes related to migration programming. Furthermore, NZRC's Migration Advisory Group is composed of volunteers from refugee communities and staff with lived experience and helps to guide resettlement work and improve operational responses. Finally, staff with lived experience can join Migration Consultancy Groups at national and local levels, providing them with a safe space to share concerns and discuss opportunities for upskilling and professional development.

At the New Zealand Red Cross (NZRC), approximately 50% of staff within the migration team are people with lived experience of a refugee journey.

► Incorporating meaningful participation into projects and programmes:

TÜRKIYE

Turkish Red Crescent Society (TRCS): participation of migrants and communities in advisory boards

In its Community Centres, TRCS has established Advisory Boards to ensure community participation in decision-making and implementation. Advisory Boards include local people, migrants, and community leaders representing different segments of society that access services at Community Centres. They make decisions on the implementation of projects and can also make suggestions, and complaints and share other feedback related to the Community Centres, helping to set the direction of programming and services and to improve accountability to those receiving support.

ZAMBIA

Zambia Red Cross: incorporating diverse views into project design and delivery

In one of the camps where Zambia Red Cross works, there are four major countries of origin for refugees, which means there are diverse perspectives and views to be considered. To ensure representation and understand the variety of needs and perspectives, the National Society works with block (camp neighbourhood) leaders and community leaders and has also trained and engaged four community volunteers from each nationality. This approach helps to ensure diverse views are incorporated into project design and delivery and conflict concerns, needs or cultural considerations are addressed. When working to promote RFL services, for example, the National Society, worked with local leaders to sensitize the communities across various countries of origin on services available and build trust.

Advisory Boards include local people, migrants, and community leaders representing different segments of society that access services at Community Centres.

ARGENTINA

Argentine Red Cross: co-designing activities with migrant organisations

The Argentine Red Cross has participated in co-design and co-production initiatives with migrant-led organisations, including workshops for migrants on access to rights and information, and training on issues identified by migrant communities. The Argentinian Red Cross regularly considers needs and requests raised by migrants and works with migration organisations to respond to these, co-construct activities and projects.

AUSTRALIA

Australian Red Cross: engaging migrants to co-design a Work Right Hub

To build its Work Right Hub, aimed at helping migrants identify if they or someone they know has experienced exploitation, the Australian Red Cross worked in partnership with people with lived experience of migration. They provided guidance on the accessibility and design of the Hub, and their input led to concrete changes being made to content.

RCRC IN ACTION

RCRC in Action: participatory approaches to integration through the AVAIL Project

The “Amplifying the Voices of Asylum Seekers and Refugees for Integration and Life Skills” (AVAIL) project was implemented from 2018 to 2020. It was led by the British Red Cross, in partnership with the Italian Red Cross, the Irish Red Cross, the Latvian Red Cross, and the IFRC, and was designed to explore new ways to support the integration of refugees, asylum seekers, and host communities by testing participatory approaches. The AVAIL project aimed to enable people with lived experience to have an impact at different levels of service provision, strategy, policy, and on broader society.³⁷

³⁷ For more information see [the AVAIL project; Co-production in service design and service delivery \(case study\)](#) and [Co-Design of the UK Asylum Process Course \(case study\)](#)

► Meaningful participation in humanitarian diplomacy and advocacy efforts:

IFRC

IFRC: including migrant voices in global fora

At the 2019 and 2023 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and the 2021 UNHCR High-Level Officials Meeting, IFRC gave priority to refugees (NS staff and volunteers with lived experience) on their delegation, and their official statements were co-drafted and delivered by refugee representatives. Furthermore, IFRC promoted support for the 2023 GRF pledge on refugee participation and, along with certain NS, encouraged governments to include refugee advisers on their delegations. At the 2023 Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement, two refugee representatives from NS were part of the IFRC Network delegation. Furthermore, IFRC supported people with lived experience of displacement to speak at climate events, including at COP27 and the planning for events at COP28. IFRC has also endeavoured to include voices of migrants and displaced people in forums such as the IMRF in 2022.

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Supported by the British Red Cross, VOICES Ambassadors receive training, mentoring, and psychosocial support to amplify their voices.

BRITAIN

The British Red Cross: sharing refugee experiences to change minds, policies and practices

The [VOICES Network](#) is a UK-wide group of experts-by-experience of forced displacement (mainly refugees and asylum seekers), who have expressed a desire to share their experiences to change minds, policy and practice. Supported by the British Red Cross, VOICES Ambassadors receive training, mentoring, and psychosocial support to amplify their voices. They speak from their personal experiences and on behalf of the network and other refugees and asylum seekers collectively. VOICES Ambassadors are independent and do not represent the view of the British Red Cross or any other organisation.



Argentine Red Cross provides humanitarian assistance and protection to migrants in need from many countries arriving and travelling through its borders. Credit: Cruz Roja Argentina

► Insights on meaningful participation from across the Movement

Eighteen KI from 13 NS were asked about their interpretation of meaningful participation, the need for and potential benefits of meaningful participation, and how it was implemented within their organisation. They were also invited to share perspectives on challenges, practical considerations, and risks related to the meaningful participation of migrants. Key insights from the interviews are summarised below.

Meaningful participation is necessary for effective policies and programmes:

When asked about the need for meaningful participation and the benefits thereof³⁸, the majority of KI (16 of 18) outlined its importance firstly in terms of building trust with migrant communities and secondly in ensuring the relevance and sustainability of programmes. Meaningful participation was also described as an example of best practice in terms of accountability and risk mitigation and adding legitimacy and credibility to advocacy efforts. According to KI, the benefits of meaningful participation for migrants included empowerment, a sense of belonging and ownership, as well as professional and skills development.

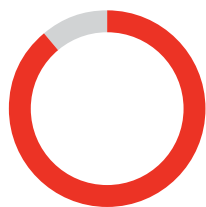
The absence of common terminology is affecting implementation:

The majority of KI expressed that the lack of a unified and explicit definition of meaningful participation led to challenges in interpretation and, therefore, implementation. When asked to define meaningful participation³⁹, KI used a range of terminology, including “meaningful engagement”, “inclusion” “inclusivity” or “participation of people with lived experience” “co-design” and “co-production.” The majority of KI agreed that clear, contextualised descriptions of meaningful participation and co-design or co-production (that can be translated into other languages) would help to strengthen action on meaningful participation at all levels across the Movement, from staff and volunteers through to leadership.

Efforts fall short of genuine and sustained co-production and co-design:

KI were asked⁴⁰ to consider their work on meaningful participation in terms of the [co-production ladder](#)⁴¹ (see annex). Fourteen out of 18 KI placed their NS somewhere in the middle of the ladder, i.e. NS engage and consult with migrants, but the latter’s views rarely influence decisions or lead to change. Whilst all KI noted that meaningful participation was important throughout the entire project cycle, 10 out of 18 mentioned that, in practice, this took place mostly during the initial design and the final evaluation phase.

FGD echoed these views and highlighted the limited and tokenistic nature of the participation of migrants and refugees in advocacy and policy forums: although they are invited to share experiences during events, they are not consistently involved in the preparation of policy briefs or advocacy messages. In general, participation was described by KI in terms of what is being done by NS, rather than what the NS aspires to, and activities such as feedback and complaints mechanisms were cited rather than migrant-led decision-making. Eight out of 18 KI noted that their NS had co-designed services with service users, but this was generally on an ad hoc basis.



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38 KI were asked the following questions: “What are the key incentives and benefits for ensuring the ‘meaningful participation of migrants’ in humanitarian action? Why do you think ‘meaningful participation’ is needed?”

39 KI were asked the following questions: “What does meaningful participation mean to you (or your National Society/organisation)? How is this phrase interpreted or defined in your work with and for migrants (or by your National Society/organisation)?”

40 KI were asked the following questions: “To what degree do you think your National Society (or organisation) is engaging in the participation ladder pictured below? Do you have specific examples to share from your context and migration programming based on the different levels?” Each step or level of the ladder was explained or clarified for the purpose of common understanding.

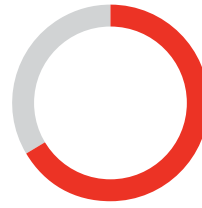
41 Developed by The National Co-Production Advisory Group (see [Think Local Act Personal and the National Co-production Advisory Group](#))

A gap between rhetoric and action:

KI were invited to share their views about the institutionalisation of meaningful participation of migrants through their inclusion as volunteers, staff members and leaders, and through formal frameworks, policies and strategies.⁴²

All KI noted that migrants were primarily involved as volunteers in migration-related programming, whilst 10 out of 18 noted their involvement as staff members. A third of KI stated that migrants held paid leadership positions. A common concern expressed by KI was the gap between rhetoric and action on meaningful participation, and the need to mainstream this into migration-related programming at all levels. KI also emphasized the importance of engaging migrants at all levels in the Movement's work – from the operational to the strategic (i.e. leadership and decision-making) – but remarked that translating this into practical action is slow.

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Two-thirds of KI responded that meaningful participation was formally incorporated into existing frameworks to some degree

Two-thirds of KI responded that meaningful participation was formally incorporated into existing frameworks to some degree (i.e. included in specific NS policies or strategies – generally those on CEA or diversity and inclusion). Most often, however, KI responded that their NS had not taken formal commitments or developed strategies explicitly addressing meaningful participation, but that efforts were underway to address this, at least at the operational or programmatic levels.

Eleven out of 18 KI noted they did not have specific tools or resources to operationalise the meaningful participation of migrants. Where tools did exist, the most common resources mentioned were those relating to CEA. Interestingly, a few KI reported that sessions on meaningful participation were organised as part of induction training for new staff and volunteers working on migration. Only 5 out of 18 KI mentioned that their NS had advanced frameworks to promote the meaningful participation of people with lived experience.



French Red Cross operates the 'Mobile support systems for migrants' project in the North of France. Credit: Louis Witter

⁴² KI were asked the following questions: "How does your National Society (or organisation) work to ensure the meaningful participation of migrants at various levels – from staff and volunteers to leadership? Is meaningful participation part of any strategies, formalised frameworks, programming, advocacy efforts, etc.?"

► Barriers and risks associated with promoting the meaningful participation of migrants

KIs were asked to identify challenges to the implementation of meaningful participation and practical considerations for NS to take on board.⁴³ These are summarised below.



ADMINISTRATIVE, LEGAL, AND POLICY CONSTRAINTS

At the institutional level, recruitment systems and practices were considered not accessible or adapted to people with lived experience of migration. It was reported that employing migrants can be challenging for NS due to constraints around legal status, and this is hampering their best efforts to diversify the workforce and engage migrants from wider perspectives and backgrounds. In addition, some migrants may be unable to receive remuneration for participation as it may negatively affect their access to benefits and government support.



LEADERSHIP AND INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Barriers related to power dynamics and the willingness of leadership to relinquish power were highlighted by KI and in FGD. KI also mentioned that leadership may lack the capacity in and understanding of meaningful participation and therefore not prioritise it at a strategic level.



CULTURE, COMMUNICATION, AND TRUST

Language and communication barriers, alongside cultural concerns and trust issues, were frequently cited by KI and in FGD as barriers to meaningful participation.



LIMITED RESOURCES AND TIME CONSTRAINTS

All KI cited limited resources as a barrier⁴⁴. It was noted that consultations, design of tools, translation, and interpretation, and support to facilitate engagement (transport, accommodation, etc.) all have costs, as does direct remuneration for people's time. Time constraints related to migrants' time to participate, as well as difficulties in complying with project timelines, given that co-design and co-production require extra time. This often conflicts with donor expectations and the fact that humanitarian organisations are operating in emergency contexts, responding to immediate needs. A disconnect was noted in terms of what donors say (i.e., calling for meaningful participation or AAP) and what they expect from humanitarian organisations (i.e., rapid response and demonstration of service delivery).



DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

The majority of KI were unsure about expectations and requirements in terms of implementation given the lack of a common definition and approach and felt most comfortable conducting CEA-type activities (e.g. needs assessments, and community feedback mechanisms). Indeed, the absence of an agreed definition or approach to meaningful participation was also cited as a key barrier to both the implementation and institutionalisation of meaningful participation in FGD. This despite the fact that, as the examples in this paper suggest, National Societies have ensured communities take part in the design of programmes and responses in a variety of contexts, with good examples proving that even without having definitions, implementation happens.

43 KI were asked "What are the key challenges to ensuring *meaningful participation of migrants* in your context? These can be strategic, operational, financial, political, legal or programmatic, etc." and What practical considerations and/or risks need to be considered when working to ensure the 'meaningful participation of migrants' in humanitarian action?

44 Some emphasised financial resources (17 out of 18), others human resources (10 out of 18), and others time constraints (9 out of 18).



REPRESENTATION

The need to carefully consider the question of representation and ensure as diverse representation as possible was flagged by several KI (13 out of 18) and FGD. This can be challenging given migrants' diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, motivations, and perspectives. Conflicts of interest among and within migrants and groups of individuals representing migrants were also noted. Several KI (9 out of 18) noted that migrants may wish to engage at different levels within the Movement, and so opportunities to participate in operational programming through to advocacy and leadership should be offered.



SAFETY AND SECURITY

The most critical and commonly cited risk (17 out of 18 KI) was the need to guarantee the safety of migrants and uphold the do no harm principle. Migrants with irregular status may be exposed to risks of detention or deportation when participating in public advocacy or campaigns. Migrants who have fled persecution or who are seeking asylum may be at risk of reprisals. Related to this, KI highlighted the need to protect personal data gathered from migrants as part of meaningful participation efforts. There is a risk of re-traumatisation or re-victimisation when asking migrants to speak about certain difficult experiences from their past and there is a need for accompanying psychosocial support or a trauma-informed approach, where appropriate.



TECHNICAL CAPACITY

KI noted the need for more tools, training, and guidance on meaningful participation in the context of migration programming, particularly given the need to engage mobile populations, respond to acute needs, and recruit both volunteers and staff who may have varied status within the country.



TOKENISM AND MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

The risk of tokenism was also mentioned (by 9 out of 18 KI) along with the need to manage migrants' expectations (by 8 out of 18). The latter related to expectations linked to opportunities for participation and expectations related to outcomes (i.e. influencing decisions). For example, it was noted that in advocacy, humanitarian organisations do not control the outcomes as policy changes are determined by States.



OTHER BARRIERS

Less frequently cited barriers included the fact that migration policies are often reactive and therefore do not allow for meaningful participation from the outset, the absence of a systematic approach to meaningful participation (which remains largely ad hoc and project-specific), and the mobile nature of migrants, particularly for NS working primarily with migrants in transit.

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Section 3:

How can the Movement improve meaningful participation?

Strengthening the meaningful participation of migrants can lead to important benefits for both migrants and each of the components of the Movement. By leading and participating in decision-making processes, migrants can influence policies and programmes impacting their daily lives, contributing to a sense of empowerment, belonging, and ownership. Meaningful participation also enhances the quality and effectiveness of humanitarian action and reduces risks of harm. Furthermore, the meaningful participation of migrants in humanitarian action can help to build trust between migrants and the Movement.

As outlined above, there is a long way to go to ensure that meaningful participation is valued and sustainably and strategically incorporated into Movement strategies, policies, programming, and advocacy. Adequate infrastructure and resources, leadership buy-in, sustained commitment and training, and technical capacity strengthening for staff and volunteers are all required. The following are recommendations on how the Movement could achieve this.

Create opportunities for those with lived experience to join the Movement at all levels

- Conduct internal mappings and surveys on staff and volunteer diversity and analyse structural barriers to meaningful participation related to human resources policies and practices.
- Be mindful of language barriers and cultural considerations during recruitment processes for both staff and volunteers.
- Recognise and value the skills, knowledge, and expertise of staff and volunteers with a lived experience of migration and increase efforts to support and equip them to engage effectively in programming, advocacy, and policymaking. This may include, for example, investing in people with soft skills (e.g. facilitation skills) rather than focusing on technical skills during recruitment processes.

Establish common definitions and terminology

- Ensure a shared understanding of the concepts of meaningful participation and lived experience. The descriptions in the Draft Movement Migration Strategy are a good starting place.
- Develop formal strategies, policies and approaches and create platforms where those with lived experience can meaningfully participate.

Institutionalise meaningful participation from the ground up, as well as top-down

- Ensure opportunities for meaningful participation at the local level, as well as in leadership positions and high-level advocacy fora aimed to influence advocacy and policy-making.
- To help build buy-in and make the case for donors and Movement leadership for further investment in and commitment to meaningful participation, document its positive impacts on migrants and the effectiveness of humanitarian action at the policy and programme levels.

Allocate sufficient resources to create spaces and platforms for meaningful participation

- Support migrant representatives to access and participate in physical and remote meetings (e.g. provide them with support to obtain necessary visas, logistical support, IT support, translation, and in interpretation services where necessary).
- Bearing in mind that migrants may need to take leave from paid employment to participate in activities, consider the possibility of compensating them for their time.

Ensure that meaningful participation is as representative as possible

- Consider the full diversity of migrants' lived experiences and engage with those from different backgrounds and with different experiences, levels of vulnerability, areas of expertise, interests, and skill sets to include a broad range of perspectives.
- Acknowledging that not everybody is at the table(s) and that it is not possible to represent every single view and perspective.

Reduce risks for those with lived experience

- When handling information about migrants in the context of programming and meaningful participation efforts, provide them with clear information about how their information and insights will be used and how their data and privacy will be protected and obtain their consent for this.
- When migrants and refugees are asked about past experiences, a trauma-informed approach should be used, and psychosocial support should be available if needed.
- Actively work with those with lived experience to understand the safety risks of participation and how best to mitigate them with adequate safeguards. For example, those who lack legal status may be at risk of detention and deportation and those fleeing persecution may be vulnerable to reprisals.

Strengthen technical capacity across the Movement

- Share existing resources, provide training, and create peer-to-peer platforms for learning and development on meaningful participation at the programming and advocacy level.
- Provide support to develop tools and resources that are locally adapted and reflect migrants' preferred methods of engaging (for example, specific tools that take into account the mobile nature of migrants and the needs of migrants in transit).

Ensure sustained engagement, be clear, and manage expectations.

- Analyse decision-making processes and power dynamics to consider how these impact migrants' ability to engage meaningfully and participate.
- Be realistic and transparent with migrants both about opportunities to participate and the Movement's capacity to effect change and influence final policy outcomes (given that these are dependent on many external factors).

Ask migrants to provide feedback in order to adapt interventions and approaches on meaningful participate.

- Ensure sustained (rather than ad hoc) engagement with migrant representatives e.g. rather than simply inviting them to speak at events, involve them in the preparation and follow-up of events, and invite them to help shape policy, advocacy, or programming outcomes resulting from this.
- Ask for regular feedback to adapt and improve ways of working to foster more genuine participation.

Annex 1

KI were asked to evaluate and locate their work on meaningful participation on the [co-production ladder](#)⁴⁵. Below are the results. Most KI situated their KI on the “engagement” or “consultation” rung of the ladder, seen in red below.

LEVEL OF PARTICIPATION	STATE OF PLAY WITHIN THE MOVEMENT (ACCORDING TO KI)
<p>Co-production (an equal relationship between people who use services and the people responsible for services. They work together, from design to delivery, sharing strategic decision-making about policies as well as decisions about the best way to deliver services).</p>	<p>This level of participation is not formalised or implemented consistently, although some NS use level of participation within specific programmes and interventions on an ad hoc basis.</p>
<p>Co-design (people who use services are involved in designing services, based on their experiences and ideas. They have genuine influence but have not been involved in “seeing it through”).</p>	<p>This level of participation is used on an ad hoc basis within specific programmes or interventions but does not as yet represent a systematic approach across the Movement.</p>
<p>Engagement (people who use services are given more opportunities to express their views and may be able to influence some decisions, but this depends on what the people responsible for services will allow).</p>	<p>NS regularly engage with those with lived experience, particularly as part of CEA approaches, although engagement tends to happen more in the initial phases of projects and programmes.</p>
<p>Consultation (people who use services may be asked to fill in surveys or attend meetings; however, this step may be considered tokenistic if they do not have the power to influence or affect change).</p>	<p>NS regularly consult with those with lived experience, particularly as part of CEA approaches, although engagement tends to happen more in the initial phases of projects and programmes.</p>
<p>Informing (the people responsible for services inform people about the services and explain how they work. This may include telling people what decisions have been made and why).</p>	<p>NS often inform those with lived experience as part of CEA approaches, in parallel to consulting and engaging with them (above-mentioned steps).</p>
<p>Education (the people who use services are helped to understand the service design and delivery so that they gain relevant knowledge about it. That is all that is done at this stage).</p>	<p>This level of participation is used systematically across the Movement, but sometimes accompanied by other forms of participation (including the abovementioned steps on informing, consulting and engaging).</p>
<p>Coercion (people who use services attend an event about services as passive recipients. Their views are not considered important and are not taken into account).</p>	<p>This does not apply to the Movement’s work; it is inconsistent with and contrary to approaches which focus on participation and CEA.</p>

45 Developed by The National Co-Production Advisory Group (see [Think Local Act Personal and the National Co-production Advisory Group](#))