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10 Best Practices for Engaging with Refugee Leaders

A Guide for Centering Displaced People in Policy Advocacy



Photo Credit: Refugee Congress / Nga Vuong Sandoval

*For too long, people who have experienced displacement have been absent from the policy tables and discussions that affect their lives. Increasingly, however, advocates, policymakers, members of the media, and others are more proactively collaborating with refugee leaders to inform and drive their work forward. This is a positive development, and ultimately it makes for more authentic and impactful work. But these engagements must be rooted in equal and meaningful partnership. **Ten best practices below, identified by refugee leaders from our network, can help ensure that this collaboration is meaningful and not extractive.***

1. Begin with Refugee Leadership

When refugee leaders are invited to share perspectives or stories, it often happens at a later stage, when a project is nearly complete—or they are invited into spaces after decisions are already made. Instead, refugee leaders should be included in your decision-making, research, and agenda-setting process from the very beginning.

Refugee leaders are experts in their lived experiences and their fields. They are also more than their trauma stories. It is important to allow their perspectives and experiences to inform your policy advocacy, research, and decision-making rather than simply using their stories to move your agenda forward.

As you work with refugee leaders, also make sure that you explain the full purpose and strategy behind what you want to achieve in partnering together, and be open to feedback. You may find that the direction you initially thought a project should take changes as you collaborate. Develop a relationship of trust, being relational instead of transactional.

2. Respect Boundaries

When refugees are asked to share their perspectives and experiences, they often have to relive painful moments of their lives. When interviewing or working with a refugee leader, defer to them on what they are willing to share about their personal story. Respect their decisions and do not ask probing questions about parts of their story that they may not be offering. Instead, create a space where refugees are comfortable and able to share what they want about their own experiences, and ask follow-up questions that may be inquisitive but not intrusive in nature, based on parts of their story that they already felt comfortable sharing. Be aware of non-verbal cues, and approach your requests with cultural humility.

Storytelling can be powerful, but it should not come at the cost of retraumatizing the storyteller. Ensure you are providing a supportive, empathetic environment when you invite refugee leaders to tell their stories, and center the refugee leader's experience and narrative rather than others' responses to their story.

Respect refugee leaders who choose not to share their story or request additional time to feel more comfortable in preparation or deal with mental health issues.

3. Focus on the Now vs. Then

Refugees are more than just their trauma stories. Create a space where refugees are able to share their successes, accomplishments, contributions, and the different parts of their identities, including who they are now and not just during their experience with displacement. Refugees should not feel like they have to share their trauma story in order to make a change or in order to have the support of their communities.

4. Check in on Safety

Be aware of security and safety concerns that may arise for people who are sharing sensitive parts of their displacement experience. Ask if there are any legal, personal, or security risks for them, their family, or community if they share their story publicly. Ask how they would like their story to be shared, including whether they are comfortable sharing their full name, image, or if they need to use a pseudonym.

5. Get Informed Consent

Always make sure that refugee leaders are actively consenting to the public documentation and proliferation of their story, perspective, or likeness, and are fully informed about the potential risks of doing so. Whenever possible, make a record of this informed consent, and store this record somewhere that is secure. Before you publish something, share it with the refugee leader to get their feedback and ensure they are comfortable with how you are presenting them and their story.

6. Create an Accessible Space for Sharing

Before you work with refugee leaders, ask what accommodations they need to participate. This may include conducting your interview in a private setting, arranging for an interpreter, or making other adjustments for time or accessibility.

Keep in mind that refugee leaders who do not work in the advocacy or media space full time have other roles to fulfill. As you invite them to engage, consider offering times that take these other roles and responsibilities into consideration. The most convenient times are generally outside of the 9:00 to 5:00 work day.

Also ensure that any supporting documents, policy guides, or memos that accompany your engagement are able to be clearly understood by anyone whose first language is not English.

Recognize that working styles and language skills are diverse. Upholding a single standard for how people should speak, write, and work prevents leaders with various cultural backgrounds and styles of communications from actively engaging.

7. Provide Leadership Development Opportunities

If you are inviting refugee leaders to be part of your work, make sure you are providing resources such as trainings, webinars, and leadership development opportunities so that they can fully engage in what you are trying to do. Draw on the expertise of established refugee leaders in your network by inviting them to lead trainings for refugee leaders and others in the field. Use effective modeling in your trainings by demonstrating, providing a space to practice, and allowing space for reflection.

8. Provide Compensation When Appropriate

As you invite refugee leaders to work with you, remember that they are often providing their expertise for free in settings in which others are being compensated for their time. When appropriate, consider offering compensation in the form of honorarium, stipends, or reimbursements in advance, and think through how payments will be processed.

9. Hire Refugee Leaders

Before working with refugee leaders, look within your own organization. Do you have people who have experienced displacement on your staff? The most sustainable way to ensure that refugee leadership is part of your work is through hiring and investing in refugee leaders. This allows your work to be centered in the perspectives and knowledge of people who have experienced displacement at all times and not just in the moment. Provide leadership opportunities for former refugees within your organizations. Remember, many were once leaders before.

10. Advocate for Others to Engage in Trauma-Informed Storytelling and Practice Meaningful Partnership

Share this resource and advocate for centering refugee leadership and engaging with trauma-informed storytelling within your organization & other settings where you engage.

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