



The Importance of Refugee Inclusion in Research Design:

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Background

United under the rallying call, “[nothing about us without us](#),” refugees have demanded inclusion in global policy and decision-making processes that impact their rights, protections, and provision. Moreover, refugees demand direct representation and participation in the academic research that critically informs governance decisions and humanitarian responses to migration crises. Refugees have reiterated their demands at the regional and international levels- including at the inaugural [2019 Global Refugee Forum](#) held in Geneva, Switzerland and at the 2019 inaugural [Africa Refugee Leaders’ Summit](#) held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Despite their advocacy efforts, refugees remain excluded from [meaningful participation](#) in academic and policy research, including in shaping the agenda for this research. The time is apt to address this.

To contextualize the global inequalities in shaping the global research agenda, the [Local Engagement Refugee Research Network](#) reviewed authorship trends in two preeminent migration journals. They found that while over 80% of the world’s refugees live in the Global South, scholars from the Global North published over 90% of articles in [Journal of Refugee Studies](#) and in the [Refugee Studies Quarterly](#). In the latter, only 4% of articles were solely authored and 7% co-authored by scholars in Global South Institutions. Refugees authored or co-authored very few articles, underscoring the exclusion of refugee voices.

Effects of Refugee Research Inclusion

What are the effects of refugee exclusion in designing research on migration topics? Simply stated, the populations that have the most to gain from research conducted about them are excluded from shaping this research. Under an existing model, researchers collaborate with displaced persons for survey participation, research recruitment, or hire refugees as translators and research assistants. However, the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration’s [Code of Ethics](#) highlights that refugees lack systematic access to determine the research question, to co-create the research instruments used in data collection (e.g., surveys and focus group questions), and lack the ability to analyze and share findings.

Refugee scholar [Naohiko Omata](#) labels one effect of refugee exclusion as an [under- or over-researched](#) phenomenon. As scholars rush to study “[hot topics](#)” or gather policy-relevant data, many significant questions remain unasked. “Over-researched” refugees feel research fatigue and frustration—particularly if their living situations fail to change after extensive research participation. Meanwhile, the “under-researched” feel ignored and isolated from the benefits research can produce. Overall, certain migrant populations and migration topics are over-studied, while others are simply overlooked.

Envisioning a New Approach, Expanded Inclusion, and How to Achieve it

Researchers can move from the existing top-down approach to arrive with a pre-designed research question and instead pivot to a collaboratively designing research with refugee community members directly. This change matters because the research question determines both the types of data collected and from whom data is collected. Ground-up collaboration identifies new research questions and helps overcome the under- and over-researched phenomenon. Early-stage refugee collaboration empowers the displaced to prioritize the topics most significance *to them*. Refugee involvement also enables researchers to better understand the stakes of selecting a given research topic over another. Finally, collaborative research allows refugees and researchers to jointly identify the stakeholders who need this data the most. Most importantly, this includes sharing research findings back to refugees for use in their own advocacy efforts.

To achieve this approach, scholars, research institutions, and think tanks can partner directly with national, regional, and international consortia of refugee leaders and refugee-led organizations (RLOs)—such as the [Refugee Led Organization Network](#) in Uganda or the [Global Refugee Led Network](#) and its six sub-regional networks. If requested, research institutions can provide capacity development to these networks to ensure ethical, mutually beneficial collaboration.

The global moment for this renewed partnership is timely. International institutions like the [Open Society Foundation](#) and [Oxfam International](#) have responded to refugees' collective advocacy by providing enhanced partnerships and capacity building for refugee leaders and RLOs. Remarkably, the United Nations has reaffirmed commitments to, "meaningful participation of refugees," through its [New York Declaration on Refugees and Migrants](#), the [Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework](#), and the [Global Compact on Refugees](#). Academic efforts can dove-tail with these broader initiatives to similarly promote refugee inclusion.

Conclusion

Early-stage collaboration with refugees to forge research agendas helps overcome the noted power inequalities. Collaboration meaningfully expands the roles of [refugee researchers](#) while being attentive to the unique ethical challenges of their inclusion. Collaboration can [establish trust](#) between researchers and the researched. Finally, research collaboration allows scholars, policymakers, and humanitarian responders to better understand the diverse needs and capabilities of the world's nearly [80 million displaced population](#). New collaborations thus further breaks down dominant narratives [monolithic](#) displaced communities, and allows the displaced to be people we acknowledge, value, and "speak to" rather than solely "speak about."

Researchers should be encouraged to make an individual or institutional commitment for refugee consultation and inclusion in early-stage research design and agenda setting on topics of forced migration; promote this pledge to other relevant stakeholders; and work to implement the proposed new approach in pursuit of this memorandum's goals. Moreover, this model and its suggestions can be expanded for research with other marginalized and vulnerable populations.