

**Participatory Policy-making with Refugee Claimants in the City of Toronto**

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## Executive Summary

Increasing numbers of refugee claimants in Toronto, Canada are revealing the strain between promises of inclusion and the limitations of current top-down policy approaches. As participatory approaches to policy making become increasingly recognized as a valuable method of developing holistic policy, improving government capacity to engage with people who have lived experience is critical.

Toronto's 2022 - 2026 Welcoming Newcomer Strategy commits to improving City programs and services to be more equitable and inclusive for all newcomers. This paper assesses whether this strategy aligns with a human rights, intersectional, and policy justice theoretical framework, drawing attention to key areas where the City can better integrate participatory approaches. It recommends four policy options that outline how the City of Toronto can better work in collaboration with newcomers, with a specific focus on refugee claimants given their distinct and precarious immigration status.

Local Pathways - engaging refugee claimants at the local level

1. Build capacity for City staff through education and training
2. Establish meaningful partnerships with refugee claimants
3. Develop leadership opportunities for refugee claimants at the City
4. Establish participatory monitoring & evaluation indicators

Based on an examination of local policy options, this paper advocates for the creation of meaningful participation of people with lived experience within local governance models. It is important to recognize the valuable participation of a range of civil society actors advocating for claimants and pushing the City to adopt better practices<sup>1</sup>.

## Section 1 - Background

Many refugees and claimants are highly innovative and work collectively to solve complex problems with limited support and resources. It is refugees themselves who have organised together when forced to leave their home countries<sup>2</sup>, mobilised community resources<sup>3</sup>,

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<sup>1</sup> Skaidra, "Seeing Like a Zone," 12.

<sup>2</sup> Network for Refugee Voices, "Declaration for Effective," Article 3.

<sup>3</sup> Manjikian, "Refugee "In-betweenness," 55.

coordinated service delivery<sup>4</sup>, and advocated for inclusion in international forums<sup>5</sup>. Far from the stereotype of passive actors or vulnerable beneficiaries, refugees continually assert their own agency and engage in important acts of participating in society, ultimately playing key roles in creating spaces of social inclusion<sup>6</sup>. Drawing on these experiences through including refugees in participatory approaches to policy making carries both moral authority and the practical benefits of developing solutions drawn from expertise, networks and resources that are unlikely to be visible to traditional policymakers<sup>7</sup>.

By the end of 2022, 108 million people were displaced globally with 35.3 million people classified as refugees and an additional 5.4 million people initiating refugee claims processes<sup>8</sup>. Canada is seeing a significant increase in refugee claims; however, Canada has only received about two per cent of the global refugee population, so this is a relatively small challenge when compared to other countries with significantly higher refugee population counts<sup>9</sup>. As the first receivers of newcomers, cities play an increasingly important role in determining to what extent refugee claimants will be welcomed in the community. To counter rising polarisation, it is essential that cities that aim to be welcoming go beyond strategic frameworks and also demonstrate strong public leadership and institutional commitment to change and complexity through strengthening inclusive processes and policies for all community members<sup>10</sup>.

### Why focus on refugee claimants in particular?

While all categories of newcomers face challenges moving to new communities, refugee claimants are made uniquely vulnerable as they navigate complex administrative, social and political systems while they wait for their refugee status to be determined. This process often takes many years, and there is no guarantee that they will be recognized as Convention refugees at the end of it<sup>11</sup>. Refugee claimants are also required to disclose their status through a temporary Social Insurance Number (SIN), which confirms their lack of status to all potential employers, housing, health providers and ultimately intensifies the barriers that they must overcome<sup>12</sup>. Refugee claimants are important participants in developing strategies to meet

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<sup>4</sup> Refugee Studies Centre, "Refugees as Providers of Protection and Assistance," 2.

<sup>5</sup> GRN, "Power & the Margins," 1.

<sup>6</sup> Manjikian, "Refugee "In-betweenness," 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ramazani, "Building Meaningful Refugee," 1.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, "Refugee Data Finder".

<sup>9</sup> Balintec, "More and more asylum seekers".

<sup>10</sup> OECD, "Local inclusion, migrants and refugees," 2.

<sup>11</sup> Jackson & Bauder, "Neither temporary," 361.

<sup>12</sup> Jackson & Bauder, "Neither temporary," 366.

their own priorities and creating more inclusive communities<sup>13</sup>. Recognizing the ways in which refugee claimants are already active in developing innovative solutions to the challenges they face<sup>14</sup> has the potential to significantly impact public policy. It is important to ensure all categories of community members, including all categories of newcomers, have opportunities to participate in public policy. Purposefully including refugee claimants in these processes recognizes that they face additional barriers and need to be part of developing solutions so that no one is left behind<sup>15</sup>.

### Focus on the City of Toronto

The City of Toronto is known for its diversity, multiculturalism and for welcoming the highest number of newcomers each year of any Canadian city<sup>16</sup>. The City has notably welcomed significant numbers of refugees and claimants including Vietnamese people in the 1970s, Somalis in the 1980s, and Syrian claimants in 2016<sup>17</sup>. Additionally, Toronto has demonstrated leadership as the first non-European signatory to the international Integrating Cities Charter, signatory to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) #WithRefugees campaign<sup>18</sup> and through adopting progressive policies like Access Toronto (TO) that support undocumented community members to access City services<sup>19</sup>.

Nevertheless, refugee claimants do not always find Toronto's policies welcoming. For example, the recent decision in June 2023 by the City to ban all refugee claimants from emergency shelters resulted in more than 250 claimants, the majority of whom were fleeing from African countries, being forced to sleep on the street outside a referral centre<sup>20</sup>. The sudden restriction on refugee claimant's right to shelter reveals ongoing contradictions between Toronto's promises and practices. While recognizing that this is an extreme situation that highlights the challenges of the housing crisis, the strain on the shelter system, and lack of funding, it also emphasises how refugee claimants are forced to operate at the margins of multiple overburdened systems.

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<sup>13</sup> Manjikian, "Refugee "In-betweenness," 55.

<sup>14</sup> Manjikian, "Refugee "In-betweenness," 55.

<sup>15</sup> OECD, "Local inclusion of migrants and refugees," 4.

<sup>16</sup> City of Toronto, "Refugee Capacity Plan".

<sup>17</sup> City of Toronto, "Refugee/Asylum Claimant".

<sup>18</sup> UNHCR, "Cities #withrefugees".

<sup>19</sup> City of Toronto, "Toronto Newcomer Strategy," 22.

<sup>20</sup> Paradkar, "These Black Churches,".

In the process of creating the 2022-2026 Toronto's Newcomer Strategy in June 2021<sup>21</sup>, the City was advised to improve its engagement of newcomer communities so immigrants, refugees, and refugee claimants are better represented in city policy<sup>22</sup>. If refugee claimants do not have regular, meaningful opportunities to engage with the City, policies that affect them will continue to be inadequate and periods of financial strain that often leave the most vulnerable behind are likely to intensify inequality. Globally, there is general agreement that including refugees in decision-making is important and necessary as evidenced by the adoption of the 2016 New York Declaration<sup>23</sup> and the success of refugee led initiatives including a declaration on effective and sustainable refugee policy<sup>24</sup>. At an international level, Canada positions itself as a leader in refugee resettlement and has modelled the importance of including refugee perspectives<sup>25</sup>. Despite this progress, the gaps between agreement and implementation continue.

With expected increases in newcomers generally and refugee claimants in particular, the extent to which the City of Toronto engages refugee claimants sets the tone for municipalities across Canada. This policy brief examines how strengthening participatory approaches to include refugee claimants at the local level has the potential to improve policy making. Through comparing Toronto's Newcomer Strategy against an integrated human rights, intersectional, and policy justice oriented theoretical framework, this paper will identify how engaging refugee claimants can benefit policy-making and make recommendations for how local decision makers can move towards this goal.

## Part 2 - Theoretical Models

### **Understanding Participatory Approaches**

Participatory approaches to developing public policy are gaining recognition as an effective approach for tailoring policy based on beneficiary needs and knowledge and empowering community members to become part of the decision-making process. There is a growing expectation that governments will engage the public as demonstrated by the adoption of public engagement mandates and frameworks at local, provincial, and national levels across

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<sup>21</sup> City of Toronto, "Toronto Newcomer Strategy".

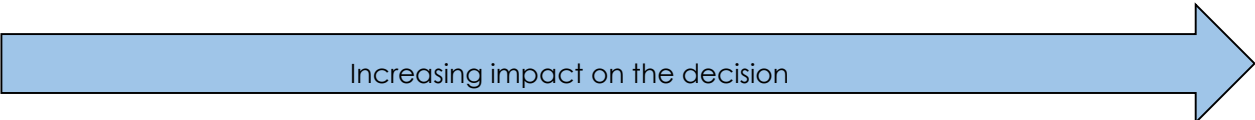
<sup>22</sup> City of Toronto, "Toronto Newcomer Strategy," 22.

<sup>23</sup> Harley & Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees," 201

<sup>24</sup> Network for Refugee Voices, "Declaration for Effective," Article 3.

<sup>25</sup> GNR, "Refugee Participation Pledge".

Canada<sup>26</sup>. Despite these steps towards approaching policy creation through more democratic processes, many groups of stakeholders continue to be left behind. This disproportionately affects groups like refugee claimants who have been made the most vulnerable and who are often 'invisible' to traditional decision makers<sup>27</sup>. In addition, it is difficult to describe what meaningful participatory decision making should look like when stakeholders have differing understandings of what constitutes meaningful consultation<sup>28</sup>. Table 1 depicts five categories of participation with community members having more opportunities to engage and inform the process with each step.



	<b>INFORM</b>	<b>CONSULT</b>	<b>INVOLVE</b>	<b>COLLABORATE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>
<b>Public participation on goal</b>	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
<b>Involvement of Refugees</b>	-refugees are informed	-small number of refugee advisors are asked for their opinion on pre-determined possible solutions	-more refugees are consulted on the existing decision making process and asked for feedback on possible solutions	-refugees involved in determining possible solutions.  Agenda has been predetermined.	-refugees involved in every stage of the process from agenda setting, implementation to evaluation

Table 1 - Spectrum of Participation adapted from IAP2

Table 1 is based on the International Association for Public Participation's (IAP2) spectrum of participation that many municipal governments in Canada use to determine what level of

<sup>26</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming public policy," 406.

<sup>27</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming public policy," 407.

<sup>28</sup> Levac and Wiebe, "Introduction," 5.

public participation is most appropriate<sup>29</sup> and is adapted to identify what refugee participation might look like at each stage. Public engagement efforts often prioritise the consultation stage<sup>30</sup>. However, to be truly transformative and disrupt decision making structures that often reinforce unequal power dynamics, participatory approaches must go beyond surface level inclusion activities as seen in the inform and consult stage. They must instead ensure meaningful participation throughout the policymaking process from start to finish. Proactive inclusion at the stage of policy creation ensures that the people most impacted are not further excluded as a result of poorly framed policy. Building the capacity of governance structures to meaningfully engage with a diversity of community members expands the range of possible solutions and has the added benefit of creating the conditions in which community members can learn from one another and develop an understanding of what they have in common to ultimately build more inclusive communities.

**Box 1: Brief Definition - Meaningful participation according to refugees**

The Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) was created by and for refugees as a direct response to the lack of refugee representation in decision making spaces that determine policies that affect their lives<sup>31</sup>. GRN advocates for meaningful refugee participation throughout all levels of government, and in collaboration with refugees globally has defined meaningful participation as:

When refugees - **regardless of location, legal recognition, gender, identity and demographics** - are prepared for and participating in fora and processes where strategies are being developed and/or decisions are being made (**including at local, national, regional, and global levels, and especially when they facilitate interactions with host states, donors, or other influential bodies**), **in a manner that is ethical, sustained, safe and supported financially**.<sup>32</sup>

While multiple theoretical models from studies focused on community engagement can be utilised to explain the practical value of stakeholder engagement and participatory approaches to policy making, focusing on refugee claimants necessitates a theoretical framework based in human rights, an intersectional understanding of diverse lived experiences and a commitment to policy justice. This integrated theoretical framework establishes key

<sup>29</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming public policy," 406.

<sup>30</sup> Ramazani, "Building Meaningful Refugee Participation," 2.

<sup>31</sup> GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation," 2.

<sup>32</sup> GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation," 7.

principles to assess whether refugee claimants have meaningful opportunities to participate and inform policies that affect them.

### Human Rights

Despite lacking an official mandate, the importance of refugee participation in policy making draws authority from evolving human rights law and multiple non-binding agreements including the 1951 Refugee Convention, 1950 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Statute, 1967 Refugee Protocol, 2016 New York Declaration and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees<sup>33</sup>. Harley & Hobbs point out that while these soft law instruments commit to including refugees as participants, they do not have more standing than any other stakeholder and as non-citizens often face additional barriers accessing their rights to participation<sup>34</sup>. Participatory approaches are not simple processes, and the diversity and politicisation of the circumstances of refugee claimants is a challenging environment in which to develop participatory mechanisms. Harley & Hobbs outline six criteria to guide the creation of participatory processes, 1) flexible participatory processes, 2) right to determine what participation looks like, 3) right not to participate, 4) realistic expectations of what is possible, 5) human rights-based approach to participation, and 6) commitment to complexity<sup>35</sup>.

These human rights principles applied to a participatory approach go beyond surface level inclusion efforts and if implemented, position claimants themselves as critical actors in decision making. This rights-based approach ensures that policy decisions directly address the barriers preventing refugee claimants from fully realising their human rights and is a tool to hold governments who are violating claimants' rights accountable.

### Intersectionality

Refugees as a group are often described as vulnerable<sup>36</sup>. This framing fails to engage with the complexities of how each experience of being treated as a refugee informs the ways in which each refugee claimant experiences, shapes and reshapes their own identity through a process Jackson & Bauder refer to as *refugeeness*<sup>37</sup>. Recognizing that this process creates the conditions where each person is uniquely vulnerable and in some cases empowered depending on a series of experiences. As a result, some groups of migrants are welcomed and

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<sup>33</sup> Harley & Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees".

<sup>34</sup> Harley & Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees," 207-208.

<sup>35</sup> Harley & Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees," 221-222.

<sup>36</sup> Klassen, "From Vulnerability," 3.

<sup>37</sup> Jackson and Bauder, "Neither temporary," 362.



viewed as contributing to local economies, while others are treated with suspicion and their legitimacy is questioned<sup>38</sup>.

Migration status, race, gender, sexuality, disability, religion and class all have significant impacts on how refugees experience and are impacted by public policy. A feminist geopolitical approach as used by Klassen is focused on how people experience the impacts of policy differently<sup>39</sup>. Taking an intersectional approach recognizes the diversity of ways in which refugee claimants experience displacement and have differing needs and priorities. Disrupting the image of the vulnerable refugee and instead examining the multitude of factors that have made refugees uniquely vulnerable and the ways in which refugees are navigating these challenges expands the possibilities of policy interventions<sup>40</sup>. When applying an intersectional lens, it is important to move beyond a checklist of identity markers to make sure groups that have been deemed the most vulnerable are in the room. People are complex and are constantly creating and recreating their identities as their needs and priorities shift necessitating ongoing engagement that creates space for deliberative dialogue<sup>41</sup>. An intersectional participatory approach for refugee policy requires recognizing unique identities and tailoring programs according to each group's needs and experiences. Through focusing specifically on the experiences of refugee claimants, the gaps between policy intent and practice begin to show.

### Policy Justice

Participatory approaches have the potential to fundamentally transform governance models. Through applying five principles of engaged scholarship to the creation of public policy, 1) reciprocity, 2) prioritising community needs, 3) democratising knowledge, 4) boundary crossing and 5) capacity building, Levac et al., emphasise the importance of meaningful participation as a pathway to transformative policy-making rooted in policy justice<sup>42</sup>. Breaking down the silos that compartmentalise policy-making has the potential to generate innovative policy solutions that address intersecting challenges and shift the balance of power. Refugees do not live single issue lives and the challenges they face settling in Canada are compounded with barriers to accessing housing, employment and navigating new communities. Ultimately, the people who are most affected will have the strongest understanding of what specific issues

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<sup>38</sup> Bahram, "Between Tokenism," 2.

<sup>39</sup> Klassen, "From Vulnerability," 21.

<sup>40</sup> Klassen, "From Vulnerability," 22.

<sup>41</sup> Levac and Wiebe, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>42</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming public policy," 404-405.

they face and their lived experience is both legitimate and an essential form of knowledge<sup>43</sup>. Currently, governments often approach and address refugee realities in terms of humanitarianism, treating refugees as victims and powerless instead of as problem solvers with the power to effect change in their own lives and their communities.

Across all three approaches, the importance of centering refugee claimants and the diversity of their lived experience emerges as a central theme. This integrated theoretical framework demonstrates the value of developing rights-based, intersectional, justice oriented participatory processes that do not simply include refugees and their stories to affirm decisions that have already been predetermined. Instead, this framework recognizes refugee claimants as experts of their own experiences and makes the case for meaningful inclusion at every step from defining the problem(s), developing a plan and implementing a range of solutions through policy and practice.

### In Focus: Toronto Newcomer Strategy

Toronto's 2022-2026 Newcomer Strategy was created as a roadmap to support the City to ensure programming and services are accessible and to improve newcomer success<sup>44</sup>. Through comparing Toronto's newcomer strategy with the human rights, intersectional, justice oriented framework outlined above, opportunities to strengthen participatory approaches to include refugee claimants in meaningful roles that go beyond consultation emerge.

	Integrated Framework		
Welcoming Newcomers Priorities (WNP)	Human Rights	Intersectional	Policy Justice
1. Improve newcomer access to the City	X 'giving' newcomers a voice X Limited participation of LE*	✓Increased understanding of factors contributing to <i>refugeeness</i>	✓ Training for staff builds capacity ✓Integrating welcoming office across departments X Not recognizing LE
2. Rigorously implement the Access TO (Access without Fear) Policy	✓Protecting human rights X Commitment to complexity	✓Recognizes additional barriers that racialized and LGBTQ2 persons face	X Not recognizing LE
3. Prepare and implement newcomer access plans for	✓Improve realisation of human rights X Top down approach	✓Equity lens will be applied	✓Applicable across departments X Not recognizing LE

<sup>43</sup> Klassen, "From Vulnerability," 2.

<sup>44</sup> City of Toronto, "Newcomer Strategy".

programs and services			
4. Convene, collaborate and advocate on system-wide issues	✓ Diversity of stakeholders engaged ? Newcomer Leadership Table composed of only organisations - who has LE?	X Focus on institutions over LE	X Not recognizing LE
5. Report on results	✓ Opportunities to participate	✓ Recognizes danger of disclosing data of undocumented people X Do indicators reflect priorities of those with LE?	✓ Multiple (although limited) sources of knowledge X Not recognizing LE
	* LE - Lived Experience		

Table 2 - Comparative Evaluation of WNP in terms of an integrated human rights, intersectional, policy justice oriented framework

Toronto's Newcomers Strategy exemplifies several policy strengths. Its commitment to welcoming and inclusive values and focus on equity and diversity recognizes that each newcomer faces unique challenges, and specifically recognizes that people who are racialized and/or LGBTQ2 are likely to face additional barriers<sup>45</sup>. Nearly three dozen (34) newcomers were consulted in the creation of this strategy. However, information about the status or demographics of the 34 newcomers were unavailable, so it is unclear if any respondents were refugee claimants. Notably, the City was advised to improve its outreach to newcomer communities in the future<sup>46</sup>.

Applying an integrated human rights, intersectional, and policy justice framework reveals three key opportunities in the strategy where the City could better engage refugee claimants and other newcomers in the future.

1. Access IO: this policy ensures that undocumented residents can access city services without facing consequences and is an example of a strong policy that is underutilised due to a lack of attention and resources<sup>47</sup>. It is also an excellent opportunity for the City to engage refugee claimants to share their own experiences accessing city services, identify what barriers they have faced and what approaches have been successful.

<sup>45</sup> City of Toronto, "Newcomer Strategy".

<sup>46</sup> City of Toronto, "Newcomer Strategy".

<sup>47</sup> City of Toronto, "Welcoming newcomers plan," 11.

This shifts the framing from a city-identified problem to understanding how the people who access services under the policy experience it in their daily lives<sup>48</sup>.

2. Newcomer Access Plans: the City plans to develop 18 newcomer access plans across multiple departments over the next few years with the goal to identify barriers and priority actions. Strengthening this process to be more participatory and directly engage refugee claimants and other newcomers beyond sporadic surveys has the potential to develop more comprehensive policies.

3. Monitoring & Evaluation: while measuring whether the City is making progress on newcomer issues is challenging, the only indicator identified in the Welcoming Newcomers Strategy that directly engages newcomers relies on surveys and focus groups<sup>49</sup>. These methodologies rely on asking the right questions and can be challenging to answer, particularly in situations where there is a language barrier. This is a key opportunity to encourage creativity and develop arts-based engagement processes where refugee claimants and other newcomers have opportunities to share their experiences in ways that are meaningful to them and intentionally create space for “meaningful listening”<sup>50</sup>.

Without involving refugee claimants in meaningful discussions, policies designed for them may fail to address the barriers they face. However, engaging community members who have been marginalised many times over is not an easy or quick process. Stakeholders will inevitably disagree and there are no easy solutions. Trust must be built.

## Challenges to Participatory Approaches

Existing bureaucratic structures were designed to make decisions on behalf of others from a distance to maintain neutrality and objectivity. Participatory approaches challenge these decision-making pathways and in the short-term, this process often raises more questions and issues than it solves. These difficulties are not unique to engaging refugee claimants and as all levels of governments increasingly introduce participatory approaches, it is important to acknowledge that effective engagement requires the following.

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<sup>48</sup> Michiner, SoRelle and Thurston, “From the Margins to the Centre”.

<sup>49</sup> City of Toronto, “Newcomer Strategy,” 17.

<sup>50</sup> Levac and Wiebe, “Introduction,” 9.

- **Trust:** Complex problems require a diversity of stakeholders, including people with lived experience at the decision-making table. But it is important to recognize that oftentimes trust has been broken many times over. This is particularly true for refugee claimants who have often heard promises of safety and a better life, only to risk being deported by government authorities. Building trust requires institutional self-reflection to identify what structures and processes need to change<sup>51</sup>.
- **Resources:** Participatory approaches that prioritise community needs require additional resources. This will be different in each context, necessary resources often include childcare, food, transport, meeting space and honorariums. City staff are not expected to develop policy for free and hence people with lived experience should be compensated for their knowledge and their time<sup>52</sup>. In addition to financial resources, this approach requires time to build relationships between disparate stakeholders and City staff.
- **Shifting power:** The most challenging aspect of participatory community engagement is shifting power into the hands of community members and detaching from pre-determined policy goals and outcomes<sup>53</sup>. While this is the goal, it is also critical to acknowledge that while participatory approaches have the potential to generate innovative, community-based solutions, there is also a risk that local governments will offload their responsibilities on to community partners without recognizing or compensating them for their contributions<sup>54</sup>.

### Part 3 - Policy Options

Shifting further on the continuum towards meaningful participatory policy creation that engenders the conditions where refugee claimants have opportunities to engage with each stage of policy making requires both political will and a commitment to complex change<sup>55</sup>. To achieve this, there is a need for practical, immediate actions that purposefully create the environment where refugee claimants have opportunities to participate in existing decision-making structures that are grounded in an integrated human rights, intersectional, policy

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<sup>51</sup> GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation," 19.

<sup>52</sup> GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation," 21.

<sup>53</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming public policy," 419.

<sup>54</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming public policy," 420.

<sup>55</sup> GRN, "Meaningful Refugee Participation," 9.

justice framework. These recommendations are tailored for a city with limited resources, and yet professed commitments to welcoming refugee claimants.

## **Local Pathways: engaging refugee claimants at the local level**

### **1. Building capacity for City staff – Education and Training**

The first priority outlined in Toronto's Newcomers Strategy is training on newcomer experiences, particularly for frontline staff<sup>56</sup>. This echoes Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) recommendations to improve training for public servants on intercultural awareness, anti-racism, anti-discrimination and human rights to promote inclusive cities<sup>57</sup> and calls from the refugee claimant supported organisation Kinbrace for city staff and representatives to improve awareness about how their interpersonal interactions with claimants significantly impact whether people feel welcomed and supported<sup>58</sup>. Additionally, training on community engagement and trauma informed practices will equip staff to better engage stakeholders with lived experience in participatory processes.

### **2. Establish meaningful partnerships with refugee claimants**

Working with refugee claimants needs to go beyond targeted consultations for a specific policy and the City needs to invest the necessary time and resources to get to know all categories of newcomers through regular engagement that builds trust and accountability. Two possible options are outlined here.

- a) The City of Toronto lists multiple refugee serving organisations as part of the Newcomer Leadership Table<sup>59</sup>. This group could be expanded to engage cultural associations and people with lived experience. Through working with all of these organisations and the newcomers they work with, the City has the opportunity to co-develop an engagement plan. This might include activities like attending organisational events open to the public and making City staff and representatives more accessible to claimants outside municipal offices.
  
- b) Establish a permanent working group of all newcomers, intentionally including refugee claimants as a group facing additional barriers, and supporting

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<sup>56</sup> City of Toronto, "Welcoming Newcomers Strategy," 10.

<sup>57</sup> OECD, "Local inclusion, migrants and refugees," 13.

<sup>58</sup> Kinbrace, "Changing the way," 7.

<sup>59</sup> City of Toronto, "Newcomer Leadership Table," website.

organisations as identified by people with lived experience where the City reports on progress related to all issues affecting newcomers. This approach requires structural change and intentionally shifts decision making power.

### **3. Create leadership opportunities for refugee claimants at the City**

For City programs and services to be welcoming, it is important that community members see themselves and their experiences reflected. When refugee claimants are seen in a range of roles from entry-level internships to staff positions, including senior leadership positions, this creates an environment where they can inform policy and programs at multiple points<sup>60</sup>. This also ensures regular interactions with staff members who do not have lived experience, building empathy and understanding.

Dialogues convened by the uOttawa Refugee Hub and the Local Engagement Refugee Research Network (LERNN) identified developing capacity building programs for refugees as a key priority to build the skills, leadership and networks needed to effectively represent refugees in policy discussions at multiple levels of government<sup>61</sup>. Training sessions on participatory approaches to research and policy making would strengthen the capacity and confidence of refugee claimants to engage with decision making from a place of community-created evidence that centers community needs<sup>62</sup>.

### **4. Establishing participatory monitoring & evaluation indicators**

To ensure that commitments to participatory inclusion are moving from promises to practice, it is critical to determine indicators that will measure whether refugee claimants have had meaningful opportunities to participate in decision making processes. The City has identified a need for better data to assess progress on newcomer programs<sup>63</sup>. In addition to evaluating whether claimants feel welcome and are able to access City resources, measuring whether they have opportunities to participate in policy making and if they feel their voices are heard in these spaces is a tool to evaluate the legitimacy of the City's participatory approaches<sup>64</sup>.

## **Recommendations**

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<sup>60</sup> Ramazani, "Building Meaningful Refugee," 17.

<sup>61</sup> uOttawa Refugee Hub and LERNN, "Outcomes Document," 4.

<sup>62</sup> Levac et al., "Transforming Public Policy," 410.

<sup>63</sup> City of Toronto, "Welcoming Newcomers Strategy".

<sup>64</sup> Harley & Hobbs, "The Meaningful Participation of Refugees," 223

In examining the theoretical framework, Toronto WNP policy context, and community needs, my recommendations are to prioritise implementing the first two policy options, 1) capacity building for staff and 2) establishing meaningful partnerships with refugee claimants. Doing so will begin to create both the skill sets and relationships through which future policies and programs can be co-developed between refugee claimants, the City and other stakeholders.

## Conclusion

Recognizing refugees as legitimate stakeholders and building participatory practices is of increasing importance. Local governments like the City of Toronto have an opportunity to demonstrate leadership and be proactive in better engaging refugee claimants to determine policy and programming. Existing governance has shown itself inadequate at responding to an increasingly complex web of challenges that requires a diversity of knowledge and experiences. As both Toronto and Canada receive increasing numbers of refugee claimants every year, all levels of government have a responsibility to ensure that they are upholding human rights.

This paper offers a series of recommendations to guide the City of Toronto, and local governments generally, to better engage refugee claimants in participatory approaches to policy making rooted in human rights, intersectional, policy justice theoretical framework.

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