

Power, Partnerships and Participation

Reflections from a workshop of
Porticus partners working with refugee
communities in Southeast Asia

August 2023

Contents

About this learning brief	3
What different types of power do you see in the refugee sector?	5
What spaces of power do you see in the refugee sector?	8
What are your perspectives on meaningful participation?	11
Meaningful participation at Porticus	17

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of Porticus.

Photos from Ihsaan

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Acknowledgement of country (Australia)

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners and Custodians of the lands on which we work, and pay our respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. We acknowledge that this land, which we benefit from occupying, was and always will be Aboriginal land.

Written by

L I G H T H ● U S E
PARTNERSHIPS

Lighthouse Partnerships is a not-for-profit organisation that supports for-purpose organisations to increase their effectiveness through participatory approaches to evaluation, strategy and program design. We have specialist expertise in migration and displacement in the Asia-Pacific region, including labour migration, human trafficking, refugees and people seeking asylum.

Commissioned by

 PORTICUS

Porticus is an international organisation that manages the philanthropic endeavours of the Brenninkmeijer family. Porticus collaborates with partners around the globe to build stronger systems and secure just and sustainable futures for all.

About this learning brief

This learning brief outlines key reflections and insights from a workshop on ‘Power, Partnerships and Participation’ organised by Porticus and Lighthouse Partnerships in November 2022 and attended by representatives of refugee community, civil society, and donor organisations in Southeast Asia.

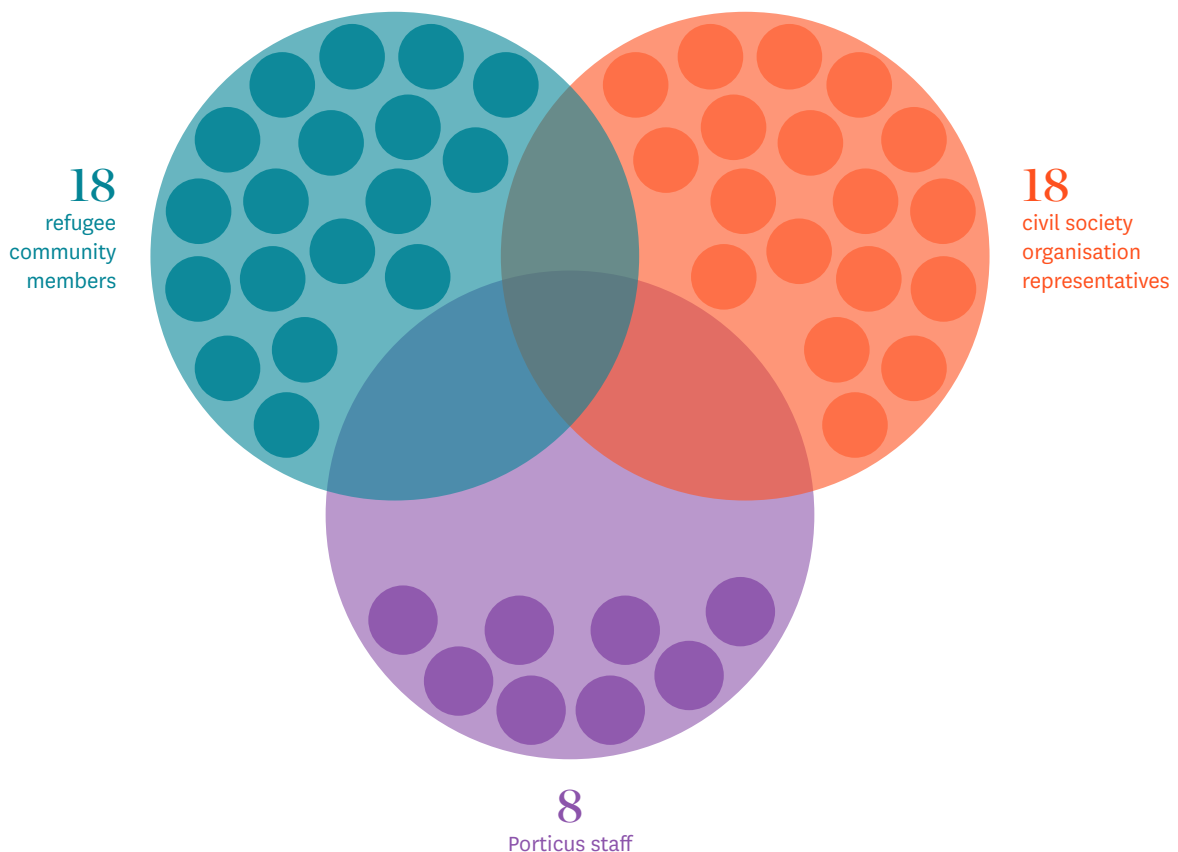
The workshop was organised in response to civil society and refugee community organisations that work with Porticus identifying that ‘meaningful participation’ and ‘meaningful partnerships’ with refugee communities were shared priorities in their work and requesting opportunities for shared learning about these issues.

The workshop was designed together with people with lived experience of displacement and civil

society organisations to build trust and shared ownership in the process. First, over a three-month period, people with lived experience of displacement were engaged by a refugee community facilitator in one-on-one meetings to learn about their experiences working in community and in the refugee sector, and to understand how these issues could be discussed with civil society and donor partners. Next, civil society organisations were consulted about ideas for the workshop agenda through meetings and an online questionnaire.

As a result of this process, a one-day hybrid workshop was organised to bring together stakeholders from across the region and engage them in interactive and creative activities for reflecting, listening, and sharing in a safe space.

FIGURE 1 Workshop participants





“Although we’ve come from different backgrounds, different organisations, NGOs, funding organisations, we felt that this was a created space because we felt... that it was a discussion of equals and everyone was heard... this was a claimed space that we created on our own.”

Refugee participant

“The workshop was great. The workshop dynamics made us feel welcomed and treated as equals with the other partners. I found that made us feel more comfortable sharing our opinions and feedback. I would suggest having more of getting to know each other activities to build networks.”

Refugee participant

Resources for workshop activities

During the workshop’s co-design process, refugee representatives shared key issues and priorities that their communities faced in relation to meaningful participation. To explore these issues constructively and sensitively, we designed workshop activities based on two key frameworks for understanding power shared by Hunjan and Pettit in *Power: a practical guide for facilitating social change: expressions of power and spaces of power**.

Expressions of power

Power is often thought of as negative and coercive (‘power over’). However, alternative expressions of power - ‘power to’, ‘power with’ and ‘power within’ - enable more positive thinking and action.

Spaces of power

Power is exercised in different kinds of spaces – closed spaces, invited spaces, and claimed spaces. Understanding these spaces is key identifying different opportunities to influence change.

In the workshop activities, participants from refugee communities, civil society and donors discussed these concepts in small, mixed groups and were asked to share examples of how different forms and spaces of power are present in their work.

The following sections of this learning brief share key reflections and insights from these activities in the voices of participants. Participant quotes have been edited for readability and confidentiality.

*Raji Hunjan and Jethro Pettit, 2011, *Power: a practical guide for facilitating social change*, Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, available at: https://www.participatorymethods.org/sites/participatorymethods.org/files/Power-A-Practical-Guide-for-Facilitating-Social-Change_o.pdf.

What different forms of power do you see in the refugee sector?



'Power to' - individual ability to act

“ The power to facilitate access to lifesaving help... facilitating access to resources that would save a child's life or not ”

“ The power to provide access to protection ”

“ Power to voice ”

“ **Refugees have the power to take action** to change something. A lot of refugee communities now, they are already doing it. They're already taking action and they feel like they have the power and the duty to do something, like to provide education to their own community members, to help with advocating, leadership trainings and giving platforms to a lot of people to voice out their concerns. ”

“ **Power to share ideas and insights, power to influence the thinking of others** - I think this is a huge thing. We should give power to others to share their ideas because we don't know, maybe the other person is having a better idea than us, right? So when you're working within the community and when you're working even with other colleagues, you should give that power to share their ideas, use positions as organisations, use position as international organisations to facilitate access for others. ”



'Power with' - collective action, the ability to act together

“ Nobody can claim that they can do things or achieve things by themselves or one group can do it. So NGOs, refugee led organisations, UNHCR, **they have to work with each other.** ”

“ Whether it's working with lived experience communities or [working] with other CSOs towards achieving a goal... in some scenarios and contexts, **it's either power together or no power at all** to achieve a big end goal. ”



'Power within' - individual or collective sense of self-worth, value, dignity

“ **Lived experience as power within** ”

“ **Motivation and drive to continue** the work that we do. That personal motivation that's coming from somewhere innate... It's not easy work. We're up against challenges all the time, but that innate power within is something that keeps us all going again. ”

“ [Trauma] is a very relevant part of a lot of refugees' experiences. That is kind of the opposite of power. Having experienced trauma and disempowerment can be a big barrier if it's not addressed to anyone having power to or power with or power within. ”

“ Last Friday I was invited to a meeting between refugees, [university] researchers and government agencies... They were saying a lot of stuff about refugees in [this country], which are totally not true. I felt like I have two choices here. Either I voice out, or I keep silent. I felt like I should keep silent because I was really trembling because there were people from immigration and from different government agencies. But I was invited there to represent refugees and I felt like I was on a mission to represent refugees... So **I took up the microphone and I spoke up and I changed the narrative of the meeting**... I just proved to them that you guys need to learn a lot about the refugees you have in your country. I think **I felt the power within me to represent refugees.** ”

“ Some members of a refugee community that we work closely with did not have the confidence to speak up and be able to advocate. But then, over time, **they recognized the power within themselves**, they developed confidence and the feeling that they can actually stand up, even though they are refugees, even though they have many challenges, they can still speak up when it comes to their situation and their issues. This is about **their self-worth, their confidence and the value that they have as a person.** ”

What spaces of power do you see in the refugee sector?



Closed spaces - when decisions are made behind closed doors

“High level meetings that big NGOs organize without including us, without including people with lived experience. **They discuss about us without us, and then they make the decision.**”

“**Sometimes as leaders we feel like it’s easier to just take decisions by ourselves.** It’s the most convenient thing, right? To not consult with anyone and just make decisions by yourself. But it’s not always the best thing... sometimes we have to all do better at involving our communities, our colleagues, our staffs in decision making processes.”

“A lot of the decisions that are taken by UNHCR happen behind closed doors or in some of those closed spaces.”

“It might seem at first that closed spaces are bad and created spaces are good and invited spaces are okay. But depending on who’s inside the closed space, it could actually be a good thing. **It could be a safe space for people with lived experience or displaced refugee experiences to come together,** to be private, to meet and talk and find their power together.”



Invited spaces - when those in power invite people to participate decision-making

“ Any program that has participants or that is **delivering services** has to be an invited space to some extent because it's never just completely open. ”

“ High level dialogues that NGOs organize, but they only have a couple of refugee leaders who always get invited to those meetings, and the **agendas are already set**. What we are **allowed to say and not allowed to say** is already set. We even have time limitation and we are expected to speak UN language. ”

“ They might **claim it's a space where you can come and contribute**, but they have actually already set their agenda in terms of outcomes and actions. ”

“ As NGOs, mostly we operate in this invited space. Sometimes we think we create space for people, but actually it's more like an invited space where we already have our agenda and our ideas in mind. We claim we're giving you the space to do this, but secretly we might have our **hidden agendas**. ”



Created / Claimed spaces - when people come together to create their own space and set their own agendas

“ The power **within** [is] a power that transforms into action... For example, we have funding organisations here who have the power within them to make the change by funding other organisations. ”

“ Organisations and networks led by refugees and people with lived experience. About three months ago, we started having meetings, all the refugee organisations, communities and some refugee led organisations. We are thinking of creating a Congress of Refugees in [this country]. We want to claim a space because everyone knows that the relationship between the government and UNHCR [is] not working well for refugees. So we thought, why not? **Refugees themselves come together in an open space and discuss their own agenda**, their own way to have a platform, a collective platform to speak out for themselves, to even design some programs and even have some concept papers, some suggestions to NGOs or government or UNHCR. ”

Spaces of power are often complex and mixed



Our organisation has spaces that are both **invited and claimed**. We invite the focal point of each refugee community, and we ask them to share ideas like what kind of things their community needs, but also we try to create an **open space** for them to share and have their own creation.



A series of meetings that we had with the Rohingya community was **closed and invited**. We had a closed meeting space just for the Rohingya leaders to come together, but we were not part of the meeting, so it was like a closed, **safe space** for them to be sharing about their own progress and what kind of agenda they want to scope for the coming year. Then because of this closed space and the dynamics between men and women in the community, we created a separate space just for women to come together. Then we had an invited space where all the allies, international actors and national regional actors, joined together with the Rohingya community.



Despite [the network] being invited space, the participation of refugee staff and a consultation with refugee community leaders is so integrated and that they are able to participate in like annual planning, budget planning so that they're very part of the decision making of where those where the direction of the organisation and their own work is going.



Within organisations... a **flat structure** can give people who work in the organisation both power to do things as individuals, **power to work together**, and a place and space to find their **power within**.

What does meaningful participation mean to you?

Why is meaningful participation important?

You can come up with as many programs as you want, hoping that they will change the lives of refugees. But if you do not get the perspective of those refugees, if you do not have them involved in every stage, then **your effort will surely not be as effective.**

No one knows what's best for refugees more than refugees themselves. If your objective is to respond to the refugee crisis in the best possible way, you have to have refugees themselves on board to participate in each stage of your programs so that the solutions that you're seeking and the actions that you are taking are more centered around the real interests of refugees.

What does meaningful participation look like?

Having an **equal say** in decision making

Care and respect

To know "how?" and "why?" to participate

To me, meaningful participation means to put a value on the lives of refugees. It means to **appreciate the ability, the skills of refugees and their ability to be in a leadership position**, to be in charge of the decision making process when it comes to the things that impact them and not only show their weaknesses and needs.

Refugees should not be on the sidelines when decisions are being made. They should **be at the table** of decision making and **lead the efforts** to solve the refugee crisis.

Being free to say "no" without consequences

For participation to be meaningful... not to be just symbolic, what we call tokenism, there must be the means for them **to thrive in that position** when they are participating in the activities that we do and the programs that we run.

Understanding the complex needs of refugees, whether it's the safety wise or so on, but **not also using these complexities as a reason to limit involvement.**

You respect me and, if it's a job, **you pay me equally** for the skills that I'm offering.

Being part of the process is the really key thing, **being part of the implementation,** overseeing it.

Are they **involving me in the process** or not? Am I there just for the final result or am I there throughout the process? Am I being treated equally with respect and dignity?

... participatory research, where you involve the subjects in the research itself... About three years ago, a researcher came from the UK and trained a group of refugee leaders, including me, on how we can do our own research. At the same time, we were helping her with the research in terms of **designing it,** not just giving data and input, but **being part of the decision making in that research.** That **data would be shared with us** so that we can also use this data for our own advocacy based, research based advocacy programs.

We created a **peer support system** in the refugee community where we provide **mentorship** trainings and then help them facilitate trainings themselves for their communities. When we started doing that, we had people from the refugee community who did not have the confidence or even the belief that they can do this, people who felt a bit hopeless. But then, after these training courses, they saw that this is something that **belongs to them,** that is was me who was leading most of the trainings and I'm someone from the refugee community, we were really giving value to their voices and trying to listen to them... that they can actually step up and feel safe and free to facilitate these trainings if they are willing to. Over time, the ones that we thought initially were a bit shy... were the ones who were actually leading the peer support activities later on... And finally, they were able to actually do an advocacy project all by themselves.

What kinds of participation are not meaningful?

I was given a job at an NGO when I was 16 as an interpreter. Then I became a community outreach officer. In that same NGO, there were **nationals** who had the same position as me, the same amount of work, but **were paid double the salary**.

Many times I was invited to participate in focus group discussions and to design some programs and projects by UNHCR. After multiple meetings, I've stopped going. I realized our inputs was never taken into action. **It was predetermined**. They just have this to **satisfy their donors** that we have meaningful participation.

Everyone consults refugees, but people **never get recognized** for what they contribute.

There were so many research projects done by UNHCR that I participated in and they took my input. I was interviewed by so many independent researchers who have done so much research on this on these issues. But **you never hear from them again**.

Refugee leaders also **not creating space for community members** or not enough community members to be part of decision making.



What can NGOs do to strengthen power and participation of refugees?

We don't need you to tell us how to do it. We just need you to trust us.

For partnership to stay strong between refugee-led organisations and NGOs [it is important to have] **mutual understanding and respect** and value. The NGOs need to look at us just like they would look at any other stakeholder, treat them the same way they would treat any other stakeholder, hear them the same way they would hear any other stakeholder.

The number one way to collaborate and to begin that collaboration is just to listen... listen with intent, and **listen with the intent to act** on that. Listening to the needs of the community as communicated by these community groups and community focal points. They are the bridge. They're able to bridge that communication gap between what the community needs with us as NGOs, service providers.

Listening and **trusting the capability** of people that have the vision and have the ability to fulfill that vision. And then trying to **bring resources** to that.

Financial support is what is most helpful for them to act and do and plan and implement what they what they need to and what they what their vision is for their community.

[If] UNHCR organizes meeting with NGOs only and they don't include us, it is your role as an NGO to tell UNHCR, to **hold them accountable** and tell them, "Hey, why aren't there leaders here?" That is the best thing you can do for us - be our voice.

Meaningful participation and meaningful partnerships with refugees is not something that can be an afterthought... It can't be while you're organizing it, you're thinking, how can refugees participate meaningfully? It's about making sure that's **embedded in our processes** from the get-go, to make sure these voices and these perspectives are accounted for.

I think there's a lot of value in **sitting with our own feelings and thoughts and perceptions**. Even though we think that we might have erased all our biases, that's often not the case. We've got lots of unconscious biases that we need to sit with.

Saying, "**Who are the people that we are excluding?**" so that is intentional. Why are we excluding these people or why are we including certain communities? There needs to be intention in the spaces that we are creating.

self-reflect on our power... sometimes sit in the discomfort of having to change, not just change our ideas and the way we think about something, but literally having to change the way we do something, the way we approach a problem, the way our organisations are structured, the way our organisational processes are structured. That's not an easy thing to do, and it can be sometimes deeply uncomfortable to reflect on it and change it and work through that change.

When we're thinking about partnership and meaningful partnership, we can't be thinking we're just going to exist and then we're going to partner with this refugee organisation. We have to **rethink our structures, our values, our processes**. We need to be ready at least to break all of that down and rebuild it to ensure that the partnership is equitable and meaningful.

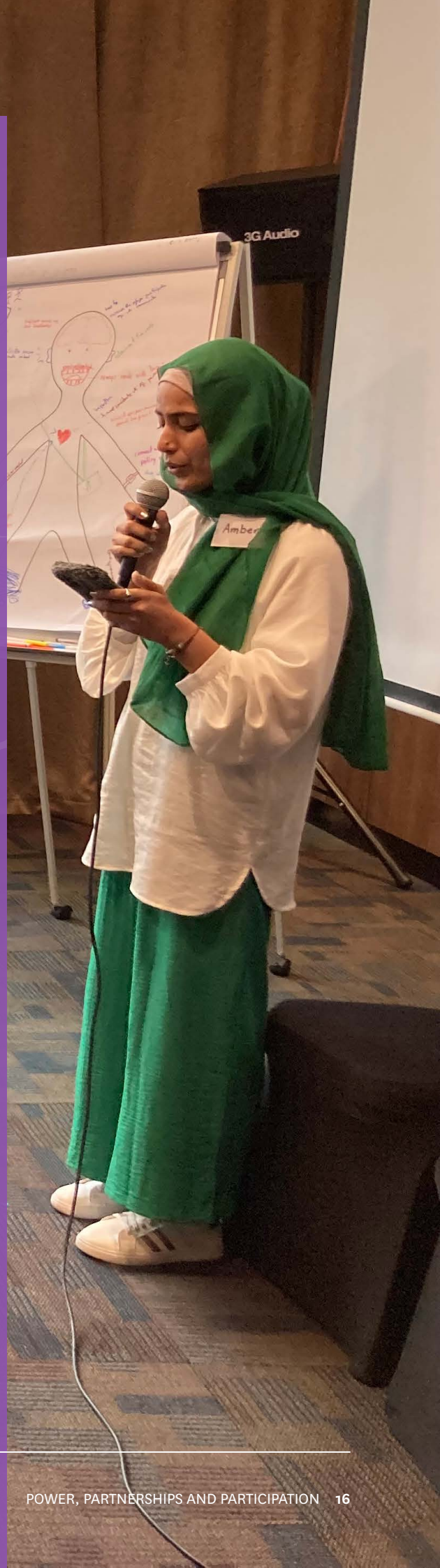
A lot of it is really about **being aware of the power imbalance and the inequalities that exist**. Knowing, although we can't right all the injustices, to the extent that we can, we should, because we're in a position of power to do that.

It starts from a value. What are your values as an organisation, as a person? If you talk about human rights and you talk about equality yet you are advocating in a space where those who are most affected are not there at all - I found myself questioning that a lot... Once we started having that value, it became like, okay, it's there and it cannot just sit there on a piece of paper, right? **How are we going to operationalize it?** ... You make all these assessments about the risks and barriers, then what is required is courage and conviction - knowing that, yes, these are all the challenges, but this is our value, so **how can we overcome these challenges?**

A migrant bird

A flock of birds in a foreign land
Fascinating beauty, nevertheless than a fairyland!
They fly, they hide, they eat and they breathe
Seems to be burning, when it comes to their feet!
They learn, they adopt and fight for their rights
They got bullied, tortured and kept away from the light!
They feel indifferent, distant and insecure from the others
When it come to the cultures, traditions that put them in troubles!
They are kept in dark and away from the realities
Kept imprisoned and apart from their families!
They look confused, stressed and worried about their future
They die from hunger and deprived from the new adventures!
They scream, they cry and plea for the help
Some try to escape but some end up being dead!
A life with no choice and a choice with no life
Their dream remains a dream, that can be seen in their eyes

By Amber, a refugee youth advocate living in Malaysia

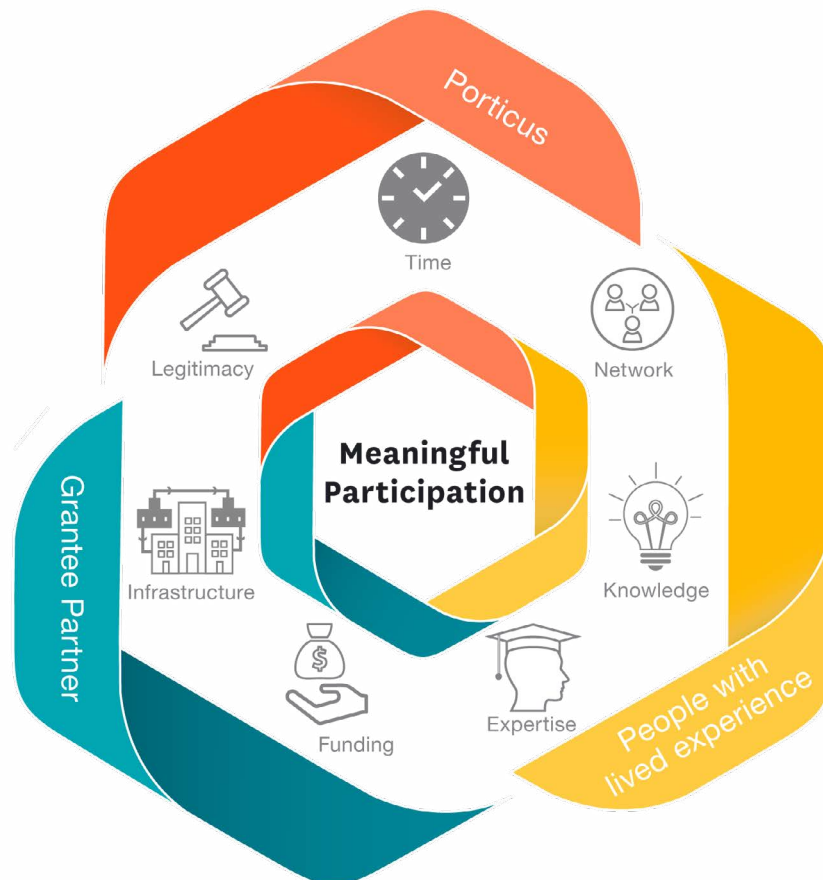


Meaningful Participation at Porticus

Making our daring goal a reality, together!

How can we put people we seek to serve at the centre of our decision-making processes? How can we respect their agency and redress the power imbalance between funders, grantees and people with lived experience? These questions were what prompted Porticus to commit to our daring goal on the meaningful participation of people who are affected by poverty and exclusion in all our grants and programmes.

Porticus defines meaningful participation as a two directional, iterative group process where funders, grantees and people with lived experience collaborate as partners and share decision-making power and mutual accountability, on a wide range of institutional and individual activities (incl. strategy development, fund allocation, grant and programme design, implementation and learning), recognising that all contribute equally valuable assets (e.g. money, knowledge and experience) needed to ensure systems change and positive change for people affected by poverty and exclusion.





Our journey of a thousand miles begins with our first steps. We are ambitious as well as pragmatic. We have established a 10-year roadmap, with incremental goals for 2024, 2026 and 2030 that will help Porticus strengthen meaningful participation in our work. The implementation of the roadmap requires commitment and support from Porticus staff, grantee & MEL partners, and other stakeholders.

Through this Asia Cluster evaluation, we are able to meaningfully include people with lived experience in our MEL process. We will also continue to create and share learnings and evidence generated from evaluations and research to the public, including communities that are affected by the issues. Also we aim to involve people with lived experience in our grants and programmes in a meaningful and participatory way that is valuable and beneficial to our partners to avoid tokenism.

For example, in the new Immigration Detention programme under the People on the Move challenge, we invited around 10 experts with forced displacement and detention experience to help us co-design the programme strategy to ensure that people on the move are front and centred in our work. They have helped shape our dual-approach which combines promoting Alternatives to Detention (ATDs) together with responding to the realities of detention, so the programme contributes to building up advocacy and momentum for strategic efforts towards recognising the importance and urgency of reducing harmful and arbitrary detention. Furthermore, some of these experts were also invited to be part of our Immigration Detention programme MEL partner recruitment and vetting process as consultants.



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