

# Learnings from our co-leadership between persons with and without lived experience of forced migration - Nearly two years on...

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Over the past 20 months, we at APRRN have been implementing a co-leadership model, as co-Secretaries General with and without lived experiences of forced migration. We want to share with our membership and wider network and partners some of the lessons we've learned, the challenges we've faced, and the positive impact we've witnessed, on our journey towards more inclusive leadership and a shift in organisational culture.

## So, why co-leadership?

Our dedication to empowering people with lived experience has long been part of APRRN's DNA. We have recognised that the human rights and humanitarian sector often excludes refugee-led organisations (RLOs) and people with lived experience, including refugee leaders, from policy-and decision-making processes as well as resources. By adopting a co-leadership model, we have aimed to challenge this status quo and actively involve individuals with lived experience in leadership and governance, influencing solutions, advocating for rights, and leading our initiatives at the local, national, regional and global level.

The model also serves as an experiment and an example of how grassroots organisations, alongside INGOs and RLOs, can work together toward meaningful refugee participation;

*"Shifting power and changing systems demand co-design and co-leadership between people with lived experiences and those with sector expertise. Only by valuing the expertise of refugees can we respond effectively, ensuring justice and dignity are at the core."*

— Hafsar Tameesuddin

## What significant lessons have we learnt?

The co-leadership has been both rewarding and challenging at the same time as a continuous learning journey. Having reflected on the last 20 months, here are some key learnings and insights:

### **Dedicating time to building a trusting, sharing relationship of equality has been crucial -**

We refer to each other as partners in the truest sense. A critical element of effective co-leadership has been dedicating time to understand one another, our individual and collective strengths and weaknesses, and build a relationship based on trust, respect, and open communication. We know we must voice when we disagree with each other, and always have as a starting point what solution and decision is in the best interest of APRRN, setting aside individual preferences. Creating spaces for regular check-ins and open, honest conversations has been essential

### **We must balance our expertise with representation to ensure meaningful impact rather than symbolic representation -**

Co-leadership requires us to balance our expertise with representation. Meaningful participation of those with lived experience of forced migration often can be tokenistic, with refugee leaders seen as what they represent rather than as a professional with multiple skills, experience and competencies in many other areas than what they represent. For it to be meaningful and impactful, refugee leaders have to be empowered and presented not only with

their personal experience and story but also within their expertise, highlighting skills and competencies relevant to analysis and strategic action.

*'We want to highlight that we as the Co-SGs of APRRN are here first and foremost because of our expertise, professional experience, and approaches to a variety of things, however often people only first see what we represent'*

- Klaus Dik Nielsen

It is crucial that we recognise while we both bring our different lived experiences, we also both contribute broader sectoral knowledge and expertise. We continually assess who leads in specific situations based on our skills, and not just our identities. For example, some questions we are constantly asking ourselves include: Does Hafsar always have to present themselves as a person with lived experience and Klaus without? How can we avoid Hafsar being tokenised as being the Rohingya voice only, while holding numerous competencies, experience and multiple identities in the role of co-SG? What role does Klaus have as someone without lived experience of forced migration? By asking ourselves these questions, even without always having the easy answers, we aim to be reflective and strategic in our interventions. This helps avoid tokenism and ensures our focus remains on making meaningful impact rather than symbolic representation.

**External structured support for the co-leadership has been essential -**

Navigating co-leadership has shown us the importance of external facilitation for difficult

conversations and role clarity. Human biases, strengths, and ways of thinking are shaped by power dynamics and privilege, which can cloud our direction at times. Finding structured support, such as coaching and supervision, has been crucial for us in addressing biases, clarifying roles, and strengthening our partnership. It has helped us understand our strengths and weaknesses and how we can better support and complement each other. We started this support after six months, however, ideally this support needs to be integrated into the model from the start to create a sustainable framework for future leaders.

**For the leader with lived experience, there remains a constant challenge of credibility -**

Stepping into a leadership role as Co-Secretary General has brought unique challenges for Hafsar. While having lived experience should strengthen their voice, we have noticed it often places them instead in an "in-between" space— not fully accepted as a co-leader of APRRN due to their 'lived experience', and simultaneously being distanced from their previous role as a refugee advocate -

*"Even when we reach leadership positions, our credibility as refugee leaders is questioned in ways others do not face. I find that my role as Co-SG is challenged both by those in the wider sector and within my community"*

- Hafsar Tameesuddin

The ongoing challenge is in balancing this high-level leadership role with the ongoing negative connotations that accompanies the label of "lived experience". Again, this highlights the need for a shift in how we value and recognise the contributions of refugee leaders beyond their experience and identities.

### **Refugee leaders and activists need more sustained support -**

The emotional demands of leadership can be overwhelming, especially for those with lived experience. In taking on this role as co-SG, there is significant pressure for Hafsar, that comes with the high expectations from both INGOs and their own refugee communities. While there is increased attention and interest in meaningfully including refugee leaders and experts with lived experience in policy- and decision-making spaces, we have noticed there is a lack of structured support, and mentorship available for refugee leaders and activists. At present in APRRN, much of our support to refugee leaders is ad hoc but we aim to provide more sustainable support to refugee leaders as we must embed trauma-informed approaches and safeguard the well-being of leaders both externally and within our wider membership.

### **The co-leadership has channelled a whole-of-society approach which feels necessary for change. *There is an important role for the co-leader without lived experience.***

One of our most significant insights is that true collaboration requires bringing together diverse expertise and voices. Co-leadership has shown us that individuals with and without lived experience each play crucial roles in advancing the rights of refugees and other vulnerable people on the move. Klaus's role, as someone without lived experience, but with diverse experience in human rights advocacy on protecting and promoting the human rights for minorities and marginalised people and partnership building across different sectors has brought a fresh perspective to our efforts. It is also an important learning on what it is to be an ally to those with lived experience:

*Whether it is donors willing to take risks, grassroots organisations on the ground, or private sector allies, everyone has a role to play. To truly embrace inclusivity, we must intentionally make space for all the diverse voices, even when it challenges existing norms and comfort zones. However, we must approach this collaboration intentionally, acknowledging the existing power dynamics and consciously making room for new voices, also within our own backyard'*

— Klaus Dik Nielsen

This blend of skills and experiences from both co-leaders allows us to approach advocacy with a "whole-of-society" mindset, building equitable partnerships and effective solutions to very complex and multi-layered issues in our region.

### **Co-leadership has been a catalyst for deeper reflection on power dynamics -**

Navigating co-leadership has sparked deeper reflection on how power dynamics can operate within our network and that despite good intentions, can persist both deliberately and subconsciously. These can be visible in decision-making processes and unconsciously mark who speaks and who doesn't. We are learning that we need to continually challenge these dynamics both within APRRN and across the broader sector with our multiple partners.

Creating spaces for internal learning has helped us move toward a shared vision, each understanding their roles while deepening reflections on power and inclusion. This journey has been essential in challenging our



own internal structures and fostering more equitable partnerships. However, we need to extend these conversations beyond the Secretariat to our wider governance structures and membership, intentionally creating spaces for other minority leaders—including youth, LGBTQI, and women refugee leaders—to step forward and lead within the network. Looking deeper into our processes and approaches will help us build equitable partnerships and meaningful participation that is intentional and diverse across our working groups.

## What impact have we seen as a result of the co-leadership?

Through the co-leadership model, we have embarked on an important first step and provided an opportunity to redistribute power and prioritise meaningful, diverse, and intentional refugee participation within APRRN and beyond. Over the last 20 months, we have started laying the foundations but the work is only just beginning. So far, we have seen it have the following impact:

### **Internally, we are prioritising Meaningful Refugee Participation (MRP) and increasing representation across all our constituencies -**

The co-leadership model between those with and without those with lived experience has put meaningful refugee participation at the forefront of our work, prioritised throughout our strategic planning and our 9th Asia Pacific Consultation on Refugee Rights held in 2023 and mainstreamed across our advocacy and programmes. In 2023, MRP was voted in by our membership as one of APRRN's 6 advocacy priorities until 2025 and it is a cross-cutting issue of APRRN's strategic and operational plan.

As a result, we have focused primarily on improving diversity and meaningful and balanced representation across the Secretariat, membership, and within the Steering Committee, one of APRRN's Governance bodies. With the new Steering Committee in place, we are proud to say that 8 of the new members (40 per cent) have lived experience of forced migration. Additionally, we updated our HR procedures and have recruited people with lived experience in our IT and membership support and communications roles in the Secretariat. We have also increased representation across our governance and membership - and welcomed more refugee-led and women-led organisations to the network.

Moving forward, we want to look deeper internally at our power dynamics and make sure we are supporting our refugee leaders enough, to ensure their voices are equally represented and heard within our network and beyond. To do this we have just started working with an MRP advisory board consisting of eight members across our network, to guide us in this important work.

### **Our consistent and intentional presence is shifting the narrative. Creating space and innovative conversations on diversity, inclusion, refugee participation and global systems change**

The co-leadership model in itself, and the presence of someone with lived experience as Co-SG is challenging the hierarchy and decentralising the human rights sector and humanitarian sector spaces. With Hafsar in the role of co-SG, it has directly shown the agency of people with lived experiences and their abilities, willingness, and rights to meaningful and equitable participation.

Hafsar's participation in high-level meetings, advocacy with state and non-state actors, facilitating spaces, and using their voice, are noticeably influencing other change-makers and their communication styles and the wider narrative.

We can see we are part of a global community shifting power dynamics, across the human rights sector and not just the refugee space. We can see that the ripple effects of our work extend far beyond our immediate sphere. There is a growing appetite for learning, collaboration, and co-creation that challenges the current system and power dynamics. We have been able to reflect on how we can collaboratively shift power dynamics across the globe. See their report here.

### **It is opening the doors to other refugee leaders, activists and advocates -**

Since we took up our roles, we've taken significant steps to promote, center, and diversify the representation of people with lived experience of forced displacement and refugee leadership in various conferences, events, and processes. The co-leadership, and having someone with lived experience is opening the space for other refugee leaders, as we prioritise bringing other refugee leaders from our membership to high-level meetings with UNHCR and other UN agencies we work with, and with governments, for example by increasing the participation of refugee voices in humanitarian and human rights policy spaces, and by quickly mobilising members and affected communities to produce public statements on rights violations in real-time.

Hafsar's attendance at the 12th Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM) in May 2023

was a game changer as they were the first person with lived experience of forced migration to attend this Track 2 dialogue with high-level government officials. And it has had a knock-on effect the following year - with more refugee leaders in attendance.

Still, there is a long way to go, in particular with some UN processes where there continues to be a tokenistic approach to including, meaningfully, people with lived experience at the negotiation tables.

### **Partners and donors have been open and responsive to meaningful refugee participation**

However, deeply ingrained power imbalances are so normalised that shifting mindsets requires time and persistent efforts. We have successfully advocated for creating spaces where Refugee-Led Organisations (RLOs) can contribute more actively to the human rights sector, including high-profile events, conferences, and processes. This advocacy has also influenced the development of principles for meaningful participation across the human rights and humanitarian sectors. Yet, entrenched power imbalances persist, with ongoing internal challenges and gatekeeping that need to be addressed.

And we have noticed that people who are in or are about to enter, co-leadership models, are coming to us to learn and exchange, which we also benefit immensely from.

## **Moving forward...**

The co-leadership model is only a step in APRRN taking greater strides towards internally promoting refugee leadership and meaningful and diverse refugee participation. In our onward collective journey, we hope to:

- Strengthen the co-leadership, refining principles and collaboratively advocating for a whole-of-society approach
- Continue to challenge stakeholders on tokenistic practices and promote participation for diverse refugee advocates at the regional, national, and local levels
- Through the development of the Meaningful Refugee Participation Advisory Board, take a deep dive into APRRN to assess power dynamics at play, review our decision-making processes to lead by example on Meaningful Refugee Participation
- Create more spaces to provide feedback within APRRN and for our members and partners
- Supporting partnerships and collaboration between all members, INGOs, NGOs, and RLOs through our working groups
- Providing long-term capacity building -and strengthening and mentoring support to RLOs and refugee leaders in areas such as advocacy, legal, and communications
- Push and promote structured support for refugee leaders and advocates who are involved in the human rights and humanitarian sector, a trauma-informed leadership approach
- Linking donors to RLOs to fund relevant on-the-ground projects
- Encouraging our members, partners, and donors to explore new relationships and partnerships with RLOs
- Sharing learnings through podcasts, articles, and blogs to promote co-leadership and MRP
- Continue to learn and share our learnings with other co-leaders, also beyond our region and beyond our sector

## Final Thoughts

As highlighted above, throughout our co-leadership journey, we have encountered various forms of resistance and denial regarding the competency and credibility of leaders with lived experience or those from impacted communities. At the same time, we have also received significant support and encouragement for this leadership model.

A key aspect of our learning has been the need to unpack and challenge both conscious and unconscious beliefs that position leadership by individuals with lived experience as merely a given within the current movement for meaningful participation, rather than recognising the extensive competencies and diverse skills they bring to the sector beyond their lived experiences.

This ongoing process has been both an educational and reflective journey for ourselves and others. ***Moving forward, we will continue to strive to foster a constructive and encouraging approach— one that invites deep analysis and critical reflection on biases, worldviews, and beliefs, rather than confrontation.***

***From Hafsar and Klaus,  
Co-secretaries General, APRRN.***

*If anyone has any questions or would like to reach out to discuss anything we have written above then please reach out.*

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