

GLOBAL REFUGEE FORUM LEGAL COMMUNITY PLEDGE

2020-2023 IMPACT REPORT



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INTRODUCTION

Launched at the inaugural Global Refugee Forum (GRF) in December 2019, the GRF Legal Community Pledge¹ is a multi-stakeholder initiative that unites over 120 diverse legal and refugee rights stakeholders committed to utilizing the law to advance protection and solutions for refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless people, and internally and other displaced people.² Signatories include international and national non-governmental organizations (NGOs), refugee-led organizations (RLOs), law firms, academic institutions, bar associations, and States worldwide.³

This multi-stakeholder effort addresses a global challenge: gaps in access to legal information and assistance undermine refugees' ability to secure rights, justice, and lasting solutions to their displacement. Reaffirmed at the second GRF in 2023, this initiative represents a collective commitment to a whole-of-society and partnership approach, aiming to increase access to legal assistance and drive systemic change for displaced people globally. This report details the progress made during the implementation of the first Pledge, covering the period from 2020 to 2023.⁴

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1. Also known by its full title as the *Mobilizing the Global Legal Community to Protect and Find Solutions for Refugees and Others Forcibly Displaced* Pledge. The text of the Pledge can be found [here](#).
 2. The Pledge uses the language: “refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless persons, and other forcibly displaced persons” – it was designed to be inclusive of all persons that experience displacement that may be in need of protection. Other legal categories within the scope of the Pledge include: internally displaced persons (IDPs), those with claims under the Convention Against Torture CAT, survivors of trafficking and climate-displaced people.
 3. A full list of the signatories to the 2019 Pledge can be found [here](#).
 4. The contents of this report is drawn from an independent strategic review commissioned by PILnet and carried out by Light House Partnerships in 2023, along with data submitted annually to PILnet by pledgers detailing their progress on Pledge commitments from 2020 to 2023. Most of the examples included are from 2022 and 2023, as highlights from 2020 and 2021 have been featured in earlier reports and updates, which can be accessed [here](#). The *Final Report – Strategic Review of the Legal Community Pledge, February 2023* is available [here](#).

StARS

“ To us, the value of the Pledge is focused on **building a global network of legal aid providers and practitioners** who can push forward and emphasize the **central role that legal representation and advice play in healthy asylum processing**. StARS believes that making legal representation and advice available to all refugees and asylum-seekers cannot be accomplished through traditional humanitarian models of assistance, but through proper engagement with refugee communities, their empowerment, and support so that they can take a lead on developing and implementing their own community-centered services.”

Between the first and second GRFs, global displacement reached over 110 million people, the highest number ever recorded. This surge was driven by events such as Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; the Taliban’s return to power in Afghanistan; Israel’s aggression on Gaza; and conflicts in Sudan, Yemen, and Ethiopia, as well as political, economic, and social instability in Venezuela. During this period, particularly during the first years of the Pledge’s implementation, the COVID-19 pandemic placed further strain on the lives of displaced people and those working with them. COVID-19 disproportionately affected displaced populations, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and increasing poverty. Access to healthcare, sanitation, and vaccination was particularly challenging, especially for undocumented individuals. Lockdowns and border closures restricted movement, preventing many from seeking asylum and accessing resettlement and other safe pathways, while legal and procedural barriers to asylum were heightened, with many countries suspending or limiting asylum processes during this period.

In addition to the varied restrictions and impact of these on displaced populations around the world, government responses to displacement also varied widely. This was especially true for new large-scale displacement, such as from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Some countries maintained open borders and humanitarian policies, or did so for certain groups. However, in many contexts, the growing securitization of migration and asylum systems, along with the expanded use of measures like arbitrary detention and pushbacks, effectively prevented individuals in need of international protection from exercising their fundamental right to seek and enjoy asylum. State action frequently violated international law and principles of natural justice and due process. Even where people were able to access territory and claim asylum, limited state capacity often caused significant delays in the determination of asylum claims, leaving refugees in legal limbo without basic services or the ability to rebuild their lives. State-funded legal aid for refugees declined in many contexts, and legal assistance continued to be a drastically underfunded area of refugee response.

Technological advancements, driven by the urgent need to adapt services during the initial years of the Pledge’s implementation in response to COVID-19, led to some positive developments. Remote access to legal information and virtual consultations for displaced populations increased, with many

refugees using digital platforms to receive vital information and access essential legal services despite mobility restrictions. Additionally, gaps in protection and service provision due to limitations in the operations of international and national NGOs, UNHCR, and government offices contributed to a significant rise in the recognition of the vital role that refugee-led organizations and initiatives play in the forced displacement sector. Displaced individuals and communities took active roles in advocating for their rights, providing peer support, and implementing community-based solutions. This was especially true in contexts where international and national NGOs or UN bodies were operating limited services or had closed altogether. At the global level, there was also increasing acknowledgment of the importance that refugees play in responding to the needs of their community and calls for greater refugee participation in all decision-making fora.

In this context, the global legal community played a vital role in supporting those displaced to secure asylum and solutions, defend their rights, and access justice. Members of the Legal Community Pledge, provided direct legal assistance to support individuals to navigate complex asylum procedures or challenge discriminatory and unjust policies, including through the use of strategic litigation. They also played a crucial role in raising awareness about the legal issues faced by refugees, advocating for more comprehensive and inclusive legal frameworks at the national and international levels.

This progress report highlights the substantial achievements of the members of the GRF Legal Community Pledge from 2020 to 2023. It demonstrates that in the face of increased levels of displacement and variable government responses, the legal community has turned its commitments into concrete actions, significantly impacting the lives of forcibly displaced people. It underscores the importance of cross-sector partnerships and the legal community's vital role in upholding the rights and dignity of those seeking safety and solutions. This report also illustrates that this work is most impactful when done in partnership with those that are displaced themselves.

AsyLex

“ Being part of a globally connected and coordinated Pledge allows us as a regional organization to **exchange views and collaborate with NGOs** and other organizations and firms active in the same area as us. We can learn about initiatives from like-minded organizations around the world and at the same time share our project ideas/initiatives with these organizations.”

Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

“ Joining the Pledge has **promoted a sense of shared commitment to a common goal**. It has helped us to ‘join the dots’ between our work and that of others working to promote access to justice for refugees, and the **alignment of our work with the Global Compact on Refugees.**”

PLEDGE IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

During the first phase of its implementation, the GRF Legal Community Pledge emerged as a powerful global initiative, uniting members of the legal community to increase legal assistance for refugees and other forcibly displaced populations. It has strengthened partnerships, fostered collaboration, and mobilized the legal sector to provide essential legal support to refugees and other displaced people around the world, making a tangible difference in their lives. During the period from 2020 to 2023, Pledge highlights include:

- ▶ Private sector signatories **collectively provided over 656,364 pro bono hours**, surpassing their original commitments by 28%.⁵
- ▶ A **Core Group of NGOs, RLOs, and law firms** was established to **support the implementation, growth, and sustainability of the Pledge**. The Core Group was successful in mobilizing funding to support Pledge coordination for the first part of the Pledge, and developed reporting metrics and tools to track Pledge implementation.

From 2020-2023, Private sector signatories collectively provided



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surpassing their original commitments by 28%.

5. Law firm signatories pledged to provide 127,930 pro bono hours annually. The number of pro bono hours indicated here is drawn only from data provided by pledgers who reported back to PILnet. The number of pro bono hours undertaken to support greater access to justice for refugees and other forcibly displaced people by those that joined the Pledge, and by other actors, is in reality much larger. In particular, the number of hours of free legal assistance provided by NGOs and legal aid lawyers would constitute a significantly larger amount.

- ▶ The legal community **mobilized across borders to provide legal support to those impacted by crises**, including Ukrainians and Afghans. Consultations on Afghanistan and a Cross-Border Working Group on Ukraine enhanced coordination between members of the legal community, while **legal information fact-sheets developed by Pledge members** in both contexts ([Afghanistan](#) and [Ukraine](#)) empowered refugees with information about their rights, legal pathways to safety, and legal assistance providers.
- ▶ Pledge members explored and supported **greater refugee participation and inclusion within access to justice programming**, developing new principles and models for enhancing refugee leadership and undertaking mutual learning around equitable partnerships within the sector.
- ▶ In Asia, Pledge members hosted a series of workshops in [2020](#) and again in [2022](#) to increase knowledge about the Pledge initiative and build the capacity of NGOs and RLOs to develop pro bono projects. These workshops culminated in two **Pro Bono Pitching Roundtables**, where NGOs and RLOs successfully pitched 28 diverse pro bono projects to law firms.
- ▶ A [collaborative pilot project in Thailand](#) funded through the Pledge led to **increased access to legal assistance for forcibly displaced people in Thailand**. This project was co-designed over six workshops that engaged local legal and refugee rights actors and members of the Pledge, leading to a localized model for collaborative private-public legal assistance delivery.
- ▶ A [GRF Legal Community Pledge Matching Portal](#) was launched by PILnet in 2021. It is the first-ever global legal clearinghouse dedicated to supporting the legal needs of organizations working with displaced communities. **77 pro bono projects were scoped and matched by PILnet through this initiative.**
- ▶ Pledge members came together to embrace **innovative solutions to address gaps in legal assistance delivery**, including [embracing technological advancements](#) during COVID-19 to enhance the delivery of pro bono legal aid and expanding the use of collaborative private-public partnership models.

© KIND | Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher hold an intake clinic with KIND.

THEMATIC IMPACT AREAS

1. Legal Assistance and Empowerment

Those committed to the Pledge are united in their belief that access to legal assistance and the legal empowerment of refugees, asylum-seekers, stateless people, and other displaced populations is an integral component of a comprehensive response to forced displacement. From 2020 to 2023, GRF legal community members around the globe employed diverse models of legal assistance to provide essential services and information to displaced populations, empowering them to secure their rights, including freedom from arbitrary detention and refoulement. For example, in 2022, the **Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK)** provided 12,440 hours of free legal aid and representation to refugees and asylum-seekers, including representing 1,174 individuals charged with the offense of being unlawfully present in Kenya in courts and police stations. All asylum-seekers represented in court were released for registration by the Department of Refugee Services.

Also in 2022, when the government of the United Kingdom implemented a policy to remove asylum-seekers to Rwanda, law firms **A&O Shearman** and **Reed Smith** partnered with the legal aid NGO **Bail for Immigration Detainees (BID)** to develop a pro bono legal assistance project. Volunteer pro bono lawyers supported BID in drafting bail applications for people who were in detention and had been served a notice of eligibility for removal to Rwanda. Every application for bail was granted.

During the pledging period, many Pledge members started to explore, implement, and promote more holistic and trauma-informed lawyering, prioritizing legal empowerment alongside or over legal assistance models, including a growth in refugee paralegal programs. Some examples include:

- ▶ **ST ANDREW'S REFUGEE SERVICES (StARS)** in Egypt operated an emergency legal drop-in clinic that focused on facilitating urgent access to documentation, UNHCR registration processing, and legal assistance for those in immigration detention or at risk of deportation. StARS integrated psychosocial, medical, housing, and education services alongside its legal advice.

- ▶ **REFUGEE SOLIDARITY NETWORK (RSN) AND REFUGEE RIGHTS TURKEY (RRT)** collaborated on a partnership project designed to support refugees in Turkey with both legal assistance and empowerment; RRT provided direct free-of-charge legal assistance to 2,701 refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey in 2023. The two organizations also jointly ran an [online information resource for refugees](#), designed to empower refugees with information about their rights and entitlements. The platform was visited by 21,000 unique visitors in 2023.
- ▶ **AMERA INTERNATIONAL** collaborated with **StARS** in 2022 and 2023 to develop a [therapeutic model for legal assistance](#) delivery, to support the capacity building of other legal service providers to take a holistic approach to their work. This approach specifically recognizes the importance of addressing the mental health needs of refugees and asylum-seekers during the legal process.
- ▶ **SUAKA**, the **CIVIL SOCIETY ASSOCIATION FOR REFUGEE RIGHTS PROTECTION** in Indonesia, collaborated with Dewi Negara Fachri & Partners, a national law firm affiliated with the international law firm Hogan Lovells, to deliver a capacity-building session for SUAKA's Refugee Community-Based Paralegal network. This session focused on enhancing practical and advanced knowledge of Indonesian law, with a particular focus on immigration law, in response to a surge in immigration-related cases.
- ▶ Over 200 **DLA PIPER** lawyers delivered legal education training courses for refugees in 17 countries through DLA Piper's flagship "Know Your Rights" program during 2020 to 2023. The program is overseen by DLA staff with lived experience of displacement and is implemented in partnership with local non-profit organizations and UNHCR offices. It seeks to respond to the legal information gaps for refugees in a given country by providing practical skills and theoretical training on different legal topics, such as labor law, entrepreneurship, education, and access to healthcare.



LEGAL SUPPORT FOR MARGINALIZED GROUPS

From 2020 to 2023, many members of the legal community increased efforts to support marginalized groups facing heightened risks and discrimination by providing legal assistance and engaging in advocacy. Women and LGBTQIA+ refugees were often a particular focus for Pledge members. For example, **Morrison Foerster** collaborated with partners to update country of origin research to support LGBTQIA+ asylum claimants in the United States, while **Linklaters** dedicated 2,250 pro bono hours in 2022 to their flagship Rainbow Migration UK casework partnership, supporting 13 LGBTQIA+ individuals with their UK asylum claims, including appeals. The **Hotline for Refugees and Migrants** in Israel produced a report in 2023 titled [“Double vulnerability: gender vulnerability of women and LGBTQI refugees and migrants in the Israeli asylum and immigration system,”](#) which underscored the heightened vulnerability experienced by these refugees and asylum-seekers, calling for policy and procedural changes needed to protect them. In 2023, **HIAS Kenya** provided comprehensive legal assistance to LGBTQIA+ refugees, pairing legal services with mental health and psychosocial support, economic inclusion support, and providing transit and safe house support to vulnerable refugees arriving in Kenya from neighboring countries.

FAMILY REUNIFICATION AND OTHER COMPLEMENTARY PATHWAYS TO PROTECTION

Since the first GRF in 2019, many States have restricted access to traditional avenues for asylum, resettlement, and humanitarian pathways to protection. In response, the legal community has increasingly focused on providing services and information to help asylum-seekers and refugees access “complementary” legal routes to safety, such as family reunification and labor mobility. State-funded legal aid for these pathways is often unavailable or difficult for eligible refugees to obtain. However, international law firms frequently have a large pool of volunteer lawyers available in many countries in the Global North. Pro bono initiatives centered on family reunification and other complementary pathways, such as [those launched in the UK and Europe in response to the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan,](#) hold significant potential for impact.

increased efforts
to support
marginalized groups



© KIND | KIND client Licci and her pro bono attorney from Greenberg Traurig.

Since launching its family reunification work in late 2019, up until the second GRF in December 2023, pledging NGO **Kids in Need of Defense (KIND)** directly assisted 325 children through the Biden Administration’s Family Reunification Task Force. In addition, KIND assisted 397 families in filing applications to reunify through the Central American Minor program. In these efforts, KIND partnered with a number of law firms and corporations, including Pledge member **Microsoft**. In the course of its work in Mexico in collaboration with child welfare authorities, KIND provided legal assistance to more than 600 unaccompanied children seeking third country reunification with family members from 2019–2023. During this time, KIND also established new pro bono projects, in collaboration with local NGOs and corporate pro bono partners, in Ireland, France, Italy, and Greece. Several pledge signatories, including **Arthur Cox**, **Dechert**, **DLA Piper**, and **Microsoft**, are actively involved in these projects and have supported asylum-seekers across the globe to be reunited with their families.

legal assistance

600 to more than
unaccompanied
children

In 2021, pledging firms **Orrick, White & Case, Ashurst,** and **A&O Shearman** partnered with NGO **Refugee Legal Support**, to establish the UK Family Reunion from Europe (UK FRFE) pro bono project. The project was set up following the UK's departure from the EU and the end of the EU Dublin Regulation, to support people within the EU to reunite with family members in the UK. In the early stages of its existence, the project assisted families in applying for exceptional case funding, which would allow their cases to be funded by legal aid. However, as the capacity within the legal aid system in the UK shrank, the project evolved to provide legal support for the entire process, from the initial application through to a final decision. Pro bono lawyers involved in the project are trained to carry out family reunion work with the support and supervision of expert lawyers at Refugee Legal Support.

Recognizing the importance of partnerships between the legal community and other stakeholders engaged in family reunification, **PILnet** and other pledging organizations including **DLA Piper, IRAP, AsyLex,** the **Refugee Solidarity Network**, and **KIND** joined the **Family Reunification Network (FRUN)** following its launch in December 2020. During 2023, FRUN members worked together to develop a multi-stakeholder family reunification pledging initiative that was launched at the 2023 GRF. This pledge garnered the support of many legal community pledging partners.

to support
people
within
the EU
to reunite
with family
members
in the UK



2. Refugee Leadership, Inclusion, and Participation

One of the most significant developments in the refugee response sector between the first and second GRFs is the advancement of a meaningful refugee participation agenda. This progress has elevated refugee participation to an “**emerging norm**” within the sector. Since 2019, members of the Legal Community Pledge have increasingly embraced and implemented meaningful refugee participation in their programming through diverse initiatives and projects. These include intentionally hiring individuals with displacement experience to contribute to legal work, developing academic and professional pathways for refugees to pursue legal careers, ensuring that those with lived experience are engaged in conferences and fora where their legal needs are being discussed, and engaging refugees and refugee-led organizations in the co-design and implementation of legal projects. Alongside these efforts, the legal community has also sought to utilize its expertise to strengthen the legal resilience of and “de-risk” RLOs, including by providing free legal assistance to help RLOs become legally registered or address other legal barriers that prevent them from being recognized as legitimate actors within the refugee response sector.

The legal community has an important role in advancing meaningful refugee participation within legal work and more generally across the refugee response sector. Recognizing this, in June 2022, **PILnet**, in its own capacity and as the Coordinator of the Pledge, joined other Pledge members and committed to the 2019 Global Refugee Forum Refugee Participation Pledge. Since this time, PILnet has sought to embed meaningful refugee participation in its own work, including by developing a “refugee-centered legal ecosystem approach,” which promotes an integrated multi-stakeholder approach to legal work and places the legal rights, needs, skills, and knowledge of

© PILnet | Plenary discussion with judges and lawyers with lived experience of displacement, Awmaima Amrayaf, Zahra Haidari, Negina Nayab Basiq and Pavlo Bogachenko, and Assistant High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, Gillian Triggs.



those with lived experience of displacement at the center. Essential to such an approach is the strengthening of the base of legal professionals with lived experience of displacement.

Seeking to contribute towards this goal, in 2023, PILnet partnered with the **Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH)** at the University of Oxford, to launch the [PILnet-RLRH Fellowship Program](#) for legal professionals and advocates with lived experience of displacement. The Fellowship program allows fellows to learn about and contribute to PILnet's work to utilize the law and engage its global legal network to advance access to rights, justice, and solutions for those displaced. This has included fellows undertaking action-oriented research on the legal needs of RLOs to inform PILnet's legal programming.

Other members of the legal community have also taken steps to support and include individuals in gaining employment during or after displacement. For instance, in Australia, the law firm **Russell Kennedy** established a specialized seasonal clerkship stream for law students from displacement backgrounds. This program, conducted annually, integrates students from this stream into the firm's general clerkship program. Several clerks have subsequently secured permanent positions upon graduation. Similarly, in the UK, **DLA Piper** has initiated the **Women in Law for Women Refugees** program, which offers professional mentoring and internship opportunities to support the career advancement of female refugees. This program was initiated by a staff member at the firm with lived experience of displacement and is tailored to provide integration assistance and facilitate entry into the UK labor market for refugee women. Additionally, in the UK in 2022, pledging law firms **Ashurst, Dechert, and DLA Piper**, in collaboration with **Fragomen** and **Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB)**, launched the [Displaced Legal Talent Initiative \(DLTI\)](#). The DLTI assists law firms in recruiting displaced legal professionals through a pilot project with the UK government. The first cohort was introduced in 2022, with **Ashurst, DLA Piper, and Fragomen** welcoming the inaugural group of displaced lawyers in early 2023.

In addition to initiatives to advance the hiring of refugees, Pledgers have also sought to expand refugee participation and leadership, within research and legal programming. In the Asia-Pacific region, a team-based, peer-mentorship research group that included persons with lived experience of displacement was established with the support of pledging organizations the **Asia-Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR)**, **Act for Peace**, the **Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)**, and the **Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law** at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. The group undertook a number of research projects that engaged researchers with lived experience of displacement, who worked alongside researchers without such experience. The group also developed [Guidelines for Co-Produced Research with Refugees and Other People with Lived Experience of Displacement](#), created to support others to engage those with lived experience of displacement in research work.

Reed Smith and the **Government of Canada** created a new pathway for resettlement of especially disadvantaged refugees from Jordan and Greece. To qualify, families must include a survivor of torture or sexual violence. This program, known as [Lamp Lifeboat Ladder](#), is a survivor-guided program, with displaced people defining and guiding the program through a Survivor's Council, which supports individuals from the point of displacement to resettlement and self-reliance in a safe country. From 2020–2023, 29 families totaling 90 individuals were resettled in Canada through the program.

Partnering with Refugee and Community-Led Organizations

Collaborating with and strengthening the ability of RLOs to deliver legal services is also essential to ensuring that meaningful refugee participation is embedded into access to justice work. Recognizing that RLOs, community-based organizations and grassroots legal service providers are ultimately best placed to identify and address the legal needs of displaced communities, a number of pledging NGOs have prioritized partnership development with such organizations.

In Turkey, with support from **Refugee Solidarity Network**, **Refugee Rights Turkey** partnered with national RLOs, such as the **Afghan Refugees Solidarity Association (ARSA)**, to deliver counseling sessions and know-your-rights information. In Lebanon, the **Lebanese Centre for Human Rights** and RLO **Refugee Forum Initiative**, signed a Memorandum of Understanding, committing to work together to empower Syrian refugees in the country to advocate for their rights.

Throughout 2020 to 2023, **StARS** has continued to partner with refugee communities using their legal services as part of the development of a community-based protection network that relies on solidarity, interagency referrals, and the provision of services based on needs as opposed to legal status. Across different programs, StARS collaborates with over 25 refugee-led grassroots initiatives and has relied on these partnerships to identify at-risk refugees within their communities. In addition to providing direct legal services, StARS supervised and supported community paralegals based in different refugee-led grassroots organizations. These paralegals played a crucial role in decentralizing access to legal advice and services, enabling StARS's legal services to reach individuals in remote or isolated communities. More importantly, they provided essential support to asylum-seekers whom StARS was unable to represent due to capacity limitations.

In August 2022, March and June 2023, **APRRN** and **APNOR** teamed up to hold a three-module **Skills Enhancement Program** for refugee leaders, including on monitoring, evaluation, accountability & learning (MEAL) tools, case management processes, and systems in a legal aid context. Twenty one participants took part, representing 19 RLOs from seven countries, including RLOs providing legal aid services.

3. Advocacy & Capacity Development

Those that joined the Pledge committed to promoting fairness, efficiency, adaptability, and integrity of legal procedures and other laws, policies, and practices regarding refugees and others forcibly displaced. During the pledging period, many Pledgers, often alongside refugees and RLOs, concentrated their efforts on advocating for systemic changes in legislation, policies, and practices to improve access to rights, justice, and solutions for refugees. Others prioritized building the capacity of civil society stakeholders to engage in this work or provide legal assistance to displaced individuals. Additionally, some collaborated with government stakeholders to enhance their understanding of relevant national and international legal frameworks and best practices.



KENYA

Together with refugee legal advocates, the **Refugee Consortium of Kenya (RCK)** conducted a participatory dialogue with refugees to support advocacy and engagement with the Kenyan government in the formulation of the Refugees Act 2021 and associated regulations. RCK also collaborated with newly elected members of the Garissa County Assembly to create awareness of the Refugees Act, focusing on county obligations regarding documentation and access to socio-economic opportunities.

THAILAND

From 2020 to 2023, the **Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APPRN)** held an annual Refugee Rights and Advocacy Course in collaboration with academic partners and experts. In 2022, this included 29 participants, with 14 advocates having lived experience of displacement.

BANGLADESH

Act for Peace supported the **Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST)** and **BRAC** becoming formal UNHCR partners to deliver legal services in 17 camps, benefitting more than 25,000 Rohingya refugees. Act for Peace also provided support for a workshop for legal practitioners, aimed at enhancing the skills of 30 BLAST and BRAC staff working in the camps.



TURKEY

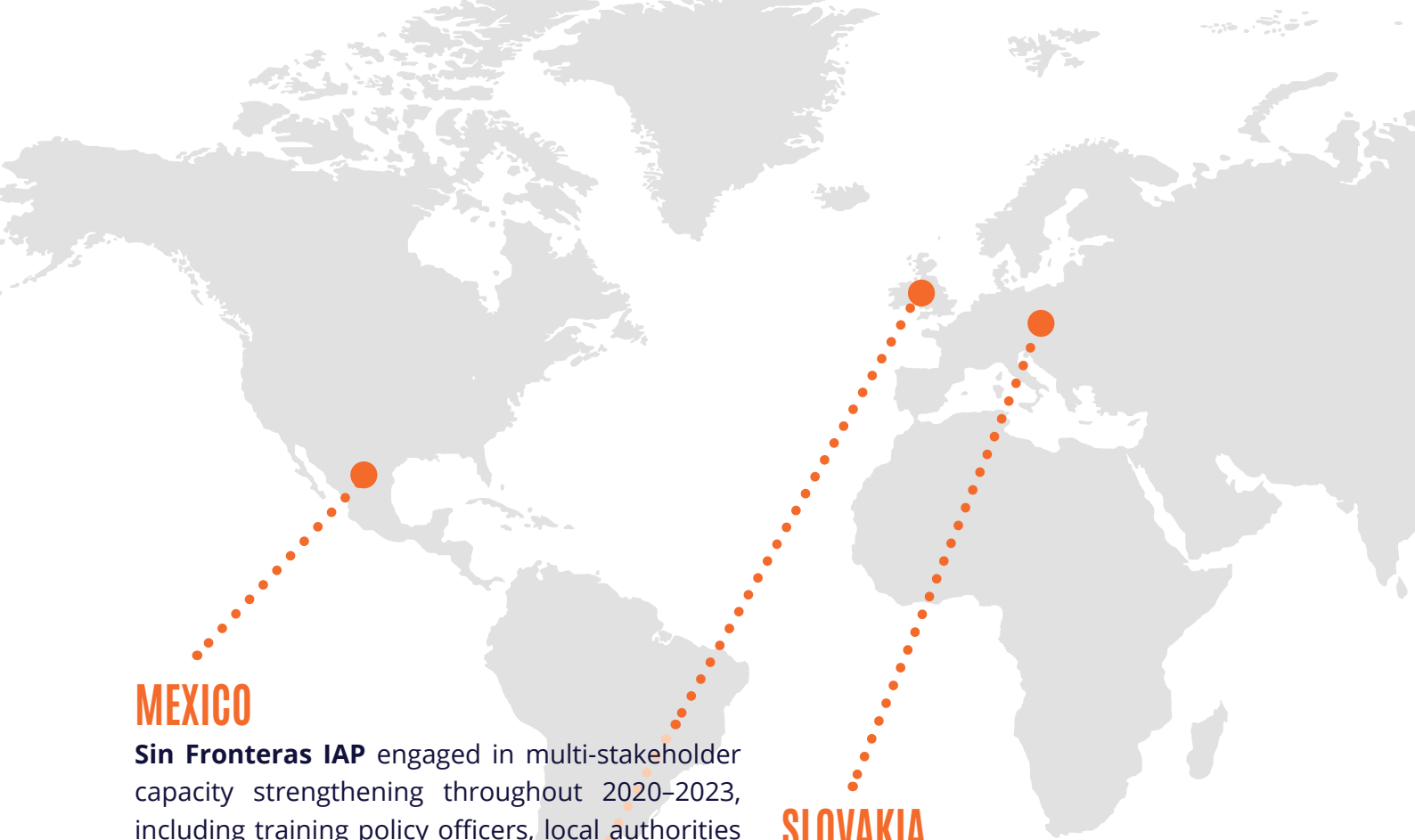
In 2023, as part of joint efforts to increase access to legal services for refugees in Turkey, **Refugee Solidarity Network (RSN)** and **Refugee Rights Turkey (RRT)** trained 399 legal and CSO practitioners on national asylum law and protection procedures, with a focus on state-funded legal aid lawyers. RRT also responded to 237 inquiries by lawyers for expert case support. To complement these efforts, in August 2023, RSN and RRT relaunched the [Asylum Law Informational Platform](#), for lawyers and practitioners in Turkey, with new informational resources, a searchable case law database and an online self-guided study platform.

ISRAEL

During 2020–2023, the **Hotline for Refugees and Migrants** partnered with NGOs, including pledging NGO **HIAS**, to utilize legal advocacy strategies targeting Israeli institutions, achieving protection from deportation for Congolese asylum-seeker families’ children. The Hotline successfully advocated for paid legal representation for detainees, leading to a government commitment to amend the Legal Aid Bureau Act. Following other advocacy efforts, the Israel Prison Service mandated detainees’ release from handcuffs during immigration tribunals.

HONG KONG

In 2022 and 2023, **Justice Centre Hong Kong** worked with a refugee-led initiative in Hong Kong to co-design and deliver a leadership program that builds the capacity of refugee youths to understand key legal frameworks, contribute to public processes, and design and implement a collective action that promotes the inclusion of refugees.



MEXICO

Sin Fronteras IAP engaged in multi-stakeholder capacity strengthening throughout 2020–2023, including training policy officers, local authorities and international entities to identify barriers for those in need of international protection accessing their rights. To increase awareness and understanding of forced displacement issues by those involved in the media, Sin Fronteras also created a virtual course for journalists in conjunction with GIZ and UNHCR, and provided in-person training workshops to over 120 journalists on “Human Mobility and Journalism” in 2022.

SLOVAKIA

In 2022, pledging NGO **KIND** conducted workshops in partnership with the Human Rights League and the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies’ Human Trafficking Initiative, to train law enforcement personnel, child welfare professionals, and nongovernmental organizations, on how to identify and respond to human trafficking cases amid war and mass displacement. The trainings led to working relationships between the organizations, and to a commitment in Slovakia to develop and implement a national registration system for trafficking cases.

UNITED KINGDOM

In 2023, a working group was established by NGO **JUSTICE**, made up of lawyers, academics, activities and community organizations, to review the Afghan resettlement schemes; Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (“ACRS”) and the Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (“ARAP”). Pledging law firm **Dechert** provided pro bono research and drafting support for the report, [Afghanistan Schemes: The Way Forward for ARAP and ACRS](#). The report outlined 24 recommendations to the Government, including proposed changes to improve the accessibility and efficacy of the schemes.

4. COLLABORATION AND COORDINATION

Bridging the access-to-justice gap for refugees and forcibly displaced individuals requires a “whole of society” approach, involving sustainable multi-stakeholder partnerships and enhanced collaboration across the legal ecosystem and other sectors. Between 2020 and 2023, both global and local signatories forged new partnerships and strengthened existing ones, including collaborations with refugee-led initiatives and local actors working directly with displaced communities. These efforts have enabled Pledgers to expand their capacity; share information, resources, expertise, and networks; and broaden the geographic scope and impact of their work. Many pledgers have shared that the pledging initiatives’ greatest value has been its role as a platform to support and facilitate these efforts.

Collaboration has been strengthened through the launch of specific joint projects and the development of tools designed to support future initiatives. New coordination mechanisms and alliances have also been established, enhancing referrals and cooperation across collaborative projects and building stronger connections between Pledgers, legal organizations, and refugee rights advocates. This progress is especially evident in Asia, where PILnet successfully secured funding for Pledge implementation, enabling more targeted work, and in the UK and Europe, where collaborative projects and initiatives have grown significantly since the Pledge’s 2019 launch.

At the outset of 2022, the **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** conducted a legal aid survey that mapped existing and planned legal aid activities, as well as support needs in the DRC’s regional and country operations, with the aim of increasing legal aid partnership with national legal aid actors. At least 12 new legal aid partnerships with national legal aid actors were formed following the mapping.

In 2023, the international law firm **Herbert Smith Freehills** partnered with **DRC** on a collaborative research project, providing funding for external consultants and seconding a staff member to the DRC for four months. The project aimed to identify potential pro bono needs and



opportunities, with a focus on the DRC's legal aid programs in South Sudan, Colombia, Poland, and Iraq. By presenting cross-cutting insights, the project sought to deepen understanding of how pro bono actors and NGOs can best collaborate in humanitarian and crisis contexts.

SUAKA and law firm **Dewi Negara Fachri & Partners** were originally matched through a 2022 Asia Pro Bono Pitching Roundtable to provide a capacity building session for SUAKA's Refugee Community-Based Paralegal program. To complement this work and respond to needs, the collaboration evolved to also include the development of a comprehensive policy paper addressing immigration law, designed to serve as an authoritative reference for SUAKA's provision of legal aid in immigration-related cases within refugee communities.

Through its AsyLex Global project, **AsyLex** leveraged its expertise in utilizing international human rights mechanisms, with a particular emphasis on UN treaty bodies, to address refugee-related issues, especially non-refoulement violations. By engaging with legal aid actors worldwide, this capacity-building initiative aims to enhance access to justice for refugees on a global scale. As part of this effort, in 2022 AsyLex launched an [interactive globe](#) that visualizes the human rights mechanisms available to individuals in each country.

► **The GRF Legal Community Pledge Matching Portal–PILnet's Refugee-Led Clearing House**

Launched on World Refugee Day in 2021 and collaboratively designed with **Core Group** members, the [GRF Legal Community Pledge Matching Portal](#) was created to connect pledged pro bono hours with needs-driven projects from non-profit organizations working with forcibly displaced individuals. The Portal is managed by **PILnet** and has become a successful platform for facilitating matches for legal assistance within and beyond the Pledge community. Since its inception, the Portal has matched 77 pro bono projects; 62 for NGOs and 15 for RLOs. 23 of these were 'operational matters'⁶ and 54 were 'programmatic matters'.⁷

Recognizing the significant and largely unmet legal needs faced daily by RLOs, PILnet explicitly sought to raise awareness of the platform and improve access to organizations led by displaced individuals. To further this goal, in 2023, PILnet appointed a legal professional with lived experience of displacement to manage the platform, supported by PILnet-Refugee-Led Research Hub (RLRH) Legal Fellows who share similar experiences. This transformation into a "Refugee-Led Clearinghouse," along with targeted outreach to RLOs, has allowed PILnet to match an increasing number of RLOs. During the reporting period, PILnet matched RLOs with free legal assistance, ranging from assistance with legal registration and tax status support to multi-jurisdictional research projects on national laws to support advocacy efforts.

6. PILnet defines operational legal needs as those that are essential to the daily operation and management of a non-profit, and include issues related to internal governance, regulatory compliance, and the necessary institutional framework for legal operation.

7. PILnet defines programmatic legal needs as those specific to the delivery of an NGO's services and programs. These include legal issues that arise in the context of project implementation, service delivery or advocacy and policy change efforts. In essence, while operational legal needs focus on the organization's internal structure and compliance, programmatic legal needs are directly related to the external work and impact of an NGO.

► Pledge Implementation in Asia

Supported by dedicated funding to pilot initiatives that foster new connections and enhance legal assistance through innovative partnership and collaboration models, PILnet and the Core Group launched several new activities in Asia, including the following:

Local Refugee Rights Pro Bono Pilot Project in Thailand

To strengthen the pro bono ecosystem among local actors working to improve access to justice for refugees, Core Group members supported the creation of a [national pro bono coordination mechanism in Thailand](#). This pilot project, the first of its kind aligned with the Pledge's multi-stakeholder approach, aimed to expand legal assistance for refugees and forcibly displaced individuals worldwide. In 2021, a thorough scoping exercise led by a local Thai lawyer—featuring four consultative workshops—identified gaps in legal services and coordination that the project could address. Launched in 2022 in partnership with the **Refugee Rights Litigation Project (RRLP)**, a Thai legal assistance NGO, the initiative focused on meeting the legal needs of refugees in Thailand by providing pro bono legal support. During the pledging period, it matched 30 refugees or refugee rights organizations with free legal assistance. The project also created a roster of lawyers by training both local and international legal professionals in international refugee law and refugee protection in Thailand, while fostering new partnerships between NGOs and law firms.

Asia Pro Bono Pitching Roundtables

In 2020 and 2022, Core Group members in Asia worked with UNHCR and pledging partners, including **Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR)**, **Act for Peace**, **Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN)**, and **Justice Centre Hong Kong**, to co-host a series of workshops on pro bono with NGOs and RLOs; helped them to scope pro bono projects; and then organized Pro Bono Pitching Roundtables where NGOs/RLOs could pitch their legal needs directly to law firms and other members of the legal community interested in taking these on. This proved to be a highly successful model to support the development of new pro bono partnerships and collaborations; [100% of the NGOs/RLOs that pitched their projects in 2022](#) were matched with free legal support.

Refugee Rights Pro Bono Toolkit

As a complement to the Asia Pro Bono Pitching Roundtables, Core Group members partnered with UNHCR and other partners to develop tools to support the growth of refugee rights pro bono in Asia and globally:

- *Menu of Pro Bono Options*: A [Menu of Pro Bono Options](#) to support law firms, RLOs, NGOs, and other relevant actors to envision and categorize the types of pro bono assistance that could be available under the Pledge.
- *Top Tips for Developing a Successful Pro Bono Project*: Two guidance documents were developed—[Top Tips for Law Firms](#) and [Top Tips for Non-Profits](#)—outlining the recommended steps needed to develop and implement a successful refugee rights pro bono project.



Growth in Refugee Rights Pro Bono Collaborative Projects in Europe and the UK

The **Greece Pro Bono Collaborative (GPBC)** was established in 2019 between pledging NGO **European Lawyers in Lesbos (ELIL)** and six international law firms, including pledging firms **A&O Shearman, Dentons, Ashurst, Orrick, and White & Case**. The firms' pro bono lawyers work with ELIL's expert asylum lawyers to provide free legal assistance to refugees in Athens and Lesbos. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, the clinic operated remotely but then returned to an in-person model in 2022. From 2020 to 2023, 221 pro bono lawyers assisted over 6,000 refugees through this project.



© ELIL

Building upon the success of the GPBC and other collaborative models, many firms adapted the model in 2021–2023 to respond to the increase in the number of asylum-seekers in Europe and the UK. [A series of collaborative projects first developed to respond to those fleeing Afghanistan](#) after the Taliban took control in 2021, provided the blueprint for similar projects to be established in 2022 to respond to those fleeing Ukraine, including the **Ukraine Collaborative Pro Bono Collaboration (UPBC)** detailed below.



221 pro bono lawyers assisted
over **6,000** refugees

Another innovative collaborative project developed by a number of pledging entities during this time is the **Rule 39 Pro Bono Initiative**. In November 2021, pledging law firms **DLA Piper, Herbert Smith Freehills, Linklaters, Orrick, and Reed Smith** teamed up with **Coalizione Italiana per le Libertà e i Diritti civili (CILD) / Italian Coalition for Civil Liberties and Rights** and human rights lawyer Dr. Daria Sartori to launch the Rule 39 Pro Bono Initiative. Through the project, pro bono lawyers are trained and supervised by Dr. Sartori to support civil society organisations in proceedings before the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) in the interest of refugees and asylum-seekers. The project focuses particularly on making complete and effective Rule 39 requests for interim measures on issues such as push backs and reception conditions. During the pledging period, the Rule 39 Pro Bono Initiative provided over 4,000 hours of pro bono legal support to more than 600 individuals (including 80 children). This project is now hosted by [Pro Iura](#).

In 2023, lawyers from **CILD, Dentons, ELIL, and Orrick** drew upon their experience building these and other collaborative projects to create the [Practical Guide to Collaborative Access to Justice Pro Bono Projects](#). The Guide aims to support the further growth of these collaborative pro bono projects and outlines best practices in the development and management of sustainable, collaborative pro bono projects to address the legal needs of forcibly displaced people and other marginalized individuals and communities. As pointed out by the authors of the Guide, these projects are designed to “fill the gap” left by inadequate government legal aid funding and are not designed for pro bono lawyers to take work that specialist/legal aid lawyers would be better placed to do. Instead, these projects, when carefully scoped, should aim to support, complement, and augment the existing efforts of NGOs and specialist lawyers working in the area when the existing efforts lack sufficient capacity to meet demand.



During the pledging period, the Rule 39 Pro Bono Initiative provided **over 4,000 hours of pro bono legal support to more than 600 individuals (including 80 children)**

5. RESPONSE TO CRISES

Over the past four years, collaboration has become an integral and even instinctive part of Pledge members' responses to crises, whether these be a situation of mass displacement of a population, health-related, or legislative-induced. In addition to the many unique projects highlighted in previous Pledge implementation updates and reports, further highlights include:

Afghanistan Crisis Response (August 2021 Taliban Takeover)

In response to the Afghanistan Crisis, 80 individuals and 42 law firms in the UK and Europe created the Working Group on Pro Bono Collaborative Response to the Afghanistan Crisis to [develop a network of collaborative pro bono projects](#). Pledging firms, including **Orrick, A&O Shearman, Ashurst, Debevoise & Plimpton, Gibson Dunn, Reed Smith, DLA Piper, White & Case, Morrison & Foerster, Dentons, and Dechert**, partnered with other international law firms and NGOs to carry out pro bono casework, supervised by specialist asylum and immigration lawyers within hosting NGOs, increasing resources and capacity.

Supporting the **Refugee Advice & Casework Service (RACS) Afghanistan Crisis Response Clinic**, the Australian offices of **Herbert Smith Freehills** provided legal support to 1,037 people seeking family reunification, and lodged permanent humanitarian visa applications for 687 Afghan asylum-seekers, including 397 children.

The **International Commission of Jurists** worked closely with the **Australian Association of Women Judges** and others to support the evacuation of Afghan women judges, securing visas and developing employment and education pathways to promote their integration and self-sufficiency. **Orrick** in the United States secured visas for over 30 Afghan clients, including members of Afghanistan's National Academy of Sciences at risk from the Taliban. Meanwhile, **Morrison Foerster's** pro bono team mobilized over 150 lawyers to assist **Human Rights First** to screen Afghan refugees, leading to the placement of eligible clients with pro bono representation. Morrison Foerster also represented some of the clients in seeking asylum and provided pro bono lawyers for Human Rights First's dedicated clinics for Afghans. **AsyLex**, a Swiss legal aid NGO, provided easily accessible information regarding evacuation options to 16,000 Afghans and provided individualized advice to over 220 Afghan families regarding their humanitarian visa applications for Switzerland.

In response to an increased demand for up to date information on safe and legal pathways to safety for Afghans in the wake of the Taliban takeover, **PILnet, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN), Asia-Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) and AMERA International** set up the [Legal Aid and Pathways Project](#), with the support of pledging organizations and firms **DLA Piper, Arthur Cox, Herbert Smith Freehills, Justice Centre Hong Kong** and other partners to produce a series of legal information sheets in English and Dari for Afghans seeking legal assistance in or relocation to a number of countries. In 2023, over 6,800 people visited

these pages via **APRRN's [Information on Afghanistan](#)** website. The website had been set up in 2022 with a linked [Facebook page](#), specifically designed for Afghans in transit to provide information on legal pathways, education, employment and psychosocial support.

Ukraine Crisis Response (February 2022 Invasion)

PILnet collaborated with **UNHCR**, **ELIL**, Pledge member law firms, and lawyers displaced from Ukraine to scope and establish a collaborative direct assistance project to address the legal needs of those displaced. **The Ukraine Pro Bono Collaborative (UPBC)**, launched in August 2022, operated across five Warsaw locations, and mobilized 42 pro bono lawyers from six international firms (including pledging law firms **A&O Shearman, Dentons**, and **White & Case**). Between August 2022 and the end of 2023, the initiative delivered more than 3,000 hours of free legal advice and assisted 5,864 individuals, of whom 71% were women. Dentons in Warsaw also supported ELIL's incorporation and registration in Poland, facilitating the legal establishment of the UPBC. **AsyLex** established a dedicated team in collaboration with Ukrainian lawyers to provide legal assistance to displaced Ukrainians. In particular, they developed online tools that facilitated access to information and legal support for over 26,000 displaced Ukrainians and provided individualized advice via email and Facebook.



© PILnet

Arthur Cox staffed an Immigration Helpline in Ireland in partnership with UNHCR, responding to over 1,800 calls on issues including immigration law, healthcare, education, and housing while **DLA Piper's** UK office engaged its legal tech teams to set up a dedicated inbox and a secure platform to receive and manage requests for assistance from Ukrainians. At its peak, the project received 700 queries in a week; DLA Piper lawyers provided information about legal routes to the UK and triaged complex queries to specialist immigration lawyers. Authors from pledging organizations DLA Piper, ELIL and PILnet, shared learning from their involvement in some of these and other previously mentioned projects focused on addressing the legal needs of Ukrainian refugees, in a co-authored article [‘Pro bono collaboration within the legal community’s response to displacement from Ukraine’](#).



UK's Rwanda Asylum Policy Response (April 2022 Policy Launch)

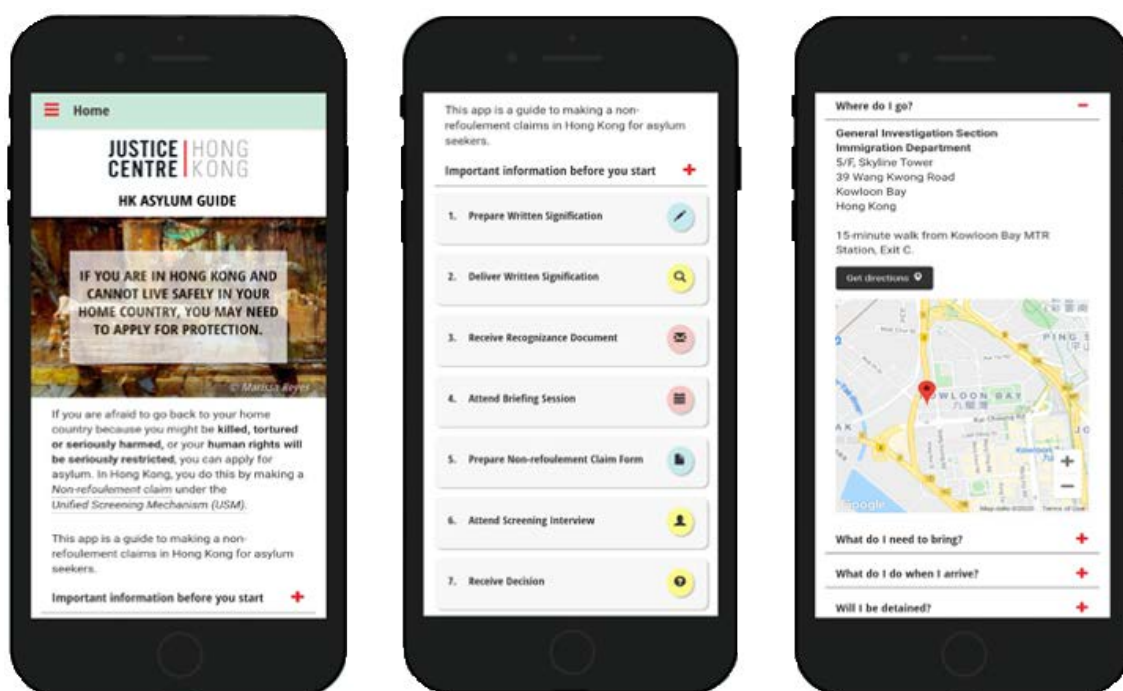
As highlighted above, **A&O Shearman** and **Reed Smith** successfully collaborated with **Bail for Immigration Detainees** to process bail applications for those receiving notifications of eligibility for deportation to Rwanda. **Baker McKenzie** represented **UNHCR** in its intervention in litigation concerning the UK's Migration and Economic Development Partnership with Rwanda. The Supreme Court unanimously deemed the policy unlawful, accepting arguments mounted by Baker McKenzie about the serious concerns for asylum-seekers' safety in Rwanda and the risk of refoulement.

6. TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION

The COVID-19 pandemic defined the first year of the Pledge’s implementation. While it caused immeasurable harm on a global scale throughout 2020, it also spurred rapid innovation and the adoption of new ways of working. The newfound efficiencies and ability to reach individuals who could not attend in-person appointments led many Pledgers to continue incorporating remote elements into their legal assistance work, even after returning to office environments.

Throughout the pledging period, Pledgers have utilized new and existing technologies to provide more accessible legal assistance and supported refugees and those working in the forced displacement to adapt to emerging tools. **Linklaters’** global fintech team provided pro bono advice to **UNHCR** on launching its blockchain payment solution for distributing financial assistance to internally displaced persons in Ukraine. As a part of its emergency response projects, **AsyLex**, a Swiss legal aid NGO, built 24/7 online chatbots in Persian, Ukrainian, and English to provide up-to-date information about legal pathways for those fleeing **Afghanistan** and **Ukraine**. Dedicated emergency legal teams provided individualized advice via email and Facebook, with over 35,000 people utilizing AsyLex’s emergency response chatbots during the pledging period. An additional chatbot was developed to help Afghan nationals draft their **humanitarian visa requests** for Switzerland and provided step-by-step submission instructions.

The **Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law** launched a new Kaldor Centre Data Lab, publishing updated data on Australia’s refugee status determination procedures. **Justice Centre Hong Kong**, in partnership with **Freshfields**, developed the HK Asylum Guide App to help asylum-seekers understand their legal rights. The **Danish Refugee Council** launched a new online legal aid platform linking legal aid organizations with people affected by the war in Ukraine worldwide, including legal Q&As and informational videos.



© Justice Centre Hong Kong | Justice Centre Hong Kong’s ‘HK Asylum Guide App’.

7. RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

In many contexts, RLOs and NGOs are at the forefront of legal assistance provision. Yet, they are often chronically under-resourced due to inadequate or non-existent State funding or because of other barriers to entry, such as exclusion from traditional coordination and funding spaces. During the first pledging period, there was a growing recognition of the need for a more integrated approach to legal assistance, including the need to mobilize and share resources to strengthen the legal ecosystem as a whole. During the pledging period, Pledge members provided resources in a variety of different forms.

Pledging law firms collectively provided over 656,364 pro bono hours, surpassing their original commitments by 28%. One increasingly popular model for delivering pro bono legal assistance is the secondment model, where law firms temporarily assign their staff to legal aid NGOs for a set period, either part-time or full-time. In 2023 alone, Pledge member law firms reported providing over 150 secondees to various actors within the legal ecosystem. Pledging NGO **ELIL** has effectively used this model to deliver legal aid through its projects in Greece and Poland. In 2023, ELIL hosted 68 secondees from law firm offices across Europe, the Middle East, and Africa for two-week secondments in Greece (Lesvos or Athens), contributing around 5,440 pro bono hours to its **Greece Pro Bono Collaborative**. Additionally, five secondees from law firm offices in London and Warsaw supported a joint secondment program with **Safe Passage International**, contributing approximately 400 pro bono hours. **PILnet** has also benefited from a partnership with law firm **Herbert Smith Freehills** to support the coordination of the Pledge; as part of this partnership, PILnet received three secondees, for periods of up to six months significantly increasing its capacity to coordinate the 2019 Pledge and mobilize contributions to the the 2023 Pledge.

In addition to pro bono hours, law firms and larger international NGOs have also sought to resource and strengthen legal assistance NGOs and RLOs engaged in legal services. For example, the **Danish Refugee Council (DRC)** is operational in 40 countries across the world and in around 75 percent of their country operations legal aid programming is part of the response. Throughout the pledging period, DRC sought to increasingly implement these services in a way that systematically supports, facilitates and strengthens local legal actors and systems. By the end of 2023, the implementation of legal aid services through local legal aid partners or formalized referrals to local legal aid partners made up a little more than half of DRC's legal aid services.

mobilize and share resources to **strengthen**
the legal ecosystem

During the pledging period, law firms reported that they increased their funding to legal aid NGOs, particularly to cover the costs associated with the supervision and coordination of collaborative pro bono projects. In some larger projects, law firms have come together to fund several full-time lawyers at legal aid NGOs. Pledging law firms have also supported advocacy organizations focused on refugee rights, as well as those providing humanitarian assistance to displaced populations. Many firms have organized fundraising efforts and contributed in response to large-scale displacement crises, such as the conflicts in Ukraine and Afghanistan. Others have established partnerships and provided funding to local organizations advancing refugee rights. For instance, through its charitable foundation, **A&O Shearman** funded two community-based organizations in London: the **Afghanistan and Central Asian Association**, which provides legal aid to and advocacy for UK's refugee community, and **Migrants Organise**, a platform for refugees and migrants to organize for power, dignity and justice in the UK.

While the mobilization of different resources by Pledge actors has served to strengthen the wider legal ecosystem, the gaps in funding for legal assistance can never be met by Pledge actors alone. It is clear that greater funding is required by States and donors engaged in refugee response. During the pledging period, Pledge actors advocated for increased funding for legal assistance, during national, regional and global fora, including through an [Open Letter to Delegates of the High Level Officials Meeting](#) in 2021. Core Group members of the Pledge called on States and other actors to recognize that legal assistance is key to asylum capacity development and an essential component of a comprehensive response to forced displacement. They advocated for delegates to increase resources for legal aid provision and legal empowerment programming, including to bolster local, community-based legal initiatives, particularly initiatives that create opportunities for people with experiences of displacement to be meaningfully involved in decision-making and resource-allocation.



8. AWARENESS RAISING AND STRATEGIC POSITIONING

In addition to fostering information sharing, resource exchange, and collaboration within the legal community—thereby enhancing the effectiveness of legal work—pledging organizations have also shared that making a commitment to the Pledge also had an impact at a more organizational level. Some refugee rights organizations reported that making a commitment towards the Pledge strengthened their strategic focus on legal assistance specifically, pushing them to dedicate more resources to support this critical area.

For law firms and for other legal stakeholders that generally engage in other areas of law, making a commitment through the Pledge has enabled them to demonstrate their commitment to refugee rights as a strategic organizational priority. Several law firm stakeholders have reported that their Pledge commitments have encouraged and incentivized their firm to continue and prioritize their pro bono work related to forced displacement. While all firms involved in the Pledge were already conducting pro bono work related to forced displacement prior to joining the Pledge, several pledging law firms have shared that being part of the Pledge, including the public nature of commitments and the requirement to report against those commitments, had given their firms a “business case” for conducting refugee pro bono work and for prioritizing refugee pro bono over other social issues. In some cases, being a signatory to the Pledge has also supported firms and organizations to mobilize funds internally to support their own or others legal assistance work, alongside providing pro bono hours.

...being part of the Pledge had given the firms a “business case” for conducting refugee pro bono work and for prioritizing refugee pro bono over other social issues

Some larger law firms also leveraged the Pledge to raise awareness about refugee rights among their clients and partners. Others pledgers prioritized awareness raising and the growth of refugee rights pro bono internally, including through capacity-building or the establishment of dedicated teams or working groups to coordinate refugee rights work across multiple offices. For instance, one global firm with over 40 offices worldwide created an internal network to facilitate knowledge sharing and collaboration among staff engaged in refugee rights work.

RLOs that signed the Pledge reported that it has encouraged them to adopt a more strategic approach to their engagement with the legal community. In South Africa, for instance, the **South Africa Refugee-Led Network (SARLN)** integrated the Pledge in their strategic plan and [established a dedicated Law Commission](#) to strategically engage with the legal community and drive forward refugee-driven advocacy on documentation and legal issues. SARLN reported



© SARLN | PILnet staff and local legal aid actors facilitated discussions around the establishment of SARLN's Law Commission during the first national refugee-led conference in South Africa.

that since its inception in 2022, the Law Commission has served as a vital platform for **SARLN** to build and enhance partnerships with both local and international legal actors.⁸

Finally, **PILnet's** own experience of coordinating the Pledge demonstrates the power of the Pledge to drive strategic organizational change. Before committing to leverage its network to mobilize support and coordinate the initiative, PILnet did not specifically focus on refugee rights, nor did it have staff dedicated to issues of forced displacement. However, since committing to mobilize its global legal network and coordinating the Pledge, refugee rights work has become a central area of focus for PILnet. In 2020, PILnet hired a Project Coordinator for the Pledge and has since built a full Forced Displacement program with a dedicated team that oversees the Pledge, manages the Refugee-Led Clearing House, and hosts the PILnet-RLRH Refugee Legal Fellowship program. PILnet staff also actively participate in national, regional, and global convenings to emphasize the critical role of legal assistance, access to justice, and rule of law principles in effective responses to forced displacement and to advocate for their integration into response frameworks.

© PILnet | Core Group member, Cecilia Vejby Andersen from the Danish Refugee Council, highlighting the importance of legal assistance at the 3rd Quarterly Informal Briefing on the GCR, 2023.



It is well known to everyone in this room that refugees and other forcibly displaced people have widespread legal needs that are way too often left unmet and this has serious consequences for people. Without legal documentation for one's identity while in exile or upon return, access to basic rights can become severely

8. This group has now been renamed the Advocacy and Human Rights Commission. A key aim of the Commission remains the engagement of the legal community to advance refugee rights and support refugee-driven advocacy.

LEARNING

Since the Pledge's launch in 2019, the legal community demonstrated a strong commitment to supporting refugees and displaced populations in a more coordinated way. From 2019 to 2023, we have witnessed how enhanced collaboration can significantly strengthen resources available within the refugee legal ecosystem. These efforts highlight that by pooling resources—whether human, financial, or technological—and building partnerships, legal actors can respond more effectively to situations of mass displacement. However, the Pledge's implementation during this time also allowed for other learnings, including around certain challenges and limitations for the initiative.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE FIRST PLEDGING PERIOD INCLUDE:

1. Refugee Participation and Inclusion Within Legal Work

The legal community increasingly recognized the value of meaningful refugee participation as a key component of effective refugee response efforts and many pledging actors sought to develop a deeper understanding of why it is important to embody and support greater refugee participation and inclusion in their own work. We have seen many good practices emerge. Pledge members have increasingly hired individuals with lived displacement experience to contribute to legal work, created academic and professional pathways for refugees to pursue legal careers, and sought to engage refugees in fora where refugee legal needs are discussed and in the co-design and implementation of legal projects. However, there continues to be a

...by pooling resources and building partnerships, legal actors can respond more effectively to situations of mass displacement

need to question “what” it takes to ensure meaningful participation within different components of the legal sector, identify more good practices and build up a stronger knowledge base around “how” different stakeholders can embed meaningful participation in their own work.

2. The Legal Empowerment of RLOs

The text of the Pledge focused on engaging the legal community to address the legal needs of displaced people, with an implied focus on supporting individuals displaced at an individual, family, or community level. We have learned during the pledging period that there is a considerable benefit in the legal community also being engaged in working with refugees at an organizational level. As more research has emerged on the barriers that RLOs face to greater inclusion within the sector, it is increasingly clear that many of these have a legal component. There is a growing understanding that there is a role for the legal community to play in empowering RLOs to address the legal barriers they face to inclusion in the sector and to understand and mitigate the legal risks associated with running a non-profit. There is a need to better understand the legal challenges and needs experienced by RLOs at a local level and to develop more partnerships with the legal community to empower RLOs to address these.

3. Collaborative Pro Bono Projects and Crisis Response

During the Pledging period, collaborative pro bono initiatives proved to be a powerful way to optimize resources within the refugee legal ecosystem, particularly in times of crisis. In response to emergencies in Afghanistan and Ukraine, private sector law firms contributed human, financial, and technological resources, working closely with asylum and immigration legal aid specialists and NGOs to address critical gaps in legal assistance. In situations where legal aid organizations were overwhelmed, some pro bono projects trained private sector lawyers to handle triage, freeing up specialized lawyers for complex cases. Models developed for the Afghan crisis were refined and adapted for Ukraine, offering valuable insights to further strengthen the refugee legal ecosystem. These efforts underscored the importance of strategically leveraging private sector resources, demonstrating the power of collaboration in addressing situations of displacement during crises.

4. Systems Change

While many have concentrated on implementing the Pledge through the provision of legal assistance, there is growing recognition of the importance of connecting such efforts—including collaborative pro bono projects—to collective initiatives aimed at driving broader systemic change. While connecting more effectively to deliver legal assistance is critical, if refugees are to have greater access to rights, justice, and solutions to their displacement, there is also a need to work more collectively to influence policies and legal frameworks. This includes advocating for systemic reforms in asylum and immigration processes; pushing for stronger protections

for refugee rights; and collaborating with governments, international bodies, and civil society to create more just and inclusive legal systems. By promoting the integration of direct legal support with strategic advocacy, litigation, and reform efforts, the Pledge initiative can contribute to lasting, systemic change that goes beyond immediate legal aid.

5. Governance, Resourcing, and Sustainability

The Pledge has served as a valuable platform, enabling members of the legal community to build partnerships and collaborate. However, its impact has been constrained by insufficient sustainable funding and an informal governance structure that lacks the resourcing and diversity needed for a truly global initiative. In the initial years of the Pledge's implementation (2020–2022), PILnet secured dedicated funding to coordinate the initiative, allowing it to collaborate with Core Group members to pilot new models for enhancing coordination, collaboration, and partnerships in Asia. During this period, the Core Group and various working groups established an informal, largely voluntary governance framework. Although Core Group members have made efforts to reform this structure, it still lacks adequate representation from individuals with lived experience and legal stakeholder from the Global South. Amid a highly competitive funding environment, the initiative has faced challenges in securing the resources or secretariat support necessary to implement governance reforms and engage with local legal actors in a sustainable way during this pledging period.



THE FUTURE OF THE PLEDGE

In keeping with the goal of the Global Compact on Refugees to foster responsibility-sharing and a 'whole-of-society approach' to refugee protection, the GRF 2023 focused on the development of [Multi-stakeholder Pledges](#); joint pledges with a large-scale reach, working towards an ambitious common goal. When canvased in early 2023, Pledge members expressed strong support for the 2019 Pledge initiative's unifying value and a desire to repledge at the second GRF in December 2023. In advance of the GRF 2023, PILnet and the Core Group committed to lead on the development of a second, more advanced, pledging initiative that embodied the multi-stakeholder pledge approach.



Members of the Core Group with lived experience of displacement were involved in the initial drafting of the Pledge and in consultations with relevant stakeholders. Input on the Pledge was also received from law firms, international and local legal assistance NGOs, RLOs, refugee lawyers, and others with lived experience of displacement, as well as UNHCR and relevant initiatives, such as the [Asylum Capacity Support Group](#) and the [Global Strategic Litigation Council for Refugee Rights](#).

© UNHCR / Olivier Chamard | Dr. Awmaima Amrayaf, Board Member of PILnet, announces the 2023 Global Legal Community pledge during the GRF 2023.



© UNHCR | GRF Legal Community Pledge members gathered at the GRF 2023.

Drawing on the lessons learned from the implementation of the 2019 Pledge, the 2023 Pledge represents a significant evolution from its 2019 origins. The 2023 Pledge now encompasses six strategic focus areas that reflect the learning as outlined above and align with a growing emphasis on refugee participation and localization across the forced displacement sector. In addition to calling on legal and refugee rights organizations to join the 2023 Pledge to demonstrate solidarity with refugees, the 2023 Pledge also invites such organizations to make their own unique commitments to expand legal assistance for stateless and displaced individuals and drive systemic reforms to improve their access to rights, justice, and sustainable solutions.

SPECIFICALLY, THE 2023 PLEDGE CALLS FOR COMMITMENTS IN THE FOLLOWING SIX AREAS:

- 1. Legal Assistance for and Legal Empowerment of Refugees and Other Displaced People**
- 2. Legal Assistance for Refugee-Led Organizations (RLOs) and Refugee Rights Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)**
- 3. Refugee Inclusion and Hiring**
- 4. Legal Advocacy, Policy Engagement, and Asylum Capacity Development**
- 5. Funding and Resource Mobilization**
- 6. Coordination, Collaboration, and Legal Capacity Development**

At its [launch at the GRF in December 2023](#), the second Pledge garnered over 110 signatories⁹, including law firms, NGOs, States Australia and Chile, the Legal Empowerment Fund, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Increased access to legal assistance continues to lie at the heart of the second Pledge and, collectively, the signatories committed to provide one million hours of free legal assistance to displaced and stateless individuals, and to the organizations that are led by or work with them. However, other wide-ranging commitments were also mobilized, including pledges to increase refugee inclusion in legal programming and to resource legal assistance and empowerment actors, with a focus on the funding of local actors.

PILnet and the Core Group are committed to ongoing coordination and operational support for the 2023 Pledge, focusing on information sharing, partnership building, and mutual learning opportunities. This includes convening dialogue platforms around specific thematic, contextual, or geographic areas, or in response to emerging legal needs, such as during or before situations of mass displacement. PILnet continues to operate its Refugee-led Clearinghouse, engage in targeted outreach, and raise awareness among RLOs and NGOs to identify specific legal needs and scope projects that align with pledged commitments. Additionally, PILnet also facilitates collaborative pro bono projects and supports multi-stakeholder models of legal assistance delivery to help pledgers implement their commitments. Through these efforts and the contributions of each signatory, the GRF Legal Community Pledge seeks to unify the legal and refugee rights community, promote the essential role of legal assistance in refugee response, and ultimately expand access to justice and drive systemic change for displaced people globally.

9. The full list of signatories to the 2023 GRF Legal Community Pledge can be found [here](#).



OUR PARTNERS

This report was compiled by **PILnet** in collaboration with the **Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge Core Group** and with substantive input from the **2019 GRF Legal Community Pledge signatories**.¹⁰

Thank you to each of the organizations and law firms that reported back to PILnet on the implementation of their pledge and shared photos of their work with us, including the **European Lawyers for Lesbos (ELIL)** whose work is depicted on the front cover. Without these contributions we would not be able to compile this impact report and highlight the importance of their work and legal assistance in general to effective refugee response.

Core Group Members



10. The full list of signatories to the 2019 GRF Legal Community Pledge [here](#).

GET INVOLVED

To learn more about the **Global Refugee Forum Legal Community Pledge** and how you can get involved and contribute to greater access to justice for refugees and other displaced people:

You can read the [2023 Pledge Framework](#) and [Pledging Guidance](#), and join the Pledge [here](#).



Sign up to our [quarterly Pledge Newsletter](#).



Check out the dedicated [PILnet](#) and [UNHCR](#) Pledge webpages.



Reach out to us at grfpledge@pilnet.org to learn more.



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contribute to greater access
to justice for refugees and other
displaced people