REFUGEE ALTERNATIVES 2018:
Improving policy, practice and public support

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Foreword

The Refugee Council of Australia and Melbourne Social Equity Institute are proud to share the outcomes of the second annual conference Refugee Alternatives: Improving policy, practice and public support, held 13-14 February 2018. The two-day conference, hosted at the University of Melbourne, brought together a broad range of expertise from across the country and globally to cover topics of displacement, protection, cooperation, wellbeing, resilience, education, advocacy, and unity.

The conference built on its premise from the previous year that lived experience is the foundation of better policy development, and that the voices of those from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds should drive policy design, content, and delivery. The 59 speakers and moderators, over 53% of whom had lived experience of seeking asylum, living as a refugee or a stateless person, were joined by 450 attendees from refugee backgrounds, academia, service provision, advocacy, policymaking, and other engaged individuals.

The conference’s goal of seeking alternatives was expressed through 15 diverse sessions on a broad range of themes, each seeking to conclude with purposeful and actionable strategies and recommendations at the global, regional or national levels. The 2018 conference also saw a new focus on the local, and included specific recommendations for local governments and civil society organisations. An overview of these themes and recommendations can be found below. A session-by-session recap of the conference, including all its emerging ideas and policy recommendations, is available in the Full Conference Report at: refugeealternatives.org.au.

Hosts

Refugee Council of Australia

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees and the organisations and individuals who support them. With more than 200 organisational members and thousands more individual members and supporters, RCOA’s work centres around the key areas of research and policy analysis, advocacy and representation (of member, refugee and asylum seeker issues) and community education and awareness raising. In addition, RCOA seeks support for specific projects that directly relate to its objectives and enhance capacity to serve the refugee community.

Melbourne Social Equity Institute

The Melbourne Social Equity Institute (MSEI) supports interdisciplinary research on social equity issues across the full spectrum of life including health, law, education, housing, culture, work and transport. The Institute brings together researchers from across the University of Melbourne in partnership with external organisations to identify unjust or unfair practices that lead to social inequity and works towards finding ways to ameliorate disadvantage. For more information visit www.socialequity.unimelb.edu.au.

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Executive Summary

Themes
Discussions at the conference brought up several themes that transcended individual sessions or sets of recommendations. These themes were repeated by different participants across diverse sessions and contexts. Some themes further developed ideas expressed at the 2017 conference, while others were emerging ideas from the year’s work. The conference outcomes are grounded in these themes.

The need for an intersectional approach
The conference opened and closed with calls for an intersectional approach to our work. Refugees and people seeking asylum are not a homogenous group: there are intersections between identities and needs based on migration status and needs as members of the LGBTI community; as older citizens; as people with disabilities; and as people from varying religions, backgrounds, and nations. Without recognition of these intersections, communities will continue to be misrecognised, silenced, and denied essential services and protections.

The harms of securitisation of migration
There was widespread recognition that the discourse around migration in general, and refugees and people seeking asylum in particular, has continued to harden. Many speakers discussed the ongoing shift in emphasis from multiculturalism and ethnic affairs to border control, home affairs, and security. Governments create suspicion and division for political expediency, exploiting security issues such as trafficking and terrorism to justify more punitive border security. Some elements of the media spread misinformation on refugees and people seeking asylum that portrays them as dangerous. There is a hardening of the public attitude towards some of the most vulnerable people in our community, trickling through to local communities as evidenced by racism and xenophobia.

The move from talk to action
Conference participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of doing as well as talking. The tone of the conference was imbued with the conviction that talk without action is meaningless, and that civil society organisations need to be trying innovative approaches to overcome this key hurdle. Key recommendations for civil society are below.

Legal rights as the first step
A number of speakers who either had lived experience of the asylum process or had worked as legal practitioners within the process reminded audiences that legal rights were the first step to continued protection. Many of the countries in Australia’s region are not signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and thus many of the refugees in our region are afforded no legal protection in their host countries, and Australia does little to alleviate the regional pressure. In fact, many speakers with experience of the regional asylum process asserted that Australia has a negative impact on the region. Australia itself has a drawn out and traumatic legal process for seeking asylum. Recent changes to eligibility laws make the process even more difficult.

The continued importance of self-representation
The need for refugee self-representation was one of the most prominent themes from last year’s conference and remained pertinent this year. In particular, there was an emphasis on the need to transcend ‘storytelling’. Many participants agreed that self-representation needs to go further and deeper than providing a platform for storytelling. People with lived experience of seeking refuge need to have space to advocate for policy, be a part of decision making practices, and have a seat at the table when it comes to issues that affect them.

Partnership and collaboration as a way forward
With so many people from various sectors coming together for the conference, it was no surprise that partnership and collaboration took a prominent role in the sessions. The popular Partnerships in Practice session took the format of short presentations from a number of different organisations and initiatives, each
discussing how partnerships have helped them to achieve practical change. The need for combined and connected resources through partnerships and the greater efficacy of collective efforts make successful partnerships beneficial to every stakeholder involved: the people on the ground and the communities with lived experience, volunteers and staff, donors, and organisations.

A re-focus on local government

A popular session at the conference was one on local government. The audience was inspired by the robust and practical action taken by the speakers in leveraging their multi-directional partnerships at the local level to tackle indifference, address xenophobia, and markedly improve settlement outcomes in three very different resettlement destinations. The speakers demonstrated the interest local governments have in seeing good settlement outcomes, as the level of government closest to the people, and that focusing on local impacts rather than the national debate was key.

Statelessness as a distinct issue

Over the last year, and due in part to the overwhelming nature of the Rohingya refugee crisis, the issue of statelessness received more attention at this year’s conference. Our session on statelessness explored how statelessness is distinct from, but also overlaps with, refugee experiences. Australia’s treatment of stateless people was discussed, as was emerging civil society and academic networks that promote collaboration and information sharing on addressing statelessness in the Asia Pacific region.

Mental healthcare is healthcare

Conference participants were moved by the story told by Somayeh Farahani of her journey from Iran to Australia during the Being Here session. This led to a wide-ranging discussion of the impact of the Australian asylum process on mental health. The prolonged and punitive limbo experienced by people seeking asylum in Australia has a significant psychological impact on people already in precarious positions, and that the change to Status Resolution Support Services eligibility rules has worsened the situation even further. A number of the sessions touched on mental health and the need for comprehensive mental health care to be available to people seeking asylum in Australia.

Conference summary recommendations

• It is essential to collaborate on a local, regional, national and global level.
• Australia must learn from existing approaches in other countries.
• The sector can draw strength and inspiration from some of the positive actions we heard about over the course of the conference.
• Approaches must be intersectional: consider age, gender, sexuality, religion, migration status, etc.
• Self-representation is essential; people with lived experience must have the agency to create change.
• Civil society should not wait for the government to draft an action plan; we can draft one ourselves and make recommendations to the government.
• A National Program of Action needs to include statelessness and regional initiatives.
Welcome

Welcome Speakers
• Elder Ron Jones – Wurundjeri Council
• Associate Professor Sara Wills – Melbourne Social Equity Institute
• Dr Melika Sheikh-Eldin – Refugee Council of Australia

Welcome to Country
Uncle Ron shared his family history as an illustration of how Aboriginal lives have been disrupted by segregation. He emphasised the similarities between how refugees and indigenous people are treated in Australia and the commonality of the outcast experiences. He stated that Australia is going backwards, not forwards, in regards to race.

Outcomes from the 2017 conference
Melika Sheikh-Eldin updated us on the outcomes from the 2017 Refugee Alternatives conference: that conference being the first to centre people with lived experience of seeking refuge at the heart of any and all policy and decision making processes: a best practice approach. Last year, 40% of moderators and speakers were of refugee background, increasing to 58% this year.

Melika highlighted how outputs from the 2017 conference informed recommendations and action plans that relate to the United Nations Global Compact on Refugees, particularly in the areas of:
• Youth engagement
• Self-representation
• Women’s engagement in policymaking, and
• Establishment of an international refugee advocacy network.

Delegates from the 2017 conference also participated in international meetings, consultations, and gender audits of the Global Compact on Refugees negotiations.
At the regional level, new approaches to building active regional networks have been taken up based on recommendations made at the 2017 conference.
At the national level, we are starting to see Australian academic institutions provide scholarships and research support for students from refugee backgrounds whose education has been disrupted.

“I like welcoming refugees onto country because we feel like we know what they’ve gone through. We’re still going through that today.”
— Elder Ron

Opening session

Speakers
• Moderator: Tina Dixon – Queer Sisterhood Project
• Yiombi Thona – Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
• Carolina Gottardo – Jesuit Refugee Service

Summary
The speakers introduced the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the Global Compact on Migration (GCM), the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) and the draft Australian Program of Action as the key documents comprising the framework of the 2018 conference. The discussion focused on Australia’s role in the Compacts and in improving the situation for refugees in the Asia Pacific region more generally, especially bearing in mind its seat on the Human Rights Council until 2020. The panel also noted how surprising it was that the Compacts neglected to include language on gender equality.

“We people who sought asylum are not a homogenous group... until there is proper time to acknowledge the intersectionality of our identities, we will be vanishing.”
— Tina Dixon
The acronyms

**GCR**: Global Compact on Refugees

**GCM**: Global Compact on Migration

**CRRF**: Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework

Emerging ideas

The importance of intersectionality

Refugees and people seeking asylum are not a homogenous group. There are intersections between identities and needs based on migration status and needs as members of the LGB-TI community, as older citizens, as people with a disability, and from varying religions, backgrounds, and nations. Without recognition of these intersections, communities will continue to be misrecognised, silenced, and denied essential services and protections.

The Asia Pacific region faces unique challenges

Many of the world’s displaced people are located in the Asia Pacific region. However, the region lacks adequate protection systems. There are few states in our region that are signatories to the Refugee Convention. Most countries are not working towards integration, and there has been a decrease in financial support and resettlement places for refugees, as well as a decrease in the regional UNHCR presence. Although civil society in our region is highly engaged, states are less interested in active participation.

Australia is very active in the development of the Compacts

Australia’s approach to the Global Compacts on Refugees and Migration is being led by Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and Department of Home Affairs (DHA). Though Australia sent substantive delegations to Geneva and New York, its approach has been problematic as it actively pushes an agenda favouring:

- Increasing criminalisation of migrants.

This contrasts with the human-rights centred approach taken by countries in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Furthermore, Australia has become known for co-opting human rights language to justify policy positions that are about border control.

On the positive side, Australia has taken progressive positions on gender equality in the Compacts.

The real possibility that we get the Compacts wrong

If we do not succeed in pushing for a progressive set of Compacts, they could significantly water down human rights standards. Countries of destination (like Australia) could succeed in pushing for an over-securitised migration agenda. Undocumented migrants could end up with no rights at all. States could succeed in exploiting the issue of trafficking to justify more punitive border security. There is currently no full agreement on detention in the Compacts, and it is not certain that the language on eliminating child detention will survive the negotiation process. There is also a surprising lack of gender equality language in the Compacts.

Alternatives

Global

The international community must ensure the Compacts complement each other and take into account the intersectional reality of migration. Migration is fluid, and has multiple complex drivers. Crossing-cutting issues need to be addressed in order to enhance labour mobility. Durable solutions such as expanding resettlement schemes, creating more options for family reunification and generating greater access to humanitarian schemes, and allowing for more visa and private sponsorship programs can provide solutions for people unable to return.

Regional

The Australian Government should show leadership in the Asia Pacific region and encourage other states in the region to sign the Refugee Convention. If the goal is to ‘stop the boats’, it is in Australia’s interest to protect refugees in our region, which would disperse the current migration flow to Australia around Asia. MPs should visit refugee communities in the region to fully understand the impacts of their decisions.

National

Australia should stop pushing its managed migration agenda and instead should align itself with the human rights-based approach taken by other participants.
Civil society
The consultation phase on the Compacts has now closed and the Zero Draft published on 14 February 2018. Civil society now has less opportunity to comment on the Compacts, but this does not mean it can no longer engage. There is still room for advocacy in the negotiation phase with various member states, including the Australian Government. Civil society should keep abreast of the processes and continue to advocate on issues such as gender, diversity, access to justice and child detention. Civil society should also target and pressure all sides of the Australian media to report the realities facing people seeking asylum and ensure their voices feature strongly in such reporting.

This is a historic opportunity as it is the first time that there is going to be a global framework negotiated by member states on international migration…common principles and statements governing all forms of human mobility.

— Carolina Gottardo

Summary
The first Conference plenary was framed by the four objectives of the Global Compacts:

- To ease pressure on host communities
- To promote refugee self-reliance through the Program of Action
- To realise more solutions for refugees than just resettlement, and
- To address the root cause of refugee flows.

The speakers emphasised the need for effective responsibility sharing as the necessary global response to a global problem. They made numerous recommendations to promote more successful advocacy and encouraged the audience to ‘leave the jargon behind and start acting’.

Emerging ideas
A shared problem, not a domestic one
The response to a global problem should not be driven by any domestic political agenda. 10 countries host 60% of the world’s refugees, and 10 countries provide 93% of the UNHCR’s budget. This unequal responsibility sharing limits the options for people to find safety where they are and fosters an environment where people feel forced to make difficult decisions and risky journeys. Every country should share a fair amount of responsibility, physically or financially.

Host communities can drive change
Civil society in host communities such as Australia can and do play an important role in discussions about responses to refugee displacement. Local communities can be successful in pressuring the government, for example by lobbying for people with refugee backgrounds to be included at all levels of policymaking.

Legal rights are the most important first step
Refugees in Australia’s region must be supported to enjoy their legal rights, including work rights. This should be the beginning of longer term protection.

We don’t need to know all the acronyms… We just need to start doing!

— John Roc

Refugees are human beings in another country who have lost diplomatic protection from their state.

— Osama Salem

Plenary: Australia in the context of global refugee policy

Speakers
- Moderator: Erika Feller – University of Melbourne
- Osama Salem – Network for Refugee Voices
- Deepa Nambiar – Asylum Access Malaysia
- John Roc – Joint Advocacy Committee of Australian Burmese Ethnic Nationals
- Paul Power – Refugee Council of Australia

Deepa Nambiar
Alternatives

Global
The international community should build a network of refugee groups, diaspora groups, NGOs, national and international peak bodies. NGOs and peak bodies need strong refugee participation to be able to be credible as advocates.

Regional
Australia can drive solutions in the Asia Pacific region:
• Governments in Australia’s region are receptive to international pressure, international reputation matters to them.
• Positive regional policies have already been linked to international pressure: for example, in Malaysia.
• There are opportunities for governments and bodies to put pressure on countries in the region and offer to ease the pressure on host countries in exchange for better refugee protection policies. For example, Australia could ask countries in its region to implement better protection in exchange for more resettlement places.

National
People from refugee backgrounds should be at the forefront of policy:
• Refugees represent self-reliance, agency, innovation, and solutions.
• Refugees start projects and companies and employ locals.
• It’s time to change the dialogue so instead of the myths that “refugees take up money and space and healthcare”, the dialogue rightly talks about people’s ability to make change.

Civil society
Advocacy should be led by people from refugee backgrounds:
• Bring refugees with common issues and concerns together to maximise effect.
• Draw on knowledge and connections of refugees and diasporas
• Ensure that you have support and engagement of refugees in affected communities and your advocacy is soundly based on their concerns and ideas.
• Cooperate with people who have and deep and effective networks with refugees.

“A domestic political agenda cannot and should not drive a response to a global problem... People increasingly share the space of our global world... This is very much a shared problem.”
— Erika Feller

Understanding the current situation for the Rohingya community

Aung Soe Naing Habiburahman

Speakers
• Host: Stephanie Hemelryk Donald – UNSW
• Moderator: Louise Olliff – RCOA
• Habiburahman Aung Soe Naing (Habib) – Australian-Burmese Rohingya Organisation
• Mahammed Junaid – Burmese Rohingya Community in Australia

Summary
This session took the form of a conversation between Australian civil society and representatives from the Rohingya community. Habib and Junaid were detailed and explicit in describing the devastating experiences of Rohingya refugees in Australia’s re-
The severity of the Rohingya refugee crisis

647,000 Rohingya refugees have fled to Bangladesh since the outbreak of the most recent violence on 25 August 2017. More than 10,000 Rohingya people were killed in the first month of that violence, and thousands more were arbitrarily detained. 150,000 Rohingya Muslims were placed in camps. There are now also approximately 100,000 refugees living in Malaysia.

The issue of statelessness

Habib described how, due to a citizenship law passed in 1982, Rohingya are excluded from citizenship in Myanmar and are also denied their own identity status, making them stateless. This makes them ineligible for certain aid and very difficult for NGOs and international bodies to record. Furthermore, it is extremely difficult for Rohingya people to register with UNHCR because of their stateless nature and their lack of records confirming their identity.

Refugee status can be generational

There is a long history of violence against Rohingya people in Myanmar and the refugee crisis is now multi-generational. The speakers pointed out that many refugees have been living in Malaysia and Thailand for up to twenty or thirty years, having children or even grandchildren, who are not eligible for education or healthcare provided by their host countries or by UNHCR.

Sometimes repatriation is not the answer

Junaid argued that facilitating repatriation cannot be the sole aim of the international community. He explained that many in the community believe that Rohingya refugees are more than happy to return home if they are given citizenship, promised a safe zone, and gain access to healthcare and education, but none of these things have been promised. Even if they were, Junaid continued, the government has a history of making promises during the repatriation process that are not fulfilled. In both 1978 and 1991, repatriation attempts were made based on such unfulfilled promises, leading to history repeating.

Alternatives

Global

The international community should:

- take the lead finding a solution to the Rohingya crisis, since there is little likelihood of a national government taking the lead
- pass a Responsibility to Protect resolution at the UN.

Regional

The Australian Government should:

- take a leadership role in encouraging countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Bangladesh to sign the Refugee Convention and guarantee rights for Rohingya refugees
- provide nations where Rohingya refugees are located with infrastructure and financial support to improve their situation
- act as an example for the region by accepting more Rohingya refugees for resettlement and providing permanent protection to Rohingya refugees who sought asylum in Australia.

National

The Australian government should:

- end government and corporate military ties with Myanmar
- publicly criticise the Myanmar government
- commit to resettling 20,000 Rohingya refugees.

Civil society

Civil society should:

- develop a task force to rally behind the Rohingya crisis, drawing on the expertise and perspectives of Rohingya organisations in Australia
- advocate for the Australian Government to take up its national and regional responsibilities.

Australia...is a signatory to the Refugee Convention...

They have to make the example that they are welcoming new refugees... Most of the countries in the region are saying that...
the developed countries are not taking any more refugees but they are pressuring us to take them. — Habib

Getting serious about refugee self-representation

Speakers
- Moderator: Fadak Alfayadh – Community representative
- Apajok Biar – Youth representative
- Om Dhungel – Refugee Communities Advocacy Network NSW
- Mebrahtom (Tom) Yabio – My Community Voice network

Summary
This session focused on how to put the expertise of people with lived experience of seeking asylum and refuge at the centre of research, advocacy, and policy development. The speakers discussed what self-representation meant to them, how self-representation can be implemented without being tokenistic, and what organisations can do to make their recruitment processes accessible to those with lived experience.

Self-representation is a triple V: it’s about the voice… making that voice visible…and the validation of who you are. — Om Dhungel

Emerging ideas

The need to transcend storytelling and give people with lived experience space to advocate for policy

The speakers agreed that self-representation was not just about consulting with people with lived experience of seeking refuge, letting them tell their stories, and then going away and advocating for them. At a minimum there needs to be feedback loops so that all participants are aware of the outcomes of any consultations, with the ideal that people are supported to represent themselves and their communities. Providing a platform for storytelling is no longer enough: there is a need to create platforms for people with lived experience to advocate for themselves, be a part of decision making practices, and being at the table when it comes to issues that affect them. People with lived experience
can have input into policy, they can recommend settlement processes and contribute to research. They can work in collaboration with service providers, government, and civil society to create better solutions. Too often, civil society speaks for refugees when it should be giving them a voice.

**The space for self-representation itself can be created in consultation with the community**

Effective self-representation means taking a bottom-up approach to creating space and keeping the person with lived experience in the centre of that process. Moving from a tokenistic approach to a truly sustainable capacity-building approach involves looking at the depth as well as the breadth of self-representation. Om Dhungel raised the example of the conference itself, where 58% of the speakers had lived experience, but the actual agenda of the conference and the decisions that drove it were made by people not generally with lived experience. Even if the conference’s representation went up to 60 or 70%, the depth wouldn’t necessarily be there until we start thinking about deeper and longer-term capacity building.

**Organisations need to make their recruitment processes more accessible to people with lived experience**

Organisations can consult with refugees in their network as to how to best to advertise and recruit in a way that is accessible. Building and using relationships with the community is extremely important so that organisations understand who the key gatekeepers and connectors are within that community. They should evaluate their processes so that rather than advertising the job in the usual ways, they genuinely engage people with lived experience by taking the time to talk to communities about the available position and find someone who has passion and drive that can be upskilled and supported. Organisations can also create separate groups or platforms to be staffed by refugees but sponsored by civil society, thus empowering refugee groups to create their own spaces and advocate for themselves. The idea of depth came up again: often organisations recruit people with lived experience with the best of intent but then don’t provide the necessary support in terms of training and upskilling.

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**Alternatives**

**Civil society**

Civil society organisations should:

- consult with refugee communities on creating spaces for self-representation
- in full collaboration with refugee communities, create platforms on which refugees can advocate for themselves; include refugees in decision making and policy making – not just story telling
- consider depth of involvement as well as breadth;
- make recruitment processes more accessible by consulting with communities on the most effective ways to advertise and recruit staff with lived experience.

*— Om Dhungel*

**Partnerships in practice**

**Speakers**

Hosts: Bwe Thay and Murama Kufi – Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) Victoria

Initiatives: RCAN Victoria, Stateless Network Asia Pacific/UNSW Sydney, Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW), Freedom Network, Refugee Advice and Casework Service/NSW Humanitarian Hub, Australian Education Refugee Coalition, Our Race/Swinburne University of Technology, Refugee Legal

**Summary**

This session took the format of short presentations from a number of different organisations and initiatives, each discussing how partnerships have helped them to achieve practical change. The
key themes that arose from these presentations included the importance of agency and empowerment of people with lived experience, the need for combined and connected resources through partnerships, the greater efficacy of collective efforts, and the move from talk to action. The speakers agreed that successful partnerships are beneficial to every stakeholder involved: the people on the ground and the communities with lived experience, the volunteers and staff, the donors, and the organisations themselves.

Cooperation, leadership, commitment, and consistency are key to delivering innovative and meaningful initiatives. Working together gives us that opportunity to have a bigger impact.

— Bwe Thay

Emerging ideas

Partnerships are empowering

All of the initiatives discussed how initiating partnerships, either between Australian institutions and grassroots organisations, or within civil society, created opportunities for the empowerment of people with lived experience. When service providers partner with community-based organisations on an equal basis, they are empowered to contribute fully to positive outcomes in their own lives and communities. There was agreement that civil society organisations have a responsibility to create platforms on which people with lived experience are able to advocate for themselves.

Partnering with diaspora organisations can make real change in countries of origin

A particularly inspiring story came from ANCORW. ANCORW runs a project in partnership with the Hazara Women of Australia, setting up retail stores that sell donated clothes collected in Australia. The initial stores were established in Mashhad, Iran, with a store now open in Kabul as well. All stores employ local women and girls, empowering them to earn their own money. Without using the connections and local knowledge of diaspora organisations, Australian civil society will struggle to make such an impact in countries of origin.

Talk without action is meaningless

Many of the initiatives presented examples of partnerships giving them the opportunity to break through the key hurdle faced by civil society organisations: turning words into action. The speakers left the audience with the sense that the time for talk is over, and that action is needed now more than ever. Partnering both within the sector and outside it can be one way to ensure our work becomes actionable and therefore meaningful. Engaging in partnerships enabled organisations to share resources and develop work that was actionable, or maximise the effect of their actions. In particular, when communities with lived experiences are empowered and given resources through partnerships, our speakers agreed that they quickly take initiative to organise their own action.

We should move beyond storytelling. If you see a refugee sharing their story…let them be CEO, let them be Public Relations Officer…let them be involved!

— Najeeba Wazefadost (ANCORW)

Alternatives

Civil society

Civil society organisations should:

• ensure that they create platforms through which people with lived experiences can advocate for themselves and participate fully in processes that affect them
• maximise available resources and improve outcomes by partnering with other organisations, including diaspora organisations.
Are we, our organisations, and individuals ready to really talk about the challenges of cultural diversity, to share our stories, and to listen to the stories and experiences of others? Because that’s what we need to do.

— Doug Cronin (Our Race)

A continuum of experiences: Refugee women in Australia

Speakers

- Moderator: Mariam Issa – Resilient Aspiring Women
- Dung Tran – Department of Human Services
- Yarrie Bangoura – Refugee Ambassador
- Esther Nima Sung – Chin Youth Organisation

Summary

This session investigated ways to counter negative discourse around immigration by looking at innovative examples of refugee women and women seeking asylum working to build togetherness and solidarity across communities.

The speakers explored the resilience of girls and women with lived experiences of seeking asylum or as refugees. They emphasised how their experiences before arrival helped shape their attitude when they resettled in Australia. They argued that the innovative ways in which women build solidarity can build communities and challenge the discourse around refugees in Australia.

They say that cultures who don’t tell stories die out. We share our lived experiences and this creates resilience.

— Mariam Issa

Emerging ideas

Storytelling as community building

This session focused less on policy recommendations and more on storytelling as a means of building community and cohesion. The speakers, who came from Somalia, Sierra Leone, Vietnam and Myanmar, told their own stories of displacement and arrival in Australia. They described how storytelling can be powerful in challenging the discourse and creating change, particularly when it comes to changing the minds of those who hold deep-seated prejudice.

Education in cultural competence

Dung Tran expressed compassion for the people of Ipswich, Queensland, where she eventually resettled and “where One Na-
tion was born,” despite the racism she faced there. She described how she implemented a cultural competence education program at the Department of Human Services, where 5,000 people to date have completed the training. She reasoned that education is the best way to promote equality and address unconscious bias and power differences. Approaching people from a positive place and understanding the confines on their thinking can make the difference. Partnering with storytellers can be the best way to open up people’s eyes and empower the person sitting on the other side of the desk.

“At the age of 5 I left my country Vietnam… separated from my parents, my little brother on my hip…I never had a childhood, but I am not bitter. Without it I wouldn’t be the person that I am today.

— Dung Tran

Summary

This session discussed practical ways that local government can improve settlement outcomes for refugees and people seeking asylum. It was one of the conference’s most talked about sessions, the audience inspired by the robust and practical action taken by the speakers in leveraging their multi-directional partnerships at the local level to tackle indifference, address xenophobia, and markedly improve settlement outcomes in three very different settlement destinations.

“Local government is the government closest to the people… Local government has a vested interest in ensuring good settlement outcomes for refugee… communities.

— Stephanie Adam

Emerging ideas

Local government can have a key role in settlement outcomes

The speakers had diverse and substantive experience leveraging the mechanisms of local government to create positive settlement outcomes for people resettling in their area. They pointed out that local government often has more incentive to look after refugee and humanitarian entrants because they are likely to be invested in them for the long-term as community members. Local government can also have the capacity to bring things to the attention to state and federal government that they may not otherwise be aware of.

Stephanie Adam worked at the City of Fairfield in southwestern Sydney, which has recently resettled 11% of the total arrivals to Australia and approximately 40-50% of the arrivals to New South Wales. It is a popular settlement destination because it has a high proportion of residents with Iraqi and Syrian cultural ancestry, and many 202 visas have been granted to people who already have family in Fairfield. Settlement outcomes have thus become the “bread and butter” of local service providers. Fairfield City Council partnered with local civil society organisations to develop a city-wide settlement action plan. This holistic approach included conducting a survey and holding a symposium to identify gaps in services and challenges to good settlement outcomes. The city council then leveraged its relationships with state and federal government to encourage them to provide funding. Stephanie emphasised that these multi-directional partnerships are what make local government so effective in this space. She advised local governments to set up advisory committees comprised of

Alternatives

Civil society

Civil society should understand the power of storytelling to build cohesion and strengthen cultural competence in communities.

“I have to argue with elderly people in my local community… I am in the middle. I understand both sides. I understand the needs of the young and I also understand the way the elders were raised. Everyone needs to work together equally.

— Esther Nima Sung

Local community = Local government

Speakers

• Moderator: Parsu Sharma-Luital – Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) Victoria
• Anni Gallagher – City of Orange
• Matthew Kirwan – City of Greater Dandenong
• Stephanie Adam – Refugee Council of Australia
representatives from different communities, and interagency networks to bring together different stakeholders.

In Greater Dandenong, which has a long history of refugee settlement going back to the arrival of Indochinese refugees in the 1970s, Matthew Kirwan emphasised the importance of the City acting as a leader in promoting multiculturalism and advocating for culturally responsive services. The local council can influence the narrative and language around refugees and people seeking asylum arriving in the community and stress the humanitarian need. He also discussed the multi-directional relationships local councils can have, able to collaborate with community groups and local agencies but also to advocate for more resources from the Federal Government.

Local government is effective when it focuses on local impacts and social justice implications rather than the national debate, when it influences the discourse and language around the topic, when it seeks champions across council to create momentum, and when it takes a gradual, holistic, and inclusive approach that becomes more ambitious every year.

Local government can successfully address xenophobia

All of the speakers had found that local government could play an effective role in tackling xenophobia in their communities. Although there were differences in the way racism was expressed in Fairfield, Orange, and Greater Dandenong, all three speakers advocated for community education. In Fairfield, where there is fragmentation not only in the broader community but within different cultural communities or even between older and newer arrivals from the same background, the Council engaged in dispelling myths around the benefits available to new residents, and seeking out influential people in the community to champion refugee rights. In Orange, the Council leveraged their relationships with local media to bring together community leaders for events such as mosque openings, and used such events as community education opportunities. In Greater Dandenong, the Council took responsibility for taking a strong stance on racism and concentrating on humanitarian need in the local area, rather than engaging in the national debate.

The need for innovative strategies in Regional areas

Anni Gallagher from the City of Orange shared her perspective on settlement in regional areas. She explained that regional locations are often places of secondary settlement, as people who initially arrive in a city then move out to the regions. When people reach a regional area, many have already reached the limit of settlement services they are eligible for (for example, the five years of targeted health support). In the case of South Sudanese humanitarian entrants moving to Orange, they weren’t necessarily prepared or supported along the way. Anni described how the local council engaged the communities in consultations and partnered with Aboriginal leaders to host “circles of understanding”. Orange is experiencing fast-growing diversity and the City hosts information sessions, language classes, and cultural activities to build social cohesion and community harmony. They have a strong group of volunteers from Orange which has also helped the local community to engage and also build their understanding.

Partnerships with indigenous communities

Anni Gallagher emphasised that engaging with Aboriginal communities can provide invaluable support for secondary settlement in regional areas. Setting up opportunities for multicultural community members to engage with Aboriginal elders and leaders helped them more fully understand the history of their new home.

Partnerships, partnerships, partnerships. That's how country areas do business.

— Anni Gallagher

Alternatives

Local

Local government should maintain and leverage multi-directional relationships:

- with state and federal government
- with the media and influencers
- with civil society and community groups.

Local government should be supported to set up advisory committees that:

- include representatives from all groups of stakeholders—community representatives, including people with lived experience, councillors, council staff and civil society representatives
- are effective when the members on the committee are vocal, opinionated, and can push decisions along
- can operate with working groups and include robust debates
- should have the capacity to make direct recommendations to the full council.
Local government should be represented in interagency networks. This representation should consist of convenors and members, as well as through different stakeholders and service providers. Local networks can be useful for advocacy, as they provide a collective space for organisations to call policies into question. They can also allow opportunities to draw together an evidence base to inform policy that includes direct experiences from service providers and communities.

Local government should be aware of the power it has to influence discourse. The language used by local council can influence the narrative around refugees and people seeking asylum. It can be effective when local governments distance themselves from the national debate on detention, for example, and focus on local humanitarian need.

Civil society

Civil society should work on incorporating regional areas in their advocacy, and work with regional local councils to come up with innovative strategies for regional settlement.

What was successful? Focusing on local impacts and social justice implications rather than national debate. That was key.
— Matthew Kirwan

Getting here

Speakers

• Moderator: Shabnam Safa – Noor Foundation
• Deepa Nambiar – Asylum Access Malaysia
• Muzafar Ali – Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre
• Amir Taghinia – sponsored through Canadian community sponsorship program

Wayne Taylor – Community sponsor (Canada)

Summary

This session aimed to understand Australia’s role in the Asia Pacific region in response to movements of people seeking protection throughout the region. It asked what can be done to achieve positive change as people continue their journey to safety and protection? The speakers posited numerous possible roles for Australia in the region, and lamented that Australia currently chooses to act as the region’s bully. They discussed how Australia’s reach and control is clearly evident on Manus Island and Nauru, and compared Australia’s community sponsorship program to Canada’s sponsorship model.

“On the boat, I told myself I had a 99% chance of being drowned in the ocean, 1% of survival… People (who) have fears that they’re going to be killed back home… they will take a 99% chance of drowning.
— Amir Taghinia

Emerging ideas

Canada’s strong community sponsorship program

A particularly moving element of this session was hearing Amir and Wayne’s stories. Amir is a refugee who was detained on Manus Island for nearly five years before Wayne’s daughter Chelsea, who had been working in the detention centre, initiated the process to sponsor Amir under Canada’s community sponsorship program. The process took 22 months and Amir will be eligible to become a Canadian citizen in three years’ time.
Wayne and Amir pointed out a number of contrasts they see between the Canadian and Australian governments in their approach to refugees:

- Canada has a Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Australia has no bill, declaration, or charter of rights.
- In Canada, political donations from unions and corporations are banned. In Australia, those two groups dominate the political agenda.
- Canada has mainstreamed human rights in its decision making process, while Australia prioritises economic rights.
- Canada takes an attitude of welcome towards refugees, whereas Australia is invested in stigmatising refugees and representing them as different from “real Australians”.

**Australia’s damaging role in the Asia Pacific region**

Many of the speakers pointed out that far from being a constructive or cooperative force in the region, Australia’s role actively damages the prospects for displaced people around the Asia Pacific region.

Deepa Nambiar raised the important issue that many countries in our region have not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, meaning many refugees are detained or considered ‘illegal’. Conditions in detention in our region are deplorable. Australia has negatively influenced regional detention policies by funding detention centres, in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and Nauru. Australia should have a more positive role in the region, because there are overlaps between Australia’s interests and those of our Southeast Asian neighbours like Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand.

Amir Taghinia explained how a sense of Australian control is keenly felt by detainees on Manus Island, who follow the news on Australia’s regional involvement. They see Australia as a regional bully, not only refusing to resettle refugees itself but threatening diplomatic consequences to other nations if they get involved in resettlement (e.g. New Zealand).

On a more hopeful note, the speakers pointed to numerous examples of positive collaboration between civil society organisations in Australia and in the Asia Pacific region. In particular, there has been progress on child detention and on the availability of shelters and foster care arrangements.

**Using film, technology, and social media to connect people to refugees**

Muzafar Ali, a refugee from Afghanistan who was stranded in Indonesia en route to Australia due to Operation Sovereign Borders, spoke about the empowering and effective experience of filming his journey. His film The Staging Post was the 14th most watched documentary film in Australia in 2017, without any corporate support, and was successful in connecting ordinary Australian people to the refugee experience and amplifying refugee voices. Social media played a big part in publicising both the film and its subject matter: the school Muzafar helped set up for refugees in Indonesia. Muzafar expanded on the power of social media to remove geographic boundaries and send messages easily and affordably to an audience that might have the power to help.

> He arrived in Vancouver on Halloween and we were absolutely delighted… We have very quickly fallen in love with Amir.
> — Wayne Taylor

**Alternatives**

**Global**

Australia should stop involvement in the wars and unrest in the Middle East that create refugee streams and instead look to support moves towards peace in the area.

**Regional**

Australia should:

- help nations in the region to resettle or integrate refugee
- provide funding for establishing infrastructure and protection for the huge number of undocumented Rohingya and other refugees in the region.

**National**

Australia should:

- introduce a bill, charter, or declaration of rights
- establish an option for private or community sponsorship similar to Canada’s model
- end offshore detention.
Civil society
Civil society should:
• target and pressure some elements of the media to stop spreading misinformation on the potential danger of refugees
• connect and provide capacity-building and advocacy support to civil society organisations in our region
• advocate with unions and corporations as well as at the government level to establish support for refugees within these influential groups.

In 2012, the Taliban stopped my car and I was with my wife and daughter. That was the moment I thought, ‘If I escape from here, I stay alive.’
— Muzafar Ali

Emerging ideas
The impact of the Australian process on mental health
The speakers lamented how in Australia, people seeking asylum are forced to endure an extended delay in processing their applications, which usually lasts for a number of years, and causes significant financial and mental stress. These extended delays, combined with government policies intentionally restricting access to work, Medicare, financial aid, have the effect of causing significant mental and physical hardship to people seeking asylum, many of whom have survived torture and trauma, experienced prolonged detention in Australia, and may have experienced periods of detention in their home countries as well. These policies are specifically designed to cause this hardship to create a disincentive for people coming to Australia.

The legal issues faced by people seeking asylum
The session detailed the lengthy and convoluted legal process people seeking asylum are forced to undergo in Australia. Greg Hanson acknowledged that there have never been more delays in the asylum process as there are now, and there is no policy to protect people from being subject to those delays. In his experience, the asylum process takes 2-10 years, with applicants commonly waiting 1-2 years for each interview, another 1-2 years for a decision, and then 2-3 years for appeal if they are refused. As of 1 November 2017, there were 17,242 people seeking asylum still waiting for a first decision almost 3 years after the department introduced their ‘fast track’ system.

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The shift in discourse and the hardening attitudes of the public
The speakers discussed the ongoing shift in emphasis from multiculturalism and ethnic affairs to border control, home affairs, and security. The last 15 years have seen a period of governments creating suspicion and division for political expediency. Demonisation has linked national security and migration, creating a
pervasive association in the national discourse between terrorism and people seeking asylum. This has caused a hardening of the public attitude towards some of the most vulnerable people in our community.

The impact of the change to SRSS eligibility

Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) is the support that people seeking asylum receive from the Australian Government, including income support which totals 89% of the Newstart payment. Recent changes in SRSS eligibility have removed housing and income support from thousands of people, forcing them to become homeless or survive on charity. The changes will continue to have serious impacts on destitution and health, as well as education and employment. People no longer eligible for SRSS will be asked to find employment, despite the systemic and structural barriers they face (e.g. inconsistent government policy, language barriers, employers being discouraged by the nature of temporary visas, the prohibitive cost of childcare, lack of recognition of their qualifications, lack of references from previous work experience, and the impact of trauma and physical and mental health issues). There are also significant barriers to accessing suitable and affordable housing, including language barriers, lack of rental history, no familiarity with tenancy agreements or the private rental market, ineligibility for public housing or crisis housing, frequent changes to work rights, and uncertain visa length.

There have never been more delays in the asylum process as there are now.

— Greg Hanson

Alternatives

National

The Australian government should:

• grant protection and rights to people who arrive by boat
• make the process of seeking asylum simpler, fairer, and shorter
• remove restrictions on temporary visa holders so that they have a pathway to permanent residency and can reunite their families
• reverse changes to SRSS eligibility.

Civil society

Individuals can support people seeking asylum by:

• writing to them or speaking with them
• sharing their knowledge with their friends or community
• donating
• volunteering, and
• listening to people with lived experience rather than the media.

Civil society can also:

• advocate on SRSS policy by making FOI requests to send to their local MPs
• organise groups to visit detention centres.

Existing at this level of precariousness and uncertainty is almost certain to tip people over the edge and...lead to an increase in self-harm or worse.

— Miriam Pellicano

Pathways from education to employment

Speakers

• Moderator: Sally Morgan – St Joseph’s Flexible Learning Centre
• Abiola Ajetomobi – Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
• Naz Almasi – Swinburne University
• Muhammad Majid – Curtin University graduate
• Speaker (name withheld for publication purposes)

Summary

This session explored how refugees in Australia access education and employment, including challenges and obstacles as well as individual pathways to success that can provide guidance for others. The speakers focused on the challenges of the Australian education system for people seeking asylum and the positive experiences and opportunities that do exist in the higher education sector.
A recent and pretty dramatic change…SRSS will be denied to people immediately once they start studying… This is an emergency. — Sally Morgan

Emerging ideas

The barriers to accessing education services

The speakers shared how certain barriers can be limiting for people who are keen to learn and study to improve their lives and gain employment opportunities. For example, study rights are often only available as an international student, causing financial difficulties. Young people can be isolated from traditional support networks such as family, or they can be aware that they need to meet university entry requirements such as IELTS but not know how to get support to study for it. Having previous education from other countries recognised in Australia can also be a struggle.

Continuing the positive work already happening in the higher education sector

Many of the speakers shared positive experiences of encountering supportive individuals in Australia’s higher education sector. They found that people were willing to help them with the application process and with compiling documents. However, this support needs to be expanded to address the broader problems faced during the process, for example financial challenges, the need for mental health support and academic support, difficulties understanding the university system, and managing the challenges of being in a new environment coupled with the academic pressures of higher education. Support from individuals can be incredibly helpful, but there needs to be a broader system of support in place in higher education that is sustainable and enables success for students.

Maximising community links over Federal government support

A theme that emerged strongly from the session was that many of the positive experiences and successes came through personalised networks and community responses. The need to maximise these is essential at a time when the Federal government does not appear to be open to civil society suggestions on these issues. We should make sure that within our communities, thoughts turn into action and ideas become reality. Individuals can connect and take responsibility and initiative, focusing on the details and the logistics to actually make sure something concrete ends up happening.

I only had 14 days to apply…and meet all the requirements of the degree… I had 14 days to get a 7 band IELTS. I studied 16-18 hours for a consecutive 10 days and luckily I got [the] 7 band. — Muhammad Majid

Alternatives

National

The Australian Government should:

- reverse changes to SRSS eligibility that make accessing education even more difficult for people seeking asylum
- equalise eligibility for the Vocational Educational Training program.

Civil society

Possibilities for civil society:

- create a body or committee with a representative from each university and representatives with lived refugee experience
- run working bodies or sessions for university front line admissions staff to educate on the issues
- set up community mentorship options.

What if…?

Moderator Sally Morgan posed a series of ‘what if’ questions during the session that inspired the audience:

- What if every person who was able and willing and keen to be at university could go there, and every person seeking asylum had equal access?
- What if by this time next year, we had a streamlined consistent approach by every university in Australia?
- What if every government school was required by law to provide VCE access for five people seeking asylum regardless of age?
- What if every university had a full time staff member providing support to students seeking asylum?
- What if all front line admission staff understood the difference between a Temporary Protection Visa (TPV) and a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV) and had a flow chart to the left of their computer screen explaining the process and with a
phone number on it of who they should call if they don’t know the answer?

• What if all scholarships had part time work at the university attached to them?
• What if a learning community, whether it be a school or a university, and the broader community took a proactive responsibility to welcome and support university students with information, mentoring information, and materials to support their course?
• What if every university committed enough fundraising to support the students that they have taken on?
• What if Jobactive worked alongside the same principles we’ve been talking about today: holistic wraparound support?
• What if people with lived experience were able to form an advisory group to universities and other stakeholders?

Getting at the gaps

Mezhgan Alizadah

Speakers

• Moderator: Josef Szwarc – Foundation House
• Olivia McMillan – Russell Kennedy
• Elisha Riggs – Murdoch Children’s Research Institute
• Mezhgan Alizadah – Primary Care Connect

Summary

This session explored the barriers to securing effective access to legal and health services and developing innovative solutions to improve access for all. The speakers acknowledged that serious failures in accessing legal and health services can and have been life threatening for refugees and people seeking asylum, and argued that bridging these gaps is fundamentally important. There was emphasis on identifying the needs of a particular community and addressing those needs by fostering partnerships or finding services.

“"The demand is ever increasing, and it far outweights the supply."
— Olivia McMillan

Emerging ideas

The gaps in access to legal services

Olivia McMillan described a number of significant barriers to legal representation for refugees and people seeking asylum. Firstly, the lack of government funding: traditionally there has been more government funding available for the legal representation of people seeking asylum, but this funding was drastically cut a few years ago, significantly impacting the capacity of community legal centres and pro bono resources to respond to the demand. Commercial law firms and individual lawyers stepped up to the plate, but they too faced barriers in terms of the limited amount of time available and the difficult process of submitting FOI requests to the government. Secondly, the challenge faced by people outside Melbourne: Melbourne has the most legal resources of anywhere in Australia, but there is significant unmet demand in other urban centres like Sydney and also in rural areas. Significant barriers are also faced by people already in immigration detention, where lawyers, volunteers, and service providers have limited access or can relay information about applications and deadlines.

The gaps in access to health services

Both Elisha Riggs and Mezhgan Alizadah identified numerous gaps in access to health services for refugee communities. These included cultural and language barriers, the specific needs of women’s healthcare (including difficulty accessing appropriate antenatal and postnatal care) and the gender of healthcare providers, the need for information in people’s preferred language, the need for access to transport and help navigating to attend medical appointments, and low health literacy overall. Elisha discussed how partnerships between agencies can be fundamental for the success of new care models, using a group pregnancy care model as an example. She also argued that co-designing such models with communities was critical. Mezhgan had found that the use of bicultural workers was essential to the success
of healthcare models she had worked with, as was educating communities about their rights and eligibilities when it came to their health.

Improving health means improving mental health

Gaps in health services for refugee communities cannot be addressed without considering mental health. Mezhgan reminded us that refugee health and wellbeing services must include mental health services, including but not limited to torture and trauma counselling. These services should extend to at risk groups like women and children and the disabled, and to issues we may not traditionally think of as a healthcare issue, such as social isolation.

“Improving health means improving mental health.”
— Mezhgan Alizadeh

Statelessness

Speakers

- Moderator: Michelle Foster – Centre on Statelessness
- Yiombi Thona – Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
- Khalid Hussain – Council of Minorities, Bangladesh
- Ramesh Kumar – Statelessness Network Asia Pacific

Summary

This session explored statelessness from different perspectives, examining the definition, causes and ramifications of statelessness, the lived experience of statelessness, and the emerging network of civil society actors working to promote collaboration and information sharing on addressing statelessness in the Asia Pacific region.

“A stateless person…is a person who is not recognised as a national by any country.”
— Michelle Foster

Emerging ideas

The conflation of refugees and stateless people

Michelle Foster introduced the session by clarifying the concept and experience of statelessness. Often stateless persons and refugees are conflated and discussed as though they are the same thing, but they are not. Although there is overlap, most stateless people do not leave their country. Most stateless people are in situ, in the country in which they were born, in which they have lived their whole lives. In fact, they might be the third generation of their family to have lived in that country, but they are not recognised as a national by that state. UNHCR estimates that there are at least 10 million stateless persons in the world today, but there are significant gaps in the data and in our understanding of who is stateless, meaning this is likely to be an underestimation. Stateless people are often invisible.
Addressing statelessness through collaboration and information sharing

Ramesh Kumar spoke about the significant progress made by the Statelessness Network Asia Pacific (SNAP) in addressing statelessness in our region. He identified collaboration and information sharing throughout the region as two essential components of a successful strategy, noting that in order to achieve practical solutions stakeholders must have solidarity, knowledge, technical support, and research resources.

Australia’s treatment of stateless people

Australia is a party to the 1961 Convention on the Elimination of Statelessness, and is thereby required to provide citizenship to any child born in Australia who would otherwise be stateless. However, a number of children born in Australia to mothers detained on Nauru are considered stateless and are being denied an identity by the country in which they were born. The speakers identified the gap between domestic law and its implementation as a major problem. There are a number of practical problems when a mother is brought from Nauru to Australia to give birth, and civil society organisations are working on individual cases, but the Australian Government is doing very little to address the issue. It has built no mechanisms to implement the Citizenship Act, despite there being at least 40 stateless people in Australia.

The solution for stateless people is not to protect them when they are in their country. They don’t need protection. They need citizenship.

— Yiombi Thona

Alternatives

Regional

Collaboration and information-sharing at a regional level is essential by:

• Strengthening solidarity and cooperation amongst regional stakeholders addressing statelessness
• Increasing knowledge among stakeholders
• Promoting practical solutions
• Using social media as a tool for collaborating and mapping.

National

The Australian Government should:

• create mechanisms to address the cases of statelessness within Australia
• recognise children born in Australia to mothers who are detained on Nauru as Australian citizens.

Civil society

Civil society should:

• advocate to the government for stateless people in Australia
• raise awareness that there are stateless people in Australia (the government reports to the UNHCR every year that there are zero stateless persons in Australia).

We started thinking: ‘Where are we from? We don’t have any country. Which is our flag? Which is our country?’

— Khalid Hussain

Civil unrest

Speakers

• Moderator: Jana Favero – Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
• Sister Brigid Arthur – Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project
• Mehdi Vakili – Save Iran
• Linda Cusworth – Corangamite Refugee Action Group; Australian Refugee Action Network

Summary

This session explored opportunities for civil society to pursue and advocate for change in our treatment and support of refugees and people seeking asylum, both in Australia and offshore. The speakers considered alternative avenues for change, rather than rely on traditional, institutional processes.

The whistle has been blown. What next?

— Mehdi Vakili
Emerging ideas

Numbers are necessary to effect change

Sister Brigid began by lamenting the lack of progress. She asked: Why aren’t we further down the track of getting good policies, given that there are so many people and groups who are working at trying to get justice? What’s stopping us from getting more success? She proposed that the answer might be that we don’t have the numbers, and that we need to be appealing to the Australian public in a way that will succeed in getting enough people on board to sway the government. We need to craft a strong overall message to get the numbers for the political solution that is needed. That message should be simple and coherent, rather than broken down into jargon and legalese. It should emphasise three things: that we are all humans, that as humans we all want and strive to be decent, and that the government is inflicting calculated cruelty and indecency in our name. Linda Cusworth agreed and added that another path to greater success could be strengthened communication and collaboration, and coordinated action between grassroots organisations across Australia.

The role of the two-party system in enabling cruel policy

With reference to Australia’s two party system, Mehdi Vakili argued that while neither of the two parties can lose votes to the other by being cruel to refugees, both parties can lose votes to nationalist and racist parties by not being cruel enough. The consequence is that the entire political system is dragged to the right, and policies of cruelty towards refugees become the political norm. Civil society should focus on analysing this process and asking why governments and individual politicians pursue or accept such policies. The next step is to dismantle that system and disrupt that process.

Positive rhetoric can alter political outcomes

Linda Cusworth focused her talk on rhetoric, framing, and messaging. A key issue civil society is addressing is the constant use of negative messaging by politicians and the mainstream media: negatives messages produce negative responses. We have the power to address these issues. We can use the same tactics that politicians use but in reverse, changing the conversation and framing the narrative in a way that creates good rather than evil, and refocusing on the positives about refugees and people seeking asylum. Linda and Sister Brigid put forward words like family, human, safety, fairness, peace, and people, talking about people’s drive for survival and to protect their families; things that Australians want for themselves. Using this value-based messaging, we can reverse the political ‘race to the bottom’ on refugee policy.

Alternatives

Civil society

Civil society can work on strategies to:

- get the Australian public on board in larger numbers
- tackle the political processes behind refugee policy
- reframe the negative messaging around refugees and people seeking asylum.

Some things that happen are just inefficiencies I think… but some of it is calculated cruelty and it’s done in order to make people suffer, presumably with the idea that people will go back to where they came from, or that they certainly won’t enjoy life here.

— Sister Brigid

It has always been about votes, and not about boats.

— Linda Cusworth
Workshop to assist planning and hosting a Refugee Week event

Speakers
- Mariam Issa – Resilient Aspiring Women
- Samuel Dariol – Refugee Council of Australia

Summary
This workshop provided tools and ideas to better plan and create a Refugee Week event at a community level. Participants from communities around Australia brainstormed ideas for creating and running a successful Refugee Week. Attendees spoke of the importance of self-representation in both the planning and implementation of Refugee Week as well as obstacles that have emerged in previous years and the different ways communities attempted to overcome them.

For Refugee Week we are focusing on areas with the highest anti-refugee sentiment and trying to get kids to understand what it’s like to be a refugee… As soon as they meet someone they think, ‘oh, that person is just like me’.
— participant from Blue Mountains Refugee Support Group

Emerging ideas

Communities with lived experience need to be involved in both the planning and implementation of events

During brainstorming, the group continually raised the importance of involving people with lived experience in the initial planning of any Refugee Week event. Some participants shared their experience of feeling alienated by events that proclaimed to advocate for refugees but hadn’t involved them in the initial planning. One participant suggested a forum run locally where community members are invited and asked what they would like to do for Refugee Week.

The need to better communicate to the media

Although Refugee Week is made up of hundreds of small events, it is now a well-established annual event and receives good coverage by the media. An important thing to consider is how to maximise the potential of Refugee Week so that it exists not only as a community event but a strong message to the media that communities celebrate refugees.

The importance of partnerships

In addition to communities with lived experiences and the media, partnerships and networks should extend far and wide to create a successful event. Participants discussed the possibilities of partnering with artists, community centres, churches, schools, businesses, and other civil society organisations.

“‘This one week of the year, every politician goes out into their community and they go, ‘oh, this is something that people actually care about’.’
— Samuel Dariol
Plenary: Towards an Australian Program of Action

**Speakers**
- Moderator: Tina Dixson – Queer Sisterhood Project
- Joyce Chia – Refugee Council of Australia
- Arash Bordbar – UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council
- Carolina Gottardo – Jesuit Refugee Service

**Summary**
This session analysed the outcomes of the conference, specifically in the context of informing the Global Compact, the Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, and Australian policy.

**Emerging ideas**

**Self-representation**
The theme of self-representation resounded throughout last year’s conference and was a key topic again this year. In this session, the speakers noted that the refugee sector is something of an anomaly when it comes to representation. While in the LGBTI sector, for example, the majority of people identify as LGBTI, and in the women’s sector, the vast majority of people working are women, in the refugee sector we are still not there. The speakers called for all of us to critically challenge those comfortable, privileged, and powerful positions we occupy in the sector. We need to move beyond ‘empowerment’ and create clear pathways for people with lived experience to have paid work within the sector, dismantling the power dynamics that currently exist.

**Collaboration**
The speakers agreed that while working in the refugee sector can be incredibly disheartening and frustrating, we draw inspiration from the collaborations and the connections that opportunities like this conference provide. They framed the Program of Action as an opportunity to maximise those collaborations and create a shared vision of where we want to be as a sector. To do so, we need to look at how we can expand our collaborations into partnership-driven agenda setting. This means connecting the local to the regional to the global, and connecting the grassroots work to the policy and legislative change.

**Intersectionality**
Another key theme throughout the conference has been intersectionality. Our speakers re-emphasised the need to understand diversity thoroughly. Refugees are not a homogenous group and they contend with numerous different identities, including age, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and so on. As a sector, we cannot pick and choose what we consider based on what is less confronting or more convenient. Our approaches must be intersectional and diverse.

“Empowerment is not enough. There should be a clear pathway to exercising that empowerment.” — Tina Dixson

“This year…we have a crucial opportunity. There will be an election either this year or early next year and we can turn the tide.” — Joyce Chia
Alternatives

Conference summary recommendations

- It is essential to collaborate on a local, regional, and global level.
- Australia must learn from existing approaches in other countries.
- The sector can draw strength and inspiration from some of the positive actions we heard about over the course of the conferences.
- Approaches must be intersectional: consider age, gender, sexuality, religion, migration status, etc.
- Self-representation is essential; people with lived experience must have the agency to create change.
- Civil society should not wait for the government to draft an action plan; we can draft one ourselves and make recommendations to the government.
- The Plan of Action needs to include statelessness and regional initiatives.

“Let’s not wait for the government to come up with ideas for the action plan. Why don’t we, as civil society, come up with a civil society action plan for Australia? Why don’t we take the steps and come up with our own way of solving the issues?
– Arash Bordbar

Dung Tran, Dr Melika Sheikh-Eldin