



Refugees advocate for their rights

Years of advocacy by the Refugee Council of Australia for greater community representation in international policy discussions has culminated in the Global Refugee led Network.

PAUL POWER reports.

When 13 refugee representatives from six continents gathered in Amsterdam in January this year for a three-day meeting, they knew they were making history.

They had travelled from Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Turkey, Algeria, Uganda, Germany, Netherlands, Argentina and the United States to discuss the next steps for their nascent international movement of refugee-led advocacy.

Seven months earlier in June 2018, the group worked together as a steering committee to organise the first Global Summit of Refugees in Geneva. This summit, held on the two days before the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) 2018 Annual Consultations with NGOs, brought 72 refugee advocacy leaders from 27 countries together to discuss how refugees could have a greater collective voice in decisions affecting them.

The outcome of the Amsterdam meeting was the Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) – the first body initiated and led by refugees to promote the advocacy goals of the world’s refugee communities. The decision was timely, coming just a month after 181 United Nations member states had voted at the UN General Assembly to adopt the Global Compact on Refugees, which recognises refugees’ rights to be seen as important stakeholders in decisions about refugee policy and programs.

The formation of the GRN is a beginning for refugee-led advocacy, but it is also the culmination of years of work in which refugee representatives from Australia have played a critical role.

One Australian politician who inadvertently played a small role in encouraging international refugee-led advocacy was Philip Ruddock. As Australia’s immigration minister, he attended UNHCR’s Executive Committee meeting in Geneva in October 2001 to defend not only his decision two months earlier to turn away asylum seekers rescued by the MV Tampa, but also to promote Australia’s hard-line response to people seeking refuge as a model for other countries. This prompted a group of Australian NGOs to decide to fight back by actively participating in the UNHCR’s Annual Consultations with NGOs, then

held just before the Executive Committee meeting, to ensure that the true impacts of Mr Ruddock’s policies were understood by the world.

From 2002, a group of Australian NGOs, including the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW) and the Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) at the University of New South Wales, began participating actively in the UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs. Led by Associate Professor Eileen Pittaway, the CRR team supported ANCORW to take the concerns of Australia’s African refugee communities to Geneva through Olivia Wellesley-Cole (2002-05) and Juliana Nkrumah (2003). In 2004 CRR supported the participation of Phun Lal and Naw K’nyaw Paw of the Women’s League of Burma.

When I attended the 2006 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs a few months after joining the staff of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), Tenneh Kpaka, a member of Sydney’s Sierra Leonean community, was representing ANCORW and appeared to be the only person of refugee background at a global gathering of 329 NGO representatives meeting to discuss refugee policy. Despite our limited resources, we at RCOA decided that we would do everything we could to work with ANCORW, CRR and others to ensure a stronger voice for refugee communities at this important annual gathering.

This need was spotlighted by RCOA’s regular consultations with refugee communities. While these talks were convened primarily to gather views on Australia’s refugee program, we heard regularly from refugee community members wanting to raise significant protection concerns on behalf of refugees in Asia, Africa and the Middle East. Dialogue with UNHCR was one way in which these issues could be raised. We knew that our collective advocacy would be more credible and effective if we, as RCOA staff, worked in partnership with refugee community representatives as advocates.

In 2007, RCOA supported Tony Ogeno Oyet from Adelaide’s South Sudanese community and Dr Melika Sheikh-Eldin, an AMES staff member of Eritrean refugee background, to participate in that year’s UNHCR consultations. They joined four other refugee representatives supported by Australian organisations: Tenneh Kpaka

and Nava Malula of ANCORW, Aguil Deng of Canberra's South Sudanese community and Blooming Night Zan of the Karen Women's Organisation. Tenneh spoke on a panel discussion about forgotten refugees and three of the Australian refugee women representatives were invited to read the formal NGO statements at the following week's UNHCR Executive Committee meeting – new ground being broken at both events.

In subsequent years RCOA, CRR and ANCORW worked together to support delegates and speakers of refugee background at significant UNHCR events. Our expectation was that NGOs in other countries would do the same, but progress was slow. Some even questioned why refugees were being invited to an event aimed at NGO representatives.

In 2010 and 2011, CRR worked with UNHCR to hold a series of dialogues with refugee and internally displaced women in camps and urban settings in Thailand, India, Jordan, Uganda, Zambia, Colombia and Finland, before bringing 10 refugee women representatives to Geneva to present to UNHCR's Standing Committee meeting and its Annual Consultations with NGOs. This event, held to mark the 60th anniversary of the Refugee Convention, was unprecedented. Never before had refugee women come directly from refugee and IDP camps to Geneva to speak directly and so powerfully to members of UNHCR's governing body.

While the impressive advocacy of the UNHCR's 2011 Dialogues with Refugee Women clearly illustrated the impact of refugee representatives in international advocacy, it seemed that interest in supporting refugee representation at UNHCR meetings was generated mostly in Australia. Each year the number of participating refugee representatives from Australia grew as some settlement organisations began sending staff of refugee background and interested refugee representatives sought their own funding to travel to Geneva. From 2016 refugee-led organisations in New Zealand and the Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network (APRRN) began sending refugee representatives to the UNHCR consultations every year, influenced in both cases by Australian NGOs.

In 2011-12, Australia chaired the main international dialogue on refugee resettlement and worked with UNHCR to organise the 2012 Annual Tripartite

Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR). Having participated in this event for years, RCOA believed that the talks between UNHCR, resettlement states, NGOs and the International Organization for Migration lacked the essential voice of people who had been through the resettlement process. We proposed to our co-hosts, Australia's Immigration Department, that Australia hosts a meeting in Melbourne in 2012 to showcase the post-arrival support offered by Australia to resettled refugees, while including refugee representatives as key contributors to the discussions.

The four designated refugee representatives all brought experience of working in settlement services – Wah Wah Naw from STARTTS, Daniel Zingifuaboro of

Access Community Services in Queensland and Wafa Reyhani and Plaw To Poe Kunoo of AMES. Their input to the Melbourne meeting made such an impression to UNHCR that the ATCR dialogue partners agreed to include refugee representatives as delegates and speakers in all future ATCR meetings. This was a breakthrough: the first annual UNHCR meeting at which refugees were formally represented.

“We are really shifting from refugees being seen just as beneficiaries to the understanding that refugees need to be part of the solution”.
Arash Bordbar.

As

UNHCR turned its attention to refugee youth

at its 2015 annual consultations, the involvement of refugee representatives in its meetings began to change. Two refugee

representatives from Australia featured as speakers on youth issues in the 2015 consultations – Dor Akech Acheik and Najeeba Wazefadost, with Najeeba giving the closing address on a panel flanked by UNHCR's two Assistant High Commissioners. In October 2015, UNHCR and the Women's Refugee Commission launched the Global Refugee Youth Consultations (GRYC), a process that involved 1267 young people in consultations in 22 countries over nine months. It culminated in a three-day global consultation in Geneva in June 2016, involving 24 youth representatives from the national consultations. The youth representatives then played a leading role in the 2016 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs which followed. Arif Hazara from Australia was chosen to speak on behalf of refugee youth at the closing session, to an audience of close to 600 NGO delegates from 90 countries.



John Roc of Australian Karen Organisation speaks at the Global Summit of Refugees in Geneva in June 2018.
PHOTO: Riccardo Peggiani.

While the GRYC was a one-off event, UNHCR's involvement of refugee youth in its meetings was not. Since then, refugee youth delegates have been invited to Geneva to participate in many events, such as meetings of UNHCR's governing body, the annual High Commissioner's Dialogue and meetings to discuss the Global Compact on Refugees. In 2017, UNHCR chose to formalise the representation of refugee youth with the formation of the UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council. Arash Bordbar, an Iranian refugee who had been resettled to Sydney from Malaysia only two years earlier, was chosen as the new body's co-chair with Foni Joyce Vuni, a South Sudanese refugee living in Kenya.

While the GRYC process was underway, RCOA was promoting talks in Australia about the role refugee-led advocacy networks could play in national discussions on refugee policy. From 2014, RCOA hosted local discussions with refugee communities in Melbourne and regional Victoria about the issues important to them and options for enabling communities to work together. In April 2016 RCOA and STARTTS hosted a similar forum in Sydney, at which the idea of forming an advocacy network of representatives of different refugee communities was

discussed. Delegates to this meeting agreed to meet again the following month and at this second meeting the NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) was formed. The following week, RCOA hosted a meeting in Melbourne of refugee delegates from across Victoria at which the decision was taken to form a Victorian RCAN. In subsequent months, both RCAN groups worked on formalising their structures, developing advocacy plans and cooperating on national advocacy initiatives.

For nearly 20 years, Australia's Immigration Department had hosted a twice-yearly dialogue with national NGO networks on refugee issues. For years RCOA drew attention to the lack of refugee representation at these dialogues, but the department consistently resisted by saying that no formally organised, collective refugee community voice existed. Early in 2017, with the NSW and Victorian RCANs formalised and operating, RCOA again lobbied for refugee representatives to be included, gaining strong support from the other NGOs involved in the dialogue. In August 2017 the Department of Home Affairs agreed to expand the number of dialogue partners to include ANCORW and a nominated representative of the Victorian and NSW RCANs. In November Tenneh



Najeeba Wazefadost of ANCORW at the Global Summit of Refugees in Geneva in June 2018, with Summit co-chairs, Sana Mustafa and Mohammed Badran of the Network for Refugee Voices. PHOTO: Riccardo Peggiani.

Kpaka of ANCORW and Parsu Sharma-Luitl of RCAN Victoria became the first refugee community representatives at the Australian Government’s formal dialogue on refugee issues. Representatives of ANCORW and RCAN have been included in all dialogues since.

In planning for the 2017 UNHCR Annual Consultations with NGOs in Geneva, RCOA, RCAN NSW and ANCORW agreed that the time was right to push even harder for refugee representation in international dialogues. Not only had the 2016 GRYC illustrated the valuable contribution refugee representatives could make at UNHCR meetings but the need for a greater voice for refugees in policy development and planning had been acknowledged in the UN’s September 2016 New York Declaration for Migrants and Refugees. This Declaration outlined plans to develop a Global Compact for Refugees, nominating refugees as one of the key stakeholder groups to be included in a “whole of society” approach to improving the support and protection of refugees. The question then remained: If refugees are to have a greater say in international planning, how will that happen and who will lead?

RCOA’s discussions with UNHCR about refugee representation led to four Australian refugee representatives being included as panellists during the 2017 UNHCR consultations. UNHCR also put RCOA in contact with a Geneva-based NGO, Independent Diplomat, which was working with an emerging refugee network led by Syrian refugees in Europe and North America, the Network for Refugee Voices (NRV). RCOA invited Independent Diplomat to co-host a side meeting during a lunch break of the UNHCR NGO Consultations on the topic: “Nothing about us without us: Getting serious about refugee self-representation.” This side meeting, moderated by youth representative Arash Bordbar, featured speakers including Atem Atem of RCAN NSW, Najeeba Wazefadost and Tabitha Chepkwony of ANCORW, Yiombi Thona of APRRN and Shaza Al Rihawi of NRV. The idea of working towards an international refugee advocacy network was discussed. A key outcome of the meeting was an agreement between ANCORW, APRRN, NRV, RCOA and Independent Diplomat to work on drawing together refugee representatives from as many countries as possible for an international meeting before the 2018 UNHCR NGO consultations.

A steering committee of refugee representatives from

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Argentina, the US, Uganda, Germany, The Netherlands, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand was drawn together to work with RCOA and Independent Diplomat on plans for the 2018 meeting. With funding support from UNHCR, several NGOs and governments, the idea for the event gained momentum and on June 25-26 that year the ground-breaking Global Summit of Refugees was held at the Geneva Press Club. With 72 refugee representatives from 27 countries in Asia-Pacific, Europe, the Americas, Africa and the Middle East, the Global Summit created a great deal of energy and the strong view that refugees were starting to find a new international collective voice.

One of the limitations of the Global Summit was that refugee leaders living in the most challenging situations were excluded, because they lacked the status and travel documents to travel to Switzerland. Several delegates from Africa and the Middle East who had documents and were invited were excluded at the last minute by Swiss immigration authorities, who feared they might not return to their country of asylum. Najeeba Wazefadost of ANCORW, who co-chaired the Global Summit with Mohammed Badran of NRV, and I began discussing how the global gathering could be followed up in the Asia-Pacific region in a way that included those unable to travel.

As we knew at least 35 refugee representatives from the region would be present for APRRN's biennial conference in Bangkok in October 2018, ANCORW, RCOA and APRRN agreed to work towards a one-day Asia Pacific Summit of Refugees that could include those able to travel to Bangkok and those who could not. We turned to technology, holding the seven-hour summit across cities in Iran, India, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia

and Australia via video conferencing links. Despite some technical glitches the summit was a great success, connecting 104 refugee representatives from 10 countries of asylum or resettlement to discuss common concerns and ideas, and to explore the formation of an Asia Pacific Network of Refugees. When the Global Summit's steering committee members met in Amsterdam in January this year, their model for the Global Refugee-led Network was influenced by the success of the Asia-Pacific summit. The international structure was based on plans to build regional networks in five regions of the world.

The first three months of 2019 saw not only the formation of the Global Refugee-led Network but also the formalisation of a steering committee for the new Asia Pacific Network of Refugees and discussions at RCOA's Refugee Alternatives conference in Adelaide about the development of a national refugee-led advocacy structure in Australia. The Adelaide conference included a discussion of about 40 refugee representatives from around Australia, facilitated by RCOA policy officer Shukufa Tahiri, with participants deciding to form a steering committee to discuss a new national network.

The movement towards the new leadership of people of refugee background was confirmed in May last year, when members of APRRN voted to elect a new chair to replace Yiombi Thona, who three years earlier broke new ground to become the first refugee to lead APRRN. The newly elected chair is Arash Bordbar from Sydney. Aged 26, he has been a significant contributor to the movement to refugee-led advocacy in the four years since his resettlement in Australia.

Arash says that, in the three years since he became involved in international advocacy, he has seen a significant shift. "In the past, some larger NGOs and UNHCR have had structures which have excluded refugees," he said. "But, year by year, I have seen a change as more organisations have learned from RCOA, APRRN and others how to include refugees as key stakeholders.

"We are really shifting from refugees being seen just as beneficiaries to the understanding that refugees need to be part of the solution and, in the future, must be part of the implementation and evaluation of policies and programs which affect them. There is still a lot of work to do, to shift from symbolic representation of refugees to truly meaningful participation – but we are getting there.

"Because RCOA and others have worked at this for years and have pushed back when they have faced resistance, the narrative about refugees has changed. We are entering a very hopeful period for refugee participation." 卐