

The NSW Inaugural Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) Conference 21 May– Report

The Inaugural NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) Conference on 21 May was initiated by the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) and supported by the NSW Service for the Treatment and Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS). The aim of the conference was to explore how the network of refugee community leaders that have been doing great work in and for their local communities could do more together on joint advocacy. The conference came against the backdrop of the refugee communities' strength and a regularly expressed need for refugee communities to have a stronger voice on issues which matter to them. The aim of bringing the refugee communities together was to gauge interest in the formation of a network or forum on state level that could contribute to a national body that has a stronger and more effective influence on key government policy decisions that affect the refugee communities.

Over 55 enthusiastic members of 17 different communities attended the conference. Communities present at the conference included: Tamil, Indian Muslim Community, Karen, Iranian, South Sudanese, Voice of Fiji, Iraqi, Hazara, Liberian, Ahmadiyya, Ethiopian, Bhutanese, Afghan, Bahranian, Chaldean, Assyrian and Circassian.

The conference started with a presentation by Paul Power, the CEO of RCOA. Paul talked about what advocacy is, how to influence government decisions and how to present issues to members of the parliament.

Following Paul's presentation, a discussion from the floor ensued. Issues raised and discussed included the increasing harm being done by the recent comments of the Immigration Minister about the refugees. The current punitive asylum policy has not only created mental anguish and uncertainty for a large group of people but the rhetoric of demonising groups of people has also proved harmful for social cohesion. The participants argued that that these type of comments deepen the existing barriers refugees are facing.

It was further discussed that the absence of a strong voice of refugee communities results in DIBP's lack of ongoing formal consultation with the communities on refugee policy issues. Conference participants noted that the absence of a solid relationship with government departments was yet another reason why there was an urgent need for the formation of a network that could develop relationships with the government and represent the refugee communities as a collective in order to have a more influential voice.

It was further discussed that a coherent voice can further amplify concerns such as the citizenship delays, policies preventing family reunion, barriers to qualification recognition and education as well as other issues commonly faced by the refugee communities. The morning discussion concluded with an emphasis on the strengths-based approach. Based on this approach, refugee communities create social cohesion through joint problem solving where they assess their capacity and the opportunities and control of any actions remains within the communities involved. A further emphasis was put on problem solving approach in order to secure a hearing with the Government in general and DIBP in particular. It was emphasised that, "refugee communities as a collective should not only be talked about, but talked with."

These issues were taken further in the workshops that followed. The participants divided into four workshop groups to discuss issues that were raised and utilised strategies to address those.

1. Citizenship and family Reunion

Issues

An emerging issue in the past two years faced by Protection Visa holders has been a delay in processing their citizenship applications which has compounded family reunion delays of the former boat arrivals effected by the 'lowest priority applications' or the Ministerial direction 62. Such delays, excessive documentation requirements, and the operation of what may be perceived as a 'hidden policy' and maladministration in the processing of citizenship applications, have led to family separation where the families offshore may be in danger and in other desperate situations. Against the backdrop of delays, DIBP has continued to give unsatisfactory responses.

Options for action

In response to the issues raised, strategies planned by the focus group included: signing petitions, lobbying of politicians, systemic advocacy, tightening the refugee community networks with other CALD communities, collectively speaking through a united refugee communities voice and raising issues with RCOA. Other strategies recommended by the participants included striving to be involved in politics.

2. Education

Issues

Issues highlighted in relation to education ranged from lack of qualification recognition, lack of targeted support available post-secondary school to the inherent expectations that refugee students are not capable of pursuing certain careers.

Options for action

Refugee communities need to shift focus to their strengths and self-initiate programs that are targeted towards the needs of their members. Examples of such programs include: mentoring programs, careers advice and formation of professional education boards to fill the gap that schools and other educational institutions cannot.

3. Employment

Issues

Among a myriad of other issues in employment, the discussions highlighted the perception of inefficiency of the current Job Active program, difficulties with recognition of overseas qualifications and limited opportunities for a supported transition to the Australian workforce.

Options for action

The idea of self- initiated empowerment using strength based approaches was reiterated. The refugee communities can work towards self-empowerment by advocating self-reliance, developing outreach teams, increase community awareness about existing employment services and opportunities, and encouraging the growth of small businesses.

4. International

Issues

Issues of an international nature raised included: reduced intake of refugees despite the upsurge in the number of refugees, running of detention centres such in Manus and Nauru Islands, violation of international refugee and human rights conventions, ongoing persecution of minorities, lack of support for internally displaced people, delays in refugee status determination, shutting down of refugee camps and forceful deportation.

Options for action

The strategies suggested to overcome included maintaining and supporting refugee camps until it is safe to return, upholding the refugee and other human rights conventions, reducing processing times of refugee claims, increasing foreign aid and refugee intake, Australia to put pressure on governments to bring to a halt to the persecution of minorities, diaspora communities to advocate for the rights of minorities, reducing processing times of refugee claims, closing detention centres and working towards improving the treatment of the unsecured displaced persons.

MP present

In attendance was also Julia Finn, State member for Granville who offered advice on effective advocacy strategies with the Government at state and federal level. The gist of her presentation was around building and maintaining strong relationships with the Local, State and Federal MPs who represent the communities in the state and federal Governments. She emphasised the greater impact of the voice when refugee communities are united and consistent.

Conclusion and further developments

The highlight of the conference was the strong note it concluded on. The participants came to a decision that the formation of a network or forum of refugee communities is a necessity. The participants indicated they want to have RCOA as the 'torch bearer', whose role is to facilitate and advise in the process of formation of the network and be an ongoing mentor to the network in relation to complex areas of policy. It was suggested that the network should be autonomous but work closely with RCOA. This way, it ensures that both the work of RCOA and the voices of the refugee communities' network are amplified best. It was also suggested that, in addition to joint advocacy, the network can also have the function of a learning, knowledge and capacity sharing platform in addition to being a problem-solving avenue for the common benefit of all refugee communities.

Next step

Participants suggested that the network should initiate on a foundation of strength where the refugee communities come together and build an enduring relationship as new Australians, who share much in common while maintaining their own differences. To form the network, a working group should form that can work on forming holistic objectives, identify gaps and assesses the communities' strength.

Next meeting

5.30pm-6.30pm Thursday 9 June 2016
Group room 1
STARTTS
1st/44-50 Auburn Rd, Auburn NSW 214