



FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO ISSUES FACING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA

August 2020

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for refugees, people seeking asylum and the organisations and individuals who work with them, representing over 180 organisations. RCOA promotes the adoption of humane, lawful and constructive policies by governments and communities in Australia and internationally towards refugees, people seeking asylum and humanitarian entrants. RCOA consults regularly with its members, community leaders and people from refugee backgrounds, and this submission is informed by their views.

RCOA welcomes the opportunity to provide input into this important inquiry. Issues facing diaspora communities in Australia have long been overlooked or more narrowly perceived in economic terms i.e. with a focus on trade and remittances. For a country that rightly celebrates the diversity of its multicultural population, this inquiry is important recognition of the breadth and depth of connections between diaspora communities in Australia and other parts of the world, as well as the range of issues that diaspora communities face. We particularly highlight in this submission:

- the need to ensure diaspora associations are able to sustainably support the communities they serve and can effectively navigate Australian institution and systems;
- concerns for members of diaspora communities that relate to foreign interference and mechanisms to address safety concerns are more fully developed;
- the importance of members of refugee diaspora communities being able to fully participate in Australia's social and democratic institutions through facilitating timely access to permanent visas and citizenship, and
- our recommendation that the Australian government strengthens its communication and partnership with refugee diaspora communities through the establishment of a Diaspora Liaison Unit and investment in targeted diaspora initiatives.

More broadly, RCOA hopes this inquiry will cast light on the many and varied contributions that refugee diaspora communities in Australia make in an increasingly interconnected world. While there can be a tendency to focus on vulnerabilities within refugee background communities because of the pre-migration experiences of refugee and humanitarian entrants, we have seen time and again from working with refugee communities over the past 40 years, that people who have experienced conflict, social breakdown and rights abuses often place a very high value on active citizenship, are strongly committed to humanitarian values, and can be strongly motivated to contribute to peacebuilding, development and humanitarian responses. While refugee diaspora communities face some distinct challenges, there is remarkable strength, knowledge and skills within these communities that have the potential to amplify Australia's constructive engagements with the world.

In addition to our own submission and recommendations, RCOA strongly endorses the recommendations made to this Inquiry by the National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG) and Diaspora Action Australia (DAA).

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1 Defining refugee diaspora communities

- 1.1 This submission is specifically focused on concerns, experiences and recommendations for *refugee* diaspora communities in Australia. By this we refer to networks of people who have been displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order before arriving in Australia, or who are connected to a group of people currently experiencing forced displacement elsewhere in the world.
- 1.2 We make the distinction between refugee *background* communities (communities formed by refugee and humanitarian entrants) and refugee *diaspora* communities (formed by people who self-identify in a diasporic way with a people who are or have been forcibly displaced and who maintain a commitment to a shared homeland).¹ While there is considerable overlap in these two groups, it is important to recognise that not all refugee and humanitarian entrants or their descendants maintain an active connection or orientation to a homeland, and that diasporic identities and associations are dynamic, diverse and change over time. As such, it is important not to over-generalise diasporic affiliations.
- 1.3 To illustrate, a person who was born in a refugee camp and resettled in Australia as a young child will likely understand and associate with a 'homeland' differently to that of their elders. The young person may in fact be more actively engaged with family and friends in the refugee camp outside their 'home' country, even many years after arriving in Australia. Diasporic associations that have not existed before may mobilise and transform in times of crisis, such as we saw within the Syrian-Australian community at the onset of the conflict in Syria in 2011. Since then, and as more Syrians have arrived in Australia with lived experience of this conflict, associations within this community have transformed. In future, as Syrian children who have recently resettled in Australia grow up here, their associations with Syria (or with places in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey where they may have spent formative years) will likely continue, but also shift as the situation in these countries and their perspectives change.
- 1.4 In working with refugee communities in Australia since 1981, RCOA recognises the changeability of diaspora community priorities and diversity within communities. At the same time, we recognise the commonality of diasporic affiliations. When holding annual consultations with communities, we hear time and again of how profoundly people in Australia are impacted by what is going on for their family, friends and communities in other parts of the world. Moreover, refugee diaspora communities are not just aware of what is going on overseas, they are actively engaged in these contexts – at a household level through family support networks, remittance-sending, migrant or refugee sponsorship and the sharing of news and information, through to associational levels, including through the provision of humanitarian and development aid, business links, and systemic advocacy.

2 Supporting vital and robust diaspora community associations

- 2.1 As RCOA research has shown, refugee community associations are fundamental to good settlement outcomes.² Refugee community associations help facilitate social participation, economic security, independence, well-being, life satisfaction and community connectedness for people settling in Australia. Of particular note to this inquiry, refugee community associations are often actively involved in keeping people informed and connected, including about situations overseas, and can help strengthen, reunite and recreate families and social support networks in Australia and transnationally.³ Ensuring refugee community associations are well supported makes good sense.

¹ Grossman, J. (2019). *Toward a definition of diaspora*, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 42(8), 1263-1282

² RCOA (2014). *The strength within: The role of refugee community organisations in settlement*.

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/strength-within/> - note, in this research we refer to refugee community organisations (RCOs) which are equivalent to 'diaspora associations' used in this Inquiry and submission.

³ *Ibid.*

- 2.2 Research also tells us that refugee community associations face multiple challenges in working effectively and sustainability in the Australian context, including with: developing robust organisational structures; rebuilding relationships and trust within communities; overcoming internal community divisions and conflict; securing resources to meet the needs and priorities of the communities that they serve; accessing and developing relationships with other stakeholders, including decision-makers and the media; navigating and brokering solutions within a complex funding and service system; ensuring representativeness of diverse constituencies, and; remaining responsive to the changing needs of communities.⁴
- 2.3 Furthermore, associations or organisations representing smaller, more dispersed or emerging diaspora communities are likely to have different support requirements and priorities compared to those representing larger and more established communities. Targeted support is needed for smaller communities to develop effective associations and community support networks.
- 2.4 Refugee diaspora associations are often multi-mandate organisations that respond to changing priorities within communities and do not fit easily within siloed funding programs, particularly where a 'community' is dispersed and the organisation may be engaged in support work at local, national and international levels simultaneously. Funding that is more accessible to these types of organisations tends to be situated at a local level, project-based and small scale, such as funding to run cultural festivals or events. This type of funding does not allow diaspora associations to invest in their governance, sustainability and capacity to respond flexibly to community-identified needs and priorities.
- 2.5 There are examples of successful initiatives that have or are currently supporting diaspora associations to overcome some of the challenges identified above. These programs work with different types of diaspora associations to strengthen their leadership and governance structures, successfully apply for grants, and navigate the complex funding and service systems in Australia to be able to more effectively respond to community needs.
- 2.6 Diaspora Action Australia's governance training and mentoring support⁵ was particularly effective in the past in supporting diaspora organisations engaged in peacebuilding, development and humanitarian responses overseas. The Refugee Action Program⁶ funded by the Victorian Government, and STARTTS' Communities in Cultural Transition Program⁷ and Settlement Services International's Community Innovation Fund⁸ in NSW, are all examples of initiatives that have filled gaps in associational capacity-building, albeit with some limitations in scope.
- 2.7 There are also promising models from other countries that demonstrate what effective support for diaspora associations and diaspora-led activities might look like and achieve. One such program is the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme that 'facilitates, supports, and enhances the role of diasporas as effective agents of humanitarian assistance, recovery and development'.⁹ This program incorporates both capacity building support for diaspora organisations to more effectively develop project plans, implement initiatives and undertake monitoring, evaluation and reporting, but also matches the funds raised by diaspora communities for development projects to amplify their impact through co-financing. DRC's Diaspora Programme has been funded by the Danish Foreign Ministry since 2010 and has worked predominantly with Afghan, Syrian and Somali refugee diaspora communities in Denmark.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ See details about DAA's training and mentoring work at <http://diasporaaction.org.au/what-we-do/>

⁶ <https://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/images/stories/pdf/refugee%20action%20program%20summary%20document.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.startts.org.au/services/community-services/communities-in-cultural-transition/>

⁸ <https://www.ssi.org.au/services/community-engagement/community-innovation-fund>

⁹ <https://drc.ngo/relief-work/diaspora-programme>

Recommendation 1 Diaspora association governance strengthening and support

The Australian Government should fund a national-level training and support initiative focussed on strengthening the capacity of diaspora associations to build robust governance structures, plan, design and implement projects, and access funding that meets the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

3 Safety concerns among refugee diaspora communities

- 3.1 Refugee protection is owed to people who are 'unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a *well-founded fear of being persecuted* for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.'¹⁰ Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for persecution based on these reasons to be experienced by people after they have arrived in Australia, including by individuals who are in the process of applying for a protection visa, those who have been granted onshore protection visas (both permanent and temporary), people who have been resettled and are on permanent protection visas, and citizens from diaspora communities.
- 3.2 The reasons why persecution continues depends on factors such as the changing political context and escalating tensions or conflict in home countries, the relative status of the person in their home country or within the Australian diaspora community (i.e. how influential they are), how vocal someone is about the situation in another country, and how effective intimidation of diaspora communities is in controlling local populations.
- 3.3 Types of foreign interference range from foreign government surveillance, harassment, intimidation and extortion, through to the use of threats and/or violence against family or friends in other countries as a mechanism for silencing, controlling or extorting money from members of a diaspora community. Cases of foreign interference RCOA is aware of or have heard reported include: foreign governments detaining or threatening family members in other countries when a member of the diaspora in Australia speaks out about human rights abuses¹¹; harassment, intimidation and defamation of community members (particularly leaders or spokespersons) publicly through media and/or within diaspora networks; foreign governments reporting or accusing diaspora associations of being affiliated with terrorist groups as a way of discrediting diaspora voices and stifling dissent, and; human traffickers extorting money from members of diaspora communities to secure the release and safety of a family member. Threats to safety can thus be experienced by both individuals in Australia and people in other countries who have connections to diaspora communities in Australia. These cases involve individuals from a range of countries, including Burundi, Cameroon, China, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Rwanda.
- 3.4 In addition to safety concerns relating to foreign interference, lack of safety can also be an issue for individuals when tensions within diaspora communities are exacerbated, such as when conflict overseas between different groups plays out in the Australia-based diaspora. Examples of safety concerns raised in community consultations include: members of a diaspora experiencing bullying, harassment and threats from people within the diaspora community in Australia; services being withheld or denied by people working in government-funded services based on a person's perceived diasporic affiliations, and; members of diaspora communities feeling unsafe because services in Australia do not recognise their experiences of persecution overseas and the importance of providing culturally-safe services that are attentive to languages and faith that were denied to people in their homeland and in displacement contexts.

¹⁰ *1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees* [italics added]

¹¹ See, for example: Boscaini, J. (2019). Chinese authorities accused of intimidating Uyghurs in Australia, *ABC News*, 31 March 2019. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-31/chinese-government-accused-of-intimidating-australian-uyghurs/10945090>; McCulloch, D. (2019). China harassing Uighurs in Australia: US. *The Canberra Times*, 12 December 2019. <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6539179/china-harassing-uighurs-in-australia-us/?cs=14231>

- 3.5 For refugee diaspora communities, a challenge is how to raise concerns about foreign interference and lack of safety with the Australian Government. This involves knowing how to access the right people within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), for example, and how concerns raised are responded to. It is RCOA's experience that even when it is Australian citizens or permanent residents whose safety is threatened, including being threatened or detained overseas, the responsiveness of Australian government departments can vary significantly. For individuals seeking asylum or on temporary visas, mechanisms for raising safety concerns and experiences of foreign interference are even more limited.
- 3.6 In addition to mechanisms for raising safety concerns with the Australian Government, refugee communities in Australia have also on occasion raised concerns about the veracity and currency of Country Information (COI) reports used in assessing protection claims in Australia, particularly when situations in countries of origin are complex and change rapidly. For example, the latest COI report for Sudan was updated in April 2016,¹² despite significant changes taking place in the country since this time with implications for protection claims.¹³ The situation in Afghanistan is another example of a rapidly-changing context, even where DFAT's COI report has been updated relatively frequently.
- 3.7 Ministerial Direction Number 84 of 24 June 2019 under s499 of the Migration Act 1958 states that:
- Where the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade has prepared [a] country information assessment expressly for protection status determination purposes, and that assessment is available to the decision maker, the decision maker must take into account that assessment, where relevant, in making their decision. The decision maker is not precluded from considering other relevant information about the country.*
- 3.8 While it is clear from this directive that decision makers can use other relevant information about a country in making a decision, the reality is that people within diaspora communities who may have a wealth of current knowledge about a country situation, including through their connections to people on the ground and through their access to information and news in local languages, have few avenues to feed into COI reports. While there is nothing precluding diaspora communities from producing alternative sources of information, the reality is that most communities do not have the capacity to document this knowledge as an alternative source of information for decision makers, and from our experience, it is extremely rare for a representative of a diaspora community to be invited to provide testimony during hearings.
- 3.9 One potential avenue for addressing both the question of safety concerns within refugee diaspora communities in Australia and ensuring COI reports used to assess protection claims are up-to-date, is by providing a forum in which diaspora communities can express and explore questions of human rights concerns with the Australian Government, with the potential for communities to be able to share information and concerns about the places where they have current connections. Such a forum may also provide a space to inform the Australian Government's international engagements more broadly.

Recommendation 2 Mechanisms for addressing foreign interference with diasporas

The Australian Government should establish clear mechanisms for members of diaspora communities in Australia to safely report on foreign surveillance and intimidation through the establishment of a Diaspora Liaison Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (see Recommendation 6).

12 <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Pages/country-information-reports>

13 <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/17/world/africa/Sudan-coup-coronavirus.html>

Recommendation 3 Diaspora engagement in Country Information (COI) report reviews

When reviewing COI reports, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should facilitate opportunities for diaspora communities to provide information that is relevant to decision-makers assessing protection claims.

Recommendation 4 Annual dialogue with diasporas on human rights

The Australian Government should hold a supplementary annual dialogue on human rights with diaspora communities to inform Australia's bilateral and multilateral engagements.

4 Addressing barriers to diaspora participation in democratic and social institutions

- 4.1 Two significant barriers to refugee diasporas' participation in Australia's democratic and social institutions have been documented extensively by RCOA and others over many years are: (1) access to citizenship,¹⁴ and (2) denial of permanent visas to refugees granted onshore protection having arrived in Australia by boat.¹⁵
- 4.2 For refugee and humanitarian entrants, Australian citizenship has a special significance. Gaining citizenship marks both their integration into their new country and the end of their displacement. For many, it will mark the first time they have experienced the protection of a State, rather than its persecution. Citizenship provides former refugees with the safety they need to settle and to heal, gives them the security to build and imagine their new lives, and to consolidate a sense of belonging and more fully participate in Australia's democratic and social institutions. For this reason, most refugees and humanitarian entrants are eager to apply for citizenship as soon as they can, and prize it highly.
- 4.3 The attainment of citizenship has been found in longitudinal research to have a positive impact on an individual's sense of belonging to Australia. According to Scanlon Foundation surveys from 2007 to 2014, 'being a citizen has a positive effect on an individual's sense of belonging in Australia. Among respondents aged 25-44 and born in Australia, 77 per cent reported a great sense of belonging. Among those aged 25-44 who were born overseas, the results were significantly different: 56 per cent of those who had become Australian citizens said they belonged to a great extent, compared to only 32 per cent of those who were not citizens.'¹⁶
- 4.4 Since 2015, RCOA has been documenting problems with substantial delays in citizenship processes for those on permanent protection visas, as well as the increasing legal barriers being introduced that have limited pathways to citizenship for refugees.¹⁷ These include:

¹⁴ RCOA (2019). [Submission on the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment \(Strengthening Commitments\) Bill 2018](#); RCOA (2017). [Submission on the Australian Citizenship Legislation \(Strengthening Requirements\) Amendment Bill 2017](#); RCOA (2015). [Delays in citizenship applications for permanent refugee visa holders](#).

¹⁵ RCOA (2018). 'Living in Limbo', [State of the Nation 2017: Refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia](#); Marston, G. (2003). [Temporary protection, permanent uncertainty: The experience of refugees living on temporary protection visas](#), Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT University.

¹⁶ Scanlon Foundation (2015). Citizenship: Discussion Paper, p. 11.

¹⁷ These delays have been heavily criticised by the Commonwealth Ombudsman, the Auditor General and the Federal Court. See: https://www.ombudsman.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0032/78980/Citizenship-own-motion-investigation-report.pdf; <https://www.anao.gov.au/work/performance-audit/efficiency-the-processing-applications-citizenship-conferral>; <https://jade.io/article/509357>

- An initial freezing of citizenship applications from refugees for over two years;
- Increased scrutiny of identity documents, leading to significant increases in processing times;
- The use of identity assessment for the purposes of revisiting refugee claims, leading to visa cancellations over minor identity issues; and
- A further freeze of citizenship applications in 2017 for over one year, after failed attempts by the Government to increase requirements for citizenship.

4.5 For refugees who arrived in Australia by boat since 2013, being able to fully participate in democratic and social institutions is severely curtailed by their lack of access to citizenship and the limbo and uncertainty of temporary protection. This is due to laws that stipulate that anyone in this cohort whose claims for protection had not been finalised by 2014 is no longer eligible for a permanent visa. The only options are for people to get a temporary visa – either a visa for three years (a temporary protection visa or TPV), or a visa for five years (a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa or SHEV). This means that once the first three or five years are over, people must start the process all over and prove again that they still need protection. It also means that people can never settle properly and live with the constant fear of being returned. This current system makes it hard for people to get work, to make friends and to plan for a future. Refugees with temporary protection are also banned from reuniting with their spouses, children, and parents. Temporary protection is also potentially indefinite.

4.6 According to UNSW's Kaldor Centre,

*The Australian temporary protection regime risks breaching international human rights law, including a potential breach of the right to non-discrimination and infringement on the right to family and freedom from arbitrary interference with family life. The explicitly punitive rationale of temporary protection may constitute a penalty in violation of article 31 of the Refugee Convention. The cumulative impact of these factors, including on refugees' mental health, may constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment in violation of Australia's obligation under article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.*¹⁸

4.7 In addition to these substantive barriers to permanency and/or citizenship for members of refugee diaspora communities, some participants in RCOA's annual community consultations have expressed a more general concern about the nature of engagement of refugee diaspora communities in Australia's formal political system. This is particularly the case where there is a culture within established political parties that stymies the participation of people from diverse, smaller or newer communities, or where there are diaspora community gatekeepers who leverage their access to diaspora communities to provide support to politicians or parties, but may not be considered representative of the community itself. Widespread lack of literacy on Australian politics among new and smaller diaspora communities, as well as limited knowledge of avenues for political engagement, exacerbate dependence on community leaders' superior knowledge to make political judgements for whole communities.

Recommendation 5 Timely and accessible pathways to permanent protection and citizenship

*The Australian Government should ensure inclusive access to citizenship as outlined in RCOA's 2019 Submission on the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment (Strengthening Commitments) Bill 2018.*¹⁹ *The Australian Government should abolish Temporary Protection Visas and grant permanent visas to all people who currently hold Temporary Protection, Temporary Humanitarian Concern or Temporary Safe Haven visas.*

¹⁸ Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law (2019). Factsheet on Temporary Protection and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas. Available at <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/temporary-protection-visas>

¹⁹ RCOA (2019). *Submission on the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment Bill 2018*. Available at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/citizenship-bill-2018/8/>

5 Strengthening communication and partnerships between diaspora communities and government

5.1 There are many promising opportunities for the Australian Government to strengthen communication and partnerships with refugee diasporas, drawing on the willingness of communities to work with government in areas of mutual interest such as aid, trade, diplomacy, migration and settlement. Moreover, there are individuals within refugee diaspora communities with valuable skills, languages, knowledge and networks that could contribute significantly to Australia's constructive and varied international engagements.

Coordination and linkage

5.2 An important first step toward strengthening government-diaspora relations is to invest in coordination and linkage roles that focus on facilitating partnerships and communication, and can develop targeted initiatives and build expertise within the Australian Government and diaspora communities. Complementing the investment outlined in Recommendation 1 (Diaspora association governance strengthening and support), this could be achieved by (1) establishing a Diaspora Liaison Unit within DFAT to facilitate engagement and access of diaspora communities across Australian Government departments, and; (2) resourcing an organisation such as Diaspora Action Australia to expand its capacity as a national body supporting, representing and coordinating diaspora communities and organisations in Australia.

5.3 To illustrate how coordination and linkage investment might benefit Australian government-diaspora communication and partnerships, we recall issues raised by Iraqi and Syrian refugee diaspora communities through RCOA's community consultations from 2017. Community members at this time were raising concerns about people being targeted by unscrupulous 'migration agents' in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan who were falsely claiming they could secure and expedite Australian visa grants (through the Humanitarian Program) for a price. At this time, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) developed a targeted campaign in these countries to warn refugees about the dangers of these 'agents', yet communication was not extended to diaspora communities in Australia who, in many cases, were being asked by desperate family members to pay these costs. Clear and targeted communication from the Australian Government and UNHCR to diaspora communities in Australia was warranted at this time and may have more quickly disseminated information about the inaccuracy of claims and the reality of refugee and humanitarian visa processing.

5.4 The cost of this lack of communication and diaspora engagement may have been invisible to the Australian Government but was borne instead by diaspora community members in Australia, many of whom were new to the country and had limited resources, but were compelled to send money because of the weight of family obligations and of having personal knowledge of the desperation of living as a refugee. Investing in linkage and coordination may have allowed this issue to be identified in a timely fashion, and a targeted response developed in partnership with affected communities in Australia.

5.5 In addition to the above, ensuring the Australian Government benefits from the breadth and depth of knowledge and skills within refugee diaspora communities requires targeted strategies of workplace recruitment and inclusion within the public service. The development of a workforce cultural and linguistic diversity strategy and its resourced implementation, developed in consultation with diaspora communities, should be a priority for a government department whose function is centrally focussed on Australia's engagement with the world.²⁰ Such a strategy would consider how to recognise and value staff attributes such as proficiency in languages other than English, cultural expertise, cross-cultural competencies, transnational networks, and knowledge of country contexts (e.g. institutions, histories).

²⁰ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/about-us/department/Pages/workplace-diversity>

Recommendation 6 Diaspora Liaison Unit and workforce diversity in DFAT

The Australian Government should establish a Diaspora Liaison Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to oversee, coordinate and support departmental engagement with diaspora communities across its range of functions, and prioritise the development and implementation of a cultural and linguistic diversity strategy within the Department that recognises the range of skills and competencies within diaspora communities.

Recommendation 7 Strengthen national coordination and representative body for diasporas

The Australian Government should invest in a body to fulfil a coordination, knowledge repository and representative role to ensure diaspora communities are effectively supported and their potential realised within the Australian context.

Building on good models of international engagement and partnership

- 5.6 There are existing models of partnership that could be further strengthened and which provide an excellent model for diaspora-government engagement. In particular, RCOA notes the pivotal work that Australian-based refugee diaspora leaders have played in international dialogue on forced displacement over the past decade or more, and the Australian Government's support of refugee self-representation at an international level.
- 5.7 This impact was illustrated at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum in Geneva when two of the five closing panellists in a meeting of over 3,000 representatives from governments, civil society and the private sector from around the world were Australian-based refugee diaspora leaders.²¹ Other refugee diaspora leaders based in Australia have played a central role in establishing a Global Refugee-led Network (GRN) with regional chapters, with Sydney-based Najeeba Wazefadost the founding chair of the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR), and of working alongside academics at the University of NSW to undertake a Gender Audit²² of negotiations leading to the Global Compact on Refugees. The potential to deepen these networks and capacities of refugee diaspora leaders has been further extended through the establishment in 2019 of the National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG).²³ The trajectory and impact of Australian-based refugee diasporas on the world stage has recently been documented,²⁴ and demonstrates what government partnership and support of refugee diaspora leaders and sustained advocacy on refugee self-representation can achieve.
- 5.8 While this work has been ground-breaking, there are opportunities to further strengthen and champion the effective engagement of people who can speak from a lived experience in international dialogue. Indeed, the Australian Government is well-placed to position itself as a leader in this regard in dialogue on forced displacement, in light of steps it has previously taken. When the Australian Government chaired the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) in 2012, the Government worked with RCOA in proposing and piloting refugee representation at ATCR meetings. Australia has been the only state since then to consistently nominate and facilitate the involvement of a refugee community representative at each ATCR gathering. Since 2017, the Department of Home Affairs has included representatives of refugee-led organisations in its regular formal dialogue with NGOs on refugee and humanitarian issues, and for some years, refugee-led organisations have been actively involved in annual Ministerial consultations on the refugee and humanitarian program.
- 5.9 Ways in which the lived experience of refugee diaspora communities can be further championed by the Australian Government at both an international and national level include:
- following the lead of the Canadian Government by including a refugee representative in its formal delegations to relevant meetings;
 - continuing to support the participation of an Australian refugee community representative at ATCR and championing the voice of refugees in international dialogue, including UNHCR's Executive Committee (ExCom) meeting, the Global Refugee Forum, and the

²¹ Sydney-based Arash Bordbar, founding co-Chair of the UNHCR Global Youth Advisory Council and Canberra-based Tina Dixon, Co-founder of the Forcibly Displaced Peoples Network. Both have previously participated in international dialogue with support partially from Australian government, NGO and academic institutions. See 2 hour mark: <http://webtv.un.org/watch/closing-plenary-session-global-refugee-forum/6116840520001/?term=>

²² <https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/events/conferences/5a33d80e7/gender-audit-report-fourth-fifth-thematic-discussions-global-compact-refugees.html>

²³ <https://www.nraag-australia.org/>

²⁴ Power, P. (2019). Refugees advocate for their rights. *Refugee Transitions*, 34, 46-51. http://www.startts.org.au/media/startts_refugeetransitions34_web.pdf

- UNHCR High Commissioner's annual Dialogue; and
- providing further support and engagement with NRAAG in the development of national policies.

5.10 DFAT is also well-positioned to share its experience of supporting representation of diaspora community members in constructive dialogue at a national and international level with other government departments, based on its work consulting and engaging with diaspora leaders at ATCR, the Human Rights Council, and in pre-deployment briefings with diplomatic personnel.

Recommendation 8 Champion refugee voices in international and national dialogue

That the Australian Government further embeds the engagement of people with lived refugee experience in national and international dialogue by including refugee diaspora representatives in Australian Government delegations at significant international meetings on refugee issues (such as the Global Refugee Forum and the UNHCR High Commissioner's annual Dialogue and Executive Committee meetings), by championing the participation of refugee-led networks more broadly, and sharing lessons from effective diaspora partnership and engagement across government departments.

Diaspora-engaged diplomacy on refugee protection

- 5.11 An area where RCOA has long seen the potential for stronger communication and partnership between the Australian Government and refugee diasporas is in developing more effective protection responses in places where diaspora communities have active connections.
- 5.12 For background context, there are many examples of situations where high-level negotiations have taken place concerning refugee populations without any serious engagement with affected communities. The outcome of decisions being made about refugees that are negotiated only between states and institutional actors (e.g. UNHCR) have been predictably poor, leading to the outright failure of policy or programs and, in some cases, onward movement of refugee populations where community concerns have not been taken seriously. Examples include returns to Afghanistan, cessation of refugee status for Chin refugees in 2018, and more recent dialogue between the governments of Myanmar and Bangladesh about the repatriation of Rohingya refugees.
- 5.13 There is great potential for engagement with refugee diasporas in countries like Australia to help build track three diplomacy informed by affected populations. Bringing diaspora leaders in as respected partners can help facilitate constructive dialogue, communicate concerns of people at risk whose voices are marginalised or ignored, bring accountability to discussions, and provide a conduit for good ideas to realise more effective solutions for displaced populations. The engagement of diaspora community leaders in track three dialogue may also enable better channels of communication between governments and affected communities.
- 5.14 There are examples of this happening through community-led initiatives, such as the work of the Joint Advocacy Committee of Australian Burma Ethnic Nationals (JACABEN), a coalition of leaders from different refugee diaspora communities in Australia who consulted extensively to develop community-informed solutions and communication on concerns for displaced communities from Myanmar.²⁵ The experiences of JACABEN demonstrate how diaspora leaders and associations in Australia are able to draw on their transnational networks, deep understanding of people and contexts, and up-to-date information garnered from communicating with affected populations in community languages, to put forward constructive policy solutions.

²⁵ See, for example, APRRN-RCOA (2018). *Myanmar Refugees in Thailand and Malaysia: Findings of APRRN-RCOA Scoping Mission*, 23-31 March 2018.

5.15 RCOA has advocated for some years for Australia to appoint an Ambassador on Refugee Protection in much the way that there is now an Ambassador for People Smuggling and Human Trafficking.²⁶ Creating such a position would provide diaspora leaders with an avenue through which to support the engagement of affected communities in high-level dialogue on refugee protection and solutions.

Recommendation 9 Diaspora-engaged diplomacy on refugee protection

The Australian Government should appoint an Ambassador for Refugee Protection to lead high-level advocacy on seeking durable solutions for refugees in the Asia-Pacific region and internationally, and to engage diaspora leaders in developing community-informed protection solutions and to engage in high-level dialogue.

Diasporas as partners in protection, development and humanitarian relief

5.16 There is increasing international interest in diaspora-led development and humanitarianism,²⁷ but the development of policy or programs in the Australian context have yet to be realised. This is despite commitments being identified in the 2017 Foreign Affairs White Paper to ‘working with diaspora communities to promote Australia’s image and reputation, to encourage trade and investment and, where appropriate, to support our development assistance program.’²⁸

5.17 Recent research undertaken in Australia has particularly shown how transnational social support networks are created through refugee resettlement processes and are mobilised for development and humanitarian purposes.²⁹ For a country that rightly prides itself on its long history of bipartisan support for refugee resettlement – with an average of 13,735 refugees finding a home in Australia each year since the 1970s – it is worth noting the connections and impact resettled refugees have on the people and places from which they have come. As well as sending remittances to family and friends, research has found that it is common for resettled refugees to set up small volunteer-run organisations to collectively mobilise resources to assist ‘their people’ living in displacement contexts in other parts of the world. These organisations:

...raise money for refugee schools and health centres, purchase wheelchairs and water pumps, send material aid, facilitate migration outcomes, and undertake systemic advocacy. They also help in ways that are non-quantifiable: strengthening social networks of care, sharing information, bearing witness and offering hope. The capacity of resettled refugees to draw on transnational social networks, contextual knowledge of refugee situations, [and] mobility enabled through resettlement, makes them distinct and valuable humanitarian actors.³⁰

5.18 A possibility that has yet to be explored is how Australia’s refugee diaspora communities can be more fully enabled to undertake the helping work that they inevitably do of their own accord—such as by:

- strengthening the fundraising, governance and project planning capacities of diaspora organisations through an Australian initiative like the Danish Refugee Council’s Diaspora Programme;
- reducing bureaucratic red tape for small voluntary organisations transferring money overseas for development-related work;

²⁶ Refugee Council of Australia (2019). *Options for Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program in 2019-20*. Available at <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/intake-sub-2019-20/2/>

²⁷ See, for example, the European ‘Diaspora Emergency Action and Coordination’ (DEMAC) initiative (<http://www.demac.org/>) and IOM’s new global iDiaspora platform (<https://idiaspora.org/>)

²⁸ Page 109.

²⁹ Olliff, L. (2018). From Resettled Refugees to Humanitarian Actors: Refugee Diaspora Organizations and Everyday Humanitarianism, *New Political Science*, 40:4, 658-674, DOI: 10.1080/07393148.2018.1528059

³⁰ Olliff, L. (2018). Time to reimagine resettlement? *Asylum Insight*, <https://www.asyluminsight.com/c-louise-olliff#.XyOt4R1S-L9>

- establishing a targeted diaspora volunteer or deployment program within the humanitarian sector, such as through Australia Volunteers or an IOM-style diaspora professionals deployment scheme;³¹
- championing the participation of active Australian-based diaspora organisations in humanitarian coordination mechanisms, and
- ensuring greater accessibility by diaspora organisations to existing initiatives in the Australian Aid Program, particularly Friendship Grants.

Recommendation 10 Diaspora engagement in Australia's aid program

The Australian Government should establish a targeted funding program modelled on the Danish Refugee Council's Diaspora Programme to amplify and strengthen diaspora-led development and relief initiatives as a valuable contribution to Australian aid that draws on the strength of people-to-people networks.

Recommendation 11 Diaspora engagement in humanitarian responses

The Australian Government should work with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to further support the development of a diaspora professionals deployment scheme drawing on the skills and capacities within Australian-based diaspora communities.

6 Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1 Diaspora association governance strengthening and support

The Australian Government should fund a national-level training and support initiative focussed on strengthening the capacity of diaspora associations to build robust governance structures, plan, design and implement projects, and access funding that meets the needs and priorities of the communities they serve.

Recommendation 2 Mechanisms for addressing foreign interference with diasporas

The Australian Government should establish clear mechanisms for members of diaspora communities in Australia to safely report on foreign surveillance and intimidation through the establishment of a Diaspora Liaison Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (see Recommendation 6).

Recommendation 3 Diaspora engagement in Country Information (COI) report reviews

When reviewing COI reports, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should facilitate opportunities for diaspora communities to provide information that is relevant to decision-makers assessing protection claims.

Recommendation 4 Annual dialogue with diasporas on human rights

The Australian Government should hold a supplementary annual dialogue on human rights with diaspora communities to inform Australia's bilateral and multilateral engagements.

Recommendation 5 Timely and accessible pathways to permanent protection and citizenship

The Australian Government should ensure inclusive access to citizenship as outlined in RCOA's 2019 Submission on the Australian Citizenship Legislation Amendment (Strengthening Commitments) Bill 2018. The Australian Government should abolish Temporary Protection Visas and grant permanent visas to all people who currently hold Temporary Protection, Temporary Humanitarian Concern or Temporary Safe Haven visas.

³¹ See the Migration for Development in Africa (MIDA) initiative: <https://midasom.iom.int/>

Recommendation 6 Diaspora Liaison Unit and workforce diversity in DFAT

The Australian Government should establish a Diaspora Liaison Unit within the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to oversee, coordinate and support departmental engagement with diaspora communities across its range of functions, and prioritise the development and implementation of a cultural and linguistic diversity strategy within the Department that recognises the range of skills and competencies within diaspora communities.

Recommendation 7 Strengthen national coordination and representative body for diasporas

The Australian Government should invest in a body to fulfil a coordination, knowledge repository and representative role to ensure diaspora communities are effectively supported and their potential realised within the Australian context.

Recommendation 8 Champion refugee voices in international and national dialogue

That the Australian Government further embeds the engagement of people with lived refugee experience in national and international dialogue by including refugee diaspora representatives in Australian Government delegations at significant international meetings on refugee issues (such as the Global Refugee Forum and the UNHCR High Commissioner's annual Dialogue and Executive Committee meetings), by championing the participation of refugee-led networks more broadly, and sharing lessons from effective diaspora partnership and engagement across government departments.

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