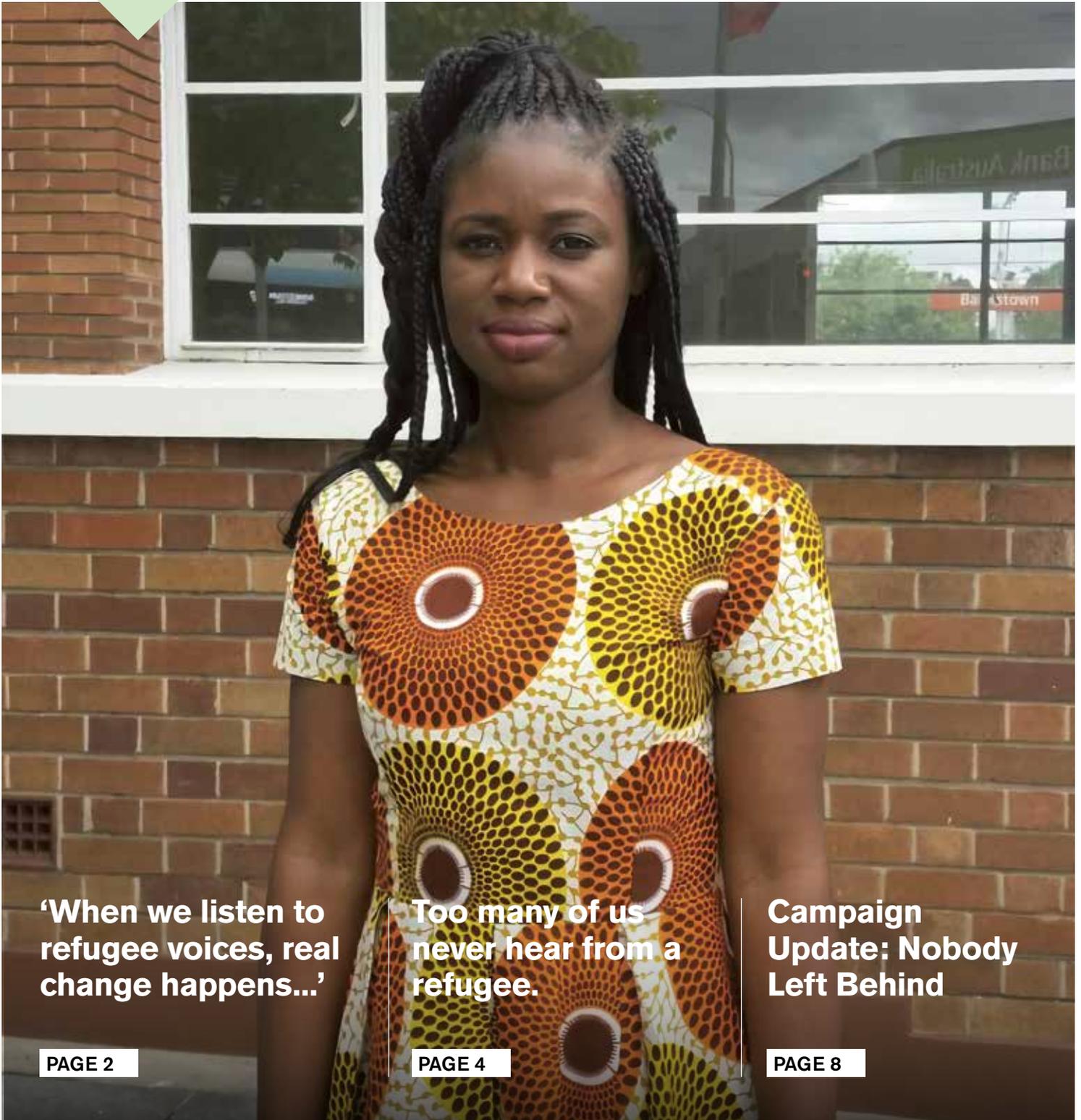


Your Voice

The latest news from the Refugee Council of Australia

March 2021



**'When we listen to
refugee voices, real
change happens...'**

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**Refugee Council
of Australia**

‘When we listen to voices, real change

*A core part of the vision for the Refugee Council, is helping refugees and people seeking asylum to help themselves and to empower and appropriately equip them to do so. **Refugee voices are absolutely critical to achieving policy change.***

Our collective experiences over the past year have highlighted just how important it is that we hear from refugees and people seeking asylum, and how crucial it is that refugee voices are at the centre of the public conversation about their fates.

As such, we are thrilled to announce that Adama Kamara will now be joining us as our new Deputy CEO.

In far too many forums, refugees are referred to as a ‘problem’ or a ‘burden’, and too often these discussions occur without any reference to, or inclusion of, those that have the lived experience.

When people who have been refugees are included, the discussion begins to shift. Decision-makers become embarrassed about referring to fellow human beings as ‘burdens’ and the conversation moves to the real value that refugees offer and how they can contribute.

“For change to be achieved, we need the strongest possible partnership between people who have been refugees and fellow citizens who share a vision for how Australia can implement just and humane refugee policies – refugees and allies from across Australia working together as equals, as RCOA and its network attempts to do,” Adama said.

“Each year, we are seeing more refugee-led advocacy organisations emerge and more advocates of refugee background involved in national policy discussions and international lobbying.”

Adama was born in Sierra Leone and her family were in Australia for her father’s university studies when civil war broke out in her home country. Unable to return, Adama’s family sought asylum and became involved in sponsoring and supporting refugees displaced by Sierra Leone’s civil war to settle in Australia.

She became the Co-Chair of the Sierra Leone Youth Group (SLYG), the first youth led organisation in Sydney’s Sierra Leone community. SLYG was formed to respond to the settlement needs of young people who

had identified challenges settling in a new country as humanitarian entrants. SLYG coordinated social and recreational programs that assisted in building social networks and helping youth recover from the impacts of trauma.

Adama later joined the STARTTS team, working as a Bicultural Counsellor with newly arrived refugees and as a Project Officer supporting emerging African communities.

“I am excited to be joining RCOA in the newly created position of Deputy CEO because RCOA has been such a strong advocate for the inclusion of refugee voices at key



Pictured: RCOA's new Deputy CEO Adama Kamara (left) with RCOA colleagues Deena Yako (centre) and Samah Shda

o refugee je happens...'

national and international refugee policy discussions,” Adama said.

The Refugee Council has been supporting refugee delegates to participate in UNHCR’s global NGO Consultations since 2007. RCOA successfully pushed for refugee representatives to be included in the global resettlement dialogue from 2012, supported the development of the NSW Refugee Communities Advocacy Network in 2016 and was a co-organiser of events that led to the formation of Australia’s National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group, the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees and the Global Refugee-led Network.

RCOA CEO Paul Power said: “Empowering and supporting refugee-led advocacy and leaderships is a focus for RCOA. This is why it’s such a significant step

to have a new Deputy CEO such as Adama on our our team.”.

“Adama brings to RCOA her experience as a community development practitioner with specialist skills in community engagement, partnership development, grants administration, policy and program development. She also has more than 15 years experience working with not-for-profit, health and local government organisations in Western Sydney.

She is an advocate for meaningful participation, and has led co-design projects with young people, people seeking asylum, refugees, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and service providers.

Please welcome Adama to the RCOA team!



“For change to be achieved, we need the strongest possible partnership between people who have been refugees and fellow citizens who share a vision for how Australia can implement just and humane refugee policies – refugees and allies from across Australia working together as equals, as RCOA and its network attempts to do.”

*– Adama Kamara,
Deputy CEO,
Refugee Council of Australia*

Too many of us never hear from a refugee.

When we get 'Face to Face', we get the truth.

Many Australians have never met a refugee, let alone heard their story.

When refugees share their personal stories, two lives are changed; the person sharing, and the person listening. It is almost impossible not to feel empathy or to put yourself in a refugee's shoes once you hear their story. They are compelling and they become very real.

If we want to improve the lives of refugees in this nation, we need to reach more everyday Australians and share such personal refugee stories.

With your support, RCOA has had significant success by training refugee speakers to tell their stories in schools and organisations across NSW, Victoria and QLD. These personal stories of heartache, struggle and resilience are delivered through our Face to Face program.

Our goal is to train and develop many more presenters—Refugee Ambassadors—who can speak around the country in a variety of public and professional contexts. We have seen that when we do this, lives change. Crucially, the public perception of refugees and their sense of empathy, shifts markedly.

The major reason why issues affecting refugees are often misrepresented is because first-hand accounts of the

refugee experience are usually absent from the public debate . such as what it truly means to be forced from one's home because of persecution and what it's really like to build a new life in Australia.

Such exclusion disempowers and marginalises refugees by depicting them as merely passive recipients of aid. This results in the continuing perpetuation of prejudices and stereotypes.

The Face to Face program brings refugees and refugee voices directly into the community and the public debate. It addresses misrepresentations and improves understanding, and by putting a face to what is for many an abstract political issue, the program confronts prejudice and stereotypes.

Importantly, the program also empowers refugees themselves to take control of how they are represented in the community.

Training these ambassadors for public speaking and giving presentations also prepares them for a competitive job market with greater experience and skills. Additionally, such events enable refugee speakers to widen their network of contacts and potential employers, ultimately equipping them to help themselves.



RCOA Face to Face graduates, 2020.
Photo: Refugee Council of Australia

The major reason why issues affecting refugees are often misrepresented is because first-hand accounts of the refugee experience are absent from too many public conversations. Things like what it means to be forced from one's home because of persecution and what it's really like to build a new life in Australia...

This program is a real success story. If you are in a position to financially support this and help fund the training and mentoring of refugee speakers so that there are many more refugee voices, please contact Deena Yako on (02) 9211 9333 or deena.yako@refugeecouncil.org.au

Covid-caused worker shortages could provide an opportunity for thousands.

RCOA pursues opportunity to help people on TPVs and SHEVs.

RCOA has been exploring ways to gain a pathway to permanency for thousands of people who are in limbo on temporary visas – by seizing a political opportunity caused by COVID-19.

We have been advocating for years for the abolition of temporary protection visas and will continue to do so. Whilst the Government has shown no willingness to budge on this issue, we believe that the COVID border closures could provide a unique opportunity.

The agricultural and horticultural sectors and other vital industries face significant labour shortages due to international border closures. The Federal Government needs to solve these shortages.

Recognising this political opportunity, we proposed to the Parliamentary Inquiry the Working Holiday Maker Program that holders of Safe Haven Enterprise visas (SHEVs) and Temporary Protection visas (TPVs) be offered a permanent visa if they work for one year in regional areas or other industries facing labour shortages.

The proposal was backed by consultations and a survey with refugee communities, with 85 percent of 717 TPV

and SHEV holders indicating a willingness to move under such a scheme.

After considering the lack of a pathway to permanency for SHEV and TPV holders, the Parliamentary Committee partially endorsed our proposal, recommending that “the Government consider additional concessions to SHEV and TPV holders who undertake at least one year of agricultural or horticultural work in a regional area, and are prepared to settle in a regional area.”

The concessions include “incentives that assist SHEV and TPV holders to meet requirements under a range of available visas, including the skilled migration scheme” and “Subsidised VET training courses for skilled occupations experiencing chronic skills shortages (of at least 10 years)”.

The committee also said that “permanent visa requirement concessions discussed (in the report) should be carefully and seriously considered”. The report was finalised in November and we now await the Government’s response. In the meantime, we have been discussing this issue further with refugee communities and industry bodies.

“The proposal was backed by consultations and a survey with refugee communities, with 85 percent of 717 TPV and SHEV holders indicating a willingness to move under such a scheme.”



Photo: Getty Images

#Nobody Left Behind

Campaign update:

2020 was a challenging year for most, but people seeking asylum in Australia faced a particularly torturous situation. **Sadly, 2021 isn't looking much better.**

You were there and helped push for Nobody to be Left Behind.

From March 2020, the Refugee Council of Australia convened a sector-wide advocacy and campaigns group to put pressure on the Federal Government to extend life-saving support to people seeking asylum and other temporary visa holders.

Our calls contributed to the support provided by State Governments across the country. Frustratingly, the Federal Government has mostly ignored the situation of refugees and people seeking asylum, and remained firm in its refusal to acknowledge them.

With the help of our supporters, we commissioned two pieces of important research.

The first examined the public cost of not extending payments, like JobSeeker, to refugees and people seeking asylum. The second reported the heightened risk of homelessness facing many people seeking asylum as a result of the lack of support provided. The intention of

these reports is to create a legitimate platform for us to advocate from, and apply pressure to Governments and decision-makers and raise awareness in the media.

We worked closely with members of the Government to develop solutions that could be included in the October budget to ensure some level of support for people seeking asylum, but we were very disappointed with the outcome.

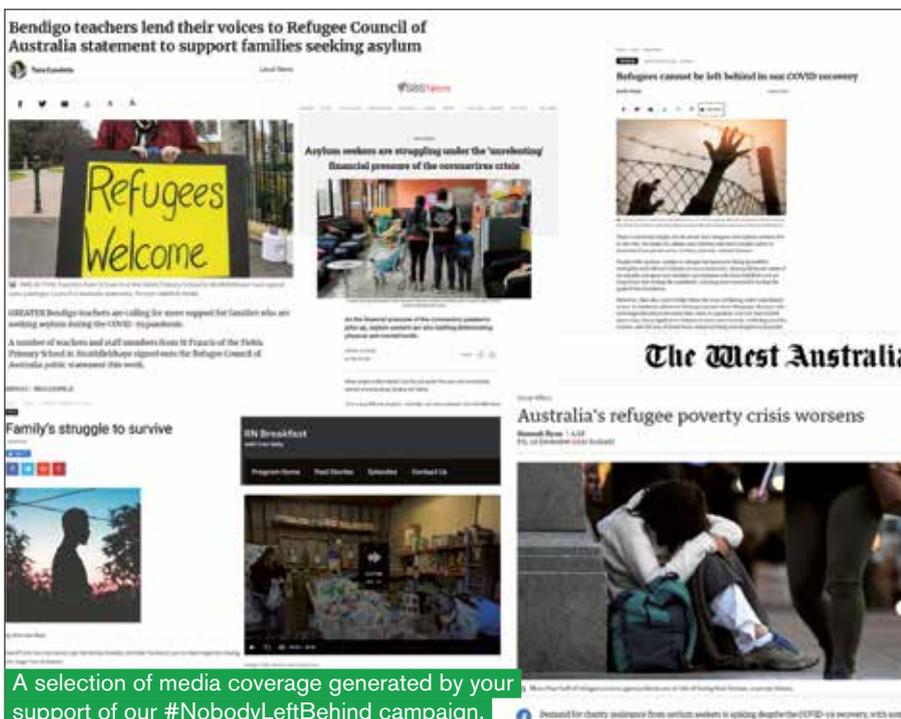
Since then, we have started hearing from our members of such significant need that they are having to provide food to families on an alternating basis, meaning that far too many families are unable to put food on the table every day. Despite raising this sad reality, our calls have been largely ignored.

The wins we have managed to achieved have only been possible because of our dedicated supporters who have stood up against such a cruel and unnecessary situation, for which we are incredibly grateful.

The challenges, and situation that far too many refugees and people seeking asylum currently face, is very bleak. However, we are not giving up; we simply cannot.

As the situation continues to change, we need to revise our response and are in the process of finalising a new strategy which will hopefully see much needed funds provided to people who need them most. Unfortunately, we are unable to share full details of this with you at this stage, but we believe this is our best chance to ensure a basic level of support for people seeking asylum who are still struggling as a result of COVID-19.

With your support, we are determined to ensure there is #NobodyLeftBehind in 2021



A selection of media coverage generated by your support of our #NobodyLeftBehind campaign.

Putting Australia's refugee record under the international spotlight.

With your support, RCOA reports to the UN's Universal Periodic Review

The Refugee Council of Australia has led the way in revealing to a key UN inquiry what refugees and people seeking asylum truly endure in this country.

Under the UN's Universal Periodic Review (UPR), the human rights record of each UN member State is examined by other member States every five years and they then make recommendations for change. From January 2021, it was Australia's turn for the UN Human Rights Council peer review process.

In order to ensure the main issues of concern were discussed during the UPR, the Refugee Council of Australia joined a coalition of NGOs to draft the Australian NGO coalition shadow report, endorsed by over 200 organisations.

We led the draft of the section on refugees and people seeking asylum and produced a separate factsheet on this issue.

RCOA also provided briefings to overseas missions focusing on the situation of refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia. This was alongside the Australian Human Rights Commission and NGO experts on a number of human rights issues, including rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders People, climate change, and rights of people with disability.

Additionally, RCOA was one of the five representatives at Australia's UPR pre-session in December 2020 and also continued to engage with delegates from different

nations, publicly and privately, to answer their questions about the treatment of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia.

We highlighted that in the previous UPR cycle there were 49 recommendations made by countries focusing on the situation of refugees and asylum seekers, none of which has been fully implemented by Australia.

RCOA raised significant concerns about the following issues and made specific recommendations about how to address them. Among the issues we raised were:

- the indefinite nature of immigration detention in Australia, with the average length of detention at 564 days at the time we spoke, and with children still being detained in onshore immigration detention
- the ongoing limbo faced by people subject to offshore processing eight years after they sought protection from Australia
- boat turnback and returning people at airports without properly assessing their claims
- lack of a safety net for people seeking asylum in the community and the impact of punitive asylum policies
- issues associated with temporary protection visas

More information on the process is available on our website.



Photo: Getty Images

Operation Not Forgotten Update.

Despite the devastating effects of COVID-19, RCOA has been able to raise funds, provide advice and guidance, advocate with authorities in Australia and elsewhere, and raise awareness about the plight of refugees and Operation Not Forgotten.

Despite the devastating effects of COVID-19, RCOA has been able to raise funds, provide advice and guidance, advocate with authorities in Australia and elsewhere, and help facilitate the process for refugees to lodge resettlement applications to Canada through Operation Not Forgotten.

Operation Not Forgotten is a community-led response to provide private sponsorship to Canada for refugees who have been trapped in PNG and Nauru, and who have no viable resettlement option. This partnership between Vancouver-based settlement organisation MOSAIC, RCOA and Ads-Up Refugee Network Canada has not only been giving people a lifeline to get off Nauru and PNG, but is also ensuring they get all the support they later need in Canada from volunteer groups there.

COVID-19 did delay the processing of applications but since late December there has been a steady flow of sponsorship applicants asked to arrange medical exams, one of the final steps towards getting their Canadian visas.

In the 14 months to January 2021, MOSAIC submitted 215 sponsorship applications for 120 refugees affected by offshore processing and 85 separated family members, assisted by more than \$2.3 million raised by the Australian public through RCOA and the Ads- Up network.

MOSAIC is hoping to welcome the first members of this group to Canada in the first half of 2021, if COVID-19 travel restrictions allow.

For 2021, MOSAIC expects to have access to close to 200 more sponsorship spots, if sufficient funds can be raised. Under Canadian Government rules, the sponsoring body must have funds available to support each sponsored refugee during the first year of life in Canada. Around AU\$18,000 is required for a single adult, with between \$9,000 and \$3,000 for each additional family member. In 2021, another \$2 million will be needed for this program.

Australians can make tax-deductible donations through RCOA via <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/canada/>

Saleem Spindari, MOSAIC'S Senior Manager Refugees and Migrant Workers Programs, on Operation Not Forgotten

"In March 1990, I fled my home with my parents and extended family members. We didn't have any clue of where we were heading. We just wanted to run away from the Iraqi troops that were getting closer to our home city of more than half a million people. We could hear the sounds of bombs shelling and fire shots getting closer. This all happened in the aftermath of the first Gulf War, known as Operation Desert Storm.

It took me and my family seven long days of walking to get to an artificial border that separates my country of Kurdistan. During this period, I felt that the entire world had forgotten us. This incident changed my life from a university student to a helpless refugee, merely because I was a member of a particular minority group, the Kurds.

Years later in Canada, I started working as a settlement worker for MOSAIC, an organization that was founded and led by refugees and immigrants.

In 2017, MOSAIC became a Sponsorship Agreement Holder, a status that allows our agency to identify, nominate and privately sponsor refugees. My refugee experience and the sense of being forgotten as a refugee has always influenced my work. That's why when I was approached by advocates from Australia and in Canada about refugees who were affected by the Australia policy to process their applications in processing centres in Nauru and Papua New Guinea, I immediately felt that getting involved was the right thing to do.

I approached MOSAIC leadership and the Board, they too felt that it was the right thing to do and agreed to dedicate our Sponsorship Agreement Holder status to support the "forgotten" refugees in PNG and Nauru. We are so fortunate to be working closely with the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), AdsUp Canada, UNHCR and several other groups."

— SALEEM SPINDARI



**Refugee Council
of Australia**