



Refugee Council  
of Australia

# IMPLEMENTATING THE REFUGEE PARTICIPATION PLEDGE

October 2023

In 2019, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) was one of 29 signatories to the Refugee Participation Pledge, an initiative led by the Global Refugee-led Network and launched at the first Global Refugee Forum.<sup>1</sup>

The Refugee Participation Pledge states:

*In accordance with the commitments established under goal 6 of the Grand Bargain to support a “Participation Revolution”, we pledge to support the meaningful participation of refugees and host communities in decisions that affect their lives. Participation should take into account the diversity within communities, including age, gender, and disability. This pledge will support the agency of those we seek to assist while improving the relevance, quality, transparency, and accountability of that assistance. We furthermore commit to share experiences on the implementation of this pledge at subsequent Global Refugee Forums and/or high-level officials’ meetings.*

The following outlines the ways in which RCOA has progressed its commitment as an organisation to support the meaningful participation of refugees in decisions that affect their lives. The three objectives for implementation of the Refugee Participation Pledge below have been developed by the Global Refugee-led Network in the lead-up to the 2023 Global Refugee Forum.

## **Objective 1: Meaningful refugee participation at the local, national and international levels, at all stages of policymaking that concerns them.**

**Impact 1(a): All stakeholders meaningfully consult with refugees at the local, regional, and international levels (including all relevant refugee-led networks) and ensure their participation in policymaking and programme implementation processes.**

RCOA has sought to **consult, support and amplify the advocacy of refugees, refugee-led organisations and networks** in the development of policy advice and advocacy. This includes:

- ⇒ Developing Guiding Principles for the work of our organisation that clearly states RCOA will give ‘priority to the views, concerns and ideas of refugees and people seeking asylum, privileging their views over the views of people with greater power and influence, emphasising their right to be represented when decisions are being made about their future’.<sup>2</sup>
- ⇒ Inclusion of refugee-led organisations and networks in strategic advocacy work, including in advocacy leading to the establishment of a Parliamentary Friends of Refugees group and subsequent events.<sup>3</sup>
- ⇒ Co-convening a Sector Strategy Group in collaboration with the National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG).

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.globalrefugeenetwork.org/refugee-participation-pledge>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Guiding-Principles-Updated-15.12.21.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/launch-parliamentary-friends-of-refugees-group/>

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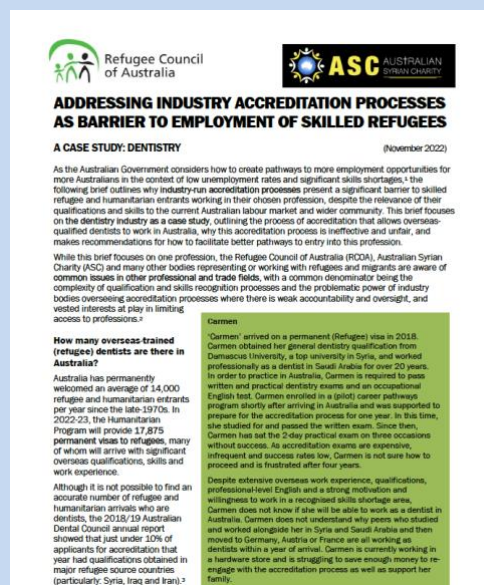
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The Refugee Council of Australia  
is the national umbrella body  
for refugees, people seeking asylum  
and the organisations and individuals  
who support them • Founded 1981

- ⇒ Supporting refugee-led organisations, networks and community advocates to make submissions on government policy and evidence before parliamentary inquiries. For example, in giving public evidence before the 2020 Senate Inquiry into Issues facing diaspora communities, RCOA co-presented alongside three representatives from refugee diasporas.
- ⇒ Regular and ongoing community consultations to inform policy advice and advocacy.

### In practice: Amplifying community concerns

In 2022 the Australian Syrian Charity (ASC) approached RCOA about issues that community members were facing finding employment commensurate with skills, experience and aspirations. Specifically, there were many highly skilled Syrian dentists who had arrived on Refugee and Humanitarian visas who were facing significant challenges navigating the accreditation process to practice as dentists in Australia. RCOA and ASC worked together to document the challenges faced by these dentists and facilitated a meeting between a small group of dentists and the Assistant Health Minister to discuss their concerns. The issues raised by ASC were included in RCOA's public submissions on policy relating to employment services, skills shortage and migration, and dental access.<sup>4</sup>



RCOA has provided **logistical or capacity-building support to refugees to enable their participation in policymaking processes:**

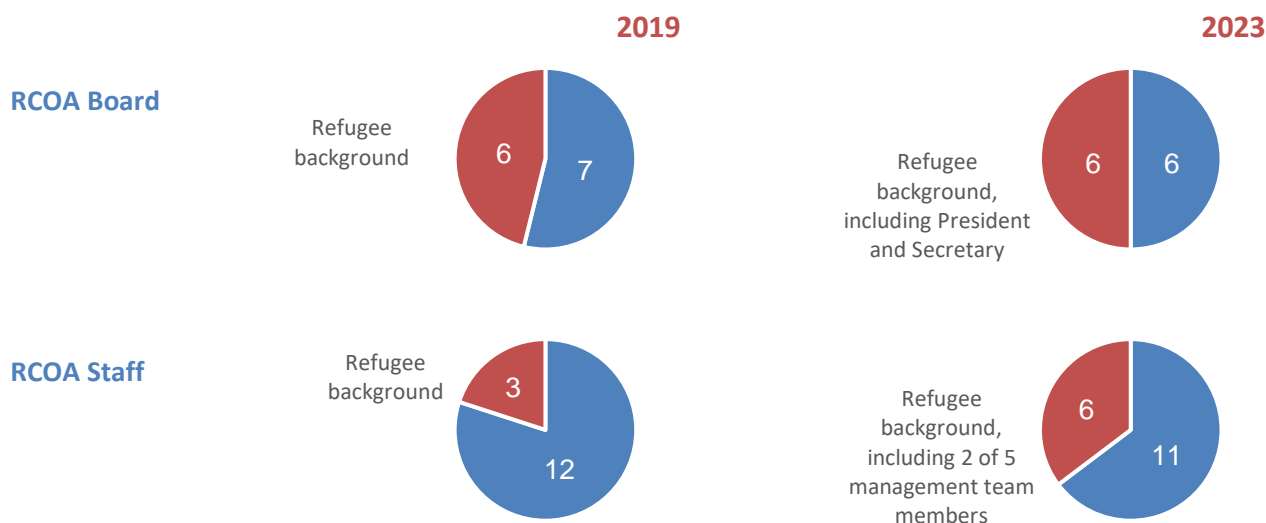
- ⇒ Working with NRAAG and members of the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) Refugee Advisory Group, RCOA provided training and orientation support to refugee representatives from Australia participating in the ATCR for the first time.
- ⇒ We have worked to resource and facilitate travel and mentoring support for first-time participants attending a range of international meetings since 2007, including ATCR, the UNHCR-NGO Consultations and consultations with UNHCR regional bureaux.
- ⇒ We have provided practical support to refugee-led networks to apply for funding to support their advocacy and coordination work.

### In practice: Convening a community roundtable with UNHCR leaders

In November 2022, the UNHCR office in Canberra contacted RCOA and the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) about a visit to Australia by UNHCR's Deputy High Commissioner and Asia Bureau Director. RCOA worked with APNOR and other refugee-led networks to convene a community roundtable in Sydney. Community advocates were invited to identify issues to raise at this meeting. RCOA staff briefed community advocates less familiar with these processes to prepare for the meeting, provided resources for inter-state participants to travel to Sydney, and supported refugee-led organisations to document their issues as written briefs to share with UNHCR colleagues ahead of the meeting.

<sup>4</sup> See: RCOA and ASC (2022). [Industry accreditation as a barrier to employment: A case study – dentistry](#); RCOA (2022). [Submission on Employment White Paper](#); RCOA (2023). [Submission on the Provision of and Access to Dental Services in Australia](#) – Submission 130

In addition, RCOA has progressively increased the **proportion of people with lived experience of displacement on our Board and Staff**, including in leadership roles (represented in red in the graphics below).



### Impact 1(b): Refugees participate robustly in relevant international forums and meetings.

RCOA has **consistently supported refugee participation at international forums and meetings** by:

- ⇒ Initiating and coordinating a selection process to identify refugee community advocates in Australia to participate in annual high-level international dialogue on refugee responses (ATCR, UNHCR-NGO Dialogue and Asia Pacific Consultations on Refugee Rights), providing logistical and financial support to participants selected for meetings, and including participants in all coordination and pre-planning work.
- ⇒ Facilitating the registration of refugee representatives who wish to participate in international meetings and who require registration by an organisation with ECOSOC status (e.g., Human Rights Council meetings).
- ⇒ Advocating for the inclusion of refugee speakers in international forums and meetings, suggesting speakers with relevant expertise or advocating for the inclusion of people with lived experience on panels.
- ⇒ Working with other NGOs to support refugee representatives to be part of the Australian delegation.

#### In practice: Making way for experts with lived refugee experience at an international level



President of the Queensland African Communities Council, Beny Bol OAM, was one of three refugee representatives from Australia selected through an open EOI process to participate in the 2023 ATCR.<sup>5</sup> Beny was subsequently selected to join the Australian Government delegation. Beny was one of four panellists who spoke at the ATCR main plenary on “Named sponsorship and resettlement”. His suggestion as an expert speaker was put forward jointly by RCOA and the Australian Government.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/EOI\\_ATCR-Refugee-community-reps\\_2023.pdf](https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/EOI_ATCR-Refugee-community-reps_2023.pdf)

Since 2012, RCOA has **advocated for and provided practical support to the Australian Government** to facilitate the inclusion of refugee representatives from Australia in the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR). In 2023, the Government not only supported this nomination process and covered the financial costs of a refugee participant participating in this global dialogue, but also included a refugee representative formally in its government delegation.

In addition, RCOA has actively supported **greater representation of people with lived refugee experience in policymaking and programs at a national level**, through initiatives such as:

- ⇒ Modelling how to give more space to people with both personal and professional expertise in policy discussion through the RCOA Refugee Alternatives conference and webinar series since 2017, where a commitment has been made to ensure speakers and participants from refugee backgrounds are able to lead conversations related to policy and programs.
- ⇒ Advocacy for participation of refugee-led networks in national dialogue, which led to the inclusion of refugee-led networks in formal and regular dialogue between NGOs and the Department of Home Affairs on Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program.
- ⇒ Providing practical support to refugee-led networks and organisations in Australia to advocate directly on issues of concern, including by supporting the drafting of submissions or joint submission on government policy.

### In practice: Refugee Alternatives

In 2021, RCOA's fifth annual Refugee Alternatives conference took place in an entirely virtual format with approximately 335 delegates. The format was highly successful, yielding more attendees from around the world and a larger number of diverse speakers and perspectives.

Importantly, more than 70% of the speakers were people with lived experience of displacement. Over 35% of all conference participants identified themselves as either a person from a refugee background or seeking asylum. As with previous Refugee Alternatives conferences, the agenda and panels were organised with the support of an advisory group made up of people who could speak from lived experience of displacement.

In April 2023, three of the four speakers for RCOA's Refugee Alternatives webinar on Resettlement and Complementary Pathways were from refugee backgrounds.



**Impact 1(c): References to meaningful refugee participation in relevant normative frameworks, such as ExCom Conclusions and resolutions of the UN General Assembly, are strengthened.**

Although RCOA is less active in directly influencing normative frameworks at an international level, our organisation **has provided input on draft Global NGO statements for ExCom** and advocated for references to meaningful refugee participation to be included.

### In practice: Calling for meaningful refugee participation in normative frameworks

In 2018, RCOA led the drafting of the Global NGO Statement at ExCom under the General Debate agenda item. The statement began by acknowledging the significance of the Global Summit of Refugees and went on to call on UNHCR to *...consider how to quickly and effectively involve refugee and host community representatives, including civil society organisations, in coordination and planning mechanisms to ensure responses are centrally informed by the people most directly affected. The refugee-led organisations and networks which have developed in many countries and regions are willing partners and bring distinct perspectives and capacities that complement the technical expertise of NGOs and other actors. Any engagement process must recognize the*

diversity which exists within refugee populations, ensuring the perspectives of women and girls, youth, elderly, LGBTI and others are heard.

## Objective 2: Enhanced accountability to affected populations

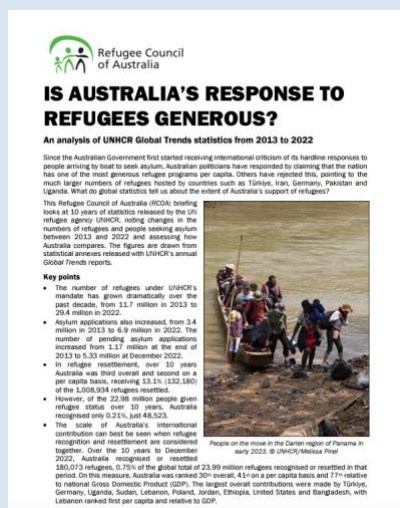
### Impact 2(a): Collective efforts are concentrated on improving concrete measures of refugee well-being and solutions.

RCOA does not provide direct services to refugees in Australia and is primarily focused on **advocacy and systemic change to improve responses to refugees and others displaced in Australia and internationally**. This includes programs and policies that impact on refugees' psychosocial, medical, legal, material and/or economic conditions. Our advocacy work is informed by people with lived experience and is part of collective civil society efforts to enhance accountability to those affected by government and other institution's programs and policies.

Examples of recent work of the Council that contribute to collective efforts to improve refugee well-being and solutions include:

- ⇒ Responding through public submissions to government inquiries and consultation processes on policies that affect refugees and people seeking asylum in Australia and internationally.<sup>6</sup>
- ⇒ Regularly compiling, analysing and publishing statistics on Australia's response to refugees, including in areas relating to immigration detention and asylum processes.<sup>7</sup>
- ⇒ Seeking to make government decisions more accessible and transparent, including by submitting Freedom of Information requests and advocating for questions on refugee policy to be asked through parliamentary processes (e.g., Senate Estimates<sup>8</sup>).
- ⇒ Publication of research and an online guide 'Keeping the Australian government accountable: a guide' on the use of non-judicial accountability mechanisms by the refugee sector.<sup>9</sup>
- ⇒ Coordinating, compiling and publishing of a review of Australia's response to refugees through the first comprehensive application of the Refugee Response Index (RRI) to a country context.<sup>10</sup>

### In practice: Promoting accountability to refugees



<sup>6</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/submissions/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/statistics/>

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/what-we-have-learnt-from-the-responses-to-2021-22-additional-senate-estimates-questions-on-notice/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/accountability-guide/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/refugee-response-index/>

**Impact 2(b): Refugee measures appropriately reflect Age, Gender, and Diversity considerations and the particular need to further strengthen women’s empowerment.**

In RCOA’s policy, research and advocacy work we strive to acknowledge and reflect the diversity of refugee experiences. Some ways we have done this include:

- ⇒ Supporting the work of refugee-led organisations and networks led by women, young people, LGBTQI+, and people with disabilities, such as collaborating with the Forcibly Displaced People’s Network as a funding partner for their 2023 Queer Displacements conference<sup>11</sup> and supporting the advocacy work of the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW) over many years.
- ⇒ Collaborating with the National Ethnic Disability Alliance and others on research on issues faced by refugees with a disability.<sup>12</sup> In 2022, RCOA contributed an extensive submission to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability, focusing on the experiences of people with disability in immigration detention.<sup>13</sup>
- ⇒ In RCOA’s research, policy and advocacy work, we strive to give careful consideration to questions of diversity and representation and to address barriers to participation faced by advocates from diverse backgrounds.

**Objective 3: Ensuring Sustainable Resourcing**

**Impact 3(a): Refugee-led initiatives receive adequate, reliable core funding to enable them to sustainably carry out their functions.**

The Refugee Council has supported refugee-led initiatives to access funding in a number of ways:

- ⇒ By providing AUD 40,000 in direct or seed funding to enable refugee-led organisations to employ staff, this funding being shared by the National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG) and Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR).
- ⇒ By supporting three refugee-led initiatives during their establishment phase, providing administrative support and acting as the legal entity while they completed the process of formal registration and seeking tax-exempt charity status. This has enabled APNOR, NRAAG and the Australian Assyrian Chaldean Syrian Advocacy Network (AACSAN) to receive government and philanthropic funding, employ staff in the projects they have managed and build organisational capacity at a critically important stage of their development.
- ⇒ By working collaboratively with APNOR to establish the Refugee Leadership Alliance (RLA) and administer the Pilot Pooled Funding Grant.<sup>14</sup> The RLA was established in June 2021 to increase access to networks, funds and influence for refugee leaders in the Asia Pacific region. The Pooled Funding Pilot aimed to secure funds from multiple donors with the total amount used to administer grants to refugee led organisations and initiatives. A participatory design process with refugee leaders was utilised to design the grants administration tools (e.g., application method, terminology and complexity of forms). This process created a two-way learning opportunity and resulted in user-friendly tools and increased awareness of the challenges experienced by refugee leaders when applying for grants. This was an important step as refugees are often excluded from program design. Over 100 applications were received and assessed by the RLA’s Board of Trustees – who all have lived experience of forced displacement. Due to the financial contributions of three donors, 21 refugee-led organisations across the Asia Pacific region were awarded over \$381,000 to implement

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<sup>11</sup> <https://fdpn.org.au/queer-displacements/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/disability-report/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/people-with-disability-in-immigration-detention/>

<sup>14</sup> <https://apnor.org/refugee-leadership-alliance/>

projects. The funding is untied and ongoing capacity strengthening support is available to organisation. RCOA's Deputy CEO co-chairs the RLA.

### **Impact 3(b): Partnerships with Refugee-led Organizations (RLOs) are equitable and focused on shifting power.**

In our funding partnerships with RLOs, RCOA has ensured that decision-making for how funding is expended lies with the RLO, and that relationships are built on an understanding that funding should be transitioned entirely to the RLO once the capacity is there to do so. For each of these funding partnerships, a mutually agreed memorandum of understanding was developed to document the responsibilities of each organisation involved.

### **Shaping public discourse in Australia**

Although not part of the GRN framework for reporting on implementation of the Refugee Participation Pledge, RCOA has also been active in **creating spaces in Australia for people who can speak from lived experience to shape public narratives about refugees.**

This has been done through initiatives including:

- ⇒ Since 2014, RCOA's Face2Face Schools and Community Program has recruited, trained and supported a pool of paid speakers from refugee backgrounds to deliver presentations tailored for primary and secondary students, teachers, community groups, government services or businesses with a passion for learning about refugee journeys and social justice.<sup>15</sup>
- ⇒ RCOA's National Refugee Ambassadors initiative—which initially began during Refugee Week and is a core part of the Face2Face Schools and Community Program—involves a pool of trained and supported speakers who can be linked to public speaking and media engagement opportunities at a local, national and international level.<sup>16</sup>
- ⇒ The Refugee Council is approached frequently by media outlets to provide commentary about refugee-related events or policy. Wherever possible and appropriate, our organisation will recommend that media outlets speak directly to representatives from refugee community networks or organisations. Our media officer will work with community spokespersons prior to for media interviews to ensure they are prepared and can best shape the narrative they wish to share.

#### **In practice: Refugee Ambassadors**

As a newly arrived refugee to Australia, becoming a National Refugee Ambassador has played a major role in my engagement with the community. It has offered opportunities of professional development and involvement in research projects and initiatives that would benefit refugee communities in Australia. As a paid speaker, I know that the work and perspective that I bring to the team is valued and respected. This experience has opened doors to other opportunities of advocacy and refugee support work.

- Samah Shda, National Refugee Ambassador



*Refugee Ambassador Sidiqa Faqihi speaks to Masters of Humanitarian Assistance students at Deakin University, August 2023.*

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/f2f-overview/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.refugeeweek.org.au/ambassadors/>

### In practice: Media stories

Some of the stories where RCOA has linked media outlets to people with lived experience to share their own experiences and ideas include:

ABC (10 August 2023)

*Asylum seekers left living in poverty as government payments dry up*

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-08-10/nsw-refugee-and-asylum-seeker-payment-reduced-holder/102649208>

The Canberra Times (18 June 2023)

*Teacher's journey from refugee camps to fashion catwalk*

<https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/8237709/teachers-journey-from-refugee-camps-to-fashion-catwalk/>

SBS Assyrian (20 June 2023)

*Oliver Sliwa: A refugee who became an Australian lawyer*

<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/assyrian/en/podcast-episode/oliver-sliwa-a-refugee-who-became-an-australian-lawyer/ikvbatny9>