

Developing a National Network for Grass Roots Advocacy for Refugee Rights

Brief overview of outcomes from the inaugural Australian Refugee Action Network (ARAN) Conference - May 2017

There were 190 participants at our very first national gathering of refugee activist and advocacy organisations in Australia in Canberra last month. The Australian Refugee Action Network (ARAN) Conference was overwhelmingly and enthusiastically in favour of establishing a national network to improve coordination of our advocacy and to share ideas and resources. Participants were very engaged and very generous in the way that they shared their experiences and ideas.

Four things stood out about the Conference:

It was a very united conference. We reached broad consensus about what we are fighting against and also about what kind of policies we want to see in place. Overall, it was clear that what unites us is vastly greater than whatever differences we may have.

It was a very practical conference. We were a meeting of activists who are already well-informed about the issues involved. We were able to share our successes - and some of the hiccups - from our often many years of activist experience. The small group sessions were amazingly rich in ideas and in fostering new relationships and horizontal links among and between us.

We walked our talk of tolerance and respect for difference. Although the many groups who were there often do quite different things and have different emphases, there was broad acceptance that these differences can be accommodated within the movement and that we can come together on the main questions and for crucial actions at particular times.

The conference was very supportive of the idea of sharing resources, avoiding duplication and increasing the impact and leverage from joint actions.

We were happy to establish a National Coordinating Committee to develop this agenda.

We were also very clear about what we want (and don't want) from that Committee. We said we want it to be **accountable and responsive** and to work on behalf of Network member groups and **amplify** their work. We want people with **skills** to do the job. We want to reflect the geographic, political, faith and cultural **diversity** amongst our members, and our grassroots and volunteer foundations. We wanted to seek out and encourage the involvement of a strong and representative voices of people with lived **refugee experience** (or people from refugee backgrounds?). We also said we want it to be transparent and responsive to groups. Specifically, we said:

- **The Committee will be no larger than 12 members**
- **Its role** is to coordinate and facilitate (but not direct) information and resource sharing and to plan for co-ordinated actions and campaigns to amplify local campaign efforts and strengthen the message to politicians and the public **The priority tasks** of the Committee are to build the Network and engage with other networks, establish links and provide a resource "clearing house" (website) of resources and activities, facilitate national working groups in key areas of activism, build capacity (training) and to broaden the Network membership.

The Committee will also need to establish some clear processes for communicating and engaging with members.

We also acknowledged that the Committee will face some challenges. At a practical level we said it will need to be able to find funds for resources and activities. It will need to add value and not build an extra layer of duplication. It will need to keep a responsive communication flow without overloading members. At an organisational level we noted the risk of becoming top-heavy, the challenges of meeting the expectations of a diverse membership and sustaining the administrative load.

The Committee we elected is below. We decided to choose a maximum of 9 committee members at this stage to allow the capacity to co-opt a further 3 members in the near future so that we can get a representative balance of membership.

ARAN National Coordinating Committee		
State	Name	Group/organisation
ACT	John Minns	Refugee Action Committee, Canberra
Vic	Pamela Curr	Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project
National	Margaret Rasa	Rural Australians for Refugees – National
WA	Caron Molster	RRAN (Refugee Rights Action Network)
NSW	James Supple	Refugee Action Coalition (NSW)
Vic	Marie Hapke	Refugee Advocacy Network
Vic	Linda Cusworth	CRAG (Combined Refugee Action Group)
Tas	Lili Calitz	Amnesty Refugee Rights Group Tasmania
NSW	Amir Javan	People Just Like Us

A more detailed report on discussions in conference sessions and workshops is being prepared and will be available shortly. This will include notes from the discussions on a common campaign platform.

Australian Refugee Action Network

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