

Title of Event: Building Bridges: Advancing Refugee Protection in a Divided World

Notetaker: Wade Radmore, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team

Host of Event: UNSW Sydney and UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

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Toplines:

- Mohammed Naeem emphasized that real leadership in refugee protection means persuading through action amid eroded trust, urging collaboration across local institutions, schools, and civil society where integration truly happens.
- He argued that refugee protection depends on decentralized, community-led systems—national policymaking often misses these local realities, while showing that “caring works” through visible, effective local initiatives rebuilds public trust.
- Naeem noted that polarization and misinformation thrive because they are politically useful, stressing engagement with “**unpoliticized middle communities**” and bipartisan collaboration to restore empathy and factual discourse.

Keynote Address

Presenter:

- **Mohammed Naeem**, Senior Director for Advocacy Strategy, Refugees International

Circulated Materials: [Full Conference Live-stream](#) (Keynote address begins at 0:39:00)

Key Points:

- Starts with a quote: “There are leaders, and then there are those who lead.”
- True leadership lies in persuasive action.
- However, our current context is one of eroded trust and understanding across societies and organizations as echo chambers grow and policymaking narrows.
- We now struggle to agree on fundamental realities.
- Urges leaders to **embrace complexity and build consensus** through civil society, local institutions, schools, and municipalities, where integration actually happens.
- Current gaps in funding, global aid infrastructure struggles, and attacks on asylum protections are all pitstops, not finish lines.
- Our biggest issue is to **trust and to productively disagree**.
- Refugee protection system is a web of interlocking norms, laws, and institutions—and that concentrating power in a single arena (such as national governments or the UN) misses the local drivers of real change.
- Across the world, integration and resettlement are led by civil society organizations, schools, and local communities.
- Emphasizes that most people already care about refugees; the challenge is to **demonstrate that caring works**.
- The most persuasive policies are made visible and materially felt.

- When refugees are visible participants in community and policy life, empathy and pragmatic support reinforce one another—creating a virtuous cycle between public attitudes and policymaking.
- Describes his experience of the U.S. government’s rapid decision-making following October 7 that lacked foresight, wishing there had been refugee leaders in these spaces to provide their lived experience as input.
- Reflects on his background growing up in a refugee community in Queens and shares that even though it was him in those ornate halls, it could have been anyone.
- He closes by stating that if we all build where our feet are, we will end up somewhere better.

Questions and Answers

Is it possible to build consensus when we can't agree on facts?

- Not entirely. The information environment is now too fragmented and complex.
- Traditional media once relied on centralized distribution, but today’s landscape—with countless channels and influencers—makes it extremely difficult to penetrate false narratives.
- When laws are based on fabricated realities, bridge-building becomes even more vital.
- Stresses the need to engage across political divides, including those typically opposed to refugee advocacy.
- E.g., Sudan: Despite partisan control in the U.S. Congress, meaningful engagement with Republican subcommittees on Africa has sometimes yielded more productive dialogue than with Democrats.

You said we don't need to make people care, but to show that caring works. How can that be illustrated to policymakers?

- National-level refugee policy often fails because it misses local realities.
- Local politics are inherently problem-solving, while national politics are performative.
- By nationalizing refugee debates, opportunities to highlight effective local programs have been lost.
- Evidence becomes powerful only when it is articulated to both national and local audiences.
- Local initiatives that work—when amplified—can reshape national discourse and rebuild trust in refugee policy.

Why do politicians appear more polarized?

- Because polarization is effective.
- It consolidates support, mobilizes voters, and simplifies narratives.
- However, it also alienates vast portions of the population—those not politically engaged, often more affluent and insulated.
- Urges investment in these “**unpoliticized middle communities**” to help turn them into a “we.”
- Policymakers tend to ignore them because they’re not politically active, but these groups could play a decisive role in rebalancing public dialogue.
- Suggests focusing outreach on smaller cities and communities—places often overlooked but essential for bridge-building between refugees and host populations.
- Only about one-third of Americans personally know a refugee, yet direct relationships are key to changing attitudes.

How can faith-based organizations engage in refugee processes without falling into a “saviour” mentality?

- Religiosity in the U.S. decreases toward the political left, increases toward the right, and remains strong in the middle.
- Faith-based institutions are crucial partners.
- The goal: build infrastructure connecting these institutions with refugee communities.

How do we tackle misinformation and make good policy visible?

- Misinformation transcends borders — e.g., voters in Michigan may care more about the U.S. southern border than those living there.
- Political and media ecosystems amplify these distortions.
- Refugee International advises, supports, and complements elected officials to take a formidable stance that retains empathetic qualities as a country.

With the U.S. cutting \$40 billion in aid, who fills that gap?

- U.S. foreign aid has increasingly been used transactionally — to curb migration rather than support protection.
- Funding shortfalls are severe; unclear who will replace U.S. aid.
- However, some grassroots innovations have emerged (e.g., Sudan Response Network — Nobel Peace Prize nominee), created to fill gaps left by government inaction.
- Refugees must be empowered to lead and shape the systems that affect them.
- The asylum system is not broken but overburdened — global collaboration is essential to restore function and narrative integrity.