

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

Notetaker: Brynn Duggan, uOttawa Refugee Hub Knowledge Team

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

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Toplines:

- Refugees and First Nations peoples must be involved in refugee protection efforts.
- Hafsar Tameesuddin argues that funding given to refugee-led organizations can have a greater impact with lesser costs.
- Dr. Jeff Crisp expects that the UNHCR will become smaller and will be pressured to become a migration management agency and withdraw from certain areas.
- Jeff makes various recommendations to the future UNHCR High Commissioner, such as truly understanding the role and learning from predecessors.
- James Jegasothy describes how state governments can strengthen refugee protection.
- Prof Kate Ogg highlights that **community sponsorship in the UK, Ireland, and Australia has led to systemic change in unanticipated areas.**
- Panelists agree that more interaction is needed with individuals with differing views, instead of speaking in echo chambers.

Panel Session:

- All Together Now: Mobilising Whole-of-Society Responses to International Protection

Moderator:

- **Prof Daniel Ghezelbash**, Professor of Law & Director, Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law

Presenters:

- **Hafsar Tameesuddin**, Co-Secretary General, Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network
- **Dr. Jeff Crisp**, Visiting Research Fellow, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford
- **James Jegasothy**, Deputy CEO, Multicultural NSW
- **Prof Kate Ogg**, Professor, ANU Law School, Australian National University

Circulated Materials: [Full Conference Live-stream](#) (Session begins at 6:27:00)

Key Points:

Panel Question and Answer Session

1. **Moderator's question:** *Hafsar, what have the recent cuts to US aid and the UNHCR budget meant for the communities you work with? What has the response looked like?*
 - **Hafsar**
 - It has become especially challenging for NGOs to provide practical programs and support to the refugees for their day-to-day survival.
 - Decreasing UNHCR budgets limit their ability to monitor situations of detention, human rights violations, and mistreatment of refugees.

- Aid cuts are destroying the hope of leaving for thousands of refugees and worsening mental health challenges.
- Women, girls, and other vulnerable groups are being exposed to violence, and there is no entity to intervene. In some refugee-hosting countries, you cannot go to the police because you do not exist.
- Affected communities are resilient:
 - ❖ In Bangladesh and Indonesia, refugees have built learning centres.
 - ❖ In Malaysia, we have trained women-led refugee organizations to respond to security issues and violence.

2. **Moderator's question:** *How have the budget cuts and current global politics influenced the UNHCR? How do you see its role evolving?*

○ **Jeff**

- I predict these trends:
 - ❖ A decrease in size, in terms of budget, staffing, and geographical presence.
 - ❖ Pressure to withdraw from relatively prosperous areas or those home to relatively few refugees.
 - ❖ Pressure to withdraw from activities not directly related to its core mandate of refugee protection and solutions. (Reduced involvement in: reintegration and reconstruction when refugees return to countries of origin, natural disasters, and IDPs.)
 - ❖ Donor states seeking to transform UNHCR from a refugee protection organization to a migration management agency.
 - ❖ A push to move away from territorial asylum in the direction of safe, legal movements.
 - ❖ A clarification of the respective roles and responsibilities of IOM and UNHCR.

3. **Moderator's question:** *What role can local and state governments play in strengthening refugee protection?*

○ **James**

- **They can provide social and physical infrastructure to ensure protection is fully realized.**

○ **Kate**

- First Nations people must be included in partnerships.
- Sponsors who most understand displacement are Irish, because as a formerly colonized people, they understand how colonialism has created dynamics of forced displacement. There are opportunities in Australia to have greater awareness, too, because of our cultural history.

4. **Moderator's question:** *Kate, based on your research, what does multistakeholder collaboration bring to refugee protection?*

○ **Kate**

- A few examples of unanticipated community sponsorship benefits:
 - ❖ UK:

- ❖ Community sponsorship facilitated relationships between different civil society organizations, as well as between them and the government.
- ❖ Relationships have been leveraged to achieve refugee protection outcomes beyond community sponsorship and resettlement. Community sponsorship actors...
 - ✚ Convinced the UK government not to reduce its resettlement targets post the Syrian conflict.
 - ✚ Persuaded the UK government to adopt a specific unaccompanied minor resettlement program.
 - ✚ Were successful in advocacy related to refugees who come outside of resettlement, in particular, the conditions of detention and refugees facing homelessness.
- ❖ Ireland:
 - ✚ A rural town in Ireland was hosting a meeting about community sponsorship, led by citizens, with a government presence, when far-right anti-asylum protesters stormed in. The government presence countered the hostility.
- ❖ Australia:
 - ✚ **Community-led community sponsorship in Australia has been able to provide access to resettlement for refugees who do not have access to UNHCR resettlement.**
 - ✚ **Community sponsors have developed transnational networks.**

5. **Moderator's question:** *What are the dynamics between grassroots local actors and international organizations? How does that impact restricted funding? How can cooperation be improved?*

○ **Hafsar**

- Working closely with local organizations will cut down costs *and* increase impact on the ground.
- People who have been working in this space have incorporated it into their identities, so there seem to be challenges in stepping back to allow communities to take power.
- To keep the refugee protection ecosystem alive, the general population is crucial.

6. **Moderator's question:** *James, why does the state government step up more than the federal government?*

○ **James**

- The state government can take a bit more of a leadership role for the following reasons:
 - ❖ Local scope.
 - ❖ Different legal responsibilities.
 - ❖ Connection to stakeholders.
 - ❖ Ability to engage more with people.
 - ❖ Accountability mechanisms.
 - ❖ Ability to test things out.
 - ❖ Ability to pressure other states.

7. **Moderator's question:** *Hafsar, what role do you see grassroots and refugee-led organizations playing in building collaborations?*
 - **Hafsar**
 - Refugees and affected communities are “people at the center of the struggle.” Their participation is crucial.
 - I am tired of hearing that refugees are burdens: Many reports prove that refugees and migrants contribute to host communities.
 - **The ecosystem of protection requires all of us to work as a collective at this critical time.**
8. **Moderator's question:** *Jeff, a new UNHCR High Commissioner will be starting in early 2026. If you had their ear, what would your top three suggestions be?*
 - **Jeff**
 - Ask, “Do you really want this job? Why do you want it, and are you aware of the challenges that it entails?”
 - Ensure they know that the job involves at least four different roles.
 - ❖ A manager of a very large and sprawling organization.
 - ❖ An international diplomat.
 - ❖ A fundraiser.
 - ❖ An advocate for refugee protection principles.
 - Advise them to find an adequate balance between these functions.
 - Recommend they learn from the experience of their predecessors: maintain the highest level of personal behaviour, commit to the role, know when it is time to relinquish the post, and focus on the position, rather than future job prospects.
 - The key challenge facing the new High Commissioner is their relationship with the USA and the Trump administration.
9. **Moderator's question:** *Kate, what role can lawyers play in this broader ecosystem, and how can we make working practices more collaborative?*
 - **Kate**
 - Strategic litigation's impact must be measured and disseminated.
 - I recommend active listening through deliberative democracy initiatives, such as citizens' assemblies.

Floor Question and Answer Session

1. **Audience question:** *How can state governments work with the federal government on overlapping issues?*
 - **Kate**
 - In terms of housing, private landlords have been an interesting player in community sponsorship in the UK and Ireland.
 - **James**
 - Planning is important. We can predict where intake might come from and plan where we want to settle people. State and federal governments must work together on creating infrastructure.
 - **Comment (from UNHCR representative in audience):**

- *As citizens of Australia, you all have to hold politicians to their commitments and 2023 Global Refugee Forum pledges.*

2. **Audience question:** *How do we mobilize young people and amplify local work?*

○ **Hafsar**

- The Asia-Pacific Refugee Rights Network has a youth working group, mainly focused on youth from displaced backgrounds.
- Unfortunately, this crisis is not going to end in the next 5 years. We need the younger generation of leaders coming along with the knowledge, institutional support, and tools equipped to carry on this work because we cannot sustain this ourselves.

3. **Audience question:** *How can a whole-of-society approach combat entrenched international refugee protection trends, like the externalization of migration control, offshore processing, and boat pushbacks?*

○ **Kate**

- Through strategic litigation, which is imperfect, of course—The best you can get are half victories.
- Education is important: Many Australians do not know about offshore processing, and changing their perspectives when informed.

○ **Hafsar**

- Community advocates often do not know what is happening at the top level.
- **We need transparency, accountability, and the opening of spaces for us to join hands with you to make this whole society approach happen.**

4. **Audience question:** *How can we implement the things we have been discussing in practice, and what are examples of good practice we can build on?*

○ **Jeff**

- **We spend far too much time talking to people who agree with us, rather than reaching out to people with different views. We need to change that.**

○ **James**

- I agree.
- We say things are entrenched, but we have always felt that way. South Africa used to be an apartheid state. We had a very different view of refugees before what happened in Vietnam and China. A lot of change has happened because different actors have joined together.