



Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

Submission to the

Australian Government , Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

30 November 2022

Submitted by

Asia Pacific Network of Refugees

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The Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) welcomes the opportunity to submit to the consultation process regarding the Australian Government new policy to guide international development cooperation.

The recommendations in this submission, if adopted, will strengthen international development cooperation. It will place human rights at the centre of government's policies, ensuring that all people can access their human rights equally and justly.

This statement has been prepared by the Asia Pacific Network of Refugees with the support and collaboration of other RLOs/Is, across Australia and the Asia Pacific region to raise the voices of refugees in decision-making processes.

The Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) is the only refugee-led network in the region consisting of more than 200 individuals and 80 refugee-led organisations/initiatives from 11 countries (Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Thai Burma Border, Bangladesh, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Hong Kong and Japan). APNOR is led and run by refugees where 40 per cent of the leadership roles includes women with lived experience. APNOR is based in Sydney.

The number of people forcibly displaced worldwide continues to grow. Responses and solutions to forced displacement remain grossly inadequate. The Asia Pacific is the region of some of the most acute and protracted refugee situations, being home to two of the largest refugee producing countries in the world Myanmar and Afghanistan. Additionally, it's a region in which climate-related displacement is already a reality.

However, only 19 out of 52 states in the Asia Pacific region are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and/or 1967 Protocol. In 2019, a meagre 0.4% of refugees in the region attained a durable solution. The capacity of the humanitarian system is also severely constrained. Refugees in our region live in protracted displacement situations with few protections and little formal support.

The 2018 Global Compact on Refugees acknowledges that *'responses are most effective when they actively and meaningfully engage those they are intended to protect and assist'*. Australia is a signatory to the ['The Grand Bargain'](#), which calls for a ['Participation Revolution'](#) to recognise the central role of local communities in humanitarian responses.

However, an initial goal to allocate at least 25% of humanitarian funding to local and national responders 'as directly as possible' by 2020 is woefully behind target at [0.5%](#). Some analysis puts this down to the innate power imbalances of the humanitarian sector, simply put, NGOs are ultimately accountable to donors not local communities. However, some donors and NGOs are working hard to shift the balance to support local people to determine their own futures.

In June 2021 the Grand Bargain was reframed to include greater accountability, with signatories agreeing to two enabling priorities: namely, 'quality funding' and 'localisation' though visibility of funding, accountability, and greater support for the leadership, delivery and capacity of local responders and the participation of affected communities in addressing humanitarian needs.

Signatories agreed to these priorities in part because 'local responders .. are often the first responders in crisis'. The move toward cash handouts is one of the welcome results of this push.

There is an explicit directive to take an approach “based on inclusive consultative processes and gender analysis with affected populations, and effective coordination that promotes increased representation and where possible leadership of local responders”

APNOR advocates for refugee agency, strengthening the collaboration between initiatives and other stakeholders to guarantee positive changes in the humanitarian system and the refugee response at the local, national, regional and international level. We do this through joint advocacy, capacity strengthening, resource sharing, partnership and outreach.

We envision a world in which refugees and diaspora are essential stakeholders along with other actors’ states, civil society, private sector for defining and implementing comprehensive and sustainable refugee policy. The way forward is to promote whole of society approach in which everyone including refugee led organisations (RLOs) and Refugee Led Initiatives (RLIs) are seen equal actors.

This submission suggests that the Australian Government:

1. Invest in Refugee leadership and refugee-led organisations/initiatives

There are many examples of refugee led-initiatives that are effective, innovative and impactful. This is because needs and solutions are identified from within affected communities; we know what will work best and are committed and accountable to our own communities. We are always the first responders to crisis in our communities. Refugees are willing and active agents of change, not passive recipients of humanitarian assistance.

In many countries in the Asia Pacific region, it is refugee-led initiatives that provide displaced communities with access to education, health, legal and social support. At the same time, refugee-led initiatives are chronically under-resourced and receive little support or recognition from other stakeholders for this important work. Importantly, refugee representatives are often left out of decision-making processes and are given little space to voice and contribute to the identification, design and implementation of solutions.

The International budget should develop mechanisms to enable direct investment in refugee-led initiatives and to ensure funding goes directly to smaller or grassroots refugee-led organisations. This may include:

- inviting collaborative partnerships between larger organisations and refugee-led initiatives
- reviewing funding guidelines and processes to address structural impediments that prevent refugee-led organisations’ from applying for available funding, and/or setting up smaller targeted funding opportunities for grassroots community-led organisations to develop their capacity to organise and implement activities.
 - APNOR has established the “ [Refugee Leadership Alliance](#)”, a pooled donor fund which aims to transform the aid sector by example, by directly funding

refugee-lead organisations in the region and providing capacity-strengthening support as requested by refugees.

We propose that the Australian Government invest in initiatives that are accountable to affected populations, for instance:

- require that grantees work with refugees to demonstrate how they are actively accountable to affected communities, including how funding will invest in refugee-led organisations and leadership capacities, and how decision-making processes within a grantee organisation involve affected people

There needs to be better **recognition and value given to diverse refugee perspectives** within refugee communities; the Government should

- actively work to ensure that leadership opportunities and support is provided to refugee-led organisations including marginalised voices within communities in terms of age, gender, sexuality, disability and minority status.

We should ensure as a country that our international policies ensure that refugee representatives who are engaged to inform, develop, deliver or evaluate responses affecting forcibly displaced populations are

- recognised in structures **as knowledge-holders and experts**. For example, refugee representatives are named, compensated appropriately, and have the same requirement of accountability to affected populations as other stakeholders involved in these processes.

We encourage the Australian government to uphold international commitments to the Grand Bargain, the sustainable development goals and the Global Refugee Commitments and to ensure **decisions that impact directly on refugees should not be made without representation from affected communities**. Governments and organisations working with refugees must make a commitment to engage with refugee community representatives, such as through refugee-led networks and organisations. Importantly, the onus is on all stakeholders participating in a decision-making process to insist on representation from affected communities before proceeding. This applies to local initiatives through to high-level policy discussions.

2. Actively work toward the fulfillment of refugee rights

Refugees cannot change unequal systems or challenge harmful policies or practices alone. We need allies and supporters with different skills, expertise, networks, resources and perspectives to help us fulfil our full potential and access our rights as individuals and as communities.

We are calling on governments, civil society groups, NGOs, the private sector, philanthropic organisations, media, and individual supporters to work with us and to see us as people and communities with great potential.

To do this we need the support of Australian government to **ensure refugees have access to education and work**. Across the Asia Pacific region, refugees are calling for access to education and work rights to be able to live and contribute to the societies in which they live and to better plan for the future. Without these basic rights, refugees will continue to be reliant on others. By allowing displaced people to gain skills and then apply them, refugees will be more able to act as net contributors. APNOR has been working with five refugee led learning centres across Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and Bangladesh to prioritise education needs and explore innovative ways of access to education specially as a post follow up to the pandemic.

It's important for all refugees to live in safety. In many parts of the Asia Pacific region, refugees do not have a recognised legal status, access to documentation, have limited or no access to legal processes to regularise legal status, and face a range of threats to safety, including detention. We want to work with the Australian government to work towards ensuring displaced people can live in safety and dignity until a durable solution can be found.

As part of the global push to increase access to durable solutions, refugees in Asia and the Pacific are calling on the Australian government to renew and increase their commitments to supporting the safe, voluntary and dignified return of refugees, local integration in host societies, and third country resettlement options.

3. Increase Dialogue , Partnership and Communication

For a very long time the refugee and diaspora communities have been raising concerns around lack of information exchange and dialogue between the government and the community .

The refugee community refers to information and communication as “aid” itself and requests for a two way flow of knowledge and ideas to increase development effectiveness for the community and the government.

We propose to DFAT to expand its partnership with APNOR , the peak body for Refugee Led Organisations/ Initiatives across the Asia region. Through a formalised partnership , we will be able to support collaboration between DFAT and the Refugee Led organisations in Australia and the region to contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic development, poverty reduction, and human rights for all.

Conclusion

The Asia Pacific Network of Refugees (APNOR) thanks the Australian Government , Department of Foreign Affairs for the opportunity to submit to the new International policy and welcomes and further on these recommendations.