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Photo: Sarah Lucie P Strauven, Refugee Alternatives Volunteer 2018

## Director's Letter: Shaping our own future

Carolina Gottardo

I was recently privileged to witness a demonstration of the ability of refugees and people seeking asylum to build positive futures and to exercise leadership - even in the face of trauma, displacement and long-term hardship.

I was a speaker at the international Refugee Alternatives Conference on 13-14 February, where more than 60% of the 65 speakers had lived experience as refugees and more than 60% were women.

Panellists like the women pictured above shared the collaborative and innovative practices which have enabled them to build new lives and enhance community cohesion in Australia, where they settled after seeking asylum.

Their panel, A Continuum of Experiences: Refugee Women in

Australia, was moderated by Mariam Issa, above right. Mariam, originally from Somalia, co-founded the not-for-profit organisation and community garden Resilient Aspiring Women in the backyard of her home in Australia. RAW aims to support women's resilience through intercultural dialogue and exchange, facilitated by the activities of storytelling, cooking and gardening.

Another conference session covered the importance of placing the expertise of people with lived experiences of seeking asylum and refuge at the centre of research, advocacy and policy development. Conference sessions also explored participation by the wider Australian community in changing the future - for example, new avenues for civil society to pursue and advocate for change in our treatment and support

Four inspiring women at the Refugee Alternatives conference on 13-14 February. From left: Speakers Esther Nima Sung - youth worker, Phoenix Youth Centre, and Chin Youth Organisation President; Dung Tran - Multicultural Services Branch, Department of Human Services; and Yarric Bangura - artist, writer, performer, entrepreneur, ambassador (Stand Up, The Big Anxiety Festival; Australia's UNHCR Special Youth Representative). Introducing them, right, is Mariam Issa, from RAW (more details in text).

of refugees and people seeking asylum, in Australia, in the Asia Pacific region, and offshore.

But even with a conference such as this, which demonstrated the treasure trove of skill and commitment across sectors and communities, the future looks very bleak for many people seeking asylum in our country. Recent severe, unfair changes to government policy have stripped many people of critical support during the protection application period, when *cont on p2*

cont from p1 they have no chance to earn an income. Now, more than ever, people seeking asylum face destitution. The article below gives more details.

JRS bases our work on a core Jesuit principle: to offer support where it is needed most. We thank everyone whose generosity has enabled us to provide this support – donors,

volunteers, schools, parishes and community groups.

The story on page 2 features a community's commitment to justice for people seeking asylum. On page 4, we highlight the empowerment and dignity that comes from being given the chance to work.

Together we can shape futures.

## A key civil society voice

Advocacy is a key component of JRS' work. Our advocacy flows from close engagement with refugees and people seeking asylum, and is intimately linked to the insights we glean through service and accompaniment.

The challenges abound. At the global level, Australia is playing a key role in shaping the Global Compact on Refugees, and the Global Compact on Safe, Orderly, and Regular Migration to privilege agendas of sovereignty and border control. These new instruments will form the foundation for future governance of migration flows around the world. Led by our Director Carolina Gottardo, JRS Australia has been a key civil society voice in multiple forums and negotiations to ensure the rights and dignities of refugees, people seeking asylum and migrants are upheld in the new frameworks and that no one is left behind.

Here in Australia, we are particularly concerned about the plight of children, women and men seeking asylum around the country. The government has decided that many from this group of people will no longer have access to even meagre income support (89% of the lowest

NewStart allowance), and is starting to cut people off en masse.

Many have significant mental illnesses or physical disabilities, are single parents with multiple children or have infants. All these factors inhibit the ability to work and to engage in an already complex, lengthy and expensive refugee determination process. Thousands are acutely vulnerable to destitution, homelessness, and a real risk of serious harm living hand-to-mouth on the streets.

Challenging this punitive policy change, and ensuring that people seeking asylum in Australia can have their claims heard fairly, is a JRS advocacy priority this year.

To this end, we are conducting research on the impacts of these and similar government decisions in the last few years. Insights gained will enable us to advocate to federal and state decision-makers in the lead up to and following upcoming elections, to reintroduce permanent protection, and ensure adequate living conditions for people waiting for an outcome on their protection claim.



 Sarah Lucie P Strauven, Refugee Alternatives Volunteer 2018


But our public engagement does not begin or end with so-called high-level political engagement. Our staff and volunteers are working hard to build relationships with schools, parishes, and local communities across Sydney in order to raise awareness of the difficulties people seeking asylum face in our neighbourhoods.

Ultimately, we hope to see people getting involved in the conversation in any way possible.

Whether it be donating to our food bank, hosting a meal for a group of people who are sleeping rough, providing much needed funding to the work of JRS with people seeking asylum, volunteering or meeting with your local MP, everything counts.



## A community in solidarity

 Students from Xavier Catholic College in Ballina with retired teacher Meg Pickup, in a joint action with Ballina Action for Refugees. There is advocacy for refugees across the Ballina community. This is a Council-designated place of welcome, and local refugee support groups run protests and fundraisers. Xavier College students wrote letters to people in offshore detention, and teachers bought care packages for women detained on Nauru. Some teachers opened their homes, offering people on temporary protection visas respite from worry about their protection status.

# At Easter, give hope. Empowerment follows.

Easter is traditionally a time of renewed hope. A new beginning in our lives.

But for people seeking asylum in Australia this is not a time of hope, a time of building a better future.

It's a time, instead, to face the devastating news that the government is slashing its support program for people awaiting final determination of their refugee status. Now mothers with newborn babies and families with young children will find it almost impossible to access financial support. Now children will go hungry; now people will be destitute and homeless.

This is the time people are at their most vulnerable and despairing. And they are looking to JRS for help. We accompany, serve and advocate for refugees and people seeking asylum.

We offer emergency assistance, temporary shelter, a foodbank, professional casework, community activities, employment support, school engagement, legal clinics, targeted



**“A single individual is enough for hope to exist. And that individual can be you.” Pope Francis**

advocacy, and projects to empower women seeking asylum. The generosity of the community enabled us to assist around 3000 people last year - but now many, many more will need our support. With your help we can make it possible for more people to face the future with confidence and hope. **Please give a gift of hope:**

- **\$40** for an Opal Card for transport costs to help asylum seekers travel to appointments with lawyers, doctors and potential employers.
- **\$50** to provide a family with a supermarket voucher for essentials for the week.
- **\$70** to provide 2 hours of essential casework and advocacy support
- **\$150** fortnightly allowance for food, travel, and medical needs of asylum seekers living in JRS' Blaiket Shelter.
- **\$280** for emergency relief payment to an individual experiencing homelessness and destitution.
- **\$600** to help a family seeking asylum meet their basic weekly living expenses including rent, food, travel and medical needs.
- **\$4,200** to fund the hire of a caseworker for one month to offer professional support to vulnerable women, men and children, helping them build resilience.

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## Please act now. For hope + empowerment.

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Donations of \$2 or more are tax deductible

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# Opening doors to security

Jacob\* fled West Africa seeking asylum. He began his life in Australia alone, struggling to meet his basic living expenses while applying for protection. He came to JRS fearful and full of self-doubt.


"I didn't have confidence, and thought, maybe I can't cope," he said.

JRS provided Jacob with emergency accommodation and casework support, and in September 2017 he joined our Empowered to Work employment program, run in partnership with the House of Welcome and funded by the City of Parramatta and Cumberland Council through the Stronger Communities Grant.

Jacob's warmth and empathy prompted us to link him with Northcott, a not-for-profit disability service provider. With Northcott's focus on inclusion in the wider community for everyone, this was a fitting match. It was also a great fit in terms of Jacob's suitability: an initial interview quickly revealed his strong interpersonal skills, and Northcott took him on as a trainee disability support worker, paying him during training.

Once qualified, Jacob was soon working full time, and able to afford his own accommodation. He now lives in a share house in Sydney's west.



 Refugee students are empowered through an education program in Baalbek, Lebanon/ Jesuit Refugee Service

"Making money has opened doors to a house, my own space and security," he says.

Jacob is no longer alone. "I feel happy and I've met a lot of people."

Whenever he has an hour to spare, he drops in to the JRS Arrupe Community Centre in Parramatta, inspiring everyone with his enthusiasm and newfound confidence.

\* Name changed

## social media

### Follow JRS: Facebook or Twitter

We track and highlight the latest in policies and attitudes for people seeking asylum, not just in Australia but also around the world.

Let us know what you think at:

 [www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia](http://www.facebook.com/JRSAustralia)

 @JRS\_Aus

## donate

### How your donation will help

General donations to Arrupe Place will directly fund:

Emergency assistance, food vouchers, casework services, home visiting services, legal advice, social support.

## link online

### Would you like to receive Link online?

Sign up for our electronic newsletter at [www.jrs.org.au](http://www.jrs.org.au)

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