

Establishment of the Australian Refugee Action Network (ARAN)

The idea of establishing a national network to promote collaboration between grassroots refugee advocacy and activism groups across rural, regional and metropolitan areas was initially discussed at the national Rural Australians for Refugees Conference in September 2016.

The initial thinking about the need for a national network was informed by the following:

- As the federal government is responsible for refugee policy, and a more co-ordinated approach to campaigning is likely to be more effective
- While organisations such as the Refugee Council of Australia and Amnesty International Australia are very important in terms of their policy analysis and capacity to influence key decision makers, the Australian Refugee Action Network was proposed a way to network the hundreds of grassroots community groups which are involved in activism and advocacy for refugee rights, and seeking to engage more members of the general public. ARAN was conceived to fill that gap.

A small working group was formed in September 2016 to progress the idea and groups across Australia were contacted to determine support for the concept. After gathering an initial membership, a national conference was proposed for May 2017, and additional representatives were invited to join the working group to plan the conference. ARAN was formally launched at the inaugural ARAN conference in Canberra in May 2017, and a committee was elected – see Committee membership at Attachment A.

ARAN now has 70 member groups and networks from across all states and territories. It includes Rural Australians for Refugees which itself has around 90 member groups. See the current membership list at the end of this report (Attachment B). Larger NGOs which have a key role in leading refugee advocacy are invited to be ARAN Associate members – these are listed at Attachment C.

ARAN seeks to strengthen the impact of the many and varied efforts of activist and advocacy groups by drawing together and publicising their activities. While ARAN does not direct member group, the ARAN Committee invites member groups to participate in concerted campaign activities on specific issues at particular times, to strengthen the overall impact of advocacy effort.

Agreement and differences of approach

As we discovered in the preparation for the 2017 conference and at it, the groups that have joined ARAN are in overwhelming (though not unanimous) agreement about the policy positions we oppose and what we support as an alternative. We have taken the approach that as we have fundamentally similar aims, different activities and styles of activism and advocacy between the ARAN member groups is strength, as it extends the reach and influence of the movement generally. It is not the role of ARAN, nor should it be of any group, to attempt to prescribe a standard method of activism or advocacy e.g. demonstrations vs. lobbying of local MPs etc. ARAN provides information and suggests a range of activities which groups can undertake depending on their resources and inclinations.

It is always difficult starting a national organisation from scratch. We nevertheless remain convinced that such a group is needed.

THE FIRST YEAR – MAY 2017 – JUNE 2018

The inaugural ARAN committee was elected at the ARAN Conference in May 2017. See list of committee members at the end of this report.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Encouraging concerted and co-ordinated action on particular issues

Over the last year the committee has aimed to provide a regular update of issues and suggestions for actions. Where ARAN has suggested action, we have provided background information on the issue and materials including proforma media releases, sample slogans and graphics, and suggested points for lobbying. ARAN encourages groups to take a range of actions including:

- large scale rallies and smaller actions in public places
 - displaying signs at a highly visible and busy area for traffic, and other creative actions
 - lobbies and protests outside the offices of Federal MPs
 - contacting MPs directly
 - social media networks tagging relevant MPs and journalists
- Notably, ARAN partnered with GetUp in calling for, and helping to organise, more than 60 actions on the 4th anniversary of the Labor government's decision to deny protection to people who arrive by boat, and to re-establish offshore camps on Nauru and Manus Island. (July 19 2013). Actions were held in urban areas and regional and rural communities across Australia.
- Protests at politicians' offices (August 2017)
- National day of action on Sunday 8 October 2017
- Manus Island and Nauru – demand to bring them to safety (Nov/Dec 2017)
- Palm Sunday actions (March 2018)
- Justice for Refugees petition - ARAN J4R Petition, (return by 16 July 2018)
- Responding to the removal of welfare for families and single people (ongoing) Call on state governments to offer support to refugees & people seeking asylum (ongoing)
- #IAmWatching actions
- Regatta of Hope/Walk for Refugees
- During the Manus occupation in December 2017 we helped to coordinate some major demonstrations and a series of smaller actions.

More recently, ARAN has:

- provided a comprehensive outline which member groups might use to provide comment to ALP MPs and candidates about the policies to be debated at the ALP national conference later this year
- Called for lobbying politicians about the cuts to SRSS support (income and housing assistance for people seeking asylum)
- Calls to mark the deaths of two young men (Manus Island and Nauru)
- Call to mark the 5th anniversary of the reopening of offshore detention – 19 July 2018

Sharing information about the activities of member groups

We have publicised the actions of member groups when they have provided us with the details.

Communications and Resources

The ARAN website has been maintained and developed, including a Billboard of current actions and events, and a Resources page with a range of materials and information to support member groups in developing their campaign activities

The ARAN Facebook page has been established as an important means of sharing information and a distinctive voice has been established on Twitter.

Regular Committee meetings

The ARAN Committee has worked hard during the year, maintaining fortnightly meetings by skype and teleconference.

The 2018 ARAN conference will be held in Melbourne on 7 & 8 July. See attached program.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES GOING FORWARD

While we have partially succeeded in achieving what we set out to do, this first year the ARAN committee has also seen some challenges. The objectives of ARAN are ambitious, and we feel that we are still in the exploratory phase in terms of working out the best ways to communicate with member groups, to support timely mobilisation around key issues, and to use social media and other avenues to maximise the impact of the collective campaign efforts of ARAN member groups.

A survey of ARAN members has been developed to seek feedback from member groups, and to gather suggestions about how to improve communications and to identify other processes which will assist ARAN to more fully achieve objectives. The results of the survey will be shared at the 2018 ARAN conference.

Like many committees, the ARAN committee seeks to achieve a lot with limited time and resources. Some of the key challenges we have encountered are described below, and some of the ideas we have about how to address these challenges going forward is also described.

Challenges:

- Online meetings – delays due to technical issues and poor connectivity with skype and teleconferencing.
- Uneven participation by committee members. Not all members have been able to participate consistently, resulting in more work falling onto fewer people, all of whom have significant commitments with their local groups.
- Although one person with lived experience was elected to the committee, and we co-opted two additional people to the committee, we have unfortunately not managed to engage these members as well as we had hoped. While all this has been partly due to changes in individual circumstances, it is important for the committee to give further consideration to effective ways of engaging people with lived experience.
- While it is important that the Committee reaches consensus on key decisions such as the communications and information shared with member groups, we have not at this point found the most time- effective way to do this.

- Maintaining the social media presence of ARAN is recognised as important, but is also time consuming, and has tended to fall to people who also have significant other commitments in their own local groups.
- We have sometimes missed opportunities to respond rapidly when they arise. To give a couple of examples, when Peter Dutton made his comments about the particular worthiness of white South African farmers for refugee resettlement in Australia, we could have been out with a media comment, a short video or Facebook post based on some quick research about the actual situation. Similar, when the disgraceful 5am raid took place in Biloela, we should have been ready to respond more quickly.
- The engagement from member groups regarding their actions, suggestions for action and other concerns has not been as strong as we had hoped. We see this sharing and exchange between member groups as important and a challenge to be discussed further at the 2018 conference.
- We have not progressed the idea of developing specific networks – eg faith-based, unions, student groups and LGBTI.

Committee suggestions about how these challenges could be addressed

a. Committee structure and meetings:

- We suggest that particular roles on the core committee might be developed around key areas of committee responsibility - ie. Planning calls to action, developing relevant resources, engagement with member groups, social media, website maintenance, etc.
- We suggest that small working groups be established, convened by the designated committee member to assist in progressing these areas of work. The working groups would include people from member groups with specific skills or interests. Given the number of groups involved in ARAN and the talents of their members, this should not be impossible to create. This could mean that ARAN could provide resources more often and more rapidly to member groups.
- One of the working groups could be a 'rapid response' group recommend immediate responses where a quick response to policy announcements or emerging crises is required.
- This working group structure would require work by committee members and others between meetings.
- Adopting the working group structure could also help to streamline decision making as working groups would develop and circulate proposals for endorsement by the committee.
- If the working group structure is adopted it may be viable to have less frequent meetings of the full committee
- We will explore more reliable online platforms for the meetings

b. Involvement of people with lived experience on the ARAN committee

- Committee members are currently seeking the views and suggestions of the current committee members about how the committee should operate to ensure that the voices of those with lived experience inform the actions taken by ARAN.
- One idea, in addition to committee membership, is for a 'reference group' of people with lived experience to provide input to the proposed ARAN actions.

c. Engagement with ARAN members

- We would like to ask each of our member groups to appoint someone to be the ARAN contact person. In particular, this person would both feed suggestions from that group to ARAN and send details (including photos etc) of actions that have taken place locally for broader dissemination throughout the ARAN membership.

d. Establishing Networking groups

- The 2018 ARAN conference will provide the opportunity to further explore the potential for these networks, and some preparatory work in being done prior to the conference to identify people who may be interested in participating in these networks.

In 2018 we hope to see full participation by all members of the ARAN committee, a clearer definition of committee roles, greater access to resources for technical work, and the appointment by member groups/networks of an ARAN contact person to facilitate good communication between ARAN and our members.

MOVING FORWARD

Continuing coordinated actions across the nation will demonstrate and mobilise the considerable level of public opposition to current policy and operations.

Stronger collaboration will support grassroots groups to by providing information and resources to undertake action in their own localities. Good ideas can be replicated across the nation, in the individual style of each group.

The ARAN committee believes that the continuation of the national Australian Refugee Action Network is making a vital contribution to strengthening and growing of the refugee rights movement. We feel confident that the 2018-2019 committees will benefit from adopting some or all of the suggestions listed above.

Attachment A: ARAN committee members at June 2018

Name	Organisation
Amir Javan	- People Just Like Us (NSW)
Caron Molster	- RRAN WA - Refugee Rights Action Network (WA)
Emmanuel Kondok	- Community of South Sudanese and Other Marginalised Areas Group
James Supple	- Refugee Action Coalition Sydney (NSW)
John Minns	- Canberra Refugee Action Committee (ACT)
Kali (Kaliyugan) Pathmanathan (co-opted)	- Tamil Refugee Council
Lili Calitz	- Amnesty's Tasmanian Refugee Rights Group (Tas)
Linda Cusworth	- CRAG - Combined Refugee Action Group (Geelong, Vic)
Margaret Rasa (retired April 2018)	- Rural Australians for Refugees (National)
Jan Govett (co-opted May 2018)	- Rural Australians for Refugees (National)
Marie Hapke	- RAN - Refugee Advocacy Network (Vic)
Pamela Curr	- Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project (Vic)
Peter Robson	- Darwin Asylum Seeker Support and Advocacy Network (NT)

Attachment B: ARAN Member Groups - June 2018

Academics for Refugees	GADRC - Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children
Amnesty International NSW Refugee Team	GADRC - Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children
Amnesty International Tasmania Refugee Action group	Gold Coast Get-Up
Amnesty International Tasmania Branch	Greater Geelong Youth with Refugees
Amnesty International Tasmania Southern Group	Hobsons Bay Refugee Network
Amnesty International Refugee Network Victoria	Home Among the Gum Trees NSW
Amnesty International SA Refugee Action Network	HASA Hunter Asylum Seeker Advocacy (Newcastle)
ARA - Australian Refugee Association	International Alliance Against Mandatory Detention
BRASS Network - Brisbane Refugee and Asylum Seeker Support network	Jews for Refugees
Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project	Justice for Refugees Armidale
Bring Them Here Vigil Group - Adelaide	Justice for Refugees SA
CASPA – Catholic Alliance for Refugees	Law Students for Refugees
ChilOut	Love Makes a Way
Circle of Friends Australia	Manus Emergency Fund
Close the Camps Action Collective	Melbourne Youth For Refugees
Community of South Sudanese and Other Marginalised Areas	Mid North Coast Refugee Support Group
CRAG - Combined Refugee Action Group	Montmorency Asylum Seekers Support Group (MASSG)
DASSAN	Mornington Peninsula Human Rights Group
Doctors 4 Refugees	

	Mums 4	RAR - Deans Marsh
Refugees		RAR - Mansfield
Newcastle Grandmothers Against Detention of Refugee Children		RAR- South Gippsland
Noosa Welcomes Refugees		RAR - Queanbeyan
People Just Like Us		RRAN WA - Refugee Rights Action Network WA
RAC - Canberra		Sanctuary Australia Foundation
RAC Eurobodalla		Semaphore /Port Adelaide Amnesty Action Group
RAC Illawarra		Southern Women's Action Network (SWAN) - Mornington Peninsula
RAC Queensland		Stop the Shame
RAC Sydney		Tamil Refugee Council
RAC Victoria		TASS - Tasmanian Asylum Seeker Support
RAN - Refugee Advocacy Network		Tassie Nannas
RAR - Rural Australians for Refugees (National)		Teachers for Refugees
RAR - Aireys Inlet		UCA - Vic/Tas
RAR - Albury-Wodonga		Valerio Daniel De Simoni Association
RAR -Apollo Bay		Yass for Refugees
RAR - Castlemaine		WA Amnesty Refugee Rights Group

Attachment C: ARAN Associate member groups

AIA- Amnesty International Australia
ASRC - Asylum Seeker Resource Centre
Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce
GetUp
HRLC - Human Rights Law Centre
RCOA - Refugee Council of Australia