



Refugee Council
of Australia

Refugee Week: how the dream of a global celebration was realised

Refugee Week is Australia's peak annual activity to promote greater awareness of refugees, the issues they face and the contributions refugees are making to the Australian community – but it all began in the 1980s with a small local event and a grand dream of a global celebration.

The idea of celebrating Refugee Week was first proposed by the founding president of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), Major-General Paul Cullen, at a meeting of RCOA members in Sydney in February 1983. Major-General Cullen was also the founding president of Austcare (Australians Care for Refugees), an organisation established in 1967 to raise funds for international projects to support refugees.

The first celebration of Refugee Week was a street procession and picnic lunch held in Sydney on Sunday 9 November 1986. Organised by Austcare with the support of a small grant from the International Year of Peace Committee, the procession from Belmore Park to Sydney Domain involved around 200 people including representatives of Afghan, Eritrean, South African, Vietnamese, Chilean, El Salvadorian and other refugee communities.

In 1987, Austcare and RCOA worked together to organise a series of Refugee Week events from 8-14 November 1987 in Sydney and Canberra – a forum on international refugee issues, a concert in Sydney's Martin Place hosted by television presenter George Negus, a 20th celebration dinner for Austcare and an address at the Canberra Club by UNHCR's regional representative Iqbal Alimohamed.

The first national celebration of Refugee Week took place from 18-24 September 1988, focusing on the theme "12 million lives on hold". Organised by Austcare, RCOA and UNHCR with the support of national and state committees, the week was launched at the Australian Pavilion at Expo '88 in Brisbane and events included receptions in most states, two concerts and a RCOA Refugee Forum in Sydney, an inter-faith service in Melbourne, nationally televised discussions and documentaries, radio interviews and a Press Club Luncheon in Canberra with lawyer Geoffrey Robertson as guest speaker.

Major-General Cullen's vision for Refugee Week was always that it become a global celebration. Having won the Nansen Medal, UNHCR's most prestigious global award, in 1981, Major-General Cullen was well-known and respected by UNHCR's international leadership and he used these connections to promote this idea. RCOA's executive director Luke Hardy backed this up by lobbying for an international refugee day or week at UNHCR's 1988 annual global consultations with NGOs. However, the proposal was not taken up by UNHCR – at least not for some time.

In 1989, Refugee Week in Australia shifted to June, aligning it with the only other similar international celebration, Africa Refugee Day, held on 20 June. The Organisation of African Unity (OAU) organised the first Africa Refugee Day on 20 June 1975, to mark the first anniversary of the OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa coming into force.

Australia's celebration of Refugee Week grew in prominence each year, with Austcare taking the lead, supported by RCOA and Refugee Week committees in different states. From 1997, Austcare took the decision to move Refugee Week to October, as local committees expressed their wish to hold outside events in warmer weather.

Major-General Cullen's dream of a global annual celebration of the contribution of refugees was achieved in 2001 when UNHCR coordinated the first World Refugee Day, holding it on 20 June to align with Africa Refugee Day.

In 2004, Austcare decided to withdraw from Refugee Week, reflecting the agency's shift from focusing on refugees to a wider humanitarian mandate. RCOA stepped in to take on the coordination role, to keep the momentum of Refugee Week going.

Noting that it was far from ideal for Australia to continue to celebrate Refugee Week in October four months after World Refugee Day, RCOA negotiated with the organisations around Australia which were involved in Refugee Week to align the national celebration with the global event.

In 2007, Refugee Week shifted back to June, to the same week (Sunday to Saturday) which includes World Refugee Day, 20 June. For RCOA, this was the full achievement of the goal outlined by our founding president in 1983 – a simultaneous national and global week of activities to draw attention to the needs and aspirations of refugees and to celebrate refugees' contributions to the communities in which they live.

Since then, Refugee Week has grown into a week in which hundreds of organisations – small and large, from local groups of volunteers to large statutory organisations, people of refugee background and allies from across the community, local councils, schools, students, faith-based organisations and business – can celebrate the week in the way they believe is most meaningful. In recent years, events have included celebrations of music and the arts, public talks and seminars on refugee issues, sporting events, rallies and much more.

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the 2020 celebration of Refugee Week to become a fully virtual celebration but created new possibilities for national and international participation in online events. As social distancing restrictions have eased, Refugee Week has returned to in-person events but virtual events remain an important part of the calendar. The modern celebration of Refugee Week blends the traditional, local events which bring people together in person to meet, eat and celebrate and online events which link people across state and national borders.