

The Advocacy Strategy of The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) for Temporary Rights to Work for Refugees under The Australia's 'Balancing Act'

Jurnal ISIP: Jurnal Ilmu Sosial dan Ilmu Politik

37-51

© The Author(s) 2025



Volume 22.1 Januari-Juni 2025

Publikasi online: 30 Juni 2025

<https://jisip.jurnaliisipjakarta.id>

Received: 24 Maret 2025

Revised: 10 Juni 2025

Accepted: 16 Juni 2025

DOI : 0.36451/jisip.v22i1.411

**Strategi Advokasi Dewan
Pengungsi Australia (RCOA)
untuk Hak Sementara untuk
Bekerja bagi Pengungsi di Bawah
'Balancing Act' Australia**

Ahmad Mujaddid Fachrurreza¹ , Arina Nihayati² , Larasati³ 

^{1,2,3} Universitas Sriwijaya, Palembang, Indonesia

Corresponding Author:

Ahmad Mujaddid Fachrurreza, Universitas Sriwijaya, Jalan Palembang-Prabumulih, KM 32 Inderalaya, Kabupaten Ogan Ilir, Sumatera Selatan, 30662, Indonesia E-mail: ahmadmujaddid@fsip.unsri.ac.id

Abstract

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the important actor in advocating for temporary work rights for refugees amid the complexity of Australian asylum policy. This study analyses RCOA's advocacy strategies in responding to asylum policy restrictions, particularly through the constructivist approach that emphasises the importance of discourse and social norms. Using the qualitative methods through the document analysis of policy papers, public campaigns, and submissions to the government, this study adopts the advocacy strategy framework to examine how the RCOA operates in a policy environment

shaped by the “balancing act” between the border security and humanitarian obligations. The research findings show that RCOA utilises the evidence-based lobbying, coalition building, and public engagement to drive policy change and reframe the narration around the refugees. Despite facing structural and political barriers, RCOA’s advocacy contributes to increased public awareness and opens up space for more inclusive policy discussions. This study highlights the important role of civil society in advocating for refugee rights through approaches based on the dignity, social inclusion, and economic contribution.

Keywords

Advocacy; Australia; RCOA; Refugees; Temporary work rights

Abstrak

Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) merupakan aktor penting dalam mengadvokasi hak kerja sementara bagi pengungsi di tengah kompleksitas kebijakan suaka Australia. Penelitian ini menganalisis strategi advokasi RCOA dalam merespons pembatasan kebijakan suaka, khususnya melalui pendekatan konstruktif yang menekankan pentingnya wacana dan norma sosial. Dengan menggunakan metode kualitatif melalui analisis dokumen terhadap makalah kebijakan, kampanye publik, dan pengajuan kepada pemerintah, penelitian ini mengadopsi kerangka kerja strategi advokasi untuk mengkaji bagaimana RCOA beroperasi dalam lingkungan kebijakan yang dibentuk oleh ‘tindakan penyeimbang’ antara keamanan perbatasan dan kewajiban kemanusiaan. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa RCOA memanfaatkan lobi berbasis bukti, pembangunan koalisi, dan keterlibatan publik untuk mendorong perubahan kebijakan dan membingkai ulang narasi tentang pengungsi. Meskipun menghadapi hambatan struktural dan politik, advokasi RCOA berkontribusi terhadap peningkatan kesadaran publik serta membuka ruang diskusi kebijakan yang lebih inklusif. Studi ini menyoroti peran penting masyarakat sipil dalam memperjuangkan hak pengungsi melalui pendekatan berbasis martabat, inklusi sosial, dan kontribusi ekonomi.

Kata Kunci

Advokasi; Australia; Hak kerja sementara; Pengungsi; RCOA

Introduction

The right to work remains one of the most contested aspects of refugee protection in Australia. While the country has a long history of resettling refugees and is a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, many refugees still face significant policy and political barriers to full employment access. This contradiction between Australia’s international commitments and domestic practices reflects deeper tensions within its refugee regime, tensions shaped by the discourses of securitization, national identity, and the categorization of deservingness (Nyers, 2006).

This article explores how the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), the national peak body

for refugee advocacy, engages in the political advocacy to defend and promote refugees' right to work. Specifically, this article investigates how RCOA acts as the norm entrepreneur, that is the civil society actor seeking to introduce, reframe, or consolidate social norms in Australian refugee politics (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Using the constructivism approach, this study argues that RCOA challenges the dominant narratives that portray refugees as burdens by promoting the alternative frames emphasizing economic contribution, dignity, and shared prosperity.

The right to work has long been part of Australia's refugee protection architecture, at least in the principle. In practice, however, the situation is more complex (Berg & Crock, 2011). Since the late 1990s, the successive Australian governments have adopted increasingly the restrictive refugee and asylum policies, including the mandatory detention, offshore processing, and differentiated visa categories that limit rights based on the mode of arrival (McAdam & Chong, 2014). The asylum seekers and refugees on temporary protection visas often face the significant employment barriers, with some left in long-term uncertainty about their right to work (Refugee Council of Australia, 2020b). This has created what scholars have called a "two-tier system" of refugee rights, in which some enjoy protection and work rights, while others remain in legal and economic limbo (Hartley & Pedersen, 2015).

RCOA is one of the most prominent civil society actors pushing back against this exclusionary framework. With over 200 organizational members and a wide grassroots network, RCOA combines the policy advocacy, public campaigns, and direct engagement with refugee communities (Refugee Council of Australia, 2023a). Since its founding in 1981, RCOA has sought to amplify refugee voices, inform public debate, and shape refugee policy by appealing to shared values of justice, inclusion, and human rights. In the area of employment, RCOA emphasizes that enabling refugees to work is not only the legal obligation and moral imperative, but also the economic opportunity for Australia (Refugee Council of Australia, 2023a).

The politics of refugee work rights are not merely technical but ideational. They are shaped by the dominant narratives about security, legitimacy, and national belonging (Every & Augoustinos, 2007). One of the most important shifts in Australia's refugee discourse occurred in the early 2000s, when political rhetoric increasingly framed the asylum seekers as threats to national sovereignty and security, particularly following the Tampa affair in 2001 (Amnesty International, 2021). These securitized narratives have had lasting consequences for how refugees are perceived and governed, especially those who arrive by boat or without official authorization (Grewcock, 2018).

Constructivism international relations theory provides a useful lens to analyze how norms, identities, and discourses influence refugee policies. According to this theory, international and domestic actors do not simply respond to material interests but are embedded in social structures shaped by intersubjective meanings and normative frameworks (Wendt, 1992). In this view, actors like RCOA can shape political outcomes by changing how issues are framed, how groups are represented, and what norms are seen as legitimate. Norm entrepreneurs, in particular, seek to

alter the prevailing “logic of appropriateness” by advocating for new standards of behavior and challenging dominant understandings (Acharya, 2009).

Australia’s visa system exemplifies the tensions between the formal inclusion and practical exclusion. While permanent protection visa holders have unrestricted work rights, those on temporary protection visas (TPVs) or Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) face significant uncertainty (UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, 2022). The asylum seekers who are still waiting for status determination may have work rights, but these are often conditional and revocable (Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC), 2021). This legal precarity undermines refugee well-being and reinforces social exclusion (Fleay et al., 2013). Yet, research shows that when refugees are granted the opportunity to work, they contribute significantly to the economy and community (Hugo, 2011).

Through the targeted policy submissions, media engagement, public campaigns, and consultations with affected communities, RCOA seeks to shift the discourse on refugee employment from one of risk and dependency to one of capability and contribution (Refugee Council of Australia, 2023b). By promoting alternative frames that highlight shared values and economic logic, RCOA does not just act not as the service provider or policy lobbyist, but also as the norm entrepreneur attempting to reconstitute the ideational landscape of refugee work rights in Australia.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design, focusing on the case study of the Refugee Council of Australia’s (RCOA) advocacy for temporary work rights for refugees. The research is grounded in a constructivism theoretical framework, which emphasizes how social realities and policy discourses are shaped through collective meaning-making processes. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of how RCOA frames refugee work rights beyond legal and economic dimensions, highlighting their significance in terms of human dignity, social inclusion, and economic participation within Australia’s contested asylum policy landscape (Berger & Luckmann, 1991).

Data were collected primarily from official Refugee Council of Australia Annual Reports published from 2018 to 2021. These reports were purposively selected based on their direct relevance to the study’s focus on refugee work rights and advocacy efforts during a period marked by significant policy debates and contestations. The selection criteria prioritized documents that explicitly discussed advocacy campaigns and policy positions on refugee employment rights, ensuring credibility through official RCOA publications, and encompassed a four-year timeframe to capture the evolution and consistency of advocacy strategies. To enrich the analysis and provide broader context, supplementary documents referenced within these reports, such as government submissions, policy briefs, and public statements, were also examined.

The analytical process involved systematic document analysis using thematic content analysis

(Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify key themes, narrative frames, and rhetorical strategies within RCOA's advocacy materials. The texts were repeatedly reviewed to familiarize the researcher with the content, followed by open coding to highlight significant concepts related to refugee work rights advocacy. These codes were then organized into thematic clusters reflecting the values and normative frames, such as fairness, responsibility, and social integration, that RCOA emphasizes in its messaging. The constructivist framework guided the interpretation of how these themes contribute to shaping public narratives and policy debates about refugees' rights in Australia.

The unit of analysis for this study is the advocacy strategy articulated by RCOA, while the broader analytical focus considers the legislative and political environment surrounding refugee work rights in Australia during the selected period. Guided by a constructivist lens, this dual focus enables the research to not only identify the advocacy strategies employed by RCOA, but also to interpret how these strategies function as discursive interventions, reshaping dominant norms, identities, and the ideational framing of refugee rights in Australia's policy discourse, illuminating the dynamic relationship between advocacy discourse and policy development.

Results and Discussion

RCOA's Advocacy Strategy to Promote the Right to Work for Refugees in Australia

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) employs a comprehensive and multifaceted advocacy strategy to promote the right to work for refugees in Australia. This strategy is rooted in the understanding that access to meaningful employment is fundamental to successful resettlement and social integration. Anchored in constructivism international relations theory, which posits that social actors generate change through the production of shared meanings and normative claims, this research interprets RCOA's advocacy as the strategic form of norm entrepreneurship. RCOA does not merely seek policy amendments but aims to reconfigure the ideational landscape through narrative framing and discursive coalition-building. around refugee rights, dignity, and contributions to society.

Constructivism, as the theoretical frame of this research, informed both the categorization and interpretation of data. This approach views knowledge, norms, and interests as socially constructed through interactions between actors. Therefore, RCOA's advocacy was analyzed not only in terms of technical outcomes, but also as discursive practices that aim to reshape dominant understandings of refugees as capable contributors to society, challenging exclusionary and securitized discourses. For example, refugee stories were not merely coded as "testimonials," but interpreted as narrative strategies that humanize policy discussions and disrupt stereotypical depictions.

RCOA's advocacy strategy combines several interrelated approaches, including direct engagement with policymakers, public awareness campaigns, and collaboration with employers and community organizations. A central theme in its advocacy is the reframing of refugee employment that is not only as a humanitarian obligation but as the economic and societal asset.

This narrative shift is key in influencing policy reform discussions in Australia.

A significant component of RCOA's strategy is the development and promotion of targeted employment services tailored for refugee and humanitarian entrants. These services aim to overcome structural barriers such as limited English proficiency, unrecognized foreign qualifications, and unfamiliarity with Australian workplace culture. RCOA's research has identified five key factors for successful refugee employment: specialized employment services, employer commitment to diversity, stakeholder coordination, support for refugee entrepreneurship, and increased awareness of career pathways (Olliff, 2010).

A compelling case of RCOA's strategic engagement is its collaboration with the Australian Syrian Charity (ASC), where RCOA supported highly qualified Syrian dentists struggling to navigate accreditation processes in Australia. Through targeted discussions with relevant government officials, RCOA advocated for policy changes to simplify recognition procedures (Refugee Council of Australia, 2024). This example illustrates how RCOA operates as both a policy actor and a facilitator of refugee voices, ensuring that advocacy is grounded in lived experiences.

In addition, RCOA engages in sustained lobbying activities. Between 2019 and 2020, it held hundreds of meetings with policymakers at both federal and state levels to advocate for humane refugee policies, particularly the expansion of work rights for asylum seekers on bridging visas (Refugee Council of Australia, 2020b). These efforts have contributed to growing public and political awareness, fostering an environment more conducive to policy reform.

Community engagement is another vital pillar. RCOA supports pre-arrival orientation programs and youth-focused initiatives that help refugees develop realistic expectations and improve employability. These programs aim to empower refugee communities with the knowledge and tools necessary for successful labor market integration.

From a reflexive position, this study is informed by a constructivist approach and a normative commitment to refugee inclusion, which inherently shapes the analytical framework employed. The interpretation of the Refugee Council of Australia's (RCOA) initiatives is thus grounded in a recognition of the transformative potential of advocacy and narrative construction. Rather than viewing these initiatives merely as technical responses, they are understood as socially embedded practices that seek to contest prevailing exclusionary discourses. Overall, RCOA's advocacy strategy is marked by its deliberate use of strategic partnerships, direct engagement in policy processes, and a consistent emphasis on personal agency and human dignity. This multidimensional approach demonstrates a comprehensive awareness of the systemic barriers encountered by refugees and the imperative to address these through both structural reform and discursive transformation.

Australian Legislative Framework to Influence RCOA Advocacy

The Australian legislative framework significantly influences the advocacy strategy of the

Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) in promoting the right to work for refugees. Utilizing a constructivist approach, which emphasizes the role of social constructs and interactions in shaping understanding and policies, it shows how the RCOA navigates and influences this framework to advocate for refugees' rights.

At the core of RCOA's advocacy is the recognition that laws and policies are not merely top-down mandates but are shaped by social interactions, historical contexts, and the lived experiences of refugees. The legislative framework governing refugees in Australia includes various laws such as the Migration Act 1958 and policies related to visa conditions. These laws dictate the working rights of refugees, particularly those on temporary protection or bridging visas, which often come with restrictions that limit their ability to seek employment (Fair Work Australian Government, 2024). RCOA's advocacy efforts aim to reshape these constructs by highlighting the economic contributions that refugees can make if given adequate rights to work.

One significant aspect of RCOA's approach is its engagement with policymakers through evidence-based advocacy. By presenting case studies and data that illustrate the positive impact of refugee employment on both individuals and the broader economy, RCOA seeks to challenge prevailing narratives that often portray refugees as burdens on society. For instance, studies have shown that refugees contribute significantly to the labor market, filling critical skill shortages in various sectors (Fair Work Australian Government, 2024). This evidence supports RCOA's calls for legislative reforms that would enhance work rights for refugees, thereby facilitating their integration into Australian society.

Additionally, RCOA collaborates with other organizations and stakeholders to create a unified voice advocating for change. For example, partnerships with entities like the Australian Red Cross and various training providers help amplify their message and provide practical pathways for refugee employment (Australian Red Cross, 2018). These collaborations reflect a constructivist understanding that advocacy is most effective when it incorporates diverse perspectives and experiences. By working together, these organizations can address barriers faced by refugees in accessing employment opportunities, such as language proficiency and recognition of foreign qualifications.

Moreover, the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) strategically integrates refugee narratives into its advocacy efforts. These individual accounts, particularly those of skilled refugees confronting structural barriers, play a critical role in rendering policy discussions more relatable and accessible to both policymakers and the broader public. Such narratives function as discursive instruments that challenge prevailing portrayals of refugees as passive beneficiaries, instead emphasizing their resilience, capabilities, and potential contributions. The researcher recognizes that the interpretation of RCOA's practices is informed by a normative orientation towards principles of equity and social justice. This perspective underscores the analytical focus on the role of personal narratives and community voices within RCOA's rights-based advocacy framework.

Overall, the advocacy strategies of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) are deeply embedded in and shaped by the wider legal and discursive frameworks that influence refugee rights in Australia. Through the strategic use of empirical evidence, institutional partnerships, and lived experiences, the organization contributes to the evolving discourse on refugee employment rights. Viewed through a constructivist lens, RCOA's work exemplifies the capacity of advocacy to reshape dominant societal understandings of refugee identities and entitlements.

Impact of RCOA Advocacy on Australian Refugees (2018–2021)

Based on the four rights of refugees outlined by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2014), namely: 1) refoulement and physical protection; 2) access to health; 3) empowerment of expertise; and 4) the right to work (Hathaway, 2021), this study categorizes RCOA's advocacy impacts accordingly. The following table presents selected activities and achievements, interpreted not merely as records, but as indicators of discursive, institutional, and social influence:

Table 1. Impact of RCOA Advocacy on Australian Refugees 2018-2021

Year	Impact	
2018-2019 (RCOA, 2019)	Refugee Social Integration Forum	2500 refugee social integration campaign forum
		1 st Asia Pacific Refugee Summit
		350 Refugee Care Campaign Week event
		More than 13,125 youth from 75 schools and 15 governmental and non-governmental organizations participated in the face-to-face discussion program
	Refugee policy advocacy	12 reports on refugee issues and their solutions
		13th anniversary of Refugee-led advocacy
		15 submission of refugee policy advocacy to Parliament, government agencies, and legal entities
		165 local government authorities across Australia have signed up for Refugee Welcome Zones
	Refugee health policy advocacy	75 lawmakers and 36 senators vote through Medevac (health) legislation
	Refugee employment policy advocacy	The Australian Refugee Council has been advocating for the sponsorship of refugee communities in Australia for over 10 years

2019-2020 (RCOA, 2020)	Refugee Social Integration Forum	70 people gathered for the annual Movement networking day
		Refugee Alternatives Conference 2020 attended by 480 people
		More than 1500 Australians commit to 12 welcoming actions in 2020
		Australia’s First Digital Refugee Week
		100 stakeholder forums held a Fair Process Working
	Refugee policy advocacy	Advocate further development of the temporary protection visa strategic plan
		53 released from Bomana immigration detention center
		9 reports, providing new and important information to the public on the impact of Australia’s refugee policy
		7 direct submissions to Parliament on key policy issues
		Refugee health policy advocacy
2020-2021 (RCOA, 2021)	Refugee Social Integration Forum	Ongoing practical support from the National Refugee- led Advocacy and Advisory Group (NRAAG)
		3800 people participated in the refugee introduction digital forum
	Refugee policy advocacy	Mobilizing decision-makers as part of the Nobody Left Behind campaign
		Advocate for 18000 refugees on temporary visas
		Helping refugees trapped overseas find safety in Australia
		12 reports on key refugee policy issues
	Refugee education policy advocacy	Education on the impact of COVID on refugees and people seeking asylum
		Expanding the reach of Refugee Week 2021 through media partnerships
6 reports important information to the public		

Source: Refugee Council of Australia Report (2019, 2020, 2021)

These activities represent more than isolated outputs. For example, the Medevac campaign (2019) marked a discursive turning point in health policy for refugees, establishing medical expertise over bureaucratic control. Similarly, Shev visa advocacy (2020) illustrated how community-driven lobbying could influence visa reform dialogues.

The umbrella of social construction shows its relevance in the advocacy agenda of the RCOA. The theoretical frame of constructivism considers that interests and identities within a country are formed and reformed through social processes and interactions. Social integration of refugees from aspects of education, media dissemination, and policy advocacy in Australia is also bridged by liaison activists such as RCOA. In this case, the RCOA has an effect as an agent for connecting narratives, interactions, norms, and social integration between refugees, policymakers, and the community. This role is important because respect for refugee voices is often weak due to the absence of robust policy protection.

Based on the 2018-2019 RCOA Impact Report, social integration was also built in the school environment. 75 schools and 15 government and non-government organizations were open to discussions between young people in Australia about refugee resettlement. In addition, health advocacy reached a critical point with the Medevac bill in February 2019 (Refugee Council of Australia, 2019), which allowed doctors to decide on medical evacuations from Nauru and PNG. The RCOA facilitated this with the Medical Evacuation Response Group, demonstrating effective coalition-building.

In 2019-2020, the RCOA influenced refugee employment policy through advocacy on Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs). Refugee SHEV holders were organized to meet with MPs and government officials, aligning with the broader “Nobody Left Behind” campaign. This initiative demonstrated RCOA’s strategic focus on equity and economic participation.

In 2020-2021, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, RCOA adapted its strategy by conducting digital forums and publishing reports on refugee vulnerability during the crisis. These outputs, when interpreted through a constructivist framework, exemplify how advocacy can recontextualize refugee inclusion beyond administrative or humanitarian language. They reposition refugee rights as integral to the public good, thereby challenging entrenched logics of exclusion and reasserting social responsibility as a normative obligation within policy discourse. Overall, RCOA’s activities between 2018 and 2021 illustrate how advocacy efforts grounded in constructivist principles can reshape refugee policy discourse, empower community narratives, and influence systemic change. Through its strategic actions, RCOA plays a critical role as a social and policy intermediary in Australia’s refugee landscape.

Beyond the documented outputs summarized in annual reports, the impact of the Refugee Council of Australia’s (RCOA) advocacy between 2018 and 2021 can be analyzed through the lens of constructivism, which views advocacy as a process of shaping norms, identities, and discourses within society. It extends the previous analysis by deepening reflection on three key dimensions: normative transformation, policy legitimization, and actor empowerment.

First, at the level of normative transformation, RCOA's efforts consistently challenged dominant policy logics that framed refugees, especially those on temporary visas, as undeserving of rights or agency. Through public campaigns, strategic storytelling, and the use of lived experiences, RCOA contributed to shifting public discourse from securitized portrayals to more humanized and inclusive narratives. The "Nobody Left Behind" campaign, launched in 2019, redefined the debate by emphasizing interdependence, social cohesion, and shared responsibility during a national crisis. Rather than appealing solely to legal entitlements, RCOA's framing mobilized moral and communal language that resonated with the Australian public's sense of fairness (Refugee Council of Australia, 2020a). This discursive strategy aligns with what constructivist scholars call "norm entrepreneurship", where actors work to redefine appropriate behavior in a given context (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Second, in terms of policy legitimation, RCOA has functioned as a boundary-spanning organization that legitimizes refugee voices within policy dialogues. Its advocacy reports and policy submissions served not only as technical evidence but also as social texts that linked refugee experiences to national values of inclusion and productivity. Constructivism suggests that institutions are not neutral arbiters but are themselves shaped by intersubjective understandings and narratives (Wendt, 1992). RCOA's work, such as their submission to the Senate Inquiry on Temporary Protection Visas in 2020, not only informed legislation but also repositioned refugees as contributors to Australia's economy and society. Their consistent presence in government consultations illustrates how NGOs can institutionalize new social meanings about refugeehood.

Third, the empowerment of refugee actors constitutes a major outcome of RCOA's advocacy. The support provided to refugee-led bodies like the National Refugee-led Advocacy and Advisory Group (NRAAG) exemplifies a shift from representation to participation. This move recognizes refugees not only as subjects of policy but as agents of norm creation. According to Acharya (2004), norm localization occurs when global norms are adapted and internalized by local actors (Acharya, 2004). RCOA's emphasis on training, facilitating media engagement, and including diverse refugee perspectives fosters this process of internal norm reproduction, making advocacy more sustainable and grounded.

Furthermore, the period of the COVID-19 pandemic created a unique discursive opening. RCOA effectively pivoted by highlighting the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on refugees and asylum seekers. It produced digital campaigns, multilingual resources, and rapid needs assessments, advocating for refugees' inclusion in national safety nets. The 2020-2021 Refugee Week expanded its reach via digital media and emphasized solidarity during crisis, a key tactic for embedding refugee issues into broader societal concerns (Refugee Council of Australia, 2020b). The digital shift enabled broader public participation and increased accessibility, reflecting a democratization of advocacy processes.

Additionally, RCOA's focus on youth engagement during these years opened intergenerational dialogue. Programs conducted with high schools and universities created spaces where young

Australians could interact directly with refugee voices. This pedagogical strategy not only informed but also shaped future public attitudes toward migration and diversity. Constructivist theory holds that identity formation is intersubjective and generationally transmitted. Thus, such efforts may have long-term normative implications.

Lastly, RCOA's methodological pluralism, combining lobbying, storytelling, coalition-building, and digital activism, demonstrates an integrated model of civil society engagement. Rather than isolating advocacy to elite policy spaces, RCOA's approach permeates community, institutional, and public spheres simultaneously. This strategy not only enhances legitimacy but also generates broader normative resonance.

Conclusion

This study has explored the advocacy strategy of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) in promoting temporary work rights for refugees within the context of Australia's restrictive asylum policies. It addresses the research question: How does RCOA advocate for refugees' right to work, and how does it reframe dominant discourses that constrain refugee access to employment? The findings underscore that RCOA functions as a norm-entrepreneurial civil society actor, strategically leverage discourse, coalition-building, and lived experiences to contest dominant policy narratives. Rather than functioning within the parameters set by the state, RCOA actively contests them, reframing refugee work rights as integral to national values of fairness, productivity, and inclusion, forging multi-level coalitions, and embedding refugee experiences within policy debates.

Grounded in a constructivist framework, this research interprets RCOA's activities as socially constructed and discursively potent interventions. RCOA's strategies, such as evidence-based lobbying, personal storytelling, public education campaigns, and institutional collaborations, function as mechanisms to challenge the dominant portrayal of refugees as dependent or threatening. Instead, these actions promote a counter-narrative of refugees as skilled, resilient, and economically contributive. The study underscores how RCOA's advocacy efforts are embedded in broader social processes that shape identities, values, and legitimacy within the refugee policy landscape.

Key examples, such as the Syrian dentists' accreditation campaign, the Nobody Left Behind initiative, and youth engagement in schools, illustrate how RCOA connects individual refugee experiences to systemic reform. These cases exemplify how advocacy grounded in lived experience can disrupt exclusionary discourses while building coalitional support for inclusive employment rights.

This study's contribution extends beyond refugee policy analysis. It highlights the transformative role of civil society in shaping governance practices and contesting exclusionary narratives. RCOA's advocacy offers insight into how non-state actors influence public discourse, co-produce policy knowledge, and assert moral authority within securitized migration systems.

By emphasizing the co-constructed nature of policy change, the research enriches scholarly debates in the fields of governance, identity politics, and civil society engagement.

Despite RCOA's significant contributions, structural barriers persist. Temporary visas continue to create legal precarity, and exclusionary political rhetoric undermines long-term integration efforts. To address these challenges, Australia must adopt a rights-based policy framework that ensures equitable access to employment, legal stability, and protection from labor exploitation. Multi-stakeholder collaboration, including government, employers, and civil society, will be essential in fostering inclusive labor markets.

Future research should examine the long-term socio-economic impacts of temporary work rights on refugee communities and explore comparative models in other refugee-hosting countries. Such studies could provide valuable insights into how advocacy strategies operate across diverse political environments, and how civil society can meaningfully contribute to policy transformation. Ultimately, aligning refugee policy with international human rights standards requires a sustained commitment to inclusion, dignity, and justice.

ORCID ID

Ahmad Mujaddid Fachrurreza  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0212-3720>

Arina Nihayati  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7788-1748>

Larasati  <https://orcid.org/0009-0007-8377-2397>

References

- Acharya, A. (2004). How Ideas Spread: Whose Norms Matter? Norm Localization and Institutional Change in Asian Regionalism. In *International Organization* (Vol. 58, pp. 239–275). <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818304582024>
- Acharya, A. (2009). *Whose Ideas Matter?: Agency and Power in Asian Regionalism* (1st ed.). Cornell University Press.
- Amnesty International. (2021). *What was the “Tampa Affair” and why does it matter?* Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org.au/what-was-the-tampa-affair-and-why-does-it-matter/>
- Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC). (2021). *Getting on the #RightTrack means creating a fair asylum process*. <http://righttrack.org.au/>
- Australian Red Cross. (2018). *Changing Lives, Changing Minds, Changing Rules - First 25 Years Report Australian Red Cross*.
- Berg, L., & Crock, M. (2011). *Immigration, Refugees and Forced Migration: Law, Policy and Practice in Australia*. Federation Press.
- Berger, P. L., & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The Social Construction of Reality*.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

- Every, D., & Augoustinos, M. (2007). Constructions of racism in the Australian parliamentary debates on asylum seekers. *Discourse & Society*, 18(4), 411–436. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926507077427>
- Fair Work Australian Government. (2024). *Visa holders and migrant workers – workplace rights and entitlements*. <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/tools-and-resources/fact-sheets/rights-and-obligations/visa-holders-and-migrant-workers-workplace-rights-and-entitlements>
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). *International Norm Dynamics and Political Change*.
- Fleay, C., Hartley, L., & Kenny, M. A. (2013). Refugees and asylum seekers living in the Australian community: the importance of work rights and employment support. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, 48(4), 473–493. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1839-4655.2013.tb00294.x>
- Grewcock, M. (2018). Sharon Pickering (2005) Refugees and State Crime, The Federation Press, Sydney. *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*, 17(1), 173–175. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10345329.2005.12036348>
- Hartley, L. K., & Pedersen, A. (2015). Asylum seekers and resettled refugees in australia: Predicting social policy attitude from prejudice versus emotion. *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, 3(1), 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v3i1.476>
- Hathaway, J. C. (2021). The Structure of Entitlement under the Refugee Convention. In *The Rights of Refugees under International Law* (pp. 173–311). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108863537.004>
- Hugo, G. (2011). *A Significant Contribution: The Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants*. Department of Immigration and Citizenship.
- McAdam, J., & Chong, F. (2014). *Refugees: Why seeking asylum is legal and Australia's policies are not*. University of New South Wales Press.
- Nyers, P. (2006). *Rethinking Refugees: Beyond States of Emergency*. Routledge.
- Olliff, L. (2010, June). *What works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants*. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/what-works-report/2/>
- Refugee Council of Australia. (2019). *Economic, civic and social contributions of refugees and humanitarian entrants: A literature review*. <http://www.ag.gov.au/cca>
- Refugee Council of Australia. (2020a). *Leaving no-one behind: Ensuring people seeking asylum and refugees are included in COVID-19 strategies*. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/priorities-covid-19/>
- Refugee Council of Australia. (2020b). *RCOA Impact Report 2020*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/australia/refugee-council-australia-our-impact-2019-2020>
- Refugee Council of Australia. (2023a). *Annual Report 2021–2022*.
- Refugee Council of Australia. (2023b). *Submission to the review of the Workforce Australia employment services system*. <https://alp.org.au/media/2594/2021-alp-national-platform-final-endorsed-platform.pdf>

- Refugee Council of Australia. (2024). *Revisiting Migrants' Contributions From A Human Rights-Based Approach: A Discussion On Facilitating And Hindering Factors*. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/issues/srmigrants/submissions/callfacilitatingfactors/subm-revisiting-migrants-cso-refugee-c-rcoa-rcoa.pdf>
- UNHCR. (2014). *UNHCR Regional Office for South-East Asia Factsheet*. www.unhcr.org
- UNSW Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law. (2022). *Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs)*.
- Wendt, A. (1992). Anarchy is what States Make of it: The Social Construction of Power Politics. *International Organization*, 46(2), 391–425.