



**2023 Kaldor Centre Conference Report**

# **Learning from the future: Foresight for the next decade of forced migration**



## About the Conference

At [Learning from the future: Foresight for the next decade of forced migration](#), the Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law convened leading experts for a day of compelling discussions designed to explore the greatest challenges for forced migrants in the decade ahead.

Scholars, policy experts, decision-makers, civil society leaders, refugee community representatives and others gathered at UNSW Sydney on 20 November 2023, on the unceded territory of the Bedegal people. Together we reckoned with seismic challenges underway – legal, political, technological, environmental, demographic, economic and social – to consider how they will shape our world in the coming decade.

We set ourselves the task of imagining what the landscape of global protection could look like 10 years from now. Our aim was to unearth the issues we need to grapple with and opportunities we need to seize today, in order to ensure protection for those who need it tomorrow.

This report summarises the key takeaways from each session, which can also be replayed on [our website](#).

The ideas revealed by our speakers will be valuable to anyone around the world interested in the protection of refugees and other forced migrants. We hope the report and other resources enable you to share and benefit from this knowledge.

### A word on foresight

*'The purpose of looking at the future is to disturb the present.'*  
- Gaston Berger

The conference used tools of strategic foresight to prompt us consider a range of plausible futures. Each panel discussion began with a scenario to help us imagine how conditions for refugee protection might evolve, based on analysis of emerging trends. The aim was not to predict the future, nor to generate agreement on what is most likely to occur, but rather to better prepare us all to shape the future we want to see.

In addition to the videos and scenarios developed for this conference, available on the Kaldor Centre [website](#), the following resources may also be of interest:

- UK Government Office for Science, [The Futures Toolkit](#) (2017) provides guidance on a range of tools and approaches for those considering how to design a futures thinking process.
- UNHCR, [Project Unsung](#) (2021) is a speculative storytelling project drawing on a range of creative approaches to reimagine humanitarian futures, and it includes prompts for activities and reflection.
- OECD, [Making Migration and Integration Policies Future Ready](#) is an example of a report setting out a set of megatrends relating to migration (but not specifically forced migration) and providing an examples of what can arise from scenario-building.

# Opening keynote: Thinking about the future of forced migration

## Speaker

Aarathi Krishnan, Senior Strategic Foresight Advisor



EXPLORE the keynote recordings & transcript

## Key takeaways

*In the age of global polycrisis, we need to prepare for interconnected risks to compound and spread.*

- Our contemporary context is marked by a simultaneous convergence of crises, from climate emergencies to economic instability. These create interconnected challenges and vulnerabilities, with global repercussions.
- Contemporary risks range from diminishing natural resources and food shortages to increasingly frequent disasters and digital governance issues.
- Risks don't respect borders but rather ripple out, with chains of consequences that reach around the globe, even as geopolitical norms and international law are being challenged by falling trust in governments.

*Our history is one of inequality – and tomorrow's challenges demand that we radically address that.*

- The challenges of today are deeply rooted in historical oppressions, and this means that institutional governance going forward must understand and address systemic inequalities. Current frameworks often perpetuate these inequities, demanding a reimagined approach to policy-making.
- Amid polycrisis, those of us who have previously been privileged can no longer assume we're exempt from fragility.

'We design through our own eyes, and so – **whose futures are we building?** And what kind of systems can we design that can help ensure just, equitable, safe futures for all?'

***To shape the future, we need to anticipate risks critically and wisely.***

- Foresight is not neutral. Addressing future challenges requires foresight that is influenced by cultural, economic and collective perspectives. If we are to make effective transformations, we need to create dynamic, resilient policies that challenge outdated paradigms, with 'anti-fragility' built in for everyone.

***There is a role for hope – and for accountability.***

- Hope motivates action, and it must be coupled with tangible change and accountability. We should develop policies in ways that prioritise justice, equity and resilience, ensuring that inclusivity and resistance against systemic injustices are central to the process and the outcomes.

'We have failed not because the challenges were impossible to solve, but because of our collective lethargy and apathy to truly **reimagine a completely different status quo**. If the most fragile continue to bear the brunt of unanticipated risk and increased uncertainty, our mutual ability to create norms of freedom – of thriving – fall behind.'

'**Hope is a radical act**. It is what makes us cross seas, skies, take risks, and jump without safety nets when the journey and arrival might endanger safety and might diminish us. We are propelled forward by the hope for a better future for our children and our grandchildren, but hope by itself is not enough. **We must translate this hope into action** that befits the types of resets we need in the redesign of new commons, values and wisdoms.'



## Panel 1: Will people in need of protection be able to access it?

### The scenario



WATCH the scenario video

*It is 2033 and over the past decade, the rate of displacement has continued its upward trend. Record numbers of people have now been forced to leave their homes due to the intersecting drivers of conflict, persecution, serious human rights abuses and the effects of climate change and disasters. Many are internally displaced, but others have crossed international borders and are sheltering in neighbouring countries.*

*Across the Global North, there has been widespread take-up of policies that contain asylum seekers in the Global South. For those few who do succeed in reaching the Global North, protection is not available. It is now common practice for asylum seekers to be removed immediately and transferred to partner States in the Global South to have their claims processed there. Public opinion in the Global North has adjusted to the new reality in which irregular migration is almost non-existent, and only refugees specifically chosen for resettlement or other visas are permitted to enter and remain in their countries.*

*This new paradigm has been made possible by the large-scale development of border technologies and unprecedented data-sharing arrangements between States in the Global North and South, international organisations and large corporations. From the moment a person flees their home, their biometric and personal data is used to track, predict, control and divert their journey. Border officials have been replaced by biometric and sensing technologies which use a combination of passport readers, cameras, CCTV systems and body scanners to identify travellers and assess their reasons for travel and risk factors (including any potential intention to apply for asylum). Attempts to enter outside these official points are also frustrated. Global surveillance tech is used to predict, monitor and prevent irregular maritime journeys, and to intercept attempts to cross land-borders other than at formal points of entry.*

*The success of this system hinges on the cooperation of States in the Global South which have made their support conditional on an increase in resettlement and complementary pathways to protection, including the expansion of work, student, family reunion and other visa programs. They have also insisted upon a significant increase in economic incentives, technology transfer and humanitarian and development aid. For their part, governments in the Global North have reaffirmed their commitments to protection for displaced people, albeit through government-operated and 'regular' migration channels.*

## Panel 1 speakers

- *Magdalena Arias Cubas, Red Cross Red Crescent Global Migration Lab*
- *Louis Everuss, Centre Coordinator, Jean Monnet Centre of Excellence*
- *Adama Kamara, Deputy CEO, Refugee Council of Australia*
- *Nikolas Feith Tan, Senior Researcher, Danish Institute of Human Rights*
- *Chair: Madeline Gleeson, Senior Research Fellow, Kaldor Centre*



EXPLORE the Panel 1 recordings & transcript

## Key takeaways

***Externalisation policies that aim to deter people from seeking asylum in the Global North are multiplying in number and, for those subject to them, carry significant risks.***

- ‘Externalisation’ encompasses measures taken by States to push border control, asylum procedures and protection responsibilities away from their territories, often (but not exclusively) to States in the Global South. These measures include arrangements to transfer asylum seekers from would-be host States to other States to have their claims processed, such as the deals between the European Union and Türkiye; United Kingdom and Rwanda; Italy and Albania; and Australia and Nauru and Papua New Guinea.
- The trend towards increased border securitisation can have the perverse effect of increasing the number of people who are forced to seek asylum through more dangerous journeys.
- Increasingly restrictive border regimes risk creating a domino effect where more destination States attempt to shift their responsibilities without expanding protection for displaced people.

***Border technology is not neutral – it is transforming borders and largely being applied in ways that keep out people who may need protection.***

- There is little transparency about the computational systems behind the tools deployed in border tech, raising ethical concerns.
- Airport ‘SmartGates’ collect biometric data that are run through migration and criminal databases to screen out people perceived to be ‘threats’. Biometric scanning can be inherently biased (eg calibrated to draw conclusions based on certain skin tones), such that gender and racial prejudice are baked into the system.
- Algorithmic risk assessments, which compare a person’s data to a normative ‘ideal insider’ profile, embed a logic into migration systems where difference becomes threat, entrenching bias against minorities.
- Such risk-coding tools are often designed and deployed by private tech companies looking to maximise profit, without prioritising public values or humanitarian ethics.
- Drones surveil borders, often with military signifiers (eg cross-hairs), amplifying the perception of migrants as threats. Like a lot of border technology, drones collect information about people on the move without their meaningful consent.
- These technologies are often deployed in a political context that prioritises border control over protection. In this respect, the principal issue may not be tech per se, but the ways in which governments choose to deploy it at the border.

***Border technology poses both opportunities and challenges for people on the move, and for those seeking to protect their rights.***

- Arrangements that increase the public perception that refugee arrivals are being managed in a predictable and orderly way may bolster public acceptance of higher humanitarian intakes.
- Technology can potentially enhance protection decision-making, for instance by giving accurate 'uncertainty scores' for asylum decisions. Technology can also be used to save lives and increase accountability for human rights violations, such as when drones are used to detect boats in need of rescue, or smartphone cameras are used to document abuses in places otherwise outside the public eye.
- Smartphones have become essential tech for people on the move, enabling them to find information about their journeys, overcome language barriers and connect with organisations that can assist them. However, smartphones can also be co-opted by States to control and track migrants, or to access data about their backgrounds and journeys.
- The securitisation of borders is eroding trust between humanitarian actors and people seeking protection, such that migrants have become more likely to avoid seeking help for fear of being arrested, detained or deported.
- Humanitarian organisations face their own challenges with the collection and use of biometric and personal data, including concerns about meaningful consent, cybersecurity and actual or perceived risks to their neutrality and independence by sharing data with governments and corporations.
- New technologies are often tested on people who are most in need of protection and lack the means to fight back against an unfair system.
- It is vital to ensure that people on the move, humanitarian actors and the public have access to full and reliable information about the kinds of technologies that are being deployed.

***With the international system under strain, it is vital to widen the focus to a variety of durable solutions – and to empower and listen to those most affected.***

- Regulated and safe 'complementary pathways' – such as education visas, community sponsorship and family reunion schemes – are increasing, as a range of stakeholders beyond government help to support refugees.
- However, such pathways tend to be discretionary and subject to political whim; legislation and international agreements are pivotal for ensuring equitable access and protection.
- Even if regular pathways to protection were significantly expanded, they would need to operate as part of a 'toolbox' alongside national asylum systems and other measures, such as emergency protection for people at immediate risk. The 'toolbox' should respect the right to seek asylum and be able to respond in a timely way to sudden and/or large-scale displacement.
- The Global North should not assume that it is the best or most desired destination for refugees, many of whom may prefer to build a life closer to their countries of origin, or to voluntarily return to their country when circumstances allow.
- Cooperative efforts must recognise the needs, interests and capacities of Global South States and host communities, and the wealth of existing protection practices in the Global South that can be built upon.
- Wherever refugees and people seeking asylum may be, their rights must be respected. We have an opportunity to think creatively about how to expand the ways people can access protection.
- Understanding the capacity and strengths of refugees, and increasing their access to power and influence, can build a stronger, more durable asylum system.

## What do we need to do better?

- We need a paradigm shift from a focus on deterrence to a focus on providing access to protection through well-managed asylum systems. This shift requires massive and dynamic policy experimentation through pilot programs and small-scale policy-transfer efforts oriented towards enhancing protection.
- We need to better understand what forms of international cooperation really work in this area, not only to advance the mutual interests of cooperating States, but also to respect the rights of displaced people.
- We must ensure that, when developing digitised border systems, human rights protections and accountability are better embedded within legislation.
- We must remember that border technologies do not produce 'objective, neutral science', but rather are vulnerable to bias and politicisation. This understanding must be reflected in the ways we apply border technologies.
- We need to understand better why there is so much hostility towards migrants and refugees in some countries, and what can be done to address this.
- We need to facilitate multiple solutions, including the three traditional durable solutions (voluntary repatriation, resettlement and local integration), complementary pathways, and mechanisms at the regional and sub-national levels to expand access to protection.
- We need to listen to people in need of international protection and the solutions they identify.

'We are today in a state of crisis with respect to territorial asylum in what we're calling the Global North. And I think we're seeing some creativity in the face of that crisis.'

- Nikolas Feith Tan

'These [technology] systems don't produce objective, neutral science. They produce particular perspectives on the world. And when we understand them with that cultural lens, we treat them differently.'

- Louis Everuss

'Listen to the wishes of people who are in need of protection themselves. What do they want? Resettlement ... may not be the actual answer.'

- Adama Kamara

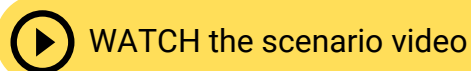
'We cannot deal with the future, or even with the present, unless we acknowledge that past .... Unless we face the reality of inequality, systemic racism, discrimination, colonialism - everything that actually impacts migration today - we can't move forward.'

- Magdalena Arias Cubas



## Panel 2: How will we identify people in need of protection?

### The scenario



*It is 2033 and the factors driving people from their homes are becoming increasingly complex and interconnected. Persecution, armed conflict, the impacts of climate change and disasters, growing food insecurity and human rights violations intersect to create mixed movements of people in search of international protection, livelihood opportunities and a more dignified existence. In this context, the task of distinguishing those eligible for international protection from those who are not has become increasingly challenging.*

*Across both the Global North and South, access to robust individualised refugee status determination procedures is the exception rather than the rule, with governments adopting a variety of measures aimed at increasing 'efficiency' in the face of increased protection claims and extended backlogs. This includes an increased reliance on group determination, where applicants from certain countries with specific characteristics are granted protection, while other groups are automatically denied.*

*Faster decision-making is also supported by widespread use of AI and other technologies. Machine learning algorithms are used to stream and allocate applications to different procedures based on an assessment of a case's complexity and the likelihood of success. Biometrics are used to establish identity, and AI tools analysing facial micro-expressions, body language, eye movements and voice are employed to assess the credibility of an applicant. Additional data collected through digital forensics, such as social media analysis, are factored into the decision-making process. AI systems synthesise all collected data to provide a recommendation as to whether an applicant meets the legal criteria for protection. Final decisions, however, still involve human oversight.*

*Meanwhile, new actors have become involved in determining protection claims. Private corporations are involved in designing and implementing refugee status determination procedures and assistive technologies. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in the number of States with functioning asylum systems. These are the result of successful efforts to incentivise States in the Global South to establish new national asylum systems, which have been supported through the transfer of resources and technology. This has reduced the role UNHCR plays in processing asylum claims, allowing it to hand over responsibility to national governments.*

### Panel 2 speakers

- Cathryn Costello, Professor of Global Refugee & Migration Law, University College Dublin
- Niamh Kinchin, Acting Dean of Law, University of Wollongong
- Edward Santow, Director, Policy & Governance, Human Technology Institute, UTS
- Shahyar Roushan, Senior Member, Administrative Appeals Tribunal, Migration & Refugee Division
- Chair: Daniel Ghezelbash, Associate Professor and Deputy Director, Kaldor Centre

## Key takeaways



[EXPLORE the Panel 2 recordings & transcript](#)

***Technologies are already transforming the asylum process, generally without design that prioritises key values such as fairness, efficiency and human dignity.***

- A rapidly evolving range of technologies is used in the migration and asylum context, starting from before displacement (eg forecasting tools using big data to predict movement), through border crossings (eg drone surveillance), triaging of visa applications (eg streaming applications by nationality), UNHCR refugee registration (eg biometric identification, such as fingerprinting and iris scans) and as assistive tools in refugee status determination.
- Algorithms can improve decision-making processes – for instance, streamlining case-management backlogs to prioritise vulnerable cases, or surfacing patterns of unconscious bias so that decision-makers can reflect and improve. However, glitches are common, transparency is lacking and the potential for amplifying bias can be baked in.

***Inserting technology into refugee decision-making can make the process less transparent, rather than more accurate and accountable.***

- In refugee status determination processes, tech is generally being used from a starting point of suspicion – such as using speech-recognition tools to test dialect authenticity; subjecting documents and mobile-phone data to opaque data-forensics processes; and ‘deception detection’ tools. This potentially shifts the burden on to a refugee to prove they are not lying.
- The use of facial recognition and other AI tools in determining the credibility of applicants is highly problematic. Trauma impacts memory and can present in ways not easily understood by humans, let alone by algorithms.
- ‘Well-founded fear’ judgments require consideration of both objective fear and subjective fear. While AI might have benefits for determining objective fear, such as by synthesising and updating country of origin information, it is questionable whether algorithms should (or can) be used to determine subjective fear.
- Humans tend to trust AI results over their own conclusions, and so decision-makers are likely to rely on the verdict of an AI-powered system, even when it is wrong and even if humans are said to be the ultimate decision-makers. Australia’s ‘Robodebt’ scandal proved this.
- Transparency is key in decision-making, especially when complex algorithms may be involved.

***Tech is here to stay – we need to explore the opportunities and mitigate the risks associated with its use in the asylum system.***

- Australia’s *Migration Act 1958* (Cth) already allows for machines to make decisions. To date, it is believed that automated decisions have only been used in uncomplicated cases to grant rather than refuse visas, but the existing law allows for expanded use.
- AI could be widely used to facilitate the streaming of strong cases for swift, positive determination, with benefits for both States and refugees – a ‘win-win’.
- Tech-assisted tools could be deployed to train decision-makers, including to review consistency across decision-makers and to address potential social and cognitive biases.
- Legal practitioners should beware of the risks of data exposure, misinformation and potential bias before considering using AI to assist them in their advocacy.

***Governments, regulators and rights advocates are at a critical juncture, with very consequential technology evolving more quickly than understanding of its implications, mostly developed by private companies with huge profit incentives.***

- Regulators need to enforce existing laws, which tend to be technology-neutral. For instance, anti-discrimination laws prevent discrimination against an applicant regardless of whether the decision-maker is a human or AI.
- Privately developed technology that has a public impact cannot be left unaccountable, yet even regulators find themselves challenged in making sense of the technology. Reform must ensure not only that information is open to the public, but also that regulators are provided with the means to undertake a technical assessment and interrogate the technological systems.
- Technology companies have in some cases pulled back from developing tools that governments could use to cause serious harm, but lines need to be drawn by the public, governments and regulators so that rights protection is not at the discretion of corporations.

### **What do we need to do better?**

- We must insist on and facilitate refugee participation in making decisions about the use of technology in the asylum system.
- We need to consider de-centring individual interviews in asylum procedures. These are often retraumatising and do not always provide a source of accurate and probative evidence. We should shift the focus to what we do know about the risks people face, based on the objective evidence available, and consider whether there should be a presumption that applicants meet the refugee definition.
- We don't need to wait to resolve lengthy ethical debates to regulate the use of technology in decision-making. We can start simply by enforcing existing laws that protect against discrimination and other forms of injustice.
- Civil society and academics need to become much more engaged on the vital questions of how AI and other new and emerging technologies will be used in decision-making. This cannot be left just to government and corporations.

'I think there is huge potential to assist decision-makers in looking through volumes of information that are presented by applicants to organise them and classify them. This is not necessarily new, but how it's going to be done through more sophisticated AI tools can have profound implications for the way that tribunals and courts do their work.'

- Shahyar Roushan

'In theory, it's just a piece of assistive technology, it's just giving you a recommendation. But in practice, a lot of the time what people end up doing is they just defer to the machine, they don't check the workings.'

- Edward Santow

'The lawyer needs to push back on the sort of technologies that are increasing the burden of proof on the applicant.'

- Niamh Kinchin

'A lot of the reasons why asylum decision-making is really challenging is because refugees have generally been illegalised.'

- Cathryn Costello



## Panel 3: Will refugees be welcome?

### The scenario



WATCH the scenario video

*It is 2033. Our sense of social cohesion has further fractured. In Australia, as throughout the world, society is split between competing narratives of nationalism and hyper-localism, on the one hand, (fuelled by growing inequality and socio-economic uncertainty) and global solidarities, on the other (driven by shared environmental threats). Democratic institutions have weakened.*

*Global North countries still decide 'who comes to their countries and the circumstances in which they come' – but now they're assisted by big data and algorithms that select migrants and refugees for resettlement based on risk profiles and their likelihood of successful integration. The algorithms do not prioritise humanitarian considerations, so the marginalised and most vulnerable are up against it. But tech-vetting has led to increased support for migrants and refugees, as people feel confident that the programs are well managed.*

*As we read the news in 2033, our personal AI assistants send us 'critical thinking reminders' nudging us to explore outside our bubble of AI-aggregated news and urging us to critically assess news stories, which now carry a blockchain 'proof of provenance' at the end of each article, showing who created and modified it and when. Still, these are hard work; they're no match for large-scale disinformation campaigns leveraging generative AI, AI-generated images and fake videos, which have made it impossible to discern what is real and what is not on social media or aggregators, which are the main sources of news for people around the world. Regulation never got in front of the tech developments. People don't feel they can trust most information they encounter.*

*However, virtual communities based on shared interests have begun to challenge traditional government power systems. Tech and demographic shifts have opened the way for new players to gain new prominence as influencers of public policy and the discourse on displacement. Social movements with digital firepower have nurtured charismatic new leaders and broader, more engaged memberships that operate both virtually and locally in person. There's growing cooperation between refugee-led movements and climate movements, which clocked up some vital successes and are more powerful as a result.*

### Panel 3 speakers

- Peter Lewis, Executive Director, Essential Media
- Shabnam Safa, Chairperson, National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group
- Amanda Tattersall, Associate Professor of Practice, Sydney Policy Lab
- Lenore Taylor, Editor, Guardian Australia
- Chair: Lauren Martin, Communications Lead, Kaldor Centre



EXPLORE the Panel 3 recordings & transcript

## Key takeaways

***Public responses to refugee issues are shaped by a dynamic interplay of technology, media, community relationships and leadership.***

- We face an increasingly challenging environment for the public discussion of issues involving complexity and nuance, such as displacement.
- Media serves as a critical platform for public debate, but traditional journalism faces challenges in maintaining trust as technology splinters audiences and undermines its business models.
- Social media algorithms and news aggregators are serving users 'micro-targeted' content, with an echo-chamber effect that makes our information landscape increasingly siloed.
- Community engagement and connecting across differences is crucial – but this is impacted by technology that silos us and diverts us from face-to-face conversations.
- Political and ideological players are often the loudest voices in the public conversation, using their powerful platforms to push agendas of fear and division rather than empathy, understanding or common ground.
- The institutions of civil society that anchored our sense of belonging in the industrial era are losing their influence and relevance to members. We must work to build connections and relationships among communities to identify commonalities from which solidarity can grow.

***Truth is harder to detect in the sprawling, evolving digital information ecosystem, breeding mistrust.***

- Wherever the 'public square' is found – in media debates, social media and face-to-face community settings – discussion needs to be based in facts, but societies increasingly cannot agree on what's true. This is often because of a deliberate strategy by political actors to confuse people, and because the way people receive information is increasingly fractured.
- Altered and AI-generated images and videos will increasingly complicate the landscape of public discourse.
- Faced with an overwhelming volume of information, people tend to resort to 'picking a team' rather than critically considering whether information is trustworthy. Building digital literacy skills will be crucial for the health of our public debate.
- Social media algorithms tend to amplify outrage rather than encouraging balance and nuance. A crucial challenge is how we can design ways to reward good citizenship in the information ecosystems with which we interact.

'Given that we are going to face such incredible challenges that are going to make people feel overwhelmed and scared, given that misinformation is going to be an even bigger problem than it is now – I think holding a place where you can have a factual, trusted conversation about the issues that are going to be so challenging is really important.'

- Lenore Taylor

**Better acknowledging diverse refugee experiences and narratives is essential for building genuine dialogue, understanding and solidarity.**

- While some refugees have used technology to build audiences via social-media, refugees are rarely represented in traditional media and are often flattened into hero or victim stereotypes. Nuanced storytelling that reflects the diverse realities of refugee lives is needed.
- Broader societal challenges – such as housing, economic inequality and political polarisation – often create an us-against-them frame that hampers constructive dialogue about refugees, who are just as impacted by these social justice challenges as other members of the community. Rather than viewing ‘refugee issues’ in isolation, we should look to the interlinkages of refugee experiences with other issues; displacement is everyone’s concern, and everyone should play a role in seeking solutions.
- We don’t need to choose between global and local solidarities; we need to try to hold the two together. This involves tethering local conversations to a global and national context, and, conversely, recognising the local implications and concerns raised by global challenges.
- Recognising power dynamics in any public discourse and empowering marginalised voices are essential for creating a more inclusive dialogue that can find common ground and open up avenues for progress.
- By fostering genuine conversations and relationships across communities, we can build broad and more powerful solidarity.

**What do we need to do better?**

- We need to foster greater digital literacy to equip people to resist the distortion of our public discourse, particularly by corporate digital platforms whose design amplifies division and misinformation, and find ways to reward good citizenship in our digital ecosystems.
- We need to increase the capacity in our community to have conversations with each other, to build the solidarity and capacity that can respond together to the challenges we face collectively.
- We need to maintain shared and trustworthy sources of information, where context, nuance and facts are provided.
- We need to recognise the diversity of refugee experiences and stories, and consciously incorporate diverse, nuanced voices in our public conversation.

‘If we look at 2033 and the way we’re going to be thinking about ourselves as a nation, the way we’re going to be looking at each other, it really comes down to the stories we start telling now.’  
- Peter Lewis

‘In terms of how we change things in the public opinion... we can start with sharing the true, human stories of refugees. They’re not all shining stars... They’re not all receivers of charity and a duty and obligation ... We really need to accept that diversity of experiences and stories.’  
- Shabnam Safa

‘A broad-based sense of solidarity is possible and real and can be created by the press, but most importantly can be created in institutions on the ground.’  
- Amanda Tattersall



## Closing keynote: Will international refugee law still be relevant?

### Speaker

Jane McAdam, Scientia Professor and Director, Kaldor Centre



EXPLORE the keynote recordings & transcript

### Key takeaways

***International refugee law will remain relevant, but the question is, will it be able to do the work it was cut out to do?***

- Despite political attacks, heightened border controls and increasing numbers of people on the move, the international refugee regime, both legal and institutional, has proven to be resilient and adaptable to changing contexts. Its foundational principles, rooted in ancient notions of sanctuary and shelter, will remain relevant into the future.
- Although international refugee law on its own cannot resolve displacement, it does offer a principled, ordered framework for protection. Problematically, some States look for the grey areas in the Refugee Convention to confine and seek to restrict their obligations as far as is arguably possible, rather than using the treaty as a blueprint to guide positive action.

***Technology presents opportunities and challenges at every step of the way.***

- The Janus-faced nature of biometrics and predictive analytics means they can be harnessed in all sorts of ways, some positive, some less so – for instance, assisting with the provision of humanitarian assistance but potentially also subverting free and informed consent.
- For those who can access refugee status determination procedures, automated decision-making poses further challenges, including the risk that machines trained on historical data will be too blunt and deny protection to people in need, undermining both human rights and due process. AI has more promise if decision-makers can use it to assist them, rather than rule their thinking.
- Technology's influence on refugee status determination may also impact refugee law itself: if asylum decisions are made without full, human deliberation, the capacity to develop more nuanced understandings of key principles and concepts may be lost – and with it, the notion of refugee law as a living, dynamic body of practice.

***Our understanding of how climate change affects displacement is developing quickly – and sometimes in unexpected ways.***

- Machine-learning technologies are enabling major advances in climate-mobility models, including surprising early indications that, contrary to common assumptions, those in the most difficult circumstances may not be the first to leave.
- Addressing immobility within countries may become a more significant humanitarian challenge than protecting those on the move.
- Communities all over the world are feeling the pressures of shrinking resources, rising costs, worsening disasters and the existential threat of climate change. Even those in relatively privileged circumstances may not feel particularly fortunate, and this may impact the reception that refugees and other forced migrants receive in the communities into which they move.

***The future of refugee protection depends on us.***

- The future of international refugee law will depend on its adaptability, continuous scrutiny and dynamic application to evolving circumstances.
- While refugee law may not look identical in 2033, its fundamental principles will endure.

'[N]ot a single State has ever withdrawn from the Refugee Convention, despite perennial protestations about its ongoing utility and relevance. Even the most jingoistic politician must realise that without it, there would be greater disorder in addressing global displacement.'

'If decisions about people's legal status are made without full, human deliberation, the capacity to develop more nuanced understandings of key principles and concepts may be lost – and with it, the notion of refugee law as a living, dynamic body of practice.'

'Refugee law alone is not, and never has been, *the* answer. It is one element – albeit a very important one – in a complex of protective principles and other laws, policies and practices concerning mobility.'



## Recommendations

**Recognise the interconnected nature of global challenges and foster future readiness.**

*We need to develop comprehensive strategies that recognise the interconnected nature of today's global challenges: addressing individual crises in isolation is insufficient. We must build anticipatory approaches that consider the future consequences of today's action and inaction.*

**Reimagine systems for just and inclusive outcomes.**

*We must critically assess current structures to identify gaps and inefficiencies. We should embrace reimagined models that reckon with historical inequities and systemic oppression, ensuring policies are inclusive, just and responsive to diverse realities.*

**Empower and enable refugees and other forced migrants.**

*We need to stop sidelining and instead strengthen the opportunities for refugees and others experiencing displacement to shape debates and decisions. This must be founded on a real recognition of refugees' agency, capacities and diverse experiences.*

**Enhance international cooperation.**

*We must evaluate and improve existing international cooperation mechanisms to strike a balance between State interests and refugee rights, to provide safe alternatives for people on the move.*

**Look beyond Global North governments for solutions.**

*We need a toolbox of evidence-based solutions for displaced people that include both traditional and innovative pathways for people to build lives in safety and dignity. This must involve not a range of actors in both the Global North and South, including civil society, the private sector, sub-national authorities and regional institutions.*

**Uphold fundamental values and prioritise human dignity.**

*We must recognise the humanity of migrants, irrespective of their legal status, and prioritise the basic dignity and rights of all individuals. We must also push back when these are threatened by new developments.*

**Get engaged in tech – and the way it will be applied.**

*We must ensure that the technologies are applied with safeguards for people's dignity and rights – everyone needs to be involved as an advocate for ethical, transparent and legal use of new technology.*

**Strengthen accountability and oversight mechanisms.**

*We should hold decision-makers, tech developers, the media and ourselves accountable, ensuring transparency and carefully evaluating the impacts that technology, power dynamics and other changes may have on asylum systems and on our public discourse, to ensure that refugees' rights are respected.*

**Foster genuine collaboration.**

*The systemic barriers and other challenges we face require intersectional approaches and greater solidarity across divides. We must create opportunities that encourage respectful dialogue and stronger coalitions.*

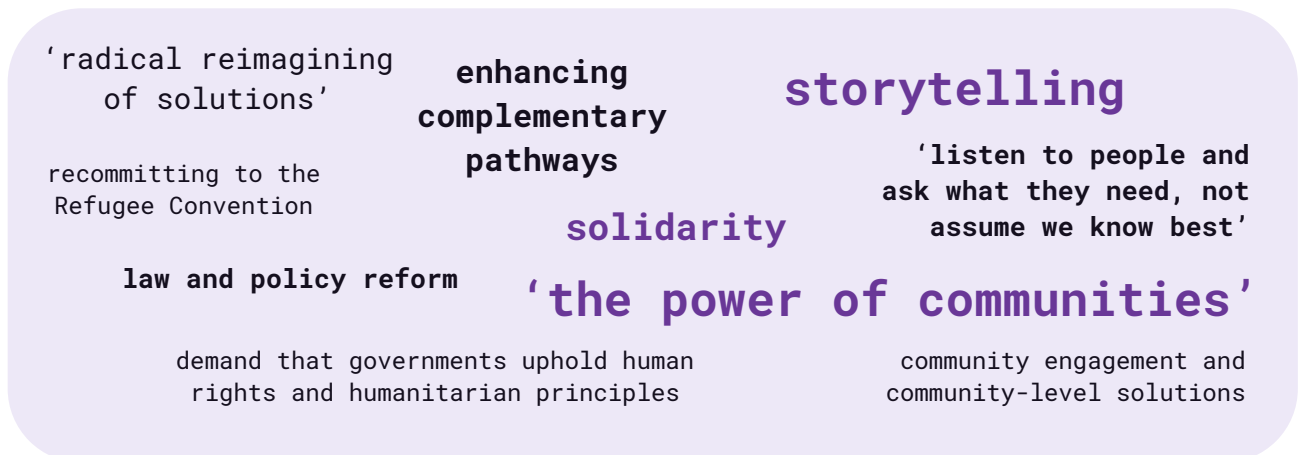
## Audience insights

We asked conference participants – a diverse array of scholars, policymakers, legal practitioners, civil society and refugee leaders – to share their insights and experience through an audience poll.

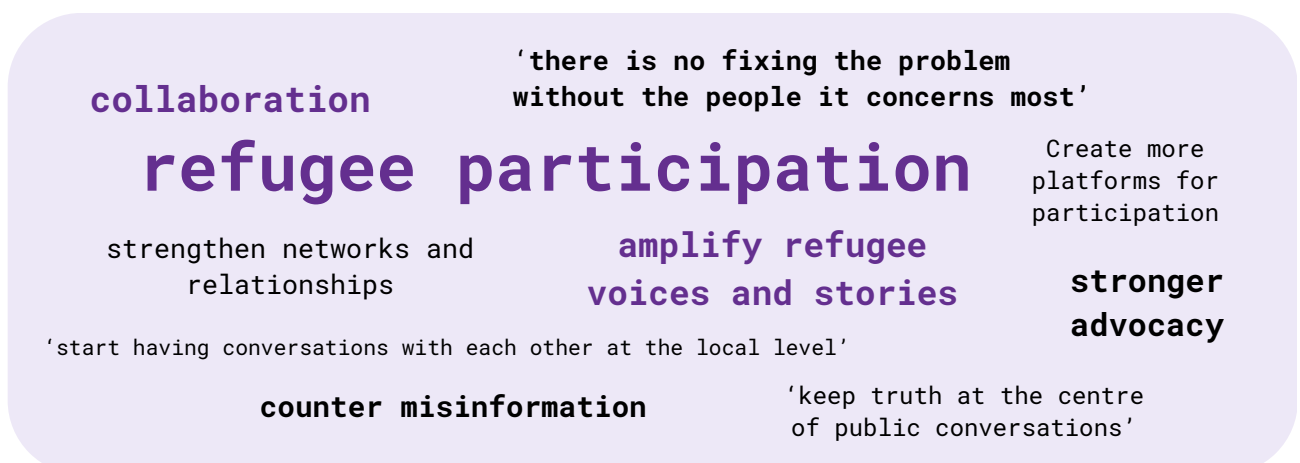
### What is the biggest challenge to protecting forced migrants in the decade ahead?



### What is the biggest opportunity for protecting forced migrants in the decade ahead?



### What is the most important intervention we need to make now?



## Where to next?

Thank you to everyone who shared their insights with us on the day – and to all who are working on these issues to contribute to shaping a more resilient, equitable and sustainable future for and with refugees and other forced migrants.

We hope that the ideas and resources shared here help to spark fresh thinking and action in advancing international protection. Together, we can create the future we want to see.

The Kaldor Centre will continue to monitor these significant trends and evolving responses and solutions. To stay in touch and keep up with these changes:

- Enjoy the conference in replay on the Kaldor Centre's [website](#).
- Subscribe and share with your colleagues our free [Weekly News Roundup](#) to track the latest developments in forced migration in Australia and around the world.
- Follow the Kaldor Centre on [LinkedIn](#), [X](#), [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#) and [Soundcloud](#) channels.
- Contact us at [kaldorcentre@unsw.edu.au](mailto:kaldorcentre@unsw.edu.au).

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