

DIASPORA CONFERENCE BREAKS NEW GROUND



The Diasporas in Action conference, on 26-27 September 2016, marked a turning point in how we in Australia think about the role of diasporas in peacebuilding and humanitarian response.

For the first time in this country, participants gathered at the University of Melbourne heard about bold, counter-intuitive approaches to peacebuilding, private sector investment in conflict-affected countries, international experiences of national diaspora action plans, contestation of authoritarian regimes, use of communications technology for development and strategies to maximise diaspora contribution to humanitarian responses after natural disasters.

In her opening address, the Minister for International Development and the Pacific Senator Concetta Fierravanti-Wells underscored the importance of diasporas. "I am committed to working with diaspora communities so that they benefit from the Government's aid expertise and in turn, that the Government benefits from diasporas' local knowledge," she said.

It had all the hallmarks of a successful conference, with stimulating presentations from international and local speakers and an excellent turnout, but there was something else as well; a palpable buzz in the air, and a sense of excitement that something new was happening.

The 170 participants came from such a range of different sectors and backgrounds that there was no place for business as usual. Academics rubbed shoulders with artists, international development practitioners explored collaboration with diaspora organisations, government representatives discussed risk with diaspora business councils, community sector organisations met young diaspora entrepreneurs. Conversations were lively and engaged (with two separate participants commenting that it was the friendliest conference they had ever been to) and connections were made.

For diasporas, it was clear that they were not alone and that there are many other communities in Australia tackling the same issues.

For the government and non-government international development agencies, there were international examples to look to, demonstrating how the sector can engage meaningfully with diasporas to enhance development and humanitarian outcomes.

For refugee settlement and community sector organisations it was clear that Australia's multicultural communities not only help people to settle in Australia, but are also connecting Australians with the rest of the world.

As the dust settles, the conference convenors, the Diaspora Learning Network, will start to plan for the future. A series of policy papers that draw on conference themes and learnings will be produced in 2017. The question that was asked by many participants – when will the next conference take place? – will also be considered. In the meantime, the DLN is inviting new members to join the network to continue to learn and explore how to enhance the contribution made by diasporas to peacebuilding, development and humanitarian response.

The conference was convened by the Diaspora Learning Network- an initiative of Diaspora Action Australia and the University of Melbourne in partnership with ACFID, RDI Network, Oxfam Australia, Refugee Council of Australia, Australian Red Cross – and supported by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

For more information: conference@diasporaaction.org.au or www.diasporasinaction.org.au