

SETTING NEW STANDARDS? THE 2024 WORLD CONFERENCE ON STATELESSNESS

Conferences have long been a way to convene people in response to a call, with outcomes varying from leaps forward for humanity to merely choreographed meeting places. So widespread, they constitute a standard part of the global economy, generating income for specialist businesses, hotels and the travel industry. In three decades of work I have attended over a hundred conferences - convened by multilateral organisations, academia, judiciaries, trade bodies, civil societies and artists. Their utility is not always clear in hindsight in view of the climate footprint. Many may have been better served by other forms of engagements, notwithstanding that technology over this period was not as advanced.

The use of online facilities post-Covid is appropriate in facilitating gatherings in ways that conferences did. Greater climate awareness and cost optimization means that many activities take place through electronic platforms. Realisation has emerged that while this 'gets business done', it struggles to replicate the people contact of informal ideas' exchanges that build alliances. A practice is emerging of less regular Conferences interspersed with online activities to maintain alliances.

In this context I wanted to share my reflection on the [World Conference on Statelessness](#) (WCS) 26-29 February. Convened at [Taylor's University](#) in Kuala Lumpur (KL) by the [Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion](#) (global), [Nationality for All](#) (Asia-Pacific), [Development of Human Resources for Rural Areas \(Malaysia\)](#) and [Family Frontiers \(Malaysia\)](#), it was attended by 450 delegates. The theme presented a major challenge: international conferences require travel – an acute problem for those without nationality. Also, conferences of this nature usually take place in the Western world where western civil society can access resources more easily.

Simply put, WCS was easily the best conference I have participated in across topic, format and people, over the course of my professional life. I attest to being in other settings that were as inspiring; participating in other sessions as informative, intellectually stimulating and rigorous; and, in more limited number, being privy to other arenas that were as electric. The WCS surpassed these in scale, intensity, sustenance and coherence of purpose. Each session of a packed agenda met this standard, building a crescendo that was beyond my imagination. In a sharp return to reality, a week later I was an invited 'expert' at a 2-day Conference in Europe where I appeared to be the only non-white participant in 40, with all-male presenters and female 'assistants' despite the presence of a small number of better-established women experts in the audience. The gulf in standards and empathy left me convinced that what I experienced must become standard participatory norms.

From the outset, the care taken by the hosts to ensure that affected people could attend was, in a single word, exceptional. Malaysia is in political crisis on this issue, but the organisers successfully advocated for special dispensations to ensure affected persons could attend. Despite solid arrangements, immigration lawyers were on standby throughout the convening. This shames others who seem unable or unwilling to take such steps. Even UN and multilateral organisations are guilty: willing to issue 'invitation' letters but considering it beyond their remit to ensure their guests' participation. This barrier against those not based in privileged jurisdictions marginalizes voices. In KL this facet was central to the subsequent tone of the Conference. The opening session included a snap online poll on how people described themselves. The strong showing among attendees who identified as persons with 'lived experience' of the issue was inspiring as was their prominence throughout the programme.

Second, this convening would meet the standard of the highest academic conferences at well-endowed Universities. It was graced by well-researched papers presented by established scholars paired alongside devoted early career researchers. At academic conferences staff are only funded by their (usually western-based) Universities if they present papers, resulting in sparse sessional attendance. Here the sessions were packed and vibrant. The higher proportion of women presenters enabled sustained analysis of how intersectional vulnerabilities deny access and how solutions must be tailored to reach the most marginalized. The skill of session moderators lay in merging papers on topics that seemed disparate into coherent interactions. Remarkably, though several people featured in more than one

panel, their interventions were not repetitive – emphasizing quality of preparation and success in getting sessions to fulfil defined objectives.

Third, the plenary sessions each day were imaginative, inspiring and engaged all the Conference facets: the emotional reserves and resilience of those who had been through and advocated the defeat of statelessness; those who researched the topic and presented solutions, and artists who presented attendant stories and performances. Each opening plenary animated themes, with reflective closing sessions featuring an open mic attesting to how prescient these had been. Then there were the feature documentary film screenings each night that created further buzz, making it twelve hours of programming each day, without counting the seven streams of parallel sessions over the morning, afternoon and evening slots.

Fourth, the quality of the accompanying arts programme would meet the highest performance thresholds at great global arts venues. I attend live performances, go to plays, visit exhibitions and follow - though perhaps not fully understand - other arts. The [arts programme at WCS](#) was compelling, inclusive, on theme and brilliant in output. Performances infused the programme with momentum, generating empathy and galvanising energy despite much of it being expended in long days.

Others I spoke to at WCS were impressed by the availability of mental health professionals, quality and generosity of the food and drink (its Malaysia - that part easily defeated the humble sandwich that is standard conference fare elsewhere!), the willingness of cohorts of student volunteers at the venue to help, the language support on offer, the outstanding timekeeping, the well-oiled logistics and many other factors that my privileged position meant I took for granted.

If in this climate consciousness time a physical conference must be held, I hope new standards will emerge for its conduct. I urge conference organisers to greater empathy in ensuring such convenings optimise their environmental, time and other resource costs in a manner on display at the *World Conference on Statelessness*.

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