

JULY 2020: ISSUE #2

AUSTRALIA AT THE UN



Message from Ambassador The Hon Mitch Fifield

Every year in July, Australia marks **NAIDOC Week**, a celebration of the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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While official celebrations in Australia were postponed due to COVID-19, the Australian Mission invited National Rugby League (NRL) player **Joel Thompson** to join us virtually for a discussion about the intersection of sport, race and mental health.

An experienced and respected player both on and off the field, Joel described how his upbringing in rural Australia and experience as an Indigenous Australian helped shape his community work and mental health advocacy.

After his own battles with mental health, Joel started ***The Mindset Project*** in 2012, an initiative aimed at helping people of all ages develop a positive view of their potential and make choices that promote long-term growth and wellbeing.

Having spent over 10 years in the NRL, Joel believes sport can be a bridge to speak about a range of difficult issues. Joel was candid about his own experiences confronting racism, as well as the lack of understanding about Australia's indigenous history and culture he has encountered throughout his career.

We thank Joel for his time and hope to welcome him to New York at some point in the future.

In early July, I had the opportunity to speak to the **Asia Society Australia** about the UN's role during COVID-19 and the ongoing value of multilateralism.

My remarks provided a brief overview of the UN's response to COVID-19 and made the case for practical and realistic reform of the UN system to ensure it is fit-for-purpose and able to respond to contemporary challenges.

The pandemic has reinforced that the UN remains an indispensable partner to Australia, not only in the COVID-19 response and recovery, but through its vital development, humanitarian and peace and security work.

My full remarks are available on the [Asia Society Australia website](#).

Finally, we are extremely pleased to feature an Australian working in the UN system in the latest issue of our newsletter. Jane Connor, the UN Victims' Rights Advocate, plays an important and valuable role at the UN, working to prevent exploitation and abuse, protecting victims' rights to report abuse and receive support, and ensuring perpetrators are held to account. I encourage you to read our Q&A with Jane.

Fiji and Australia present 'Vuvale Partnership' during HLPF

The ongoing impacts of COVID19 overshadowed this year's High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development.

There was an acknowledgement from across the board that the pandemic risks reversing hard-won development gains and setting back progress on Agenda 2030.

But there was also cause for optimism, with a range of Voluntary National Reviews demonstrating the ongoing commitment to the SDGs, including four by Pacific Island nations.

For the Australian Mission, a particular highlight was joining the Fijian Mission to present our **Vuvale Partnership** during the annual global multi-stakeholder SIDS partnership dialogue.

'Vuvale' means 'family' and the partnership provides a platform for a new era of cooperation, consultation and friendship between our two nations.

At the UN, this includes working closely on a range of development, human rights and peace and security issues, and upholding international law and principles.



CSW64 formally concludes

As Vice-Chair of the Bureau for the 64th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), Australia helped bring the session to its conclusion this month, paving the way for CSW65 next year.

While it was disappointing that CSW64 had to be scaled-back to the pandemic, Australia is pleased that the political declaration we co-facilitated - which coincided with the 25th Anniversary of the Beijing Declaration - was able to be adopted shortly before UNHQ closed to in-person meetings in late-March.

We are hopeful that we can enjoy a more extensive session next year.

The Australian Mission would like to extend our thanks to all Bureau Members and Member State delegates for their engagement in the process to agree this year's political declaration.

Australians at the UN: Jane Connors, Victims' Rights Advocate for Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

Australian Jane Connors is deeply committed to elevating the voices and defending the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse.

In her role as the first United Nations Victims' Rights Advocate (VRA), Jane works to identify ways to prevent exploitation and abuse, protect and promote victims' rights to report and receive support, and to ensure perpetrators are held accountable.

The Secretary-General envisaged the role of the VRA to work across the UN system, at Headquarters and in the field, to identify ways to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse and, if these wrongs occur, to promote and protect victims' rights to report and receive support; to ensure that victims' cases are properly managed; and to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable.

The VRA works with all UN entities so that every victim receives personal care, follow-up attention, information on the progress of their case, and respect for their rights throughout investigations and accountability processes. The VRA also joins forces with States, local authorities and civil society, especially on the ground, so that victims benefit from the full effect of local laws and remedies.

Prior to becoming the VRA, Jane served as the Director of International Advocacy for Amnesty International and in a number of positions at the UN, including at the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Before joining the UN, Jane taught law at universities in London, Lancaster and Nottingham in the UK, and at the University of Canberra and ANU in Australia.

We asked Jane a few questions about her current role and how her work has been impacted by the pandemic.

What does the role of the VRA look like in practice?

In practice, my work is a mixture of advocacy with all UN entities involved in peacekeeping, humanitarian and development contexts, as well as Member States and civil society, including national human rights organisations. Critically, the role also involves very practical interventions to ensure victims of sexual exploitation and abuse receive the support and assistance they require.



Photo courtesy: UN Photo/Nektarios Markogiannis

I work with four Field Victims' Rights Advocates deployed in the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Haiti and South Sudan who are the main contact for victims on the ground, helping them to report, accompanying them as they seek assistance and accountability, and making sure they know how their cases are progressing.

Much of my work is directed to supporting the hands-on assistance the Field Victims' Rights Advocates provide. When I can, and obviously not during the COVID-19 pandemic, I visit field settings and, dependent on their wishes, meet victims to hear from them first-hand.

I also develop policy tools, such as the draft Victims' Rights Statement, now being discussed by colleagues, which aims to set out the rights of victims of sexual exploitation and abuse, and advocate for particular priorities, such as the resolution of outstanding paternity/child support claims.

Why is this work important? What impact does it have on people's lives?

The work is important because it recognises the victim, the harm they have experienced and the responsibility of the UN to translate its policy of zero tolerance into reality and respond to these wrongs.

Practically, the work is directed to providing the victim with immediate, short-, medium- and long-term assistance, including medical care, protection, shelter, food, legal assistance and access to livelihood support programs.

In some cases, the work, especially of the Field Victims' Rights Advocates, has resulted in provision of child support to guardians of children born of sexual exploitation and abuse. Provision of testimony by victims in courts martial has also been facilitated.

In Haiti, women have gained skills allowing them to set up small businesses, and school fees and supplies have been provided so their children can go to school.

In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, projects funded by the Trust Fund in Support of Victims of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse, have provided women with skills in basket-weaving, tailoring, maize flour production and mushroom farming. They have sold their goods and acquired some capital. This builds self-esteem, assists in community reintegration and mitigates re-victimization.

What has been your biggest challenge since taking up the role in 2017?

This role is very challenging. It is new, deals with the harm caused by our personnel, and requires careful managing of expectations.

There are few financial and human resources, and many aspects are outside the power of the VRA and Field Victims' Rights Advocates.

For example, the UN is an employer, and is only empowered to impose disciplinary or administrative sanctions in substantiated cases. Processes related to the accountability of perpetrators are usually carried out in their countries and depend on the applicable legal framework.

Similarly, civil proceedings for paternity and parental responsibility are usually conducted in the countries of alleged fathers.

But perhaps the greatest challenge is ensuring that the assistance and support the victim needs, and to which she is entitled, are provided and she is kept informed of her case's progress.



Photo courtesy: UN Photo/Nektarios Markogiannis

What impact has COVID-19 had on the work of OVRA? How have you adapted?

I have been working from home since the Secretary-General closed UNHQ to all but essential staff in early March, and I have not been able to visit countries where there are risks of sexual exploitation and abuse, nor to meet victims.

I have focused on advocacy, including through policy papers on risks and mitigation measures developed with the IASC, the USG for the Department of Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, and the Emergency Relief Coordinator and the High Commissioner for Refugees.

I have convened webinars with university students, including at the University of New South Wales, moved forward on paternity/child support claims and mapping assistance and support available to victims in 13 countries with differing UN footprints.

I have maintained very close contact with the Field Victims' Rights Advocates, also working from home and subject to physical distancing measures, often barring them from travel. Their capacity to innovate has been extraordinary.

Conscious that sexual exploitation and abuse often spike in humanitarian emergencies as those in vulnerable situations become even more vulnerable, they have led on developing measures to heighten staff awareness of risk. They have kept in touch with victims who have been receiving support through phone, SMS and platforms such as Zoom. They have maintained close contact with community-based complaint mechanisms so that they can be informed of new cases, and arranged medical assistance, including for childbirth and transportation albeit remotely.

Unfortunately, some livelihood support projects which could not be adapted to physical distancing requirements were suspended, but these, as well as school programs for children are being reintroduced in compliance with COVID-19 mitigation measures.

Further information on the Office of the Victims' Rights Advocate is [available here](#).

You can also follow the work of the OVRA on Twitter at [@UN_OVRA](#).

An uneven burden: The impact of COVID-19 on women and girls, lessons learnt and the road to equality

This month, the Australian Mission was pleased to host a virtual event featuring two lifelong gender equality advocates and accomplished Australians.

Former Australian Senator and [CEDAW candidate](#), Natasha Stott Despoja, and former UN Deputy High Commissioner for Human Rights, Kate Gilmore, joined the Mission and UN delegates in New York and Geneva for a discussion on the impact of COVID-19 on women and girls.

While the pandemic has exacerbated many pre-existing inequalities between men and women, Natasha argued that this extended to other marginalised groups as well, such as those living in extreme poverty and those with disabilities.

Natasha highlighted that women are always disproportionately impacted during a crisis and that the evidence so far suggests COVID-19 is no different.

"Across the board we are seeing a range of impacts on women, some short-term and severe, others medium and longer-term. Importantly, we know that these impacts will only get worse if we don't include women's voices, perspectives and experiences in recovery efforts," she said.

In the midst of the pandemic, Kate called on Member States, global leaders and civil society to come together and find the courage to confront long-standing inequalities, including those between men and women.

"What I think is needed is the courage to face the structural inequalities that have existed in our economies and societies for too long, and take often complex but worthwhile actions to address them," Kate said.



In discussing who is responsible for creating a more equal society, free from gender discrimination, Natasha was clear that "gender equality is everybody's business".

Natasha said UN mechanisms, such as CEDAW, played an important role, but that international, regional and local institutions, NGOs, civil society organisations and individuals can all help shape a more equal world.

Kate made the case for the importance of norms, including those articulated by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

"As we go forward, the normative system and the UN bodies that uphold it will be critical, and it's why they need great leadership, great experts and great wisdom on these bodies," she said.

Looking forward to what actions need to be taken to 'build back better', Natasha argued that we already have the tools, we just need the collective will to deploy them.

"We already have gender equality policies and solutions that we know work, what we need to do now is apply these consistently across decision-making bodies, processes, economies and societies. A gender lens focus is what is required now if we are to see transformative change."

Despite the challenges facing women and girls around the world, Natasha ended the event with a note of optimism.

"This is obviously a critical, difficult and awful time, but we also need to try and think of this as an opportunity. It's an opportunity for us to shape a recovery process that places gender equality at its core. We can't let this moment of change pass us by, we must all reimagine the kind of world we want and take action to help achieve it."



Budget time: An insight into how the UN Budget is agreed

The UN Regular and Peacekeeping budgets are negotiated by the Fifth (Administrative and Budgetary) Committee.

The Fifth Committee is one of the six main Committees of the UN, and all 193 Member States are represented.

The Committee meets during the main part of the General Assembly session (October to December). Because of its heavy workload it also meets during a resumed session in March.

The Committee holds a second resumed session in May to deal with administrative and budgetary aspects of UN Peacekeeping.

Any decisions with budgetary implications taken in the other five Main Committees, UN Security Council and some other parts of the UN system including the Human Rights Council are brought to the Fifth Committee for consideration and approval.

The Fifth Committee does not simply 'rubber stamp' these proposals, but carefully considers their implications and resourcing levels relative to the mandates.

The Committee strives to achieve the broadest possible agreement on every resolution, and therefore delegations work to try to find consensus rather than taking decisions by votes.

The Committee is sometimes criticised for working over weekends and late nights, and when its sessions run later than scheduled.

While the working practices could be improved, it shows the commitment of delegations to achieving consensus outcomes.

This leads to decisions where everyone shares responsibility and ownership.

What was the latest agreement?

Due to the pandemic, the past two sessions were conducted virtually.

During the May-June session, the Fifth Committee informally agreed an annual peacekeeping budget of \$6.58 billion (slightly less than the Secretary-General's request of \$6.66b) for 12 peacekeeping missions and support functions.

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The Fifth Committee has had three women Chairs during its history, two of which were Australian: Penny Wensley (fifty-fourth session) and Gillian Bird (seventy-third session).