COMMENTARY

REFLECTIONS ON STATELESSNESS AWARENESS FORUM (EUROPE) 2024

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I   INTRODUCTION

Statelessness Awareness Forum (Europe), or SAF(E), is the first ever international forum hosted by a stateless-led organisation, Apatride Network.[1] The organisation is one of the biggest stateless-led organisations in the world, working to address statelessness in the European Union ('EU') by focusing on awareness raising, legal assistance and stakeholder bridge-building, and impact initiatives that tackle daily challenges faced by stateless people.[2] These daily challenges may include issues in documentation, employment, banking access, freedom of movement, lack of representation in the media and other relevant spaces.

SAF(E) is designed by Apatride Network as a continuous, annual event that takes on the challenge of the lack of systemic awareness raising on statelessness. The first edition was held from 20 to 24 March 2024 in Alicante, Spain. It brought together leading experts in statelessness, including experts from stateless-led organisations, representation from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ('UNHCR'), the Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion (ISI), the Hungarian Helsinki Committee, and the European Network on Statelessness ('ENS'). This reflection piece is meant to highlight the significance of SAF(E), the lessons drawn and learned from the forum and the impact it has had on addressing statelessness.

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1   Apatride Network, *Ongoing Initiatives* (Web Page, 2024) <https://apatride.eu/initiatives/>, archived at <perma.cc/J5RE-93BB>.

2   ibid.

The idea of SAF(E) arose within the Apatride Network not long after its founding. It arose as an answer to the key issue faced by those undertaking to tackle statelessness: the lack of awareness on statelessness among the general public and even among experts that should know better, such as in the United Nations ('UN'), legal, political and other relevant fields. This lack of awareness has much to do with how established statelessness experts are disconnected from stateless individuals, their communities and their expertise. Discussions amongst Apatride Network members revealed that one of the best ways to enhance systemic understanding is to have a stateless-led, continuous awareness raising forum that simultaneously engages universities, university students, young professionals from various relevant fields and established experts on statelessness.

SAF(E) is a new development from the rise of stateless-led organisations as an answer to statelessness, a historically overlooked yet dire human rights issue. There have been serious shortcomings in effectively addressing statelessness, resulting from power imbalances between those affected and the state actors that cause and maintain statelessness. The unaffected experts and organisations that work on the subject have been poorly connected to the stateless and hence have shortcomings in responding to or even understanding the topic. SAF(E) prioritised the inclusion of experts who are stateless, treating them with the respect that they deserve as leading experts in the field, rather than tokenistic speakers with a sad story to share. By involving stateless-led organisations and statelessness experts with direct experience of statelessness, the forum adopts a bottom-up approach to tackle the extensive knowledge gaps on statelessness, dispel misconceptions and outline the widespread legal contradictions related to the issue.

The forum is a unique opportunity to address statelessness by returning control of the subject's narratives to those affected by it, providing a much needed safe space to that end. In addition to benefiting participants who may have limited knowledge of statelessness, it also helps improve the understanding of leading experts on statelessness by allowing them access to the ground-up expertise of affected individuals and their communities.

II   SAF(E) 2024

The first day of SAF(E) 2024 focused on the introduction to statelessness, with a panel of experts with lived experience of statelessness discussing overlooked challenges in the subject. The second day of the forum involved presentations on nationality revocation, the UNHCR's mandate and the UN's mechanisms to address statelessness, and a panel discussion on shaping narratives and the power imbalances therein. The third day of the forum was an innovative, informal learning day: small groups of five to seven participants, including at least one or two experts with lived experience of statelessness, collectively decided how to spend the day and learn closely about a particular form of statelessness. The fourth day saw presentations from the informal day groups, a presentation from ENS on strategic litigation, and two workshops on creative strategies and statelessness prevention that tested participants' critical thinking. On the fifth and last day, prominent advocate Maha Mamo shared her experience as a stateless person and the day was concluded with a forward thinking session. At the end of the forum, all participants went home with an enhanced knowledge of statelessness and were encouraged to stay connected and undertake initiatives that make a difference in addressing the issue.

A   *Preparations and Challenges*

Given the ground-breaking nature of SAF(E), there were unique challenges with organising the event including: travel restrictions of those with lived experience of statelessness; low awareness of statelessness and hence the limited appeal of the forum; limitations in securing funding for the forum, and; capacity constraints of Apatride Network and its partners. All of these points and more will be covered in detail below.

Often overlooked in conferences that invite stateless people to speak is that stateless people face serious limitations on their freedom of movement. For those stateless people lucky enough to have travel documents, these documents are usually expensive and require frequent renewal. Commonly, the renewal of a stateless travel document is once a year. The date of validity starts from when the decision is made for the stateless person, not from when the stateless person receives the document. Practically speaking, that means that the travel document is valid for less than a year. In considering that one must have a travel document valid for at least six months to be allowed to cross borders, this leaves very little time for the stateless person to actually travel! While attempting to renew their travel documents, some of the stateless speakers of SAF(E) could not confirm their involvement in the forum until close to the commencement date. This increased the difficulty of organising the forum, generating undue stress for everyone involved. Besides the freedom of movement and travel documentation challenges, there were other challenges to consider prior to the commencement of the forum, such as facilitating a safe space at SAF(E) for the stateless to freely express themselves. This required balancing complex and intersectional dimensions of different forms of statelessness and prudently handling any political or otherwise divisive subject matters.

Another critical difficulty for SAF(E) and its organisers is the limited awareness of statelessness in general, which made it difficult to promote the forum. Even in Europe, a continent that practically invented statelessness as a by-product of its nation-state model of governance[3] and continues to generate mass statelessness to this day, statelessness remains largely unknown. Historically, states such as Germany, Austria, the Republic of Belarus, Greece, Netherlands, Italy, Spain, France, Cyprus, Norway, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, the Baltic and the Balkan countries, have all caused and maintained mass statelessness in the last century.[4] Contrary to common misconception and prejudice, this mass statelessness has mostly impacted European minorities and even some members of local majorities.

The same low general awareness of statelessness also made raising funds for the event difficult. The donor community may not contribute to a topic that it does not understand. This situation led Apatride Network to use unrestricted funding

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[3]   See as discussed in Mira L Siegelberg, *Statelessness: A Modern History* (Harvard University Press 2019) ('*A Modern History*').

[4]   See Siegelberg, *A Modern History* (n 3); Caroline Sawyer and Brad K Blitz (eds) *Statelessness in the European Union: Displaced, Undocumented, Unwanted* (Cambridge University Press 2011).

that it has as part of its pilot of the Global Statelessness Fund.[5] This helped make SAF(E) possible but left little resources for the other projects that Apatride Network handles. No budget was left to compensate for the work that Apatride Network members contributed, including for their work on SAF(E). Almost all of Apatride Network's budget covers project expenses, with most of that budget currently going toward SAF(E). It is an essential investment that makes a meaningful difference in the field. At the same time, it does highlight the difficult budget realities that stateless-led organisations often have to face.

SAF(E)'s success was a testament to the dedication of its members and volunteers who generously contributed their time and skills. This reliance on volunteers also highlighted the challenge of limited resources and manpower. It underscored the need for more effective management to prevent overburdening a few members. Development and upkeep of precise project plans that can match capacity and the establishment of a more transparent distribution of tasks remains a challenge for SAF(E) going forward. There is a strong need for developing ways to avoid the reliability issues that the organisers faced. All of this means that Apatride Network needs to continually find and encourage more members who can fill leadership roles for SAF(E) and independently take ownership of the initiatives they join.

B   *Successes and Lessons Learned*

Once SAF(E) 2024 commenced, the innovativeness, discipline and resourcefulness of Apatride Network's team helped tackle the above challenges, allowing for a smooth realisation of the event. There were very few onsite issues during the event, mostly relating to technical equipment and minor delays. The first edition of SAF(E) shone to showcase a number of strengths. The high calibre of the speakers, including experts and advocates with lived experience of statelessness, ensured that all sessions and workshops were informative and engaging. This quality provided comprehensive knowledge on statelessness while elucidating its subtleties, including those often overlooked by even leading experts on the subject. All of the forum participants took home improved knowledge and understanding of this complex issue.

The forum, with the participation of 36 persons including over 15% with lived experience of statelessness,[6] successfully served as an inclusive space where all voices and opinions were heard and appreciated. The diversity of backgrounds and perspectives, both by speakers and participants, contributed to an enriching learning environment during SAF(E). This enhanced the forum's discussions and broadened the extent of shared insights. The diverse contributions made by people with lived experience of statelessness were particularly unique and noteworthy, challenging the methodologies and concepts currently mainstreamed in academia and the non-government organisation ('NGO') space. These mainstream methodologies and concepts suffer from a detachment to ground level realities of the stateless (eg, legal and historical ones), precluding accurate knowledge

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5   Global Statelessness Fund ('GSF'), 'Home Page', *Global Statelessness Fund* (Web Page, 2024) <https://statelessnessfund.org/>, archived at <perma.cc/2XVV-UN5H> ; See also the GSF grant to Apatride Network: Open Collective, 'Adressing Statelessness in the EU', *Open Collective* (Web Page, 25 October 2023) <https://opencollective.com/global-statelessness-fund/expenses/168066>, archived at <perma.cc/B6VG-LRNW>.

6   These statistics were gathered from internal documents of Apatride Network, including attendance and registration sheets at SAF(E) 2024.

exchange and inadvertently allowing for the domination of narratives by state actors that cause statelessness.

Experts with lived experience of statelessness highlighted the multifaceted nature of statelessness by grounding and humanising the issue, moving beyond abstract, legal and top-down discussions and emphasising the urgent need for empathetic solutions. By showcasing the diverse circumstances in which statelessness occurs and persists as well as their varying viewpoints, the experts underlined the necessity for adaptable and practical approaches to tackle the issue. Integrating stateless perspectives encouraged innovative thinking from other participants, with a more equitable and just approach to addressing statelessness.

One of the biggest and most positively received successes of SAF(E) 2024 came on the third day of SAF(E): the informal learning day wherein small groups of 5–7 people were led by an expert, or two, with lived experience of statelessness. Each group was allowed to decide collectively how they would spend the day in different environments and tasks. The opportunity allowed for a more in-depth dive into a specific form of statelessness in smaller groups that could engage and interact more actively. Aside from deeper learning and engagement, the format also encouraged exceptional networking opportunities among participants and panellists. Judging by the feedback provided after the forum which was gathered through an anonymised form shared with participants, the participants found this informal learning approach to be exceptionally effective and enjoyable. The provided feedback also reflected that the conference successfully achieved the aim of providing participants with new insights and comprehensive approaches to address the issue.

Throughout SAF(E) 2024, the intersectionality of statelessness was addressed, particularly highlighting the connections between statelessness and various forms of discrimination, systemic inequalities, imbalances of power, skewed narratives dominated by state actors that cause and perpetuate statelessness, manipulated legal language, abuse of state actor monopolies of power (eg, in legal identification), and undue political influences. Recognising and addressing this complex interplay of different forms of systemic issues and discrimination is necessary and essential for a comprehensive understanding of statelessness. SAF(E) will continue to focus on the need for more equitable representation and inclusive dialogue in future editions to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the intersectionality of statelessness. Apatride Network aims to achieve this through a collaborative and inclusive planning methodology, involving SAF(E) alumni and multidisciplinary partners in the development of the program. This will ensure a balanced representation in the panels in terms of gender and geographical representation.

As an annual event, future editions of SAF(E) can further its diversity and inclusion by reviewing and adapting its promotions and partnership strategies. Initially, the forum was intended to be designed for participants who had limited or no knowledge of statelessness. However, it was difficult to reach this specific group and SAF(E) 2024 ended up attracting university students and young professionals who had already encountered the topic, either from writing academic papers on the subject or by coming across statelessness in their line of humanitarian or social work. Organisers of SAF(E) were swift and effective in adapting to this reality by adjusting the forum's agenda, bringing in more complex themes such as strategic litigation, state actor systemic stratification and discussions on UN mechanisms. Introduction to statelessness was kept intact for

the first day of the forum yet contained elements that even seasoned experts in the field found enlightening.

To ensure broader accessibility, Apatride Network plans to reduce financial obstacles in future editions of SAF(E) to encourage greater participation from individuals who may otherwise be unable to afford it. This will be done by reducing the participant fee and duration of the forum, as well as seeking additional funding to alleviate any financial burdens on participants and speakers in attending SAF(E). In addition, Apatride Network will work more closely with its participants to emphasise SAF(E) as an educational and training event, providing an opportunity to better validate the days of absence from employment or studies.

Yet another idea for future editions of SAF(E) is to create dedicated spaces designed to facilitate potential collaborations among attendees. By providing dedicated spaces, the forum will further its aims to encourage open dialogue, share diverse perspectives and explore joint initiatives to address the multifaceted issues related to statelessness. Participants could brainstorm ideas onsite, develop new partnerships and create action plans, thus enriching the forum experience and laying the foundation for sustained efforts to support stateless communities.

III   CONCLUSION

The inaugural Statelessness Awareness Forum (Europe) in March 2024 was not just another forum on the subject, but a unique platform that gave those who have experienced statelessness control of the narrative. The program, panels, workshops and methodologies were collaboratively decided, designed and developed by persons with lived experience of statelessness. A combination of lively, interactive, formal and informal learning environments ensured supportive settings for the open exchange of embodied knowledge and expertise, in-depth discussions and meaningful exchanges. Although centring the voices and experiences of affected individuals and stateless-led organisations can be challenging as it can impose an emotional strain and elicit feelings of vulnerability in participants, SAF(E) provided a safe space to collectively challenge the existing hierarchical structures in such conferences and balance the institutional influence. This fostered a positive refinement of the methodologies and concepts employed in research and NGO efforts on statelessness. The forum left a lasting impression, motivating all attendees to apply their newly acquired knowledge and inspiration to tackle statelessness through their initiatives.

As Apatride Network is starting to plan SAF(E) 2025, it intends to incorporate identified opportunities to offer more collaborative approaches, deeper engagement and provide more precise outcomes for the forum. Apatride Network will strive to expand the academic fields and geographical representation at the forum to diversify perspectives, enrich discussions and provide holistic solutions. This will be done through a targeted contact and expansion of partnerships with more academic institutions and relevant civil society actors in the EU.

Apatride Network will also continue to include an informal learning space during the forum, while providing clearer goals, fostering collective objectives and introducing engagement mechanisms that will be used after the conference. In identifying specific interests of participants within the intersectionality of statelessness, or within a specific national context, SAF(E) will help guide participants to integrate statelessness into academic work or professional

activities. This will provide the opportunity for targeted insights, a chain reaction of knowledge exchange and actionable efforts that lead to tangible results. The subsequent editions of SAF(E) will enhance the exchange of existing and ongoing academic works, opening a call for participants to participate in panel discussions dedicated to presenting and reflecting on their own research and solutions.