

Submission regarding the settlement of African humanitarian entrants in NSW

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Following concerns raised to the Commission regarding the settlement of African humanitarian entrants in NSW, the Commission resolved to undertake an investigation under section 13(c) of the Community Relations Commission and Principles of Multiculturalism Act 2000.

In the past five years, there has been around a 500 percent increase in the settlement of African humanitarian entrants to NSW, which has impacted significantly on Government service providers and contracted agencies.

The terms of reference of the investigation are:

- To identify barriers of the settlement needs of African refugees in consultation with the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs; NSW Government agencies, non-government organisations and African communities.
- Monitor and assess the impact of African Humanitarian migration in NSW.
- Coordinate the development of NSW policy and positions on African settlement issues, and to report back to the Premier, and Minister for Citizenship.

Background to the Submission

This submission draws in part on research undertaken by a team of researchers from the Centre for Refugee Research at the University of New South Wales, as part of a three-year longitudinal action research based study into the implementation of the Women at Risk Program and its effectiveness as a tool of international protection. During this period the research team has worked closely with UNHCR, international NGOs and local women's organisations in Thailand, Kenya, Australia, and with refugee women and service providers from 17 other international refugee sites. (A background and summary project report with key recommendations is attached here.)

The project's research has been focused in Kakuma camp, Kenya, in camps along the Thai-Burma border and in urban areas in both these countries. Research has also been conducted with resettled refugee women, their families and service providers in Australia. Additional funding provided by UNHCR, Geneva also provided the researchers with the opportunity to work with refugee communities in both New Delhi, India and in Sherkole Camp in Ethiopia as part pilot project designed to trial the risk assessment tool which has been one of the outcomes of this project. The Chief Investigator on the project, Dr Eileen Pittaway, is the Director of the Centre for Refugee Research and has worked in the refugee field for almost 25 years. During this time she has worked with numerous refugee populations in Australia including those from Indochina who arrived as part of the Comprehensive Plan of Action. During this time she visited camps in Hong Kong and Malaysia. The research team have also participated each

year in the Annual Executive Committee (EXCOM) meeting of UNHCR and more recently in the Annual Tripartite Consultations (ATC). ANCORW has been a major financial partner in this research and has facilitated access to refugee communities and service providers in Australia.

International Refugee Conference

In November 2005, the Centre and ANCORW convened a major international Refugee Conference entitled “Hopes Fulfilled or Dreams Shattered”. This was supported by many refugee and service provision organisations. The main catalyst for hosting this conference came from research findings and reports that many service providers were not coping with the needs of recently arrived refugee groups from Africa. Health services reported being stretched to the limit and schools did not know how to cope with so many traumatised and often preliterate children and young people. These reports all pointed to an urgent need to rethink settlement policy and service provision. Many refugees from these communities have spent extended periods in refugee camps often for over 15 years, without access to adequate food, water or health services. Many women and girls have experienced multiple incidents of sexual and gender based violence including rape, in their home countries, during flight and in camps. Many children have grown up with only limited access to education and training services.

Over 800 people participated across the five days of the conference with almost a quarter of these being former refugees. There were presentations by over 120 different speakers, refugees, service providers, academics, UNHCR and DIMIA. Papers addressed the challenges faced by resettling refugees and service providers, examples of good settlement practice and made recommendations to address many of the identified gaps. Speakers from overseas shared their experience of work in camps and with urban refugees. One of the main aims of the conference was to bridge the gap between refugees’ experiences off shore and on arrival in Australia. For many this was the first opportunity to really understand the challenges. All who participated commented most on the fact that this was one of the few conferences they had attended in which refugees themselves spoke about their experiences, shared the challenges and made strong recommendations about how to best address these. This submission draws on some of the key recommendations made from the conference. The full, edited conference report will be available in early May 2006.

Introduction

Australia has a commendable history with regard to refugee resettlement both in terms of the size of its program and the quality of many of the resettlement services provided. This submission aims to make suggestions as to ways in which this could be improved in order to ensure that we are responding in the best way to the international challenge of refugee protection. Despite our clear commitment, there are many areas in which we could do better. We urge the Community Relations Commission to work closely with DIMIA and all relevant State and Federal Departments to ensure that policies and programs are

appropriately funded and supported to best meet the needs of recent arrivals, including those from Africa.

Current international refugee situation

Most of the world's refugees now live in protracted refugee situations; with the majority having lived in refugee camps for over 17 years. While many of these protracted situations are in Africa, there are similar camps across Asia, in Thailand/Burma, Nepal/Bhutan, Afghanistan/Pakistan and many of the former countries of the Soviet Union. This experience of protracted displacement has serious consequences for the displaced populations who will often have more complex resettlement needs than those who have not experienced such prolonged displacement. This has particular impacts on children and young people who often have known no other life or community that is not a refugee camp. Recently in a training with resettled refugee women conducted by one of our colleagues when asked to think about her culture one of the refugee participants replied -my culture is "refugee" I have been a refugee for 40 years.!!

International Responsibility/Burden sharing

UNHCR's Executive committee have in last few years increasingly focused on the critical and urgent need to address the problem of protracted refugee situations, particularly those in Africa. These are situations in which most of the worlds refugees have been effectively warehoused in insecure, dangerous and unsustainable camps on average now for 17 years. For too long countries of first asylum have borne the responsibility of supporting these large numbers of refugees. Generally with limited support from the international community and international donors. The majority of the world's refugee camps are unsafe and unsustainable. Camp inhabitants rarely have sufficient, food, water, shelter and health services and for women and girls the risks of rape and sexual violence are extremely high. It is imperative that the international community support UNHCR with both the resources and political will to address these protracted situations and to ensure that those in search of asylum and protection are able to access quality and effective protection either in countries of first asylum or through increased resettlement opportunities. While it is clear that resettlement alone will not address this problem it can make a critical contribution to assisting those individuals and populations most at risk and cannot be afforded any other protection solution.

Australia is one of the small number of resettlement countries who does, and can make a significant contribution to addressing this problem. In recent years our program has focused increasingly on such protracted situations in Africa. While resettling populations who have experienced protracted displacement and have been exposed to high levels of violence and trauma, is not without its challenges, it is essential that the benefits to Australia and to New South Wales are also recognised. Australia has long been proud of its commitment to human rights and its role as a good global citizen, our resettlement program is tangible evidence of this. In a time when Australia and many other developed countries are actively encouraging increased immigration, the refugee and humanitarian

programs also supplement this need for increased population. Australia has a long history of refugee resettlement and the economic, social and cultural contributions brought by each wave of refugees has now been well recognised. The challenge now is to ensure that we continue to welcome and support refugees in way which minimises the trauma and the difficulties of resettlement, identifies and supports their strengths and enables them to establish themselves and begin to rebuild their lives in strength and dignity.

“The problem of protracted displacement –Not an “African” problem!”

The problem of protracted situations is high on the UNHCR’s agenda and in order to address this, a concerted effort is required on the part of the international community. Resettlement, although only one strategy is a critically important one. It is clear too that resettling populations from protracted conflicts brings with it a particular set of challenges. Australia has made an important and significant contribution to this problem by targeting refugees from camps in Africa. This is generally a population with more complex resettlement needs than earlier arrivals. However to suggest that this is an African problem denies both the heterogeneity of these communities and the impact of their prolonged displacement. The fact that Black African's are so visibly different from the majority of Australians makes them an easy target for blame and stigma. Labelling the problem as African misses both the fact that groups arriving from Africa are far from homogenous with different cultures, religions, languages, class and education levels. It also overlooks the impact of being a refugee for so long. The focus should be on addressing the impact of this rather than stigmatising on grounds of colour, nationality or assumed cultural practices.

The answer does not lie, as some would suggest in reducing intakes from Africa or indeed from other protracted situations. Instead it behoves countries of resettlement to meet their international humanitarian obligations to refugee protection by ensuring that services and supports are appropriately targeted. An honest appraisal of the real needs of this group, the problems they are facing and the failures of support is essential. Wide community education about the circumstances from which these groups have come is a key element of this preparation. If we do not do this and allow the problem to be dismissed as one of culture we will indeed be well on the way to creating a “black underclass”. Black street gangs will replace Indochinese and Lebanese gangs because we have again failed to support and address the needs of these groups. If we allow this to occur we as a society will have failed these young people and their families.

Potential Impacts on Social Cohesion and Integration in NSW

The potential for long-term settlement problems for vulnerable refugee groups has serious implications for the wider Australian community in terms of its social cohesion and the weakening of the social fabric. It also has significant economic implications in terms of the high cost of settlement breakdown in contrast to the benefits of successful settlement. Past research on settlement has shown that access to specialised settlement support services can significantly improve the ease with which refugees integrate into

their country of resettlement (Forbes-Martin, 1992). This is particularly important for vulnerable groups, including refugee women and their families (Majka, 2001; Robinson, 1999; Waxman, 1998).

Recent literature also details a widespread lack of coordination, and the frequently perceived failure of settlement services to adequately address the needs of resettled refugees, in particular vulnerable groups including women at risk (Majka, 2001; Robinson, 1999; Waxman, 1998). Theorists call for rigorous research and innovative methodologies to challenge pervasive misconceptions about refugees, to identify the social and economic contributions made by refugees to countries of resettlement and to inform specialised, effective and sensitive services that facilitate successful settlement and integration into their host countries (Colic-Peiskar & Tilsbury, 2003; George & Ka Tat Tsang, 2000; Korac, 2003; Majka, 2001).

Specific Policy and service provision recommendations

Settlement Service Provision

With the increased intake of highly traumatised refugees from protracted refugee situations, current service providers are struggling to respond to the increased level of need in the general refugee population and are neither adequately resourced, nor sufficiently trained to cope with the additional needs of particularly vulnerable groups. The cultural diversity of the groups settling, the greater disparity in education levels and literacy, and the longer periods of time people have spent in camps and urban settlements all affect the ease with which they resettle and integrate and the level of support and assistance required. Increasingly social support is being provided to refugee communities by mainly faith based volunteer groups and other informal networks, including church groups and refugee community groups. These groups often play a key role in assisting the successful resettlement of refugee families and in particular of refugee women at risk. However in some cases the efforts of well meaning but untrained volunteers with limited understanding of refugee issues, of gender and of cultural difference have been shown to compound the difficulties faced by many refugees, in particular by young people and refugee women at risk.

Once humanitarian entrants exit the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Services (IHSS), they are generally referred onto Migrant Resource Centres or CSSS programs who are responsible for assisting them with the remaining stages of settlement and providing a link into more mainstream services. These programs while providing an important basis of support and assistance for refugees in this transition period, are not designed to replace the services provided by the IHSS yet there is concern that many at risk and vulnerable cases may be exited from the IHSS program too early and will not receive the long term intensive support they require. While important provisions are made for an extension of IHSS service provision in certain cases, this is often not enough with service providers at times continuing to provide assistance for upwards and often beyond a year after arrival. This is of particular concern for refugee women at risk (WaR) who are often in need of intensive settlement support. These services are often not equipped to provide the long

term intensive settlement support women at risk and other vulnerable groups may require yet currently there are few other long term settlement support options available.

In addition to targeted service provision additional financial support should be provided to support advocacy and self-representation by members of emerging refugee communities. In particular these programs should target often marginalised community members including women and young people.

The volunteer sector plays a crucial role in providing settlement support to humanitarian entrants once they have exited the IHSS program. The social support, friendship and assistance provided by these volunteers is crucial in assisting refugees to settle in Australia. The role of community support is a critical but often understated component of the settlement process. However it is important to note that although volunteers have a key place in the settlement process it is essential their role not be confused with that of their paid counterparts. Increased commitment to the provision of training and support for volunteers is imperative. Under the new IHSS model, the services of many volunteer groups who previously provided assistance to settling refugees are no longer being accessed. This has left many groups feeling a sense of dislocation and uncertainty as to their role under the new program. Ensuring they continue to remain active, informed and validated participants in the settlement process is essential.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Extend time period for IHSS service provision for vulnerable cases. Introduce provisions for long term case work service for ‘at risk’ cases once exited from the IHSS.
- ❖ Target financial support to support capacity building and community development with New and Emerging communities, in particular women and young people
- ❖ Increase the level of recognition, training and support for volunteer sector.

Health and Psychosocial support

The majority of refugees arriving from Africa have come from camps or urban areas in which they have been denied access to adequate food, water and health services. The high incidences of malnutrition and related diseases including anaemia and malnutrition related blindness have now been well documented. Physical and psychological health problems are also high among women and girls who have been raped and sexually abused. On arrival health service providers must be provided with both detailed health data about the conditions from which the refugees have arrived as well as individual health data relating to each individual. This points both to the need for more comprehensive data to be provided prior to the arrival of each new population and for individual health and social records to be provided for each individual. UNHCR field staff often complete detailed health and social assessments for each refugee and are frequently distressed to discover that this does reach key service providers in the country

of resettlement. The privacy issues pertaining to the sharing of individual records must and can be addressed prior to arrival with the full consent and permission of each refugee.

Refugees will often have complex and interlinked health and psychosocial health problems, it is therefore imperative that there are improved linkages between the ranges of on arrival service providers. The appointed case managers must ensure that each of these needs are addressed promptly and ensure regular case meetings with each of the relevant providers.

Recommendations

- ❖ On arrival health service providers must be provided with both detailed health data about the conditions from which the refugees have arrived as well as individual health data relating to each individual.
- ❖ Improved case management, including better linkages between refugee health and psychosocial service providers.

Economic and Social Impacts on Sponsoring Families of The Special Humanitarian Visa Category

While recent enhancements to the level of IHSS services provided to special humanitarian entrants and their proposers are an important and positive step towards easing the integration of newly arrived entrants into Australia, there is still much to be done to ensure that Special Humanitarian Entrants and their proposers receive the support and assistance they require. Currently despite the existence of a loans scheme many proposers find themselves under increased financial and emotional pressure from loved ones and families left overseas to sponsor them to settle in Australia as soon as possible. Often these proposers are themselves struggling with the process of settlement and require time and support to be able to integrate fully before entering the process of sponsoring their families to come to Australia. There is increasing pressure, particularly on members from the African communities to sponsor their family and community members to settle in Australia as soon as possible. Yet often people experience significant difficulties in accessing advice and assistance from migration agents. This issue is particularly pronounced for those refugees living in regional areas who at times have to spend substantial amounts of money to travel to metropolitan cities to access migration agents only to find they are then required to pay exorbitant fees to access their services. There appears to be a limited number of free migration services available which often makes the task of simply applying for family members to be reunited a prohibitive task for many refugees.

Although Special Humanitarian Entrants arrive under a different visa category they often meet the same criteria as those accepted under the Refugee Program and thus arrive in Australia needing similar intensive settlement support. An increasing focus on providing settlement services and support to special humanitarian entrants is needed. While many special humanitarian entrants will settle in with relative ease it is essential that we

acknowledge that many of the refugees arriving under the Special Humanitarian Program will require further support than is currently available to them. Often proposers, concerned that their applications will not be successful, overestimate their ability to provide settlement support to those they are sponsoring. Our research with refugee women at risk has shown that for those women who are resettled with family members or who are able to sponsor their families and community members to join them soon after arrival, that their settlement prospects improve significantly. For those refugees who are denied the ability to reunite with their families their settlement is often a delayed and painful experience as they continue to grieve for those left behind. The Special Humanitarian Program plays a vital role in the settlement process but pre-arrival migration assistance and post-arrival settlement support services must be increased if families are to settle together successfully.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Increase the availability of free or reduced cost migration services in both metropolitan and regional areas.
- ❖ An extension of the level of IHSS service provided to Special Humanitarian Entrants and their Proposers.

Regional and Rural settlement in NSW

With the increasing push to resettle refugees in regional areas, service providers are concerned that the increase in arrivals has not been matched by an increase in resources. Operating within a limited settlement services framework, refugees can at times only be assisted by one paid worker within the IHSS who is often heavily supplemented by volunteers. These volunteers usually receive minimal training and can at times be unfamiliar with the intensive settlement needs of refugees, leaving those unprepared often overwhelmed and at times burnout as they attempt to provide this essential support. The Centre for Refugee receives frequent requests from IHSS and CSS service providers and volunteers for additional training. These groups frequently mention that the current DIMIA funded training does not meet their needs, however the Centre is neither funded nor adequately resourced to respond to such requests. It is imperative to consider the primary role played by many volunteer groups in supplementing the settlement services available and the need to recognise these efforts through increased funding and support. However this should not be at the expense of funding additional paid positions for appropriately trained settlement service workers.

Regional providers of IHSS services express a strong sense of isolation and require further support and assistance to fulfil their potential as service providers. With even more limited access to training and support than their metropolitan counterparts, the situation for regional providers urgently requires attention. The sense of isolation felt by regional providers could be broken by placing them in touch with a network of IHSS providers both in other regional and metropolitan areas. Due to their location regional providers are frequently unable to access essential services including face to face interpreters, forced to rely primarily on telephone interpreters. Where EHAI services are

available, they are contracted out to local counsellors and health practitioners who have little experience working with torture and trauma survivors. Yet despite their limited resources, regional providers are often able to provide a level of personalised support and assistance that would not be possible in a metropolitan setting. This is often due to the close knit nature and smaller geographical area of many regional communities. However while many regional communities welcome refugee communities with open arms, some are concerned about the implications of refugee settlement in their area.

Preparing not only settlement service providers for refugee arrivals but also receiving communities is essential. Communities who may not be aware of the circumstances from which refugees have fled, have in some instances greeted new arrivals with hostility and suspicion. Racism often occurs in regional areas where racial difference is not common and this can be exacerbated by instances where a lone African refugee is settled to a predominantly Anglo-Saxon community. This situation can be eased by ensuring critical masses of refugees are settled in the same area and by consulting with communities prior to introducing refugee settlement.

There are enormous benefits to resettling refugees in regional areas, however a comprehensive settlement services framework needs to be firmly established before such resettlement occurs. Increased resources and support are essential to ensuring the success of regional settlement.

Recommendations:

- ❖ Ensure that regional host communities are receptive to refugee resettlement and that there is sufficient community support as well as employment and educational opportunities.
- ❖ Settle groups of refugees together in single communities rather than peppering different ethnic groups across communities.
- ❖ Resources and support to Regional IHSS service providers must be expanded to reflect both the increasing numbers of refugees, including woman at risk and young people with high support needs being resettled in regional areas.

Proposed Longitudinal Research Study

The Centre for Refugee Research with the support of ANCORW, is committed to undertaking a three longitudinal study of the resettlement and settlement in Australia with a particular focus on New South Wales. It will focus on refugee women at risk, young people and other vulnerable groups from Africa and other protracted refugee settings. An application is currently being prepared and will be submitted to the Australian Research Council in 2006. The funding application will be submitted as a Linkages application and the Centre is currently actively seeking financial and in-kind partners for this project. We would welcome the involvement of the CRC as one of these partners. This study will focus on identifying the particular settlement needs of refugee women at risk and young people in order to ascertain whether current service provision is effectively responding to these needs. It will identify the strengths and weaknesses of current models of service provision and will propose new models to enhance the successful resettlement of women

at risks and their families. It will develop a number of tools, which will assist to build a body of theory and knowledge around the resettlement of refugees and corresponding settlement service provision. This will include the development of a series of indicators of successful resettlement. It will focus in particular on the additional settlement needs, and on the impact of settlement services on women at risk and other vulnerable groups. It will identify indicators, benchmarks, and models of effective service provision and practice. It will also explore the role played by volunteers and other informal support networks, including faith based groups, in providing settlement support to refugees. This will inform the development of a theory of resettlement. We would be delighted to provide additional information on this project.