

SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO AUSTRALIA'S RELATIONSHIP WITH THE COUNTRIES OF AFRICA

The Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) is the national umbrella body for organisations involved in supporting and representing refugees and asylum seekers, with a membership of more than 350 organisations and individuals. RCOA promotes the adoption of flexible, humane and constructive policies by government and communities in Australia and internationally towards refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced persons. We consult regularly with our members and refugee community leaders and this submission is informed by their views.

RCOA welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with the Countries of Africa conducted by the Federal Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. In this submission, we aim to draw attention to the ways in which Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program may facilitate the development of effective partnerships and exchanges between Australia and the countries of Africa.

Australia's role in providing durable solutions for refugees from African countries

Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program has played an important role in providing durable solutions for refugees across the African continent, which remains one of the major source regions for refugees. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that the total population of concern in Africa (including refugees, asylum seekers, stateless persons and people in refugee-like situations) is over 3,000,000 (see Appendix 1). Additionally, people of African origin also comprise more than a quarter of the world's 5.7 million refugees living in protracted situations (see Appendix 2).

In providing the opportunity for refugees from Africa to resettle in a new country, Australia makes a significant contribution to protecting victims of persecution and supporting refugees to rebuild their lives.

Recommendation 1:

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government continue to provide durable solutions to refugees from the countries of Africa by:

- a) maintaining a targeted resettlement program for refugees from Africa;*
- b) giving special consideration to the needs of African refugees in seriously protracted situations;*
- c) progressively increasing the Refugee and Humanitarian Program to provide further opportunities for resettlement.*

The role of diaspora communities in developing bilateral relations

Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program has profoundly reshaped our relationship with the countries of Africa. In the past, Australia's closest ties with Africa were with Commonwealth nations in the east and south of the continent. In recent decades, however, increased immigration from Africa – much of it through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program – has

allowed Australia to establish direct connections with a far broader range of African nations. According to the 2006 census, Australia is home to more than 247,000 African-born people from over fifty different nations (see Appendix 3).

The increase in migration from Africa creates opportunities for expanding Australia's bilateral relations with African nations, as diaspora communities are uniquely placed to facilitate this process. Their ability to speak local languages, familiarity with local customs and culture and direct personal connections in their countries of origin offer a strategic advantage when brokering trade relationships and implementing aid and development projects. Indeed, diaspora communities in Australia, including refugee communities, have in the past played a key role in fostering links between Australia and their countries of origin. Former humanitarian entrants from Central and Eastern Europe and South-East Asia, for example, have been actively involved in developing Australia's relationships in these regions after conditions in their countries of origin stabilised.

While many African diaspora communities in Australia are still emerging, they are already taking a leading role in aid and development initiatives in Africa. One such project highlighted by a participant in RCOA's 2008-09 national consultations is a school established in Nairobi for 300 Sudanese refugee children, with the support of community members in Perth and Sydney. Similarly, in southern Sudan, members of the Sudanese diaspora community in Australia have returned to their country of origin to assist in development efforts as the region has gained greater autonomy. As African communities in Australia continue to grow and develop, it can be expected that they will play an increasingly significant role in the development of bilateral relations between Australia and the countries of Africa.

Recommendation 2:

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government, in developing bilateral relations in trade, aid and development with the countries of Africa, engage directly with African diaspora communities in Australia.

The role of diaspora communities in economic development

African diaspora communities across the world provide crucial support to family members and communities living in poverty through remitting funds to their countries of origin. According to the International Foundation for Agricultural Development, remittance flows to and within Africa are worth almost US\$40 billion, far exceeding official development assistance to the region and in many countries exceeding foreign direct investment as well. On a country-by-country average, remittances represent five per cent of the Gross Domestic Product of African nations.¹

Families and communities in the countries of Africa often rely heavily upon financial support from relatives overseas. Remittances can play an important role in economic development through improving living conditions and supporting the establishment of small businesses, particularly in rural areas. However, the formal market for money transfers in Africa is among the most problematic in the world, due to issues such as uncertainty about the volume of remittances, high rates of informality, limited competition due to a regulatory environment that favours monopolies, high transfer costs and a lack of technological innovation.

¹ See International Foundation for Agricultural Development (2009). *Sending Money Home to Africa: Remittance markets, enabling environment and prospects*. Retrieved 27 April 2010, http://www.ifad.org/remittances/pub/money_africa.pdf; International Foundation for Agricultural Development (2006). *Sending Money Home: Worldwide Remittance Flows to Developing and Transition Countries*. Retrieved 27 April 2010, <http://www.ifad.org/remittances/maps/brochure.pdf>

Furthermore, the need to support family members overseas places an additional financial and psychological burden on refugees in Australia and can seriously impact on settlement outcomes for African refugee communities. Feedback from community consultations indicates that members of African refugee communities in Australia are highly motivated to establish themselves professionally and socially and participate in all aspects of Australian community life. However, newly-arrived refugees, who also face the challenge of settling in a new country and may be recovering from experiences of torture and trauma, may be forced to sacrifice or postpone their education, work in two jobs or forfeit holidays and other social and recreational activities in order to send remittances to relatives experiencing extreme poverty overseas. Diaspora communities report that newly-arrived African refugees, who are often on lower incomes, in most cases devote over 25% of their weekly income to remittances.

In light of these difficulties, members of African diaspora communities in Australia have acknowledged the need to transcend remittances as an aid and development strategy and instead develop more sustainable solutions which focus on capacity-building. The Australian Government could provide invaluable support in developing these sustainable solutions through supplementing community fundraising efforts and assisting diaspora communities in developing the partnerships and institutional capacity necessary to implement sustainable development projects.

Recommendation 3:

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government:

- a) explore opportunities for providing financial and institutional support to assist in the development of sustainable aid and development projects in the countries of Africa.*
- b) in developing sustainable economic development strategies with the countries of Africa, engage directly with African diaspora communities in Australia.*

The role of diaspora communities in raising awareness about human rights issues

The first-hand experience of diaspora communities of conditions in their countries of origin, combined with their direct personal connections in these countries, places them in a unique position to raise awareness about human rights issues in African nations. These communities can play a particularly important role in drawing attention to the needs of vulnerable groups which may otherwise escape international attention.

African diaspora communities in Australia are already highly active in this regard. RCOA is regularly contacted by individuals and community organisations wishing to highlight instances of human rights abuse and bring to light the needs of internally displaced persons and refugees whose situations require urgent attention. During 2009, the following issues were brought to RCOA's attention by diaspora communities from African nations:

- ***Afar community in camps across the Horn of Africa*** – need for more resettlement places; community in Australia's lack of success in Special Humanitarian Program applications; 'invisibility' of smaller ethnic communities in regional intake.
- ***Banyamulenge refugees in camps in Burundi, Rwanda and Uganda*** – need for resettlement for people facing victimisation after being made stateless by the Democratic Republic of Congo.
- ***Congolese community in camps in Africa*** – fraud in offshore processing (non-Congolese claiming that they are Congolese to secure resettlement places).
- ***Ethiopian community in camps across Africa*** – need for more resettlement places (particularly for family reunion).

- **Eritrean refugees in camps in Sudan and Ethiopia and the situation of Eritrean detainees in Libya** – need for more resettlement places (particularly to deal with protracted refugee situations, lack of access to protection and deteriorating security in Eritrea).
- **Liberian community in Guinea and Ghana** – UNHCR encouraging repatriation despite ongoing concerns about instability and insecurity in Liberia; offshore processing concerns (including inappropriate use of interpreters, ‘selling of stories’ for application purposes and inappropriate pre-departure health check processes).
- **Oromo community in Horn of Africa** – Offshore processing corruption (Government officials with money use other people’s stories to receive protection, while others are too poor, do not read or write and have been unable to scribe their stories).
- **Sierra Leonean community in West Africa** – amputation was used as a tool of torture during the ten year civil war in Sierra Leone; however amputee visa applications continue to be rejected; inappropriate pre-departure health check processes for people who have suffered torture/trauma.

African diaspora communities in Australia also play an increasingly significant role in raising issues of concern to their communities in international fora. RCOA works with other Australian non-government organisations (NGOs) to facilitate the participation of individuals from refugee backgrounds in UNHCR’s Annual NGO Consultations, Standing Committee meetings and Executive Committee meetings in Geneva. Over the past four years, RCOA has assisted Australians originally from Sudan, Eritrea, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sierra Leone to raise issues about refugees from their countries of origin and other regions of Africa with government representatives and senior UNHCR officials. The participation of African diaspora communities in these fora has been an important mechanism for raising awareness about human rights issues in African nations on the international stage.

Recommendation 4:

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government:

- a) *engage with African diaspora communities in Australia in developing strategies for addressing human rights issues in the countries of Africa.*
- b) *support members of African diaspora communities to raise issues of concern to their communities in both domestic and international fora.*

The role of African communities in facilitating cultural relations and exchanges between Australia and the countries of Africa

Refugees and migrants from African backgrounds have played a key role in facilitating cultural, scientific and educational relations and exchanges between Australia and the countries of Africa. Migrants and refugees of African origin have brought to Australia an incredibly diverse array of traditions, rituals, cuisines, art forms and languages which have enhanced the richness and diversity of the Australian cultural landscape. The participation of people from African backgrounds in Australian community life has also enhanced the broader community’s knowledge and understanding of African cultures.

Additionally, through the resettlement religious, ethnic and cultural groups who face persecution in their countries of origin, Australia has played an important role in assisting these groups to practice and maintain their unique cultures.

Recommendation 5:

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government encourage and support African diaspora communities in Australia to practice and maintain their unique cultures.

Summary of recommendations

1. RCOA recommends that the Australian Government continue to provide durable solutions to refugees from the countries of Africa by:
 - a) maintaining a targeted resettlement program for refugees from Africa;
 - b) giving special consideration to the needs of African refugees in seriously protracted situations;
 - c) progressively increasing the Refugee and Humanitarian Program to provide further opportunities for resettlement.

2. RCOA recommends that the Australian Government, in developing bilateral relations in trade, aid and development with the countries of Africa, engage directly with African diaspora communities in Australia.

3. RCOA recommends that the Australian Government:
 - a) explore opportunities for providing financial and institutional support to assist in the development of sustainable aid and development projects in the countries of Africa.
 - b) in developing sustainable economic development strategies with the countries of Africa, engage directly with African diaspora communities in Australia.

4. RCOA recommends that the Australian Government:
 - a) engage with African diaspora communities in Australia in developing strategies for addressing human rights issues in the countries of Africa.
 - b) support members of African diaspora communities to raise issues of concern to their communities in both domestic and international fora.

5. RCOA recommends that the Australian Government encourage and support African diaspora communities in Australia to practice and maintain their unique cultures.

Appendix 1: Populations of concern in the countries of Africa by country of origin

Country	Refugees ²	People in refugee-like situations	Asylum seekers ³	Stateless and others in need of protection ⁴	Total population of concern ⁵
Angola	171,393		741		172,134
Benin	318		187		505
Botswana	26		153		179
Burkina Faso	721	4	317		1,042
Burundi	281,592		6,645		288,237
Cameroon	13,870		2,933		16,803
Central African Rep.c	120,106	5,000	1,233		126,339
Chad	55,105		3,369		58,474
Cote d'Ivoire	22,227		6,468		28,695
Dem. Rep. of Congo	367,995		36,278		404,273
Djibouti	650		66		716
Egypt	6,777	3	1,828		8,608
Eritrea	181,971	4,427	14,604		201,002
Ethiopia	63,862	16	31,507		95,385
Ghana	13,239	3	2,016		15,258
Guinea	9,495		2,016		11,511
Guinea-Bissau	1,065		277		1,342
Lesotho	8		17		25
Liberia	75,213		2,394		77,607
Libya	2,084		765		2,849
Madagascar	277		17		294
Malawi	106		8,210		8,316
Mauritania	45,601		784		46,385
Mauritius	24		25		49
Mozambique	208		682		890
Namibia	985		28		1,013
Niger	796		271		1,067
Nigeria	14,168	1		10,474	24,643
Republic of Congo	19,925		5,039		24,964
Rwanda	72,530		6,108		78,638
Sierra Leone	32,536		2,623		35,159
Somalia	559,153	2,001	20,543		581,697
South Africa	453		151		604
Sudan	397,013	22,235	18,080		437,328
Swaziland	32		99		131
Tanzania	1,270		2,901		4,171
Togo	16,749	1	1,131		17,881
Uganda	7,548		3,140		10,688
Western Sahara	90,530	26,000	31		116,561
Zambia	195		495		690
Zimbabwe	16,841		34,795		51,636
Stateless				100,064	100,064
Total	2,664,653	59,691	218,967	110,538	3,053,849

Source: UNHCR. 2008 year-end statistics, as at 22 May 2009. Includes people in refugee-like situations

² Persons recognised as refugees under the 1951 UN Convention/1967 Protocol, the 1969 OAU Convention, in accordance with the UNHCR Statute, persons granted a complementary form of protection and those granted temporary protection.

³ Persons whose application for asylum or refugee status is pending at any stage in the asylum procedure.

⁴ Refers to persons who are not considered nationals by any State under the operation of its laws.

⁵ Includes refugees, people in refugee-like situations, asylum seekers, stateless persons and others in need of protection and assistance. Unlike UNHCR statistics, these figures exclude returned refugees or internally displaced persons.

Appendix 2: Location of protracted refugee situations in the countries of Africa

Country of origin	Country of asylum	Number of refugees
Angola	Democratic Republic of Congo	111,600
Angola	Zambia	27,100
Burundi	Tanzania	240,500
Central African Rep.	Chad	57,300
Democratic Republic of Congo	Rwanda	52,400
Democratic Republic of Congo	Tanzania	79,700
Democratic Republic of Congo	Zambia	47,300
Eritrea	Sudan	124,800
Somalia	Kenya	259,100
Somalia	Yemen	132,300
Sudan	Chad	268,000
Sudan	Ethiopia	25,900
Sudan	Kenya	28,500
Sudan	Uganda	56,900
TOTAL		1,511,400

Source: UNHCR. 2008 year-end statistics, as at 22 May 2009. Includes people in refugee-like situations

Appendix 3: Country of birth for persons from African backgrounds residing in Australia, 2006

Country of birth	Persons	Country of birth	Persons
Algeria	1,004	Madagascar	188
Angola	394	Malawi	684
Benin	22	Mali	60
Botswana	863	Mauritania	14
Burkina Faso	24	Mauritius	18,175
Burundi	751	Mayotte	0
Cameroon	135	Morocco	1,295
Cape Verde	18	Mozambique	641
Central African Republic	9	Namibia	702
Chad	32	Niger	12
Comoros	13	Nigeria	2,496
Congo, Democratic Republic of	618	Rwanda	202
Congo, Republic of	523	Sao Tome and Principe	9
Cote d'Ivoire	250	Senegal	196
Djibouti	97	Seychelles	2,508
Egypt	33,497	Sierra Leone	1,809
Equatorial Guinea	9	Somalia	4,316
Eritrea	2,016	South Africa	104,128
Ethiopia	5,633	Sudan	19,049
Gabon	26	Swaziland	231
Gambia	132	Tanzania	2,295
Ghana	2,771	Togo	35
Guinea	330	Tunisia	441
Guinea-Bissau	10	Uganda	1,713
Kenya	9,940	Western Sahara	15
Lesotho	79	Zambia	4,082
Liberia	1,526	Zimbabwe	20,157
Libya	1,516	TOTAL	247,691

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006 Census of Population and Housing. Figures exclude overseas visitors.