OVERVIEW OF WORKING GROUP ON RESETTLEMENT MEETING

MELBOURNE, 20-23 FEBRUARY 2012

Each year, governments and non-government organisations (NGOs) involved in refugee resettlement take part in discussions with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The purpose of these meetings is to discuss resettlement needs and issues, share information and best practice and identify strategies for addressing key challenges. The main discussions each year are held at the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR), a gathering which takes place in Geneva each July and brings together more than 150 representatives of governments, NGOs and inter-governmental organisations from up to 28 countries. Between the yearly ATCR meetings, one or two smaller meetings of the Working Group on Resettlement (WGR) are held to focus greater attention on different aspects of the ATCR agenda. Each year, one resettlement state takes on responsibility for chairing and convening the ATCR and meetings of the WGR.

In July 2011, just after the 2011 ATCR, the Australian Government took responsibility for chairing these international discussions for 12 months, with the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) acting as the Focal Point for NGOs. Australia’s period as chair will conclude at the end of the 2012 ATCR in Geneva (9-11 July). In deciding the program for Australia’s year as chair, the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), RCOA and UNHCR agreed to hold two WGR meetings in 2011-12 – one on pre-departure issues for resettling refugees and one on post-arrival support. The WGR meeting on pre-departure issues was held in Geneva on 11-12 October 2011, with 40 government, 5 NGO, 41 UNHCR and 2 IOM representative present. Topics discussed included emergency resettlement, progress in responding to priority situations, the strategic use of resettlement and practical issues of cooperation between resettlement states and UNHCR.

The February 2012 WGR meeting was ground-breaking in a number of ways, being the first WGR meeting held in the Southern Hemisphere (and only the third meeting outside Geneva) and being the first meeting to focus exclusively on post-arrival support for refugees. The meeting brought together 87 delegates based in 18 countries in the Americas, Europe and Asia-Pacific (35 government, 44 NGO, 5 UNHCR and 3 IOM reps) for two days of site visits to settlement agencies in Melbourne and regional areas of Victoria, and a two-day plenary.

Financial support from DIAC, AMES Victoria and Access Community Services (Logan City, Queensland) enabled delegates from Argentina, Romania and the Czech Republic to attend, while the US Government provided support for Uruguayan and Bulgarian delegates. The Latin American and Eastern European NGO delegates joined US and Japanese counterparts for a four-day visit to New Zealand in the week prior to the WGR meeting. That visit was hosted by Refugee Services Aotearoa New Zealand and examined approaches to refugee settlement support in Auckland and Wellington.

The Australian NGO delegation at the WGR meeting consisted of representatives of RCOA, the Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA), AMES Victoria, Foundation House and the University of

---

1 Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Japan, Romania, Sweden, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay.
NSW’s Centre for Refugee Research, as well as four refugee representatives nominated by the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women, SCOA and AMES.

In organising the event, DIAC and RCOA were keen to illustrate Australia’s cultural diversity and the active role former refugees play in the support of newly arrived refugees and in national life. This exposure to the role of refugees began with a welcome reception hosted by AMES Victoria on the evening of 19 February at Melbourne’s Multicultural Hub. The reception provided an opportunity for delegates to meet each other, to speak with refugee community representatives and to enjoy food and entertainment provided by Melbourne’s Karen, Iraqi, Bhutanese, Horn of Africa and Burundian communities. Over the coming days, many of the presenters were former refugees, who shared aspects of their settlement journey, discussed approaches to settlement support and contributed to plenary and group discussions about settlement and integration issues.

Melbourne site visits, 20 February

The WGR meeting formally opened on 20 February with an overview of Australia’s settlement service system and presentations on orientation programs for newly-arrived refugees in Melbourne, including AMES Victoria’s community guides program.

Delegates then split into four groups for a series of site visits to organisations providing support to refugees in and around Melbourne. Each site visit focused on a particular theme and included presentations from practitioners, service providers and former refugees, as well as tours of local services and businesses.

- **Health and torture and trauma services**: Hosted by Foundation house, this visit included an overview of the services and therapies provided by Foundation House to survivors of torture and trauma as well as other Foundation House initiatives focussed on improved access to health services for refugee and humanitarian entrants.

- **Housing**: Hosted by AMES Victoria, this site visit involved a guided tour of AMES’ transitional housing facility in Maidstone. It also included presentations on housing issues and a walking tour of the suburb of Footscray, a hub for recently arrived refugees and migrants which features many businesses, restaurants and services run by former refugees.

- **Role of different levels of government in settlement**: Hosted by Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre, this visit explored the role of local, state and Federal government departments in providing settlement support for refugees. The visit included presentations from the Victorian Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship, Darebin Council, and some of Spectrum MRC’s programs in partnership with different levels of government (settlement and family, youth and community development).

- **Youth and family issues, education and training**: Hosted by the South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre and the Centre for Multicultural Youth, this visit provided an overview of a range of programs for children, couples and families settling in Australia, including physical activity and tutoring programs, relationship counselling and transition planning for unaccompanied minors moving out of care. The Centre for Multicultural Youth arranged a panel discussion with young people from refugee backgrounds on the challenges of settling in a new country. This was followed by a discussion on education issues and employment pathways with representatives from a local English language school, local employment network and agencies involved in providing homework help and other support to refugees. This visit also included a walking tour of the Afghan Bazaar and Little India districts of Dandenong, which feature many businesses and restaurants run by former refugees and migrants.

- **Involving volunteers in mentoring and community engagement**: Hosted by AMES Victoria, this visit included presentations on some of the more successful and innovative volunteer and
mentoring programs, including AMES volunteering and Bounce mentoring programs, AMES’ approach to community engagement and a presentation from the Sudanese Australian Integrated Learning (SAIL) program.

- **Employment:** Hosted by the Ecumenical Migration Centre (Brotherhood of St Laurence), this visit involved presentations on innovative and effective employment programs, including Given the Chance, Stepping Stones, the Refugee Action Program and Sorghum Sisters Social Enterprise. Former refugees and a construction company representative spoke about the practical benefits of the programs.

- **Role of refugee organisations in settlement:** Hosted by Victorian Arabic Social Services, this site visit involved presentations from a range of refugee community organisations involved in providing support and assistance to refugees settling in Melbourne. Organisations involved included the Anti-Racism Action Band, Islamic Council of Victoria, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and the Australian Sudanese Lost Boys Association.

**Regional tours, 21 February**

On 21 February, delegates split into groups for two regional tours which included interactive presentations on on-arrival services, the Adult Migrant English Program, employment transitions, social enterprises and projects that engage the local community.

The first group travelled to Geelong for a tour hosted by Diversitat, visiting Diversitat’s newly opened hub servicing Geelong’s migrant and refugee communities, as well as Diversitat’s You-Turn, Pulse community radio station and Wholefoods Café initiatives. Delegates then travelled to the Wyndham Community and Education Centre in Werribee to see some of the innovative education, training and employment projects established in the area, including WCEC’s Saffron Kitchen social enterprise, sewing and weaving women’s group, and the development of the Wyndham Humanitarian Network in response to the emerging needs of newly settled refugee and humanitarian entrants.

The second group travelled to Shepparton for a tour hosted by Uniting Care Cutting Edge. The tour included an overview of services provided by Uniting Care and other local agencies to newly arrived refugees. Delegates then broke into groups to discuss various settlement issues and challenges, including health, housing, education, employment and English language training, with local service providers and former refugees settling in Shepparton. The tour concluded with a visit to an English language school for refugee children and young people, during which delegates had an opportunity to take part in an English class with refugee students.

**WGR Plenary, 22-23 February**

After a discussion of delegates’ observations of the site visits, the formal proceedings of the WGR meeting began with Minister for Immigration and Citizenship, Chris Bowen MP, delivering the opening address. The plenary was jointly chaired by Jim O’Callaghan, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship’s Humanitarian Branch and Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia. UNHCR was represented on the podium by Wei-Meng Lim-Kabaa, Deputy Director of UNHCR’s Division of International Protection and Head of the Resettlement Service.

The plenary consisted of a series of thematic sessions with presentations from government and NGO representatives from many of the countries represented at the meeting, as well as from UNHCR and refugee representatives. Invited guest speakers included: Dr Tim Soutphommasane from Australian Multicultural Council; Robert Mulas, principal of Fairfield High School, NSW; Ahmed Dini, Victorian Local Hero 2012; and Margarita Caddick, Hume City Council, Victoria. Among the themes explored during the plenary were:
• Multiculturalism as the basis of settlement;
• The role of the volunteer sector, specialist providers and local communities in settlement;
• The role of refugee organisations in settlement;
• Government and business sector partnerships;
• The contributions of refugees;
• The challenges and opportunities presented by resettlement outside major cities and in small towns and rural areas;
• Enhancing the role of local councils and municipalities in the provision of settlement services; and
• Measuring successful settlement.

On the second morning of the plenary, delegates broke into a series of groups to discuss specific settlement challenges, including housing, employment, language learning, education, community outreach and participation, youth issues and the settlement needs of specific groups (such as people with disabilities, vulnerable women, people with complex medical needs, survivors of violence and torture, people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex, and older persons). Each breakout group developed a series of principles or recommendations to be taken forward to the ATCR meeting in June.

Public lecture, 22 February

On the evening of the first day of the plenary, a public lecture and panel discussion was held at the University of Melbourne focusing on the topic “International Refugee Protection: Partnerships, Challenges and Opportunities”. Speakers included UNHCR’s Wei-Meng Lim Kabaa; Anastasia Brown, Director of Resettlement Services for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, who coordinates the world’s largest NGO resettlement program; eminent demographer Professor Graeme Hugo from the University of Adelaide, who presented the findings of his recent research on the social, civic and economic contributions of refugees and humanitarian entrants; and Parliamentary Secretary for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, Senator Kate Lundy.

Closing reception, 23 February

Following the conclusion of the plenary on February 23, delegates attended a closing reception hosted by Foundation House. After a smoking ceremony and formal Welcome to Country from representatives of the Wurundjeri people, delegates had the opportunity to witness an Australian citizenship ceremony, at which 10 former refugees from Burma, Iraq, Sudan and Afghanistan took the citizenship pledge. Senator Lundy, who presided over the ceremony, then delivered a final address to bring the WGR meeting to a formal close.

Next steps

While the main purpose of the gathering was to give representatives of governments and NGOs in different resettlement countries an opportunity to share ideas and experiences to better inform policy and practice within each country, the issues and ideas discussed will be followed up at the larger ATCR gathering in Geneva in July. DIAC will draw together a report which includes options for collective international action on refugee settlement issues and principles which governments and NGOs could consider in developing programs within their own countries. On a less formal level, delegates at the meeting were busily sharing resources with each other and discussing options for cooperation across national boundaries.