



Refugee Council
of Australia



PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON AUSTRALIA'S REFUGEE POLICIES

AUSTRALIA'S REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM 2011-12
Community views on current challenges and future directions

SECTION 6

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This is an extract from the full RCOA submission to the Australian Government on the 2011-12 Refugee and Humanitarian Program. This extract includes the following sections:

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Cover photo: In Malaysia, as in many other Asian countries, even official UNHCR refugee status does not always afford adequate protection. These two Afghan refugee brothers in their 20s are not allowed to work legally, even though they are desperate to support their families. © UNHCR/Zalmai.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1.1 AUSTRALIA'S REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM AND GLOBAL NEEDS

During 2009-10, Australia passed the 750,000 mark in its intake of refugees and humanitarian entrants since nationhood.¹ The 13,770 refugee and humanitarian visas issued in 2009-10 were divided between 9,236 offshore refugee and humanitarian visas (the lowest number in eight years) and 4,534 onshore visas (the second highest on record). These included 2,156 onshore visas granted to asylum seekers who entered Australia by boat. The main source regions for offshore refugee and humanitarian visas were Asia (38.6%), Middle East and South-West Asia (31.8%) and Africa (29.2%). The Refugee and Humanitarian Program remained a small part of overall immigration to Australia, making up just 7.0% of permanent additions by migration in 2009-10. The offshore program is well below its historic high of 89,199 arrivals in 1949-50 and its 35-year peak of 21,917 arrivals in 1981-82.²

Australia's share of international refugee support remains modest – hosting just 0.22% of the world's refugees and receiving just 0.53% of asylum applications in 2009.³ Australia received 9.85% of the refugees resettled in 2009 but resettlement remains a durable solution offered to a tiny minority, with only 1.1% of the refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) benefiting from resettlement during the year. When the numbers of refugees being hosted is considered with 10 years of refugee recognition and resettlement, Australia's global share is 1.16% (19th overall, 23rd on a per capita basis and 68th relative to total national Gross Domestic Product).

Five countries have produced 60% of the refugees under UNHCR's mandate – Afghanistan (2,887,123), Iraq (1,785,212), Somalia (678,309), Democratic Republic of Congo (455,852) and Burma (406,669). The six countries to receive the largest influxes of refugees are Pakistan (1,740,711), Iran (1,070,488), Syria (1,054,466), Jordan (450,756), Kenya (358,928) and Chad (338,495). More than half of the world's refugees (5.47 million) are in what UNHCR classifies as protracted refugee situations.⁴ Only 24% of the world's refugees are living in camps, with the rest dispersed in often very difficult conditions in urban and rural areas.

UNHCR's 2009 statistics record another 7.95 million people of concern who are not in countries of citizenship – asylum seekers, stateless people and others in need of protection. Around two-thirds of these people (5.17 million) are in Asia, the largest groups being stateless people in Thailand, Nepal and Burma. Within Asia, there are unknown numbers of people (perhaps millions) who have been displaced primarily by persecution but do not appear in UNHCR statistics, having no official status as asylum seekers or refugees. Regarded as “illegal foreign workers” or “illegal immigrants”, these people are primarily from Burma and can be found in largest numbers in Thailand, Bangladesh and India.

While global resettlement in 2009 (at 112,442 places) was the highest since 1995, resettlement will have to be expanded considerably if current needs are to be met. UNHCR estimates resettlement needs for 2011 at 172,307 and over coming years at 805,535. Those in need of resettlement are from the three key regions of Middle East and South-West Asia (43.8%), Africa (33.2%) and Asia (17.3%).

Recommendations

Based on feedback from its national consultation process from discussions with non-government organisations (NGOs) in Asia, Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) recommends that the Australian Government:

¹ As at 30 June 2010, the total refugee and humanitarian intake and refugee recognition since 1901 was estimated at 757,500.

² Australia's Refugee and Humanitarian Program was redeveloped in 1977, in response to the emerging refugee crisis in Asia.

³ Statistics in this section calculated from UNHCR's 2009 Global Trends or UNHCR statistics from earlier years.

⁴ Refugee populations of more than 25,000 displaced for more than five years. These protracted refugee situations involve refugees from 18 source countries in 23 countries of asylum.

1. *Demonstrate its unequivocal commitment to the Refugee Convention by ending the numerical link between the onshore Protection program and the offshore Refugee and Humanitarian program, to demonstrate the importance of Australia providing asylum to refugees who have not been able to find effective protection elsewhere.*
2. *Advance the development of an Asia-Pacific regional refugee protection framework by expanding its offshore resettlement program to offer additional places for vulnerable refugees within the region.*
3. *Develop a five-year plan to expand its offshore Refugee and Humanitarian Program to 20,000 places per year, returning it to a similar level to that achieved in the years following Australia's response to the Asian refugee crisis in the late 1970s.⁵*
4. *Maintain a global focus to Australia's resettlement program by setting a minimum regional target of 25% for each of the key regions of Africa, Asia and the Middle East and South West Asia.*
5. *Encourage other governments to increase their commitment to resettlement (or to develop resettlement programs for the first time) and to include the needs of the Asia-Pacific region as part of a global approach to resettlement.⁶*
6. *Review Australia's policies on the resettlement of refugees with disabilities, giving careful consideration to:*
 - (a) *the introduction of exemptions from the health requirement for all applications under the offshore component of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program and all applications for family reunion made by refugee and humanitarian entrants; and*
 - (b) *the implementation of key recommendations of the Joint Standing Committee on Migration report "Migration treatment of disability: Enabling Australia".*
7. *In the light of advice from NGOs working with refugees in Asia, the Middle East and Africa, give greater consideration to resettling refugees from smaller groups of highly vulnerable refugees including:*
 - (a) *Refugees who are well outside their region of origin (such as African and Middle Eastern refugees in Asia) and have little prospect of local integration;*
 - (b) *Refugees in detention or at high risk of being detained.*
8. *While not altering UNHCR's pivotal role in referring refugees for resettlement, give consideration to receiving resettlement referrals from experienced NGOs which have detailed knowledge of highly vulnerable people within larger refugee populations.*
9. *Explore even greater cooperation with the key resettlement states of the United States and Canada, examining options for the three states to take on different but complementary responsibilities for resettlement within the Africa, Asia and the Middle East regions.*
10. *Consider options for the development of a small additional program (or sub-program) to facilitate resettlement of refugees with the involvement of community-based organisations.*

1.2 DEVELOPING AN ASIA-PACIFIC REGIONAL REFUGEE PROTECTION FRAMEWORK

Participants in RCOA's consultation process were unanimous in their opposition to the idea of a Regional Processing Centre in Timor-Leste, viewing it as an unacceptable shifting of Australia's responsibility to another country and an imposition on a very small state by a rich and powerful neighbour. Asian NGO representatives consulted shared these concerns, seeing it as an entirely Australia-centred proposal which offered little towards resolving refugee protection issues in Asian states.

The Prime Minister's proposal for an Asia-Pacific Regional Protection Framework is viewed quite differently, with many consultation participants agreeing that regional and international cooperation is vital to any significant change to the circumstances of people seeking protection from persecution. However, given the often self-serving and highly distorted nature of the Australian

⁵ Australia's offshore refugee and humanitarian intake averaged 21,239 per year in the three years from 1 July 1979.

⁶ In 2001, the then UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Ruud Lubbers, recommended that developed nations set annual resettlement targets at a level equal to 0.1% of their national population. Under this formula, Australia's offshore program would have 22,000 places each year.

political debate about asylum seekers, many are sceptical about whether Australia is genuinely interested in seeing an improvement in refugee protection, fearing that any efforts to change current circumstances will be aimed only at achieving domestic political goals.

The development of a regional protection framework will clearly require significant additional commitments from Australia, including financial resources and resettlement places. Australia must demonstrate that its goal is not to shift its responsibilities to its Asian neighbours but that it is prepared to lead by example, both in its modelling of protection-centred asylum policies and in its willingness to put resources into strategies to improve regional refugee protection outcomes. Australia must be prepared to review its current asylum policies and amend policies which, if copied elsewhere, would undermine refugee protection.

Asian NGO representatives emphasised the importance of developing a framework which will have tangible benefits for participant countries. It was suggested that, if countries in the region are able to see clear benefits of being involved in a regional protection framework, they may be more inclined to participate. States are more likely to take steps to enhance refugee protection if neighbouring states are taking similar steps at the same time, removing fears that unilateral actions may result in refugees moving from neighbouring states where protection is inadequate.

Educating and empowering local NGOs in the region to take on a greater role in advocating for improved standards of refugee protection could be critical to encouraging cooperation. A Thai NGO representative commented that responses to refugee issues in his country were largely in the hands of international organisations and foreign nationals, suggesting that Thai citizens and organisations needed to be much more actively involved if refugee questions were to be taken more seriously by Thailand. One consultation participant suggested developing a parallel NGO process to the Bali Process to facilitate greater NGO engagement on protection issues in the region.

A Malaysian NGO representative observed that many refugees who came to Malaysia from elsewhere expected to be treated fairly but were shocked by the treatment they received from Malaysian authorities and the limited support given by UNHCR. While most would prefer to remain in Malaysia, after a while they began to consider ways of leaving for countries with higher human rights standards, including Australia. In many parts of Asia, people have great difficulty in getting prompt and unrestricted access to a refugee status determination process and continue to have no legal status even after registering with UNHCR. In some countries, even UNHCR recognised refugees are subject to arrest and detention. Few refugees or asylum seekers have official permission to work and, in order to survive, are forced to break the law, risking arrest or detention. Many asylum seekers and refugees report being exploited by employers taking advantage of their lack of status and by corrupt officials pressuring them to pay bribes. Across the region, many refugees are asking for the most basic of human rights – access to an asylum process, official permission to remain in the country, protection from arbitrary detention and refoulement, the right to support themselves, health care and access to basic education for their children.

As acknowledged earlier, more than two-thirds of the world's stateless people are in the Asian region, with by far the largest group being in Thailand. Research conducted by the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has shown that a lack of legal status is the single greatest risk factor for a highland person in Thailand to be trafficked or exploited. In seeking to improve protection within the region, collective international action is needed to resolve statelessness.

Consultation participants saw the need for Australia to be much more active in advocating for international pressure on countries responsible for policies which create refugee crises. For example, Bhutan, which has produced more refugees per capita than nearly any other country in the world, has faced little public pressure, even from the countries which have committed significant resources to the support and resettlement of Bhutanese refugees. In addition, there is a pressing need for greater international scrutiny of the treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in countries of asylum, through channels independent of governments and UNHCR.

Recommendation – Strategies for the promotion of a regional protection framework

11. Taking into consideration the nature of protection needs in the Asia-Pacific, feedback from consultation participants and NGOs working in the region and key lessons learned from previous examples of regional cooperation on refugee protection, RCOA recommends that the Australian Government not pursue plans for a single Regional Processing Centre in Timor-Leste but focus on promoting the development of an Asia-Pacific regional refugee protection framework through the following strategies:

A. Focus on protection principles

- i) Seek the agreement of governments in the Asia-Pacific region to work together collectively to provide to all asylum seekers:
 - a) Timely access to sound refugee status determination;
 - b) Effective protection (including freedom from detention and respect of human rights) throughout the time taken to determine status and to provide a durable solution;
 - c) Timely durable solutions and/or a safe return to the country of origin.
- ii) Work towards the development of a regional agreement to guarantee non-refoulement.

B. Promote greater understanding of refugee protection needs

- i) Create a new position of Australian Ambassador for Refugee Protection, to assist the Government in high-level advocacy on refugee protection issues within the Asia-Pacific region and internationally.
- ii) Support the development of a parallel NGO process to the Bali Process, to foster the engagement of NGOs across the region in refugee protection issues.
- iii) Lobby UNHCR to coordinate more detailed research on forced displacement in the Asia-Pacific region, to gain a fuller understanding of refugee protection needs. This should include research on the numbers and circumstances of unrecognised refugees in Asia (particularly people from Burma in Thailand, India and Bangladesh), with a view to exploring strategies for regularising their status.
- iv) Lobby for the creation of a UN Special Rapporteur on Refugee Protection, to promote robust international examination of refugee needs independent of all government and UNHCR processes.

C. Model best practice in asylum procedures

Review Australia's approach to immigration detention with a view to reforming Australia's asylum seeker reception and detention arrangements to model the protection-centred practices Australia would like to see replicated in the region. The current Australian policy of indefinite mandatory detention is a particular concern, given the role that arbitrary detention plays in the fears which foster onward movement from South-East Asia.

D. Respond to protection issues in refugee-producing countries

- i) Involve the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in taking up protection issues within refugee-producing countries through every multilateral and bilateral means possible, proposing international action to support states unable to protect their populations and putting international pressure on those unwilling to do so.
- ii) Develop a strategy for the role of Australian aid in improving situations in refugee-producing countries, including through development initiatives, peace building, anti-corruption programs, support of human rights frameworks, strategies to resolve statelessness and efforts to improve security for vulnerable people.

E. Encourage and support change in countries of asylum

- i) Encourage states to work towards policies which ensure refugees and asylum seekers have:
 - a) Fair and prompt access to asylum processes;
 - b) Legal status and freedom from detention;
 - c) The right to work;
 - d) Access to education;
 - e) Access to health care.

- ii) Lobby for each country in the region to develop domestic asylum legislation in line with the principles of the Refugee Convention.
- iii) Seek opportunities to promote training for government and NGO officials on refugee protection issues, particularly in countries where national expertise is more limited.
- iv) Develop a strategy for the role of Australian aid in improving situations in countries of asylum, focusing on education of refugees and asylum seekers, health and livelihood programs, support for highly impoverished non-refugee populations, capacity building of government officials on refugee protection issues, supporting the role of local NGOs and ensuring adequate funding for UNHCR's work.
- v) Fund the development of a deployment scheme to involve Australians in supporting the provision of legal aid to asylum seekers, refugee status determination and involvement in resettlement programs.

F. Focus on statelessness

- i) Lobby for the development of strategies to resolve statelessness in the Asia-Pacific region, through the Bali Process, in discussions with ASEAN bodies and in bilateral discussions with governments across Asia.
- ii) Work with governments of the Asia-Pacific region to put forward specific proposals to resolve statelessness in the lead-up to the ministerial meeting to be hosted by UNHCR in Geneva on 7-8 December 2011.
- iii) Explore forming an international working group to address the displacement of Rohingya, examining issues inside Burma, treatment of Rohingya asylum seekers and refugees in various parts of Asia and possible remedies.

G. Enhance resettlement

See recommendations 1 to 10.

H. Develop strategies for sustainable and monitored return

- i) Seek agreements with states receiving returnees that all returnees will be protected from detention, harassment, torture and discrimination on return, with future returns suspended if this agreement is breached.
- ii) Work with UNHCR and human rights organisations to provide comprehensive independent monitoring of returnees.
- iii) Provide a safeguard for returnees from Australia, guaranteeing immediate resettlement through the In Country Special Humanitarian Program if they are subject to detention, harassment, torture or discrimination.

1.3 FAMILY REUNION AND THE SPECIAL HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM

The impact of the policy of numerically linking the offshore Special Humanitarian Program (SHP) and the Onshore Protection Program – a policy not replicated in any other country – has been to reduce the availability of SHP places to its lowest level in nine years. The SHP is the main means by which humanitarian entrants reunite with family members, providing options for the reunion of immediate family (or “split family”) for SHP and onshore protection visa holders and for members of the wider family for people on any form of Refugee or Humanitarian visa.⁷ Within the SHP, the “split family” category (partners and children of adult humanitarian entrants and parents of unaccompanied humanitarian minors) is given priority over wider family reunion and SHP proposals from community-based organisations. In 2009-10, 1,267 SHP Split Family visas were granted, a level lower than two of the previous three years. However, within a smaller program, the Split Family category made up a higher proportion of the SHP (39.2%). The recent increase in asylum applications is, under current policy, highly likely to result in a further decrease in SHP visas available and an increase in requests for family reunion under the Split Family category.

⁷ 'Split family' members of Refugee visa holders are counted against the Refugee component, not the SHP.

Refugee and humanitarian entrants are increasingly looking at other visa options in the general Migration Program, in an attempt to bring family members to Australia. However, in most cases, these options are not viable, given the high costs of application and agent fees and of supporting family members for extended periods without social security, health care and other support. Eligibility restrictions also limit family reunion for humanitarian entrants. For example, the requirement, for an Orphan Relative visa, that documentation be provided to demonstrate that a family member is the sole survivor in the context can be problematic in a refugee situation where family members are missing.

There is a growing body of research suggesting that the prolonged separation of families – particularly those displaced by war and conflict – has a far-reaching impact on those who have been resettled. The negative psychosocial, economic and social consequences of family separation have been clearly identified in community consultations in the past. This year's consultations also highlighted the potential benefits to individuals, families and the broader Australian community of ensuring there is timely humanitarian family reunion.

In RCOA's community consultations, the main concerns raised about family reunion for humanitarian entrants were:

- the insufficient number of places for family reunion with the Humanitarian Program;
- the impact of the numerical link between the onshore protection program and the SHP;
- the restrictive definition of "family" applied by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) failing to take full account of actual family structures and dependency;
- the very limited access to affordable migration advice – and the negative impact this has on the overall application process;
- difficulties in the application process (including the complexity of forms, the time taken to determine applications, the inadequacy of feedback to unsuccessful applicants and unreasonable expectations about availability of supporting documentation);
- the impacts of the "time of decision" requirement and the long processing times on split family applications from unaccompanied humanitarian minors;
- the difficulties faced in reuniting family through the Migration Program; and
- the separation of families through resettlement to different countries.

Family reunion is, of course, not the only focus of the SHP. It also provides a means for resettlement for:

- People who cannot easily get access to UNHCR refugee status or its resettlement process, despite having compelling needs for resettlement.
- Those still within their country of origin, providing a vital alternative, through the In Country SHP visa, for people at immediate risk of persecution. (As noted earlier, this could be expanded to include returnees from Australia who are experiencing persecution or significant discrimination).
- Refugees supported by community-based organisations, including ethno-specific groups and broader volunteer organisations formed specifically to support the refugee resettlement process.

In a shrinking program with expected growth in Split Family applications, it is important that these other aspects of the SHP are preserved and supported. Community-based organisations have played an important role in resettlement in Australia. Their continuing role can be enhanced through improved training, requiring effective cooperation between these groups and providers of Humanitarian Settlement Services, supporting groups with access to resettlement referrals (where relevant) and ensuring that competent groups continue to have the opportunity to assist in resettling an appropriate number of new arrivals.

Recommendations

RCOA recommends that, in seeking to address the issues outlined above, the Australian Government:

12. *Increase the number of places available in the Special Humanitarian Program, through breaking the numerical link with the onshore protection program and by expanding the overall program.*
13. *Enhance humanitarian entrants' access to family reunion through the Migration Program by waiving application fees, lifting bars on access to social security for family reunion visa holders who have been proposed by humanitarian entrants and examine alternatives to complex legal and eligibility requirements which cannot be met by people living in refugee situations overseas.*
14. *Foster discussion among resettlement countries about how to work together in resettlement to reduce dispersal of homogenous groups of refugees.*
15. *Review the "time of decision" requirement for SHP Split Family grants, in view of the likely long-term impact on those who arrived as unaccompanied humanitarian minors of living alone in Australia without family support.*
16. *Review the DIAC definition of "family" to bring it into line with the UNHCR Resettlement Handbook's definition (which includes a broader understanding of dependency).*
17. *Create incentives for migration agents to provide free advice to humanitarian entrants through discounts in the costs of registration and training and modifications to registration requirements.*
18. *Develop a clearer strategy for the aspects of the SHP which do not involve family reunion, including the In Country SHP and the involvement of community-based organisations in resettlement.*
19. *Increase funding for the Immigration Advice and Application Assistance Scheme and review funding distribution to increase access for refugee and humanitarian entrants across Australia.*
20. *Improve feedback to people whose SHP proposals are unsuccessful, in line with recommendations of the Commonwealth Ombudsman's Report 15/2007.*
21. *Seek community feedback about how current information strategies about the SHP application process and other family reunion options can be further improved.*

1.4 PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON AUSTRALIA'S REFUGEE POLICIES

Consultation participants expressed concern again this year about what they saw as a general failure of political leadership on asylum seeker and refugee issues. Many expressed their desire for politicians on all sides of politics to present facts, use correct terminology and cease leveraging asylum issues for political gain. The confusion of issues – often wilful – in the current discourse was noted. Over-population, water security, and caring for vulnerable and marginalised Australians all enter as common arguments against taking a more humane approach to asylum seekers and refugees. There is wider public concern about government expenditure in relation to asylum seekers and refugees, with perpetuated myths fuelling the concern.

Refugee and humanitarian entrants voiced a number of concerns regarding both the media's and politicians' portrayal of issues and had varying views of the direct impact the public discourse had on their daily lives. While people consulted in Sydney reported no adverse treatment, a number of those settled in Perth and Brisbane said they had experienced hostile treatment as a direct result of the public debate about asylum seekers and refugees. Concerns were expressed about politicians purporting to be supportive of refugees still in camps offshore without realising that their negative comments about asylum seekers were actually hurting people who came through the offshore humanitarian program. The negative stereotypes perpetuated in the media (as "queue jumpers" and as people reliant on welfare) impacted the lives of refugee and humanitarian entrants, particularly when seeking employment. They felt stigmatised as a burden on Australia, rather than as people who contribute economically and socially. African community members in Brisbane spoke about the appearance of graffiti on African-owned and operated shops, urging Africans to "go back to your country".

Another person noted that the negative public discourse led to a missed opportunity: that the Australian community “does not get to see what refugees and asylum seekers *do*, or how we contribute”. Other negatives from the public discourse are also overlooked, such as the psychological impact on some former refugees who relive traumatic experiences as a result of negative media coverage and others who respond by withdrawing from wider community contact because of a feeling that they are being rejected by Australian society.

In considering the strategies to address ways to shift the negative public discourse on Australia’s refugee policies, a number of options exist for campaigns, for education and information provision and for policy formation and development. A worthwhile new initiative is *Let’s Change the Conversation*, a campaign launched by Amnesty International Australia in December 2010. It involves media and multi-media advertising, public information and training sessions aimed at arming people with facts, anecdotes and personal stories to better equip them in challenging common misconceptions. This type of training can and should be offered to individuals, organisations, the media, the corporate sector and, in some form, to DIAC staff and contracted service providers. The Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia (FECCA) launched its campaign to reclaim multiculturalism in November 2010. FECCA’s *Different But Equal* report outlines a whole of government approach to reframe multicultural policy in Australia.

Many participants shared the view that the positive stories of resettled humanitarian entrants were not being told, not promoted and not even recorded. It is vital at this point in the debate to show the points of commonality humanitarian entrants share with all other Australians. Shared values include a concern for family, a desire to be self-sufficient, to learn and to be a contributing member of the community.

Recommendations

RCOA recommends that:

22. *DIAC, the Australian Government and politicians take on a more proactive role in engaging with the media on asylum and refugees issues, with the development of a Government communications strategy to support the Refugee and Humanitarian Program.*
23. *The Australian Government examine Amnesty International Australia’s Let’s Change the Conversation campaign and consider implementing similar training and education opportunities.*
24. *The Australian Government and all parties represented in the Australian Parliament take up the framework and reforms set out in FECCA’s National Multicultural Agenda “Different But Equal”.*
25. *The Government reinstitute funding for the Australian Human Rights Commission for the provision of information and educational materials related to asylum seekers, refugees and human rights.*
26. *The contributions of people of refugee background be acknowledged during Refugee Week through:*
 - *formal awards ceremonies conducted by Federal and State Government agencies; and*
 - *local recognition by Federal and State MPs of people of refugee background within their electorates.*
27. *Specific refugee-related components be included for consideration in the development of the national curriculum.*
28. *DIAC consider funding (through the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program or similar programs) the development of a NGO-coordinated national training and media strategy to improve the quality of reportage on refugee and asylum seeker issues and enable refugees and the organisations working with them to engage with the media and the Australian public.*

6. PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON AUSTRALIA'S REFUGEE POLICIES

When two elephants fight, it is the grass underneath that suffers.

– Brisbane community representative commenting on how the political leaders' inflammatory rhetoric affects refugee and humanitarian entrants.

6.1 OVERVIEW OF CURRENT ISSUES

In our 2010 submission, RCOA highlighted the often-expressed concern among those consulted about the general failure in political leadership on asylum seeker and refugee issues. Unfortunately, these sentiments were again consistently expressed in consultations for the 2011-12 Refugee and Humanitarian Program. Participants expressed their desire for politicians on all sides of politics to present facts, use correct terminology and cease leveraging asylum issues for political gain. Most participants expressed equal concern about the media's portrayal of these issues. It was widely noted that misinformation and negative coverage far outweigh facts and positive stories of asylum seekers and former refugees. The prevailing view from RCOA's community consultations is that there is little of the "frank, open, honest national conversation" or a calm and rational debate that Prime Minister Gillard spoke of at the Lowy Institute in July 2010.⁸

6.1.1 Asylum seekers arriving by boat

It must be noted that in some consultations, separate attention was paid to the discourse about asylum seekers who arrive by boat. It is clear that this issue needs to be addressed uniquely simply because of the extent to which it has been distorted in much of the public debate. It was noted in many consultations that some Australians do feel a genuine fear about boat arrivals because of the way the issue is often presented: as a problem which is rapidly worsening, as involving illegal movement organised by criminal smuggling syndicates and as a threat to Australian border security. There are more balanced analyses of the issues published;⁹ however, these analyses never gain the same levels of public attention or media prominence as much more sensationalised accounts of the issue.

During the consultations, many service providers advised that many of their clients who reached Australia by boat are very reluctant to state this. They are fearful of the reaction they may receive, the presumptions that are made about them and even the anger it may cause among their own communities here in Australia. The rhetoric about "boat people" being "queue jumpers" and "illegal" has become so endemic that a divide has occurred even among some humanitarian entrants. Regular use of these terms in media reports and commentary, despite a Press Council ruling against the use of the term "illegal" in this context, has brought this misinformation into the vernacular. RCOA and others have long advocated for an end to such terminology which distorts public understanding of asylum seekers and the nature of refugee flight. In particular, there is a pressing need for politicians, not subject to Press Council advice, to show leadership in this regard by presenting factual information and using correct terminology, whatever their position on asylum policy.

6.1.2 Political impact domestically and internationally

Sector feedback to RCOA indicates that it is the opinions of the public, rather than the views of individual politicians, that need to be most urgently addressed. Regardless of differing individual and party views, all politicians are united in having to respond to a wider public that feels some level of fear, however unfounded this fear may be. The impact of present discourse is real; "tougher" policies to address the public's fears result in people spending longer periods in overcrowded, remote detention facilities, more families separated and people living in Australia

⁸ Gillard 2010.

⁹ See, for example, Koser, K. (2010). *Responding to boat arrivals in Australia: time for a reality check*. Lowy Institute for International Policy. http://www.lowyinstitute.org/Program_GlobalIssues.asp; Koser, K. (2010). "Time to rock the boat on refugees". *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December. Retrieved 31/01/11, <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/politics/time-to-rock-the-boat-on-refugees-20101212-18tvk.html>

unable to fully belong in communities where they feel judged and isolated. Fact and reason have given way to sensationalism and fear in this discourse. Community leaders, politicians, the media, NGOs and individuals all have a role to play in changing this discourse for the benefit of society as a whole.

Australia's international reputation also seems to be suffering. RCOA received feedback indicating that diplomats are relaying the message back to their capitals that Australia's approach to the issue of asylum seekers is adolescent at best. As detailed in Section 3.3, Table 13, in 2009 Australia was ranked 36th for the numbers of asylum seekers recognised or registered as refugees (42nd on a per capita basis and 67th relative to national wealth). From an international perspective, there is no justification for the high profile and shrill nature of the Australian asylum debate.

6.1.3 Distorted and intertwined issues of population, immigration and asylum seekers

The current discourse is distorted and tangential, leading to overall confusion for the public and even for those within the refugee sector. A monitoring of major news outlet blogs and information gained through our consultations shows that the population debate is often raised when refugee and asylum seeker issues are being discussed. Over-population, water security and caring for vulnerable and marginalised Australians all enter as common arguments against taking a more humane approach to asylum seekers and refugees. To this end, RCOA would welcome political leaders clearly stating the facts about the relatively small numbers of people seeking asylum in Australia each year, explaining the responsibilities of being a signatory to the Refugee Convention and why it is in Australia's strategic interest to support other countries to respect and implement the principles of the Convention. As discussed in Section 6.3, pollsters often group immigration, population and asylum seeker and refugee issues together in research polls and surveys, with the result that the distinctions between these issues are often blurred. For example, in the Scanlon Foundation's 2010 *Mapping Social Cohesion* report, the first question in the survey was open ended: respondents were asked "what do you think are the most important problems facing Australia today?" Just 6.8% of respondents answered "Asylum seekers/illegal immigrants" as their first preference, while a further 3.5% suggested it as their second preference. If, however, "asylum, immigration and population issues" are grouped together, they were ranked first by 14% of respondents.¹⁰

Among the more extreme examples last year of sensationalised media coverage of asylum seekers was article published on the front page of the 28 March 2010 edition of Queensland's Sunday Mail, a News Limited tabloid newspaper.¹¹ "They're here" screamed the headline on a page dominated by a photo of a boat carrying asylum seekers. The sub-heading breathlessly declared: "Refugee crisis hits home: As Christmas Island overflows, boat people are enjoying shopping trips in Queensland". Inside, readers saw the evidence for themselves – a photo of a woman wearing a hijab, shopping with her children in a supermarket. They were, the Mail wrote, "suspected immigration detainees ... returning from a shopping excursion at CentroToombul shopping centre". The article recounted that the Australian Government had transferred some asylum seekers from its immigration detention facilities on Christmas Island to a detention facility in Brisbane. Some had been allowed to go shopping while waiting for the outcome of their refugee status determination process. The article even gave details of some of the items in the asylum seekers' shopping baskets.

The year's media coverage also included some quite vitriolic opinion pieces about asylum seekers and organisations which support them. Every single boat arrival during the year received some media coverage, many times backed up by commentary aimed at building a sense of a worsening crisis. The publication of this material in the most popular forms of public media has a real impact on the daily lives of those trying to settle and develop a sense of belonging here in Australia. These effects extend well beyond the community of asylum seekers and humanitarian entrants, as former refugees expressed to RCOA during the consultations (see Section 6.2).

¹⁰ Markus, A. (2010). *Mapping Social Cohesion 2010: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys*. Scanlon Foundation & Monash University.

¹¹ Australian Refugee Rights Alliance (2010). *Fear and loathing in Australia: Politicians and asylum seekers*. http://www.arra.org.au/uploads/documents/2010_ARRA_Xenophobia.pdf

There is wider public concern about government expenditure in relation to asylum seekers and refugees, with perpetuated myths fuelling the concern. Perhaps the most prolific is a fabricated email which has existed in different forms in Australia for the past five years. It again went viral in early 2010 making the false claim that refugee families received considerably more in welfare payments than disadvantaged Australian families and aged pensioners. The many attempts by DIAC, Centrelink, some MPs, RCOA and others to correct the record had limited impact as misinformed Australians continued to forward the email to often equally misinformed friends.

6.1.4 Response to development of new detention centres

The announcement of plans to establish an immigration detention facility at Inverbrackie in the Adelaide Hills drew much local ire due to the lack of information and consultation with local people and local authorities and fears about the people who would be housed there. Two reportedly heated public community meetings were held after the announcement by Prime Minister Gillard, and the *Adelaide Advertiser* received 894 online comments to one article alone. A scan of these comments shows that the majority of people were expressing the view that the asylum seekers should not be located in Adelaide, that they were “illegal”, “queue jumpers” and even that the detainees would be a danger to local residents. The opposition from locals was not to the detention of the asylum seekers; rather, they were opposed to the opening of a detention facility in their area and resented that the asylum seekers were being given any assistance whatsoever.¹²

These sentiments were echoed by some residents of Leonora and Northam in Western Australia, the sites of other new detention facilities. Talkback radio, newspapers and internet sites were full of strident opinions for a number of weeks. Comments by those promoting humane treatment of asylum seekers were very often tersely countered. The development of these detention centres close to local towns brought more people into the debate, including people from some distance away interested in whipping up negative sentiment. However, as the debates subsided and plans to establish the detention facilities advanced, more positive voices emerged in the Adelaide Hills, in Leonora and also in Weipa in Far North Queensland as some local volunteers and organisations prepared to welcome the detainees.

6.1.5 The number of asylum seekers arriving by boat

There appears to be a genuine belief by many Australians and even commentators that the increased number of people seeking asylum in Australia by boat is directly linked to a “soft approach by the Government”. The general view is that the numbers are immense, there is a flood of people coming and it won’t end. Contrary messages such as “people generally do not wish to leave their homeland”, “people are fleeing violence and possible death”, “people have no queue in which to wait”, “countries en-route from Sri Lanka and Afghanistan do not offer protection to refugees” and “the numbers are relatively very small” are not having a large enough impact on the people who hold negative and unwavering views towards boat arrivals.

6.1.6 Christmas Island boat tragedy

Although still very recent, it is worthwhile, in terms of public discourse analysis, to look at the Christmas Island boat tragedy of 15 December 2010. The fact that there was very graphic imagery available must be considered when looking at the public response, as it enabled people to empathise and have more understanding of the event than may have otherwise been the case. RCOA was asked to provide commentary to media outlets all across the country, overseas and in all types of media on December 15 and in the days following. Outlets and programs which would not normally be interested in sympathetic coverage of asylum seeker issues contacted RCOA and other organisations to seek information about the impact of the tragedy and the factors which may compel people to risk their lives to seek asylum. There was much more interest than usual in looking to solutions, with considerable discussion about strategies to reduce boat arrivals while

¹² Kenny, M., Wills, D. & Todd, A. (2010). Prime Minister Julia Gillard announces new detention centre for Adelaide Hills. *AdelaideNow*, 22 October. <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/new-detention-centre-for-sa/comments-e6frea83-1225940182833>

maintaining a humane approach to refugees and asylum seekers. Much discussion focused on the people involved as individuals rather than the more common collective view of “boat people” as a border security threat. Many outlets contacted RCOA in search of community contacts so as to gain insight from people who had themselves arrived by boat.

6.2 CONCERNS OF REFUGEE AND HUMANITARIAN ENTRANTS

While most participants expressed concern over both the media’s and politicians’ portrayal of issues, representatives of refugee and humanitarian entrant communities had varying views of the direct impact of the public discourse on their daily lives. Some people settling in Sydney, for example, had not experienced any negative impacts, while a number of those settling in Perth and Brisbane reported experiencing hostile treatment. A number of former refugees highlighted that the negative and inflammatory rhetoric perpetuated by politicians and public figures had an enormous impact on people settling in Australia, as well as those refugees living around the world.

It was noted that while politicians often purport to be supportive of those refugees languishing in camps offshore, the negative discourse was actually hurting those people that came through the offshore program. A number of people raised their concerns that the negative stereotypes perpetuated in the media (e.g. refugees and asylum seekers as victims, as “queue jumpers”, as reliant on welfare) impacted on their daily lives, particularly when seeking employment. Former refugees were concerned that potential employers saw them as people without skills. They also noted that there seemed to be a view that refugees and asylum seekers are not economically productive, that they are a cost to Australia and make little contribution to the community.

Refugee community members also noted that the negative public discourse led to a missed opportunity: that the Australian community “does not get to see what refugees and asylum seekers *do*, how we contribute”. There was also wide agreement that the lack of understanding of *who* refugees are, *where* they come from and *why* they fled their homes were all reasons contributing to the negative discourse.

Communities members in Brisbane noted that issues regarding refugees are highly politicised but the issue should be viewed through a social policy lens. Many in Brisbane shared their observations that this politicisation had a harmful impact on their communities. African community members in Brisbane noted that graffiti was appearing on African-owned and operated shops, urging Africans to “go back to your country”. Community members observed that any political problems related to asylum seekers and refugees actually affect all refugee and humanitarian entrants:

Whether we come here as asylum seekers or as refugees, it affects us all. The cry of the African people is that there be bipartisan support on the refugee issue... The political leaders, who are supposed to protect us, [should make] their voices heard in the community. We will then know that we are helped and protected. Without this, the African community believes that there will be no end to the graffiti and the other toxic responses [to the current debate].

Throughout the consultations, people called for bipartisan support of the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. The lack of leadership from “the top” was seen as a catalyst for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and for a lack of understanding and harmony between the broader Australian community and refugee communities. Concerns were also raised that the framing of the debate has affected the way in which the Government approaches resettlement. Serious concerns were raised that the Government has allowed some presumptions of the debate to go largely unchallenged – for example, that people arriving on boats are “illegal” and that resettlement is the only “proper process” for the entry of refugees to Australia.

Some participants also raised the issue that politicians tend to focus on people smuggling as the central problem, while the participants felt that the primary focus should be on addressing the needs of people seeking protection. They felt that the emphasis on people smugglers was misleading and disconnected from the reality that so many people suffer without proper protection.

A startling assertion made by a community representative in Western Australia (but also echoed in other states) was that refugees coming through Australia's offshore resettlement program should be warned about the negative public attitudes towards refugees before they arrive in Australia. While refugees coming to Australia through the resettlement program learn a lot about the positives of life in Australia through the offshore cultural orientation process, the community members felt that the reality was quite shocking to new arrivals. A number of former refugees also spoke of the fear and anxiety that they experienced, with particular worries that the continued negative discourse would impact on the likelihood that their families would be accepted into Australia. Additionally, a number of people voiced considerable unease regarding being able to publicly speak about their experiences and concerns, fearful that they would be misrepresented in the media. These fears led many not to engage with the media, even when the opportunity presented itself.

Further concerns included:

- The need to delink the onshore and offshore humanitarian programs because of the role the linking policy plays in undermining national acceptance of a fair asylum system, by pitting the needs of refugees in protracted situations against those of asylum seekers and creating the perception that there is a "queue" which onshore asylum seekers are attempting to evade.
- There is little coverage of the survival experiences of refugees, their successes in Australia or what they have given up to get here. It is rarely mentioned, for example, that being a refugee is not a matter of choice.
- The limited acknowledgement of the physical impact or emotional upheaval of refugee flight. Some refugees relive their traumatic experiences as a result of the negative media coverage. Some of this coverage (such as reporting on the outrage of the local community coming to the Adelaide Hills area) was particularly unsettling and undermined refugees' sense of belonging in Australia.
- While the quality of settlement services in Australia is widely acknowledged nationally and by UNHCR, the current mood of the debate dilutes the positive impact of services, as individual refugees become more worried about their future in an unsupportive environment. A great deal of damage is done when refugees withdraw from community support systems, given that effective settlement takes place in communities.
- The debate impacts on recent arrivals and former refugees, with former refugees feeling that that they have been treated with greater suspicion in the past year. There is also anecdotal evidence of a growth in migrants' negative attitudes towards refugees.
- The negative messages may also undermine the motivation of young refugees to study or to engage socially with others.

6.3 OPINION POLLS AND RESEARCH

6.3.1 Opinion polling from 2010

In the six months leading up to the August 2010 Federal election, at least 15 opinion polls canvassed Australians' views on asylum seekers and refugees, according to research conducted by Monash University for the Scanlon Foundation's *Mapping Social Cohesion* project.¹³ A careful reading of these polls suggests a number of trends in public opinion:

1. **Support for 'tough' policies:** A majority of Australians support the idea of "tougher" policies regarding asylum seekers. An Essential Report poll in July found that 56% of those polled felt the Federal Labor Government was too soft on asylum seekers, 10% too tough, 21% taking the right approach and 13% did not know. In a Galaxy poll in July for the *Herald Sun* newspaper, 63% approved of "Julia Gillard getting tough on asylum seekers", 26% disapproved and 11% were uncommitted. An Age/Neilsen poll in June found 62% supported offshore processing of asylum seekers, 33% opposed and 5% did not know.

¹³ See Monash University (2010). *Inventory of Public Opinion Polls*. Retrieved 30/01/11, <http://www.globalmovements.monash.edu.au/socialcohesion/inventory.php>

2. **Support for ‘genuine refugees’:** Despite this, the protection of “genuine refugees” is supported by the majority of Australians. When asked in an Essential Report poll in June about whether asylum seekers should be “sent back to the country they came from even if they are genuine refugees”, 31% approved of the notion, 59% said they should be allowed to remain “if they are found to be genuine refugees”, 4% said all asylum seekers should be allowed to stay and 6% did not know.
3. **Mixed views about political parties’ policies:** Views are mixed about which political party is best equipped to handle asylum issues. While the Liberal-National Coalition’s policies are supported by a larger minority than the policies of the Australian Labor Party or the Australian Greens, support for Coalition policies remains at 35% or less. An Age/Neilsen poll in July found that 34% felt that the Coalition had the best policy for handling asylum seekers, 30% supported the Greens’ policy and 25% supported Labor policy. The Essential Report’s July poll found 29% “most trusted” the Liberal Party on asylum policy, 23% Labor, 11% Greens and 37% did not know. In June, an Age/Neilsen poll found that 35% believed the Coalition had the “best policy on asylum seekers”, 19% Labor, 18% Greens and 29% did not know.
4. **Asylum policy not a vote changer:** While asylum policy has a high profile in Australian public debate, it does not appear to be a vote changer. When asked in the July Essential Report poll about the “most important issues in deciding how you would vote in a Federal election”, only 4% nominated “treatment of asylum seekers” and 1% nominated “managing population growth”.¹⁴
5. **Distorted views of the scale of the issue:** The majority of Australians have either no idea or a grossly inflated view of the numbers of asylum seekers arriving by boat. Essential Research’s June poll asked 1045 respondents: “From what you have read and heard, what percentage of Australia’s annual immigration intake are asylum seekers arriving by boat?” Only 18% nominated the correct proportion of “1% or less”, while 38% believed the figure to be “about 25%” or “50% or more” and 30% did not know. The remaining 15% believed the figure to be “about 5%”. As noted in Sections 3.1 and 3.2, in the year to June 2010 only 2,156 (1.03%) of the 208,921 permanent additions through migration were asylum seekers who arrived by boat.

An election campaign survey commissioned by the US Studies Centre in Sydney found that Australians are more concerned about “illegal immigration”¹⁵ than those in the United States. The survey canvassed the attitudes of Australians and Americans towards “illegal immigrants”, immigration generally, and the strengths and weaknesses of the respective party policies.

Table 26: Responses to election campaign survey by the US Studies Centre, Sydney¹⁶

Statements regarding immigrants	Agree strongly/ agree	Disagree strongly/ disagree	Can’t say
Right now, Australia is taking in too many immigrants.	69.1%	24.8%	6.1%
Our laws make it too difficult for foreign nationals to acquire Australian citizenship.	19%	69.1%	11.8%
Immigrants have a favourable effect on the country.	57.6%	33.8%	8.6%
One of the reasons immigrants come is to take advantage of government benefits.	59.5%	31.3%	9.10%
Immigrants need to work their way up on their own, without favoured treatment.	92%	5%	3%
If immigrants would try harder, they could be just as well off as others.	65%	23%	13%
Discrimination against immigrants makes it difficult for them to succeed.	48%	42%	10%

¹⁴ This view was supported by Peter Browne of Swinburne University’s Institute for Social Research in a pre-election analysis published in July 2010. See Brown, P. (2010). “Boats and votes”. *Inside Story*, 6 July. <http://inside.org.au/boats-and-votes/>

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the survey used “illegal immigrant” and “asylum seeker” interchangeably without defining the terms to survey participants.

¹⁶ Australian polling occurred in the first week of the 2010 federal election campaign (July 14-22) while American polling was in February 2010.

According to the results, 76% of Australians believe that increasing numbers of asylum seekers and “illegal immigrants” are an important problem for the country, whereas in the USA, where the number of “illegal immigrants” in 2009 was estimated by the US Department of Homeland Security at nearly 11 million, 71% rate it as important. While 69% of Australian respondents agree that Australia “is taking too many immigrants”, only 62% of their American counterparts concur. Among those who consider asylum seekers as “one of the most important issues facing Australia”, 47% indicated they planned to vote for the Liberal-National Coalition and 37% for the Labor Party.¹⁷

In June 2010, Australian Red Cross released details of a poll of 1,000 people which it said showed that the majority of Australians are sympathetic towards the plight of refugees and asylum seekers. The survey showed that:

- 86% of people would flee to a safe country if they lived in a conflict zone and were under threat.
- 94% of these people would use all their money and assets to get to a safe country.
- 31% know of someone who has come to Australia escaping persecution or conflict in another country.
- 83% agree that people fleeing persecution should be able to seek protection in another country.
- 83% are willing to assist a refugee in their community settle in Australia.
- 67% agree that refugees have made a positive contribution to Australian society.¹⁸

Australian Red Cross CEO Robert Tickner said that this survey showed that “there appears to be a disconnect between the strong sympathy of the Australian public and the unsympathetic nature of much of the public debate around asylum seekers and refugees”.¹⁹

6.3.2 Other research and evaluation

Amnesty International Australia

In May 2010, Amnesty International Australia (AIA) commissioned social research to explore community attitudes to asylum seekers arriving in Australia by boat.²⁰ The research included public focus groups that evaluated the groups’ understanding and observations on the asylum seeker debate and tested how particular images and information shifted their observations.

The research demonstrated that unsympathetic views towards asylum seekers were not based on racism or a lack of compassion; rather, community attitudes were shaped by major parties’ continued reference to “border protection” and concern that those who arrived by boat and sought asylum were “breaking the rules”. This perspective reinforced the feeling people who arrived by boat should not expect a “fair go”, as their behaviour was seen as “un-Australian”.

After participants in the research were provided with the facts (e.g. that seeking asylum in Australia is not illegal), they had the opportunity to reflect and reconsider their perspectives. As a result, many changed their negative views. This shift led AIA to develop a new approach to its campaigning on refugee and asylum seeker issues: AIA combines personal stories and simple facts in order to better engage with Australians. AIA has committed to a long-term campaign to shift public attitudes and understanding of asylum seekers and refugees (see Section 6.4.2 for details on the campaign).

¹⁷ See Iyengar, S. & Jackman, S. (2010). *Australian and American Attitudes to Illegal Immigration*. Stanford University & University of Sydney. <http://ussc.edu.au/s/media/docs/publications/1008IllegalImmigrantsSurvey.pdf>

¹⁸ Australian Red Cross (2010). *Most Australians sympathetic towards refugees finds Red Cross survey*. Media release, 21 June. <http://1.redcross.org.au/?fuseaction=NEWSROOM.archive&sub=627>

¹⁹ Australian Red Cross 2010.

²⁰ Pagliaro, A. (2010). *Let’s Stop the Spin on the Boats*. Human Rights Defender, December.

Scanlon Foundation's 'Mapping Social Cohesion' report

The final report of the Scanlon Foundation's "Mapping Social Cohesion" project was released in 2010, following on from the 2007 and 2009 surveys. These three surveys assessed Australian attitudes on social cohesion and population issues. The 2010 study, based on responses from 2,000 Australians, shows there has been a loss of trust in Australia's elected MPs, reflecting a broader loss of trust in the community. Between 2009 and 2010, the proportion of respondents who believe "most people can be trusted" fell from 55% to 45%. The survey also found an "entrenched negative attitude to asylum seekers who arrive by boat".

When asked for views on the admission of asylum seekers selected overseas there was strong positive sentiment, with 67% supporting the admission of people who have been assessed and found to be in need of assistance. This is in sharp contrast with negative attitudes towards those who arrive by boat and claim asylum. Only 19% of respondents agreed that the so-called "boat people" should be eligible for permanent residence while 27% believed that boats should be prevented from landing. The largest proportion favoured temporary residence only or detention prior to deportation.

The survey found a sharp fall in the level of trust in the Federal Government, in inter-personal trust and an increase in reported experience of discrimination. In 2009, 48% of respondents indicated that they trusted the Federal Government "to do the right thing for the Australian people" "almost always" or "most of the time". In 2010 this proportion had decreased to 31%.

A final key finding relates to a significant long-term shift in Australian opinion. The survey registers broad support for a non-discriminatory immigration program that is perceived to be furthering the national interest.

Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) research

To coincide with the launch of the documentary series *Immigration Nation: The Secret History of Us*, SBS commissioned research into Australian attitudes towards immigration and the understanding of Australia's immigration history. The research, conducted by Ipsos, aimed to better inform the debate about immigration in Australia. The research offers a deeper understanding of the range and complexity of contemporary attitudes towards immigration and cultural diversity and the perspectives and experiences of Australians from diverse migrant backgrounds. Key findings of the research²¹ included:

- There is broad support for diversity, with 62% agreeing Australia should be a multicultural society and 61% agreeing immigrants have enriched the Australian way of life.
- There is a strong sense of "belonging", although to a lesser extent among culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) Australians and first-generation immigrants, with 95% of all Australians reporting a sense of belonging "to a moderate or great extent" and 89% of CALD Australians reporting a sense of belonging "to a moderate or great extent".
- Reported experiences of discrimination in the past 12 months happened to 13% of Australians, but among CALD respondents, it is almost one in four.
- Overall, there is a belief that racial prejudice had increased in the past five years, with no differences between the views of CALD and non-CALD Australians.
- There is broad lack of awareness about Australia's immigration history and responsibilities, with:
 - 8 out of 10 saying Australia has always been generous to immigrants;
 - more than half saying that Australia has taken more than its fair share of immigrants and refugees, relative to other nations;
 - 37% believing Australia has always been a world leader in racial equality; and
 - 34% believing we don't have a responsibility to accept refugees.

²¹ Ipsos-Eureka Social Research Institute (2010). *The Ipsos Mackay Report: SBS Immigration Nation*. Special Broadcasting Service.

- There were low levels of trust in the information received in the media on immigrants, refugees or asylum seekers. Interestingly, CALD Australians show higher level of trust in media reports than non-CALD.
 - 68% trust the media “only slightly” or “not at all”
 - 41% of CALD Australians trust media reports “to a moderate or great extent” compared to 28% of non-CALD Australians.

Australian Human Rights Commission: In Our Own Words

*In our own words – African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues*²² documents the results of three years of consultation with African Australian communities around the country and records African Australians’ experiences of human rights and social inclusion. The report presents issues, solutions and good practice initiatives identified by African Australians throughout a series of consultations coordinated by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC). It is very important to remember that African Australians have a variety of emigration experiences, with only some people coming to Australia through the Refugee and Humanitarian Program. It is worth noting, though, that a feature of many of the consultations was finding ways to counter the negative media stereotypes of African Australians. The community noted that this impacted on their ability to settle well, as they felt it was far more difficult to feel accepted in the broader community with such negative perceptions. The impact of past remarks by politicians about African Australians’ ability to settle in Australia was also highlighted as having a significant impact on people’s ability to feel welcome in their communities. Many consultation participants stressed the need for African Australians to become better informed about how the Australian media works and explore ways to engage with it constructively. A key focus – often echoed in the RCOA consultations – was to promote the many positive contributions that African Australians make to the social, economic and cultural life of the nation. These considerations mirror the words and considerations of refugee and humanitarian entrants at RCOA’s consultations. A number of the recommendations from this report have informed the strategies suggested in Section 6.5.

6.3.3 The 2010 Federal election

RCOA’s membership and participants at the consultations noted that refugee and asylum seeker issues were at the forefront of the political debate leading up to the August 2010 Federal election. The Coalition’s election sloganeering of “stop the boats” provided the public with the impression that this could actually be achieved but without much regard for how and why this would be achieved and what the consequences would be. There was also very little emphasis on the reasons why people flee and the fact that most boat arrivals have come from countries where people are routinely persecuted and where large scale violence and instability persist. Equally, the Gillard Government’s statement regarding a Regional Processing Centre in Timor-Leste did not boost confidence nor add anything positive to the discourse. The public has become more confused by and mistrusting of the proposal, particularly given the lack of support in Timor-Leste. In the view of consultation participants, the announcement of the vague plans for a regional processing centre muddied the discourse in relation to developing a regional protection framework. Many noted that they had little confidence that the announcement was ever to be followed through, experts questioned its viability and impact on the region, and many doubted that it would have any impact on the safety concerns of people making dangerous boat journeys or impeding the business of people smuggling.

Australian Election Study (2010)

The 2010 Federal election saw the Liberal-National Coalition, which campaigned heavily on its promise to “stop the boats”, achieve a national swing of 1.5%, while the Greens, who campaigned for a more compassionate response to asylum seekers, achieved a national swing of 4.0%, receiving the highest ever vote for a third political force in a national election. The Australian

²² Australian Human Rights Commission (2010). *In our own words – African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues*. <http://www.hreoc.gov.au/africanaus/review/index.html>

Election Study (AES) provides a comprehensive set of data regarding citizens' voting and political behaviour. The AES surveys contain questions relating to the media, general political interest and a variety of election and social policy issues.

Table 27: AES 2010 – importance of refugee and population issues

Question	Extremely Important	Quite Important	Not very Important
When you were deciding about how to vote, how important was the issue of refugees and asylum seekers to you personally?	38.3%	37.7%	24.0%
When you were deciding about how to vote, how important was the issue of population policy to you personally?	37.7%	44.2%	18.0%

While over three quarters of voters nominated the issue of refugees and asylum seekers as extremely or quite important, it only ranked sixth among the issues of most concern during the election campaign, garnering less than 6% support as the most important issue.

Table 28: AES 2010 – most important issues for voters

Issue of concern most important to you and your family during the election campaign? And which next?	Most important issue – percentage	Most important issue – ranking	Second most important issue – percentage	Second most important issue – ranking
Health and Medicare	28.5%	1	21.4%	1
Management of the economy	22.3%	2	13.7%	2
Education	10.0%	3	12.5%	3
Global warming	7.5%	4	4.3%	10
Interest rates	6.2%	5	6.6%	7
Refugees and asylum seekers	5.9%	6	9.9%	4
Taxation	5.5%	7	7.3%	6
The environment	3.8%	8	7.7%	5
Unemployment	3.1%	9	5.1%	8
Industrial relations	2.8%	10	2.7%	12
The resources tax	2.8%	10	4.3%	10
Population policy	1.5%	12	4.5%	9

A larger proportion of those surveyed by AES believed that the Coalition came closest to their views on refugees and asylum seekers. This figure of 41.2% was similar to the proportion of electors who gave the Coalition their primary vote (43.7%).

Table 29: AES 2010 – political allegiances and views on refugee and population issues

Question	Labor (ALP)	Liberal-National Coalition	No difference	Don't know
Still thinking about the issue of refugees and asylum seekers, whose policies would you say come closer to your own views on this issue?	21.1%	41.2%	25.6%	12.1%
Still thinking about the issue of population policy, whose policies would you say come closer to your own views on this issue?	21.9%	30.2%	29.7%	18.2%

6.4 CURRENT RESPONSES

Participants in this year's consultations made known a number of initiatives taking place both locally and nationally to combat the negative discourse.

6.4.1 DIAC

A number of consultation participants noted that certain regional offices of DIAC were making efforts to publicise positive stories of refugee resettlement, particularly through local newspapers. They noted that these stories were having an observable and positive impact on the local community.

Recommendation 22

RCOA recommends that DIAC, the Australian Government and politicians take on a more proactive role in engaging with the media on asylum and refugees issues, with the development of a Government communications strategy to support the Refugee and Humanitarian Program.

6.4.2 NGOs

A number of not-for-profit and charitable organisations have implemented campaigns or initiatives promoting not only the Refugee and Humanitarian Program in Australia but also an understanding of the global displacement of people and the dangers that millions face. A few recent programs are outlined below.

Amnesty International Australia

AIA has recently launched a campaign entitled *Let's Change the Conversation*. It was widely agreed among RCOA consultation participants that one-on-one conversations are essential to changing the current discourse and encouraging reflection and understanding. Many also acknowledged that change must be led by politicians and mainstream media but that individual people need to challenge misinformation when they hear it. The AIA campaign involves media and multi-media advertising, public information and training sessions aimed at arming people with facts, anecdotes and personal stories to better equip them in challenging common misconceptions. This type of training can and should be offered to individuals, organisations, the media, the corporate sector and, in some form, most definitely to DIAC staff and service providers with whom DIAC is affiliated. The training would assist those in the sector to better articulate their own personal involvement and their position on issues such as detention, boat arrivals and processing of asylum claims. The training does not presume that everyone will be convinced to support AIA's stance on refugee policy; rather, it assists people to be able to engage in challenging conversations.

The *Rethink Refugees* media campaign and related website²³ was informed by the EMC research into current attitudes to asylum seekers arriving in Australia (see section 6.3.2). The resulting ad (broadcast on a number of television channels, as well as displayed on billboards) encourages Australians to (re)consider what they know and think about asylum seekers and refugees. The tagline "When you think about the boats, think again" succinctly captures the need for Australians to reflect on what they currently understand. The website contains real life stories of fleeing danger and survival and also provides factsheets and other ways to gather information.

Recommendation 23

RCOA recommends that Australian Government examine Amnesty International Australia's Let's Change the Conversation campaign and consider implementing similar training and education opportunities.

²³ See www.rethinkrefugees.com.au

A New Multicultural Agenda

On 30 November 2010, the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) launched its campaign to reclaim multiculturalism with a submission to the Australian Government toward a new multicultural agenda.²⁴ In its submission *Different But Equal*, FECCA outlines a whole of government approach to reframe multicultural policy in Australia. The three pillars of the National Multicultural Agenda (belonging, participation and contribution) seek to achieve equality of cultures. FECCA's recommendations in each of these dimensions address strategies which can create equal dialogues between all parties (individuals, government, etc) in the public sphere. The National Multicultural Agenda rejects "dichotomies such as 'them and us', 'host and guest'", and seeks action from all Australians, with the Government leading this national vision.²⁵

Ms Maria Vamvakinou, the Federal Member for Calwell, announced plans for the formation of a parliamentary "Friends of Multiculturalism" group to initiate a bipartisan discussion about multiculturalism.²⁶ A number of consultation participants raised the issue of a lack of a government-driven multicultural agenda as a contributor to the negative discourse. Participants noted that there is no longer a Minister for Multicultural Affairs, or a fair representation of multicultural politicians. This sends a public message that multiculturalism has been put on the backburner and is not important. The establishment of bipartisan group to launch discussions is a vital step in shifting public perceptions.

Recommendation 24

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government and all parties represented in the Australian Parliament take up the framework and reforms set out in FECCA's National Multicultural Agenda "Different But Equal".

6.4.3 Other initiatives

Media-based initiatives

While the negative discourse is often blamed on the "media" (as though it is a singular entity), a number of initiatives and compelling work are coming from some media sources. The Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) has made a commitment to "inspire all Australians to explore and appreciate our multicultural world and contribute to an inclusive society". SBS is interested in extending this commitment to a broader set of public debates and, to achieve this, the network has not only commissioned research about Australia's perceptions of cultural diversity but also has produced a "suite of landmark, locally produced factual programs exploring elements of Australian multicultural society scheduled through 2011".²⁷

Channel Seven's *Sunrise* host David Koch has used his blog to counter myths about asylum seekers and to provide information on people who have come to Australia through the refugee program. His posts include a blog detailing the reality behind the fabricated emails which claim that asylum seekers receive more benefits than pensioners, as well as a profile of Anh Do and his book *The Happiest Refugee*.²⁸

As detailed in the Australian Human Rights Commission's *In our own words – African Australians: A review of human rights and social inclusion issues*, the organisation New Australia Media is a good practice example to assist young people from new and emerging communities to develop media and journalism skills. A recently established project matches professional journalists with young people: the journalists mentor the young people to prepare news articles, which are then

²⁴ See Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia (FECCA) (2010). *Different But Equal: FECCA'S National Multicultural Agenda*. <http://fecca.org.au/PDF/DifferentButEqualNov2010.pdf>

²⁵ FECCA 2010, *Different But Equal*.

²⁶ FECCA (2010). *Over 100 organisations support multiculturalism campaign*. Media release, 30 November. http://www.fecca.org.au/Media/2010/media_2010066.pdf.

²⁷ Ipsos-Eureka 2010.

²⁸ See www.kochie.com.au

published to a website hosted by the State Library of Victoria. This approach has the dual purpose of providing skills to the new community members while also providing learning opportunities for journalists.

Community-driven initiatives and groups

A number of community groups have formed (or in many cases, re-formed) in the past 12 to 18 months to respond to the increasingly negative discourse and regressive policies towards asylum seekers and refugees. Active community networks include: Rural Australians for Refugees, the Refugee Advocacy Network in Victoria, Darwin Asylum Seekers Support and Advocacy Network, Asylum Seekers Christmas Island, Justice for Asylum Seekers, ChilOut, Circle of Friends and some union-based groups. These groups have convened to provide public information and education; to promote the rights of asylum seekers and refugees in Australia; and to provide support to asylum seekers in detention. While each group has its own particular methods to achieve their individual goals, many are planning exhibitions and rallies, as well as coordinating letter-writing campaigns to Parliamentarians and letters of support to asylum seekers in detention.

Arts-based initiatives

There are a variety of innovative arts-based initiatives run by organisations and community groups across Australia which aim to promote positive images of refugees. Two examples given by consultation participants are the Horn of Africa Theatre Group's *His Story* and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre's *Journey to Asylum – Waiting*, which aim to tell the real stories of asylum seekers and refugees through theatre and artistic impression. These and other arts-based initiatives serve the dual purpose of providing an innovative way for former refugees to engage with the wider public while also empowering the participants by building their skills, capacity and connection to their communities (both "old" and "new").

Social Media opportunities

Many organisations consulted highlighted strategies specific to social media. Amnesty International has an active Facebook page with over 6,400 followers in Australia. Facebook has a blog page for refugees to post their stories, as does Blogspot.com, which has a page dedicated to photos of camps and other living situations posted by refugees. UNHCR has a strategy of providing mobile phones in refugee camps to allow refugees to tell their story first hand and report on life in camps.

6.5 STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE AUSTRALIA'S HUMANITARIAN PROGRAM

In considering the strategies to address ways to shift the negative public discourse on Australia's refugee policies, a number of options exist for campaigns, for education and information provision and for policy formation and development. Each has distinct roles for DIAC, for politicians and other public figures and for organisations like RCOA.

6.5.1 Sharing personal stories and acknowledging achievement

Many participants shared the view that the positive stories of resettled humanitarian entrants were not being told, not promoted or not even recorded. RCOA, Researchers for Asylum Seekers, AIA, the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, and the Victorian Multicultural Commission all have compiled many of these stories. At the time of writing, the AIA campaign in this area was fairly new; therefore, research, evaluation and conclusions drawn from this campaign approach are not yet available. RCOA suggests that a concerted effort be made to show the human stories, the struggles, the obstacles overcome, the joy at finding safety and the gratitude to the country and people who provided this security. It is vital at this point in the debate to show the points of commonality between humanitarian entrants and other Australians. Shared concern for family safety, desire to self-support, to learn and to be a part of a community all fit within what many Australians would agree are shared values.

The Australian Government has an important role to play in resourcing educational and community-based programs. This profiling of individuals requires experienced handling and cultural knowledge. There are obvious limitations to DIAC's involvement in an initiative of this type, given the role that it has played (and, unfortunately, continues to play) in the extended detention of many people ultimately recognised as refugees. A number of consultation participants recommended that the government re-establish funding for organisations like AHRC to provide education and information to the broader Australian public.

Government agencies and representatives also can play a significant role in acknowledging the positive contributions of former refugees to Australian society. The Victorian Multicultural Commission has led the way with the Victorian Refugee Recognition Record, announced annually each Refugee Week since 2004 "to celebrate and document the diverse contributions that people from a refugee background have made".²⁹ In NSW, the Friends of STARTTS and RCOA have worked together to celebrate the achievement of former refugees and to acknowledge community support of refugees through a Refugee Week awards ceremony held each year for the past three years. Among the 750,000 refugees who have settled in Australia since Federation, there are many stories of resilience and achievement. Federal and State government agencies could follow the lead of the Victorian Multicultural Commission in establishing similar awards to acknowledge the contributions of people of refugee background. Similarly, at a more local level, Federal and State Members of Parliament could publicly acknowledge outstanding contributions of people of refugee background during Refugee Week.

Recommendation 25

RCOA recommends that the Australian Government reinstitute funding for the Australian Human Rights Commission for the provision of information and educational materials related to asylum seekers, refugees and human rights.

Recommendation 26

RCOA recommends that the contributions of people of refugee background be acknowledged during Refugee Week through:

- *formal awards ceremonies conducted by Federal and State Government agencies; and*
- *local recognition by Federal and State MPs of people of refugee background within their electorates.*

6.5.2 A focus on welcoming communities

RCOA is developing ways to expand its "Refugee Welcome Zone" program, which we perceive could have a very positive impact on discourse at the local level. RCOA will soon be releasing information about activities undertaken by a number of local Councils in support of their declaration as Refugee Welcome Zones. With Federal Government or broader support, it would be possible to expand this concept to other non-governmental organisations, sporting clubs and businesses, to encourage organisations to consider the roles they can play in building welcoming communities for refugees.

6.5.3 New national curriculum and education-based opportunities

Another opportunity now available to the Australian Government is to examine the presentation of refugee and asylum seeker issues and the human cost of conflict and persecution in the new national curriculum. Currently, some refugee-related issues are already explored in school projects and assignments. Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS) runs an annual competition³⁰ among 30 schools. The JRS competition encourages students to research issues about refugees, interview a former refugee or asylum seeker (supported by JRS) and then present their findings via a multi-media project. This JRS competition is beneficial for the students, enabling them to learn more about the

²⁹ See Victorian Multicultural Commission (2010). *Awards and Recognition Programs*. <http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/projects-and-initiatives/promoting-harmony/awards-and-recognition-programs>

³⁰ Examples of past winners are available at <http://www.jrs.org.au/jrs-youth-award/overview/winners/188-winners-2010>

purpose and benefits of Australia's support of refugees while also reinforcing themes learned across a number of subject areas. If these issues were explored more directly through the national curriculum, more students could develop their understanding of the experiences of refugees.

The Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority – the independent authority responsible for the development of a national curriculum – has already published the framework upon which the new national curriculum will be built. The changes in educational pedagogy, in world events and affairs and in Australia's demographics have led to a shift in the priorities for education in the 21st century. These changes include the reality of global integration and increased international mobility. As a consequence, it is recognised that Australian students need to “nurture an appreciation of, and respect for, social, cultural and religious diversity, and a sense of global citizenship”.³¹ The educational goals set out for young Australians also include an appreciation of social, cultural, linguistic and religious diversity; the ability to relate to and communicate across cultures, especially the cultures and countries of Asia, to be responsible global and local citizens; and to commit to national values of democracy, equity and justice, and participate in Australia's civic life.

Consultation participants from the health, education and community development sectors noted that tertiary training and degrees should also include refugee-related courses, so that the next generation of doctors, nurses, physiotherapists, teachers and community workers will be equipped with at least a baseline understanding of who refugees are and the conditions from which they flee.

Recommendation 27

RCOA recommends that specific refugee-related components be included for consideration in the development of the national curriculum.

6.5.4 Engagement with the media

There is a pressing need for a coordinated strategy to counter the widespread inaccuracies and misinformation in reportage on refugee and asylum seeker issues within the Australian media. This should involve both responding to negative coverage and creating opportunities for positive engagement with the media. The development of targeted training programs for media personnel to enhance understanding of the refugee experience and of Australian refugee policy would not only improve the quality of reporting and assist in combating misinformation, but could also increase media interest in promoting positive images of refugees and asylum seekers. Strategies should also be developed to enhance the capacity of former refugees and organisations working in the sector to engage effectively with the media and the Australian public.

There is also a need for political leaders and Government officials to take on a greater leadership role in responding to inaccurate, misleading and sensationalist coverage of refugee and asylum seeker issues. While some positive efforts have been made, notably DIAC's responses to fabricated e-mails on welfare entitlements, they remain isolated examples and their impact to date has been limited. A more coordinated approach to monitoring and challenging inaccurate media coverage is clearly needed.

Recommendation 28

RCOA recommends that DIAC consider funding (through the Diversity and Social Cohesion Program or similar programs) the development of a NGO-coordinated national training and media strategy to improve the quality of reportage on refugee and asylum seeker issues and enable refugees and the organisations working with them to engage with the media and the Australian public.

³¹ Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (2008). *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*. http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/resources/National_Declaration_on_the_Educational_Goals_for_Young_Australians.pdf

6.5.5 Other opportunities

This year's 60th anniversary of the Refugee Convention provides an opportunity to celebrate the contributions of former refugees to Australia and for honest discussion of the challenges of refugee protection. This year's Refugee Week celebrations can have greater impact in the mainstream media and with the wider Australian public if leaders from all sectors unite under a common banner of open and honest discourse.

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