



Refugee Council
of Australia



THE STRENGTH WITHIN

**The role of refugee community
organisations in settlement**

2014

INTRODUCTION

The role played by refugee community organisations in the settlement experience of humanitarian entrants has been barely touched upon in Australian research. Research commissioned by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) in 2011 found that community groups make a significant contribution to settlement outcomes for refugee and humanitarian entrants, although this research does not detail the nature of the support provided.¹ For example, the *Settlement Outcomes of New Arrivals* report found that 21.4% of humanitarian entrant respondents had accessed support through a “cultural organisation or community group” in the past six months, compared with 4.3% of family migrants and 3.1% of skilled migrants.² Other research has highlighted the value of refugee community organisations because of their capacity to relate to and understand the unique lived experiences of refugee and humanitarian entrants, playing a particularly important role in the early stages of settlement as new arrivals navigate the complex challenges of finding their way in a new country.³

From the perspective of the Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA), it is unsurprising that community structures are quickly formed as new waves of refugees settle in Australia. Negotiating life in a new country in the context of forced migration presents enormous challenges; it is understandable that people seek what is familiar to build bridges and help them understand their new reality, drawing strength from their shared experiences, language and cultural understandings. The ability to establish community structures and supports also provides an important opportunity for refugee communities to regain self-determination. Recent research conducted with new and emerging refugee communities in Melbourne, for example, found that developing internal strength and sustainability rather than remaining dependent on governments and organisations was a much desired and stated goal for communities whose pre-migration experience had been in situations of forced dependence.⁴

It is also unsurprising that ethnic community structures evolve and remain relevant many decades after initial settlement, as we are bound together by our deeply-rooted social and cultural bonds (for example, children of Vietnamese refugees may still associate with Vietnamese ethnic organisations, although their reasons for connecting to these organisations may be very different from those of their parents).⁵ Research from the UK on refugee integration highlights the importance of social bonds with ethnic communities to refugees feeling settled and a sense of belonging.⁶ Moreover, many refugee and humanitarian entrants come from collectivist cultures which emphasise family and group goals.⁷ Forming collective structures makes perfect sense.

¹ Australian Survey Research Group (ASRG) (2011). *Settlement Outcomes of New Arrivals: Report of findings. Study for Department of Immigration and Citizenship*. Canberra: DIAC; Hugo G (2011) *Economic, social and civic contributions of first and second generation humanitarian entrants*, Canberra: DIAC

² ASRG 2011, p.21

³ For example: Bloch A (2002) *The Migration and Settlement of Refugees in Britain: Refugee Community Organisations and Volunteering*, pp. 161-177, Palgrave Macmillan; Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) (2008) *Rebuilding Social Support Networks in Small and Emerging Refugee Communities*, Epping: WCC; Waxman P (1998) “Service provision and the Needs of Newly Arrived Refugees in Sydney, Australia: A Descriptive Analysis,” *International Migration Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 761-777; Pittaway E and Muli C (2009) “We have a voice – hear us”: *The settlement experiences of refugees and migrants from the Horn of Africa*, Sydney: Horn of Africa Relief and Development Association and UNSW Centre for Refugee Research

⁴ WCC 2008, p.47

⁵ Giorgas D (2000) *Community formation and social capital in Australia*, Paper delivered to the 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, Sydney Convention and Exhibition Centre, Darling Harbour Sydney, 25 July 2000; See also Bloch 2002, p.168

⁶ Ager A and Strang A (2008) “Understanding Integration: A Conceptual Framework”, *Journal of Refugee Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 166-191

⁷ Abur W (2012) *A study of the South Sudanese refugees’ perspectives of settlement in the western suburbs of Melbourne*, Masters of International Community Development: A Minor Thesis, Victoria University (unpublished); Summerfield D (1999) “A critique of seven assumptions behind psychological trauma programmes in war-affected areas”, *Social Science & Medicine*, 48 (1999), pp.1449-1462; Valtonen K (2002) “Social Work with Immigrants and Refugees: Developing a Participation-based Framework for Anti-Oppressive Practice Part 2”, *British Journal of Social Work*, (2002), 32, pp. 113-120

Cover photo: Members of Eritrean Australian Humanitarian Aid (EAHA), a Melbourne-based volunteer organisation, rebuild sections of a school for refugee children in Kassala, Sudan. Many refugee community organisations are active not only in supporting settlement in Australia but also in raising funds for international development and relief projects. Photo: EAHA

In recognition of the important but often unrecognised role played by refugee community organisations in settlement, the following discussion paper provides an overview of some of the roles and challenges faced by these organisations in supporting the settlement of newer members of refugee communities. It highlights that a strengths-based approach to assisting refugees to resettle must not only focus on individual and family resilience and strengths but also the strengths and resilience within refugee communities.

Information presented in this discussion paper is sourced from existing Australian and international literature⁸ as well as from the views of refugee and humanitarian entrants that have been consistently raised in RCOA's annual community consultations over many years.⁹ Feedback on the content of this paper was also sought from key refugee community leaders and settlement service providers. Case studies have been included to provide illustrations of the breadth of settlement and other support provided by refugee community organisations. These case studies were selected to represent a range of communities, organisational structures, goals and activities.

DEFINING REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

Refugee community organisations are defined in many different ways in academic and other literature in the context of settlement – from referring to them through the use of the generic term “communities”, “refugee communities” or “ethnic communities”, to more explicit references to organisational structures, such as “immigrant organisations”, “ethno-specific organisations” or “ethnic community-based organisations”. For the purposes of this paper, RCOA defines a refugee community organisation as *any group, association or structure that is created by refugee and humanitarian entrants for the benefit of their own self-defined cultural community*. In this way, they are different from settlement services that are formed to provide social services for refugee communities, although the two may not be mutually exclusive.

It is worth noting that how a cultural community defines itself is a dynamic, contested and fluid process, as evidenced by the way in which many organisations have an open and flexible approach to community membership.¹⁰ For example, communities may define themselves along or across language, ethnic, religious, gender, age or geographical lines. This contested process of defining who a community organisation represents can lead to groups splintering into smaller communities (e.g. a language group from a particular country of origin and religious affiliation residing in a specific geographical area) or, conversely, expanding to incorporate multiple cultural communities (e.g. a pan-African or Middle Eastern community organisation).

There are hundreds if not thousands of refugee community organisations in Australia that are established by refugee and humanitarian entrants to provide important social, cultural and practical support to their own communities. These community organisations are established for a range of reasons, are structured in different ways and represent a vast array of interests and objectives – from formal ethno-specific community organisations providing funded settlement support, to legally incorporated interest groups advocating for their communities' needs in Australia and overseas, to more informal social and cultural groups that come together for mutual support.

THE ROLE REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS PLAY IN SETTLEMENT

The Australian Government's national settlement framework defines someone who is “settled” in terms of their social participation, economic wellbeing, independence, personal wellbeing, life satisfaction and community connectedness, ultimately under the banner of Australian citizenship.¹¹ As noted above, refugee community organisations are extremely diverse structures and play varying roles depending on their organisational capacity and how and why they are formed. Most do, however, make a significant contribution to supporting good settlement outcomes as defined by the

⁸ An annotated bibliography of the literature cited in this paper is available on the RCOA website here: www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/rpt.php

⁹ See RCOA's annual community consultations and intake submission: www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/isub.php

¹⁰ WCC 2008, p.43

¹¹ Commonwealth of Australia (2012) *The Settlement Journey: Strengthening Australia through migration*, Canberra: Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC), p.6

national settlement framework. Although by no means an exhaustive list, some of the roles that are played by refugee community organisations include fostering social participation, economic wellbeing, independence, personal wellbeing, life satisfaction and community connectedness.

Social participation

- **Providing a bridge to mainstream services** – An often cited role played by refugee community organisations (and particularly leaders) is as bridge-builders to mainstream services.¹² More established community members and leaders are often well placed to provide information to newer arrivals about the services and supports that exist, encouraging participation.¹³ This bridge-building goes beyond simply information provision. Information provided by fellow community members or leaders is often given greater weight by new arrivals who may be wary of government-affiliated services, influencing whether someone chooses or not to access a particular service. Many service providers in RCOA community consultations, for example, have acknowledged the role played by community leaders in promoting (or otherwise) access to their services.
- **Advocacy and empowerment** – One of the primary reasons why refugees form their own community structures is to advocate for members of their own community who are marginalised and have limited access to decision-making structures, whether this is in Australia or overseas.¹⁴ The important advocacy role played by refugee community groups can empower those who participate and provide a stronger voice for those who may be otherwise voiceless. These groups also strengthen the capacity of mainstream service and community structures to engage with marginalised groups.¹⁵
- **Democratic strengthening and civic participation** – Although grassroots community structures are not without their challenges, one of the functions they provide is as a platform for democratic strengthening and civic participation.¹⁶ That is, community leaders within organisations are often elected and elections are held on a regular basis. This enables leadership to change, communities to remain dynamic and ensure greater opportunity for shared decision-making within communities.¹⁷ Refugee community organisations can also provide community members with a springboard into other civic participation opportunities by helping them to build leadership and other skills required for running a successful organisation.
- **International refugee protection, aid and development** – An often unrecognised but significant role played by refugee community organisations goes beyond support to community members in Australia, but contributes significantly to international refugee protection through development aid for projects in countries of asylum and origin.¹⁸ Many organisations, for example, are set up to advocate and raise awareness and resources for the benefit of vulnerable refugee communities overseas.¹⁹ There are countless examples of refugee community organisations in Australia that have raised funds and channelled considerable resources into education, human rights, health and other initiatives benefitting refugees and asylum seekers in the places where they have strong links. As such, they represent a form of social participation and a dividend to international refugee protection and development that can be invisible to governments and NGOs working in this field.

¹² Westoby P (2008) "Developing a community-development approach through engaging resettling Southern Sudanese refugees within Australia", *Community Development Journal*, Vol. 43, No. 4, October 2008, pp. 483–495; Valtonen 2002

¹³ Kenny S, Mansouri F, Smiley D and Spratt P (2005) *Arabic Communities and Well-Being: Supports and Barriers to Social Connectedness*, Geelong: Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights, Deakin University

¹⁴ Pittaway and Muli 2009; Ager and Strang 2008; Valtonen 2002

¹⁵ Kelly L (2007) "Contingent Communities: British Social Policy and the Invention of Refugee Communities", Clay CJ, Madden M and Potts L (eds), *Towards Understanding Community: People and Places*, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 60-69

¹⁶ Bloemraad I (2005) "The Limits of de Tocqueville: How Government Facilitates Organisational Capacity in Newcomer Communities", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 31, No.5, pp. 865-87

¹⁷ WCC 2008

¹⁸ See also Villacrés DN (2013) "Beyond Remittances: Reframing Diaspora-Driven Development in El Salvador", *Migration Information Source*, March 2013, www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=936 (accessed 19 April 2013)

¹⁹ Turcotte D and Silka L (2007) "Social Capital in Refugee and Immigrant Communities", Jennings J (ed), *Race, Neighborhoods and the Misuse of Social Capital*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 109-132



QRC member Sujauddin Karimuddin speaks at a public forum in Brisbane. Photo: QRC.

Case study: Queensland Rohingya Community

The Queensland Rohingya Community (QRC) was formed in 2010 and registered in 2011 by a small group of young newly arrived Rohingya men. There are currently around 76 members. Originally all were located in Queensland but members are now scattered throughout Australia. Members include families, young people attending high school and an increasing number of single male asylum seekers on bridging visas. QRC comprises nine executive committee members who are elected annually. Activities, including financial support for Rohingya in transit countries, are self-funded with executive committee members contributing most of the funds. However members attending specific activities such as cultural performances are invited to make a contribution. QRC has applied for and received some small grants for community celebrations and cultural performances. All activities are implemented by volunteers.

Some of the activities undertaken by QRC to date include:

- Settlement support for Rohingya asylum seekers on bridging visas and newly arrived refugees including providing translation and familiarisation with local banking, accommodation, health, support agencies and systems.
- Sporting activities and social groups for young people in Australia – cricket, barbecues etc.
- Social events to celebrate religious festivals.
- Meetings to brief community members on local cultural practices.
- Advocacy activities – information forums for the local (Australian) community.
- Lobby meetings with political parties to brief them on circumstances of Rohingya in Burma and in transit countries. The commitment of many members to serve their community is a continuation of their leadership roles in transit countries which they often undertook at great risk to themselves. This advocacy has helped secure recognition by the international community of the plight of stateless Rohingyas.
- Financial support for newly arrived Rohingyas in Malaysia and support for displaced Rohingyas in Burma.
- The Community is planning to offer support for around 20 students in Bangladesh who have completed matriculation requirements to further their education at local Bangladeshi universities.

Economic wellbeing

- **Pooling financial resources** – Refugee communities often come together and pool resources to support each other, playing a vital role for community members who face financial hardship.²⁰ Examples include: collecting money to pay for airfares for family reunification, pooling money to pay for unexpected expenses such as funerals, weddings and medical care, and collectively purchasing property or businesses.²¹ These informal financial supports can provide essential access to economic resources for individuals and families on low incomes that may have limited access to bank or other types of formal loans.²²
- **Supporting employment transitions** – Research has highlighted the significant barriers to employment faced by refugee and humanitarian entrants.²³ Refugee community organisations can provide important employment links and support, helping newer members of communities to find work or to gain Australian work experience and entry into the labour market through established ethnic-run businesses.²⁴ More established community members who are working can act as conduits between employers and other community members looking for work.²⁵ As one commentator has argued: “density in social networks increases social capital, which in turn enables members of a community to utilise alternative social and economic resources not available elsewhere in society... Ethnicity itself becomes a distinct and powerful form of social capital developed through cultural endowments (obligations and expectations), information channels and social norms”.²⁶

Case study: Equatoria Community Welfare Association New South Wales Inc.

The Equatoria Community Welfare Association (ECWA) is a non-profit, non-religious umbrella organisation representing Equatorian and other Sudanese people living in NSW. ECWA was established in 2003 with current membership of around 2,000 people. Membership is open to Equatorian Australians and others who show a commitment to the Association’s objectives. There are three categories of membership: full membership (18+), junior membership and associate members (open to all). The vision of the Association is “*A peaceful, culturally strong Equatorian and wider Sudanese community contributing to a diverse Australian society*”. The Association has a volunteer committee of management elected by the general assembly of all voting members at the Annual General Meeting. Committee members hold their positions for a two year period. Activities are run by volunteers from the range of ethnic communities it represents. Funds are raised through fees and donations.

Activities organised by ECWA include:

- Celebrating significant festivals and events e.g. South Sudan Independence Day.
- Child care and activities for children 5-11 years old.
- Social, cultural events - providing facilities for young people to practice and perform music and cultural dance classes.
- South Sudanese Soccer Tournament.
- Youth camp and barbecue.
- Support for new arrivals.
- Linking clients to local settlement services.
- Attending migrant services interagency meetings and community conferences.
- Providing two TAFE student placements at ECWA office.
- Partnerships and advocacy with other local organisations (e.g. STARTTS, TAFE, Fairfield MRC, local council).
- Homework help.
- Activities for women to address issues of social isolation (e.g. craft program, excursions).
- Assistance to member organisations to apply for support, liaise or correspond with state or other public bodies.
- Translation of documents.

²⁰ WCC 2008; Bloch 2002

²¹ Dorais 1991

²² Turcotte and Silka 2007

²³ Olliff L (2010) *What Works: Employment strategies for refugee and humanitarian entrants*, Sydney: RCOA

²⁴ Turcotte and Silka 2007

²⁵ Finnan CR (1982) “Community Influences on the Occupational Adaptation of Vietnamese Refugees”, *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 55, No. 3 (Jul., 1982), pp. 161-169

²⁶ Cited in Giorgas 2000:10

- **Multiculturalism, culture and language development** – One of the important roles that refugee community organisations play is in maintaining, strengthening or developing cultural traditions and languages,²⁷ contributing to the wealth of Australian multiculturalism.²⁸ New communities bring with them language capabilities, food, music and traditions that all contribute to the fabric of Australian diversity which has been widely-acknowledged as one of Australia's strengths. The language and cultural knowledge that new communities bring also contributes to the potential of Australia to make links internationally.²⁹
- **Volunteering** – The significant social and economic capital represented by refugee community organisations is often not recognised by community members themselves, whose commitment to the plight of fellow community members is seen as a duty and the welfare of the community as their responsibility. As one community worker describes: "Often the work of these communities isn't seen or promoted as volunteering by these organisations. There could be several reasons for this including language and cultural factors. This mismatch in use of language or the term volunteer can mean less recognition for the refugee community organisation's work. It should also be noted that acknowledgment or recognition in many cases is not the motivating factor for individuals getting involved in refugee community organisations."³⁰

Independence

- **Settlement support** – Whether funded or unfunded, refugee community organisations and their members provide a range of settlement supports to new arrivals. Common examples include providing transport, meeting and greeting new arrivals at the airport, providing short- and long-term accommodation, interpreting and translating, orientation, providing employment links, education advice and supplying material goods.³¹ This support, when provided by communities for their own members, can draw directly on culturally-specific knowledge, norms and language, reducing the need for language and bicultural facilitators (e.g. interpreters).³² Refugee community organisations can also emerge to fill gaps in mainstream service provision, particularly where there is a mismatch between community needs and funding priorities and timing.³³
- **Orientation and community education** – It is common for former refugees to informally and formally provide information and advice to newer arrivals about living in Australia and how to navigate systems.³⁴ In research conducted with refugee community groups in Melbourne, participants spoke about the importance of community networks in providing opportunities to discuss issues that living in a new culture presented: "Analysis of issues using different experiences and perspectives facilitated the exchange of ideas and solutions, providing comfort and increased confidence to overcome problems."³⁵ While formal orientation programs are mostly focused on earlier stages of settlement, refugee community groups often continue this role for many years, reflecting the long-term reality of settlement. For example, by establishing ethnic radio or media programs in community languages, groups continue to provide information, advice and interpretation of the nuances of life in Australia.

²⁷ Ager and Strang 2008; Valtonen 2002

²⁸ Fozdar F and Hartley L (2012) *Refugees in Western Australia: Settlement and Integration*, Perth: Metropolitan Migrant Resource Centre

²⁹ Turcotte and Silka 2007; Villacrés 2013

³⁰ Adama Kamara, Community Projects Officer, Auburn City Council, personal communication

³¹ Fozdar and Hartley 2012

³² See also: Radermacher H, Feldman S and Browning C (2008) *Review of Literature Concerning the Delivery of Community Aged Care Services to Ethnic Groups: Mainstream versus ethno-specific services: It's not an 'either or'*, Monash University and Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria

³³ Waxman 1998; Bloch 2002, p.161; Simich L, Beiser M, Stewart M and Mwakarimba E (2005) "Providing Social Support for Immigrants and Refugees in Canada: Challenges and Directions", *Journal of Immigrant Health*, Vol. 7, No. 4, October 2005, pp. 259-268

³⁴ Waxman 1998

³⁵ WCC 2008, p.25



Volunteer Bitu Jayzan receiving an award for her services to the community from Rishema Salah Chohili, religious leader of the Mandaean Community in Australia. Photo: SM.A

Case study: Sabean Mandaean Association

Mandaeans are an ethnic minority primarily from Iraq practising a monotheistic belief system which recognises John the Baptist. Mandaeans started arriving in New South Wales in 1980 and the Sabean Mandaean Association (SMA) was established in 1982 to assist the settlement of Mandaeans mostly from Iraq and Iran. There are currently around 8,000 Mandaeans in Australia, mostly located in Sydney.

A Synod, Management Committee and eight subcommittees manage the SMA and its activities. The committees (Social and Sport; Entertainment; Community Centre; Youth; Media; Finance; Education and Grants) include people with expertise in financial management, casework, children, youth, event management, settlement of women, cultural issues and sport. The governance structure of the Association includes annual elections of committees and regular renewal in leadership. SBA has ongoing relationships with settlement service providers and local community organisations (e.g. STARTTS, NSW Health, NSW Police). The Association has more than 100 volunteers and its physical assets include premises in Liverpool with a large modern church, community hall, modern kitchen and offices. The Association has also acquired land to enable it to practice cultural and religious beliefs. Infrastructure activities and all services are conducted by volunteers and funded by the community itself. The Association has no paid staff and applications for SGP funding have been unsuccessful to date.

The activities of the SMA include:

- Support for new arrivals (e.g. reception on arrival, filling in applications for financial support).
- Information sessions coordinated by SMA with local service providers (e.g. NSW Police, Legal Aid, NSW Health and STARTTS).
- Family casework support for new arrivals.
- Monthly newsletter.
- Religious services.
- An immigration committee that has ongoing communication with Mandaeans in Syria and elsewhere and provides advice to the SMA Board on events affecting Mandaeans in the Middle East. A pro bono lawyer helps Mandaeans at risk overseas with applications for asylum.
- Community sponsorship (under migration program) by Association members of a small number of Mandaeans at high risk.
- Youth activities – youth group, soccer club, children’s band, Mandaean choir.
- Children’s playgroup.
- Camps for Mandaean families.
- Aramaic language classes (SMA receives some limited funding from NSW Government).

Personal wellbeing

- **Promoting health and wellbeing** – Greater levels of community participation, social support and trust in others in the community have been associated with enhanced wellbeing³⁶ and reduced experience of psychological distress, which is particularly important in the context of settlement support for survivors of torture and trauma.³⁷ As Mitchell and Correa-Velez argue: “Recovery from the impact of torture and trauma is most effective where all aspects of the model inter-relate, bringing together therapeutic work, community development and systemic advocacy... In harnessing community development as one strategy within an integrated approach to recovery, the link between participation in a strong community and subjective wellbeing is of fundamental importance.”³⁸ Canadian research has found that a like-ethnic community of significant size confers mental health advantage.³⁹ A common way in which refugee organisations promote health, wellbeing and community cohesion is through sport and recreation, such as running sports tournaments or supporting young people from the community to participate in sporting teams.
- **Conflict mediation** – Reflecting cultural practices, some refugee community organisations can play important roles in terms of conflict resolution between individuals, families and within communities; a common phenomenon in the context of forced migration.⁴⁰ Particularly when built along traditional family or tribal lines, community organisations are often called upon to get involved in resolution of conflicts within families, between families or between community factions. These conflicts can go unnoticed by those outside of the community unless they attract attention of Police or other authorities. Where access to these structures is absent or limited (e.g. rural and regional areas), conflicts can escalate. Some defer to community leaders for support with family mediation and in times of personal crisis, preferring these supports to more formal supports provided by social services in Australia.⁴¹ As one Sudanese participant in a Melbourne study of refugee community organisations describes: “We help each other if there’s an occasion, a festival, if there’s good or bad news, for example, when there’s a funeral, we sit together and solve problems.”⁴²

Life satisfaction and community connectedness

- **Building social connections** – Refugee community groups and organisations can play an important role in addressing the isolation and disconnection experienced by many refugee and humanitarian entrants, particularly where English is a barrier to new arrivals forming wider social connections.⁴³ This can be especially important where people feel like outsiders and in the context of experiences of racism and discrimination in the broader community.⁴⁴ As research highlighted by VicHealth has found: “Belonging to a social network of communication and mutual obligation makes people feel cared for, loved, esteemed and valued. This has a powerful protective effect on health.”⁴⁵ In social capital terms, commentators talk about the important role played by ethnic communities as potential facilitators of bridging and bonding social capital and in rebuilding social connections that have been shattered by war.⁴⁶
- **Supporting, reuniting and recreating families** – Family separation is a common experience for refugee and humanitarian entrants in Australia. Refugee community organisations can play a number of important roles in supporting, reuniting or recreating family structures that are so

³⁶ Kenny et al 2005

³⁷ Mitchell J and Correa-Velez I (2010) “Community development with survivors of torture and trauma: an evaluation framework”, *Community Development Journal*, Vol 45 No 1, January 2010, p91; Berry & Rickwood 2000, cited in WCC 2008:12; Simich et al 2005

³⁸ Mitchell and Correa-Velez 2010, p.94; See also Ingamells A and Westoby P (2008) “Working with young people from refugee backgrounds in Australia”, *European Journal of Social Work*, 11:2, p.165.

³⁹ Beiser M (2005) “The Health of Immigrants and Refugees in Canada”, *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, March-April 2005, pp. 30-44

⁴⁰ Settlement Council of Australia (2013) *Discussion Paper on Domestic Violence*, Sydney: SCOA

⁴¹ Westoby 2008

⁴² WCC 2008, p.27

⁴³ Bloch 2002; Fozdar and Hartley 2012

⁴⁴ Pittaway and Muli 2009; Kenny et al 2005

⁴⁵ VicHealth (2005) *Social Inclusion as a determinant of mental health and wellbeing*, Carlton: VicHealth, p.3

⁴⁶ Summerfield 1999; Ager and Strang 2008

pivotal to social connectedness and being able to settle well in Australia.⁴⁷ Where individuals are without family supports, community networks can fill important gaps in terms of both material and emotional support.⁴⁸ As a Sudanese community member describes in one study: *“At first being in Australia was bad because we had lost many relatives. After some time, the community develops; even if they are not relatives, they are considered as family.”*⁴⁹ For new and emerging communities, refugee community organisations can and do play an important and active role in sponsoring family members to reunite, for example, through the Special Humanitarian Program⁵⁰ or by providing migration advice (e.g. help filling in visa application forms) and financial resources to facilitate family reunion.

- **Keeping people informed and connected** – Some organisations provide up-to-date information to refugee community members on political conditions and incidents in country of origin. For refugee and humanitarian entrants with family remaining in dangerous situations overseas, access to reliable sources of information is often limited. Community organisations in Australia can have access to sources of information about recent events on the ground and shifts in policy which affect refugees and asylum seekers. Communities share this information and analysis of it through regular updates (newsletters, briefs). This is particularly relevant and valuable where there is ongoing conflict in the country of origin or asylum and access of family members to protection in these countries is either non-existent or inadequate. This is known to affect the wellbeing of community members and can, and often is, a serious impediment to settlement (for example, worrying about the safety of relatives affects the capacity of community members to go about their work or study).

Case study: Middle East Communities Council of South Australia

The Middle East Communities' Council of South Australia (MECCSA) was formed in 1999 as an umbrella body representing eight communities in South Australia – the Iraqi, Iranian, Afghan, Uzbek, Qatari, Kurdish, Turkman and Syrian communities. All are financial members of MECCSA. MECCSA elects its office bearers from a Committee comprising leaders elected by the respective communities it represents. MECCSA has been receiving SGP funding since 2007. This funding supports a coordinator responsible for day-to-day management of MECCSA activities and an office located within the Migrant Resource Centre of South Australia (MRCSA). MECCSA has received some one-off small grants from a range of state government bodies for its cultural and youth activities. The majority of MECCSA's activities, however, are not externally funded and are run by its 100 or so volunteers.

Some of the key activities undertaken by MECCSA include:

- Advocacy and negotiation with agencies and government on behalf of member organisations. This includes preparation of funding applications. Communities have distinctive cultures so the emphasis is on activities which bring communities together such as joint celebration of religious festivals and New Year with the broader community.
- Sports and other activities focusing on young people, many of whom are left behind by the education system. MECCSA supports 10 volleyball and 9 soccer teams and basketball teams.
- MECCSA and member organisations have played a key role in helping community members find employment. The majority of jobs held by members in meat processing, fruit picking and construction work are organised through the MECCSA community network rather than through the Job Services Australia network.
- Providing mentoring, support and advice to improve leadership skills of member organisations.
- The Council implements a very effective volunteering program. Volunteers are recruited, trained and utilise their skills within MECCSA settlement, cultural and social services.
- MECCSA conducts regular consultations with Middle Eastern communities to identify issues, evaluate services and recruit new volunteers.
- Casework services provided to eligible clients from the Middle Eastern background within their first five years of arrival to Australia.

⁴⁷ RCOA (2011) *Humanitarian family reunion: the building block of good settlement*, Sydney: RCOA

⁴⁸ Dorais 1991; Bloch 2002

⁴⁹ WCC 2008, p.30

⁵⁰ <http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/pdf/shp-client-info-sheet.pdf>



AHV's driver education program for Afghan women Photo: AHV.

Case study: Association of Hazaras in Victoria

The Association of Hazaras in Victoria (AHV) was established in 2002 when the community began growing rapidly in the south-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Many Hazaras were on temporary protection visas (TPVs) at this time and had minimal support available, and the organisation was set up to provide a voice for this community and fill gaps in services. Today, AHV's main goals are: to assist Afghan refugees and migrants with their resettlement in Australia; bring the Afghan community together and promote their active participation in Australia's multicultural society; and support human rights, democratic freedoms and the rights of ethnic minorities in Afghanistan.

AHV now represents nearly 3,500 Afghans, predominantly living in the south-east region of Melbourne, in the cities of Casey and Greater Dandenong. The organisation is run by a voluntary committee of management of 11 people who are elected bi-annually (i.e. there are no paid staff). AHV has received a number of small project grants from various sources (mainly local and state government) and raises funds through sales and advertising revenue from a monthly magazine that is sold to the Afghan community Australia-wide. The operating budget of AHV in 2012 was just under \$80,000.

The main activities of the organisation undertaken from this budget and run by volunteers from within the community include:

- Publication of the Arman Monthly magazine with a readership of several thousand. This magazine is published in Dari, Pashtu and English and provides local, national and international information relevant to the Afghan-Australian community.
- Andisha community language school held on Saturdays and teaching Dari and Pashtu languages to primary school aged children in Melbourne.
- Driving education program assisting Afghan women (25-30 participants per program) with both driving theory and practice to enable them to attain their drivers licence.
- English classes for bridging visa holders who are ineligible for other government-funded English programs, with classes run by volunteers two days per week.
- Cultural events and festivals, including annual Eid and Afghan New Year celebrations.
- Sport and recreation programs for young people, including supporting girls' and boys' volleyball and soccer teams and a chess club.
- Casework, referral and translation, including assisting community members with family reunion visa applications and the translation of documents.
- Advocacy with local, state and federal government about the needs of the Afghan community, including setting up a working group for bridging visa holders.

KEY CHALLENGES FACING REFUGEE COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

While there is a growing recognition of the importance of refugee community organisations in providing settlement support to new arrivals, these groups and organisations also face many challenges. Often, the work of volunteer-run community organisations is invisible to mainstream services and government departments, particularly as most receive little or no government funding. Research has also shown the complex processes at play in the constituting and sustainability of community organisations, highlighting the fact that refugee community organisations may not always be effective or representative.⁵¹ Some of the challenges and complexities facing refugee community organisations include:

- **Developing robust organisational structures** – Establishing and developing a viable community organisation is not an easy process for anyone, and can be especially difficult where the people seeking to establish an organisation are themselves recently arrived and negotiating their own settlement challenges. Finding the time for people to come together to plan and develop a shared vision and robust organisational structure in the settlement context can be enormously challenging.
- **Rebuilding relationships and trust within communities** – A common experience for those who have experienced forced displacement, torture or state-sanctioned violence can be the destruction of relationships between individuals and within families, groups and networks. Targeted disruption of social structures and networks is often the central focus of contemporary political and military conflict.⁵² As a result: “refugee communities may be fragmented, with a significant amount of internal conflict and few, if any, formal structures. The impact of war, persecution and torture may result in distrust and conflict between community members and beyond the community.”⁵³ Rebuilding relationships and trust may require much greater focus and time.
- **Overcoming internal community divisions and conflict** – As with any community development practice, creating structures where people work effectively together requires a shared purpose and commitment. This can be complex in the context of forced migration where politics and ongoing conflict in homelands can be played out in Australia. For example, violence perpetrated in countries of origin or asylum can create divisions within communities in Australia between individuals, families or groups that are affiliated with different factions.⁵⁴
- **Securing resources** – Accessing the resources required to run an effective community organisation can be a significant challenge, particularly in the context of refugee communities whose membership is constituted by families on very low incomes. However, access to resources goes beyond simply financial issues but also access to infrastructure (such as office or meeting spaces)⁵⁵ and personnel. (Some organisations rely on a single funded worker, for example, through Federal settlement services funding and the viability of the entire organisation can be jeopardised if this funding is lost).
- **Building relationships with service providers and other communities** – The relationship between refugee community organisations and other funded settlement services can sometimes be fraught, particularly in the context of auspice arrangements between emerging refugee community organisations and funded mainstream agencies. Tensions can be created within communities and between community leaders and auspice organisations that are deemed to be representing needs in order to receive funding, and where there is a mismatch between what the community perceives as their needs and funding arrangements.⁵⁶ Some refugee communities, particularly emerging communities, may also have limited contact with other more established communities or access to information and support that these communities can and are willing to offer. As such, organisations in newer communities can often find themselves “re-inventing the wheel” as they establish themselves, navigate systems, seek access to resources and implement activities.

⁵¹ Pittaway and Muli 2009; Kelly 2007

⁵² Ager A, Strang A and Abebe B (2005) “Conceptualizing community development in war-affected populations: illustrations from Tigray”, *Community Development Journal*, Vol 40 No 2, April 2005, pp.158-168

⁵³ Mitchell and Correa-Velez 2010, p 91; Westoby 2008

⁵⁴ Turcotte and Silka 2007; Ager et al 2005

⁵⁵ WCC 2008

⁵⁶ Mitchell and Correa-Velez 2010, p 97; Ager et al 2005; Westoby 2008; Abur 2012

- **Juggling expectations** – Ensuring that the community members who run these organisations (many of whom are also community leaders) are able to juggle multiple expectations and the demands made on them can be difficult in the face of significant community needs. In the case of emerging communities, leaders can feel pulled in many directions. This can lead to frustration and burn-out, threatening the ongoing sustainability of organisations or the splintering of communities into multiple organisations. Pressures on community leaders can come from both community members themselves and service providers. For example, within communities there may be cultural expectations of what a leader (“big man”) should provide – resources, free activities and events – that is based on leadership practices overseas and that may not translate into the Australian context. Service providers may put demands on leaders to participate voluntarily in consultations and projects and link other community members into services. This can take significant time and resources, such as having to call individual community members to solicit participation.
- **Navigating and brokering solutions within a complex funding and service system** – Research and anecdotal experience highlight the enormous challenges faced by refugee community organisations in securing sustainable funding or brokering solutions that will meet community needs.⁵⁷ For example, attracting funding often requires portraying communities in a deficit model (e.g. as vulnerable and at risk of social problems such as drugs, alcohol, gangs, delinquency and extremism). Leaders who are best able to do this and attract funding may not always be the best at getting things done or rallying the community. Grant makers are also moving towards funding of organisations that reach a bigger cross section of the community. This means that often ethno-specific groups do not receive funding despite the need and their ability to reach the community.
- **Accessing decision-makers** – For many refugee community organisations, a key issue is not access to funding but access to decision-making structures and finding the most effective ways of advocating for community needs to effect systemic change. This may be in part due to a lack of understanding of complex Australian systems and services but also relates to the ways in which policy-makers engage directly with communities.
- **Ensuring organisation’s representative nature** – A challenge for community organisations formed along ethnic or national lines is in ensuring its representative nature, in particular, that young people, women and sub-groups within the community can have their voices heard.⁵⁸ This can be a difficult process of negotiation that is linked with broader cultural transitions in settlement and requires strong leadership. It can also present challenges for mainstream services and funding bodies that are uncertain who exactly an organisation is representing and this can unfortunately lead to mistrust and an inability for an organisation to make wider connections. Kelly (2007) uses the term “contingent community” to describe a group of people who will to some extent conform to the expectations of the host society in order to gain the advantages of a formal community association but the private face of the group remains unconstituted as a community. She writes: “What is viewed from the outside as a community may in fact be a construction without the linkages and interdependence associated with communities.”
- **Engaging the media** – The leaders of refugee community organisations can be called upon by the media to represent their community. More often than not this is to provide a perspective on sensational and negative issues (e.g. “ethnic gangs”). This can be particularly fraught for those who are not media savvy or trained. How these organisations and their leaders are able to represent their community, and how the community members themselves respond to this representation can create divisions and difficulties.
- **Becoming a viable community organisation in very small and dispersed communities** – All of the challenges highlighted above can be accentuated in the case of very small and dispersed communities, and where organising across large geographical areas can be particularly difficult and costly.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Kelly 2007

⁵⁸ According to Carey-Wood *et al.* (1995, p. 88), women were often excluded because “community groups are organised by men, address issues of more concern to men in the community, and exclude women from some activities on cultural, social or religious grounds”. Cited in Bloch 2002, p.170; Kelly 2007

⁵⁹ Bloch 2002; Kelly 2007; WCC 2008

- **Remaining responsive to the changing needs of communities** – As a refugee community becomes more established in Australia, its needs will inevitably change.⁶⁰ Organisations that have been set up to support the immediate settlement needs of new communities must evolve as the community itself evolves. Ensuring an organisation remains representative and responsive to community needs requires ongoing negotiation.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Developing a fuller understanding of refugee community organisations is important not only to understand the support that is provided within refugee communities in assisting others to settle but so that these groups can be strengthened to play this important role. Where organisations and groups are less well resourced, informed and supported by wider Australian government and community services, misinformation and divisions can be perpetuated within communities.⁶¹ Investing in these largely volunteer-run community structures moves further towards a strengths-based model of refugee resettlement that recognises the resilience, skills and experiences of refugees themselves and the valuable and cost-effective contribution they can make to providing holistic settlement support. With this in mind, RCOA recommends:

1. Further research be undertaken to explore the roles played by refugee community organisations, the challenges they face and how they can be strengthened.
2. A strategy be developed by the Department of Social Services for supporting, strengthening and incorporating refugee community organisations in the national settlement framework.
3. Funding bodies consider ways to support refugee communities to build viable organisational structures.⁶²
4. Local, state and federal government policy-makers consider ways of critically engaging refugee community leaders in decision-making forums.
5. Capacity building initiatives be considered that focus on refugee community leaders and supporting the development of robust community structures.

⁶⁰ Giorgas 2000

⁶¹ Waxman 1998

⁶² Lessons could be drawn from the Refugee Action Program funded by the Victorian Government.