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INQUIRY INTO MULTICULTURALISM IN AUSTRALIA Submission by The Migrant Centre Organisation Inc., Gold Coast, Queensland

Australia's 22 million people are defined by ethnic and cultural diversity, reflecting families of early settlers, long-established migrant communities and newly-arrived migrants and refugees. This diversity co-exists with the original Indigenous inhabitants of the Australian continent. Although more than 50% are Australian-born, many of them are children of migrants. The positive results of migration in the building and strengthening of Australia can be seen in the globalisation of our continent.

As a provider of services to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse migrants, The Migrant Centre Organisation Inc. (TMC) would like to present its experience of multiculturalism in Australia through the examination of key issues.

Social inclusion

Newly-arrived migrants and refugees struggle to find their place in Australian society. Learning English, navigating a new system, understanding different social norms, securing education and employment are challenges that face newly-arrived migrants. While they receive benefits and support from the Government (for instance, 540 hours of Adult Migrant English Program and Centrelink assistance), many refugees and migrants experience pressure with issues of social participation, underemployment, reskilling and recognition of prior learning.

The typical route for many migrants and refugees is Centrelink-TAFE-job search agency (Humanitarian Settlement Strategy assists refugees for 6 months). TMC strongly believes that multicultural service providers should be an integral part of this pathway. By using its close and sensitive understanding of diverse migrant cultures and needs, TMC can secure a higher level of success with settlement and social participation for CALD migrants. Organisations such as TMC work with different criteria from job search agencies. The latter do not ask about prior learning and skills; employment – of any kind – is considered an outcome. Using different criteria for outcomes, TMC can demonstrate that migrants and refugees enjoy a smoother path to social integration and economic participation.

Funding bodies provide the means for community organisations to promote social inclusion, however, the effects are often diluted. Frequently, there is poor communication at the grass-roots level. NGOs exercise what they believe to be their best judgement without asking the people who will receive the services. When small and emerging migrant groups arrive in Australia, the ability to connect with people from their own community will assist in becoming part of the wider community through social opportunities that are already in place. However, many migrants struggle

to connect with people from the same cultural and linguistic backgrounds because these communities are scattered and poorly organised.

Cultural understanding and awareness

It is not just a case of promoting cultural sensitivity for newly-arrived migrants and refugees. Often, these people are not aware of cultural diversity of long-established migrant communities as well as the wider community and other emerging ethnic-specific communities.

TMC have observed instances of cultural insensitivity and ignorance by mainstream and community organisations. Clients have been advised by employment agencies to remove their hijabs and turbans or be clean-shaven in order to secure employment; medical personnel at hospitals and clinics have shown impatience at patients who require interpreters; migrants feel that immigration officials use 'racial profiling' every time they enter the country. In 2011, it is not uncommon to have people laugh when they encounter surnames they cannot pronounce.

Too often, mainstream organisations wave the 'multicultural' card to secure funding; these services frequently overlook cultural and religious differences. A so-called multicultural aged care provider demonstrates this insensitivity by matching a Serbian carer to an elderly Bosnian Muslim lady. A Spanish lady was distressed because, after each shopping trip with her English-speaking carer, all her groceries reflected the choices of her non-Spanish speaking carer. Her requests for a Spanish-speaking carer were ignored.

CALD migrants experience discrimination in the workplace. After securing employment, the organisational culture may not promote multicultural understanding among its staff. TMC have anecdotal evidence of migrants who are unable to sustain their jobs because of perceived differences and misunderstanding with their colleagues.

Findings

Migration has been used as a polarising issue in the political arena. The media has fuelled public unease of apparently burgeoning migration numbers by stories such as 'children overboard' and choosing to print negative publicity about migrants and refugees. TMC have experienced instances where the local media have asked for stories about refugees; when told that the refugees and their families did not wish to revisit the war and conflict that they have survived but wish instead to speak about their new and happy lives in Australia, these positive stories are never published. The wider Australian public have been misled by the media who have effectively placed all migrants in the boat. Only 1% of migrants enter Australia by boat; some refugees spend more than 20 years waiting to be settled, the rest arrive on international flights. TMC would like to know why the truth is not publicised.

Countries such as United States of America and Canada see multiculturalism in different ways. There is no such policy in the USA – when they take the pledge of allegiance, migrants identify as Americans. Canada has a multicultural policy that envisions different ethnic groups as mosaic tiles that form one unified picture. As a younger country, Australia must define its own multicultural policy. Education of the wider public, including long-settled and newly-arrived communities, of cultural, linguistic and religious differences will create a 21st Century Australia that is dynamic, diverse and globally-inclusive. Let us not celebrate Harmony Day on one day of the year; let's all live harmoniously on 364 days of the year. 21 March can be spent in disharmony

The future of multiculturalism

TMC strongly believes that strategies can be developed to strengthen the future of multiculturalism in Australia. Funding for multicultural initiatives will be best utilised by organisations such as The Migrant Centre who have the capacity to devise, develop and deliver projects with successful outcomes because of its close understanding of migrant issues and needs.

The Migrant Centre's commitment to promoting multiculturalism is described in its vision: *‘unity in diversity – equal opportunity for all.’*

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