

African Australian Communities Leadership Forum (AACLf)

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
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Dear Committee Secretary

Inquiry into migrant settlement outcomes focusing on youth gang activity

Thank you for the opportunity to provide our views and comments in relation to the above inquiry.

About Us

The African Australian Communities Leadership Forum (AACLf) is an alliance of over 50 African Australian community leaders and organisations in Victoria. Our focus is on working collaboratively with key decision and policy makers to provide additional information and adequately contextualize the African Australian experience to ensure effective policy development and service delivery. A number of members of the AACLf are members of the Victorian state government's African Ministerial Working Group.

In addition, a number of the AACLf members are academics, lawyers, accountants, youth leaders, teachers, health professionals, community leaders, university students, public servants, social workers and entrepreneurs.

Community Issues Paper 2016

In March 2016 a community review was conducted and a report was written by the AACLf as a sort of community stock take to present an overview of the African Australian context. While the report was prepared for the community by the community, it was subsequently presented to the Victorian state government in September 2016. This community issues paper has been attached to this letter as a further helpful reference for this inquiry. It answers some of the questions posed by this inquiry by providing a useful context for African Australian migration patterns, the successes, the challenges and recommendations for ways forward. A reference list of additional sources of information is also included in the community issues paper.

This letter provides an additional context beyond the scope of the effectiveness of settlement services to identify specific challenges and successes to help foster successful pathways into the broader community.

Background

While we await the results of the 2016 census the last census (2011) indicated the number of African Australians at almost 60,000. Most have come as skilled migrants and international students from South Africa and Zimbabwe and a large intake has come from horn of Africa communities fleeing crisis from war or famine in the 80's, 90's, 2000's and 2005. Smaller refugee groups have also come from parts of West and Central Africa and an increasing number of people have come from other English speaking Commonwealth countries as skilled migrants and post graduate international students from countries like Botswana, Uganda, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroun, Zambia, Kenya etc. For a number of groups who have come as skilled migrants and/or from English speaking countries, the employment statistics collected by their associations indicate employment rates higher than the Australian average, as high as 97%.

For people who have come from crisis situations, they bring untold optimism, resilience, a strong work ethic and a desire to belong, contribute and create successful pathways for their families; however there are higher barriers and hurdles to overcome.

Settlement

While Australia provides a range of settlement services, the anecdotal evidence from people who have accessed the services in more recent times is that the support is inadequate to provide an effective transition into employment and social connectedness to the broader community. Language is one of the most important points of access and indicators of success for new migrants. Settlement services should be adequately funded to ensure proper English language proficiency at a level commensurate with the requisite educational level and for full employment. As the first entry point for many refugees, settlement services should be fully equipped as connecting hubs to connect people to their local community organisations to increase their connectedness, employment and entrepreneurial pathways.

Recommendation

1. Provide appropriate funding to settlement services to provide a complete and high level English language proficiency training and to act as connecting hubs to relevant community groups.

Community Organisations

Many community organisations are exclusively volunteer run with zero government funding, except for small grants for occasional events, festivities and one off programs. While these activities foster connectedness and provide cultural showcase opportunities, community organisations have a great opportunity to play a much greater role in the settlement

landscape. Firstly, these organisations are staffed by volunteers who have had similar experiences, successful pathways and know the pitfalls. They are closer to the issues and challenges and are best placed to act in an advisory capacity to established settlement service providers and also provide complementary appropriate and targeted programs and services to the new community.

Grassroots community organisations are usually made up of community members who are more established and they can act as an excellent source of instant and trusted networks. They enhance connectedness and can provide mentors and links to employment and other opportunities. Funding community organisations builds their capacity, quality assurance, accountability, growth and continuous improvement. It is not uncommon to have highly utilised and well regarded community programs like homework clubs for young people from social housing with parents with low English proficiency, unfunded. This lack of appropriate and consistent funding creates a lack of confidence in government support, disengagement and poor community outcomes. The ultimate beneficiaries of properly funded community organisations are community members who get well designed and targeted consistent services and successful outcomes. It should be considered 'business as usual' that all established organisations seeking government funding to support any specific community must work with community organisations and train and employ those community members in the program. This should be a standard tender and procurement practice.

Recommendation

2. Fund Community organisations to build their capacity to provide immediate and additional links for community members and complementary appropriate service assistance to established organisations.

System Interventions

For a number of people who arrive with little or no financial resources, they are often moved into social housing. While social housing can provide a sense of community, they have also traditionally been environments of concentrated disadvantage; poverty, low employment, easy targets by drug and other established criminal groups and frequent police interventions. For a young person trying to establish their identity and sense of belonging; they can become easy targets for established criminal groups looking to recruit naïve and impressionable people to carry out the often riskier and highly visible criminal ground work; car thefts, burglary and selling prohibited substances.

Consider the following de-identified case study (based on a number of real stories consolidated into one)

A teenager from a large family of 7 children with a single mother whose father died in the war moves to Australia at 12 years old. His mother is learning English with the rest of the family and is occupied with being a sole carer for a household of 7 children all under 14 years and trying to establish herself in a new environment. They live in a social housing and he frequently hangs out at the basketball court to get some air from his over crowded home

upstairs.

He is bullied at school for his accent and his colour and he loses confidence in his abilities. He is placed in grade 7, even though he has never attended a day of school in his life, having lived in a particularly difficult refugee camp. He starts missing classes and his mum, unable to read, is unaware of the school's concern expressed through letters. She is also very pre-occupied with the other children and has not attended any school activities, parent/teacher meetings etc. Child protection become involved and he tells them his mother has hit him, frequently yells at him and he doesn't feel safe at home. He also discloses that he has been approached by drug dealers at the basketball court to sell drugs. After a number of court dates, he is removed and placed in residential care. At residential care, he is abused by the older boys and is introduced to drugs. He eventually runs away and starts to live with a group of adults, unbeknownst to him, established criminals. He eventually gets co-opted into a spiral of using and selling drugs and other criminal activity directed by the older people in the crime syndicate.

It must be mentioned that the Crime Statistics Agency estimates that the recent spate of criminal activity by young people are committed mostly by people born in Australia (over 60%). The established criminals are 'mainstream Australians' exploiting a vulnerable group of young people. There have been some reports in the newspapers and a so-called 'Faigen's law' is being developed in response.

A number of young people who have been caught up in the web of criminal activity have been involved with the system through child protection. There are a number of stories of children being removed due to physical discipline. The boundaries for physical discipline are unclear in legislation and different in different eras, households and cultures. It is imperative that cross-cultural training and competency is a core part of being a social worker or being a state employee in any frontline service delivery role. It is also important that child protection work closely with families and communities to develop family re-integration protocols as a priority. Many of these families are loving and close families who are not aware of the current boundaries around physical discipline. Information and alternative tools are cheaper and more effective.

As extensive research and experience has demonstrated with other marginalized communities, state interventions can be a very blunt instrument; particularly within family contexts. Children losing that connection to family in settings where they are already marginalised, makes them highly vulnerable to being victims of crime and sometimes perpetrators of crime. It is an often quoted statement, that perpetrators of crime have often been victims, many times over, themselves.

Many young people have shared very disturbing experiences about discriminatory policing. This has been an ongoing complaint well documented by the Police Accountability project led by the Flemington Kensington Community Legal Centre and others. The case of Daniel Haile Michael and Ors vs Victoria Police which led to the racial profiling legal settlement is

another key case in point. The harassment has led to an increasing lack of trust between community and police. Trust is a critical currency in maintaining social harmony. It is imperative that the local police stations maintain active consultative working relationships with their local community to assist with the detection of crime, assist with early interventions; warnings and other diversions and rebuild trust and a deeper understanding of each others' contexts.

Recommendations

3. System interventions must be co-designed with grassroots community organisations.
4. Community organisations must be consulted in the design of services and programs to ensure relevance, appropriateness and effective targeting.
5. Divest from the end of the cycle (corrections and custody) and invest at the beginning (education, community led programs, education and employment pathways) to inoculate against poverty and crime and enhance success.
6. Rebuild community/police trust with consistent consultations, cross-cultural training co-developed with community.

Social Inclusion

For many, social inclusion is about place and belonging. For groups who are new, few and highly visible due to their physical difference (colour, clothing etc.), social exclusion can be a common experience. A very critical factor for social inclusion is the narrative created and then amplified about certain groups. In a few short months, the African Australian community who was largely absent from media representations or discussions, has become a highly visible, frequently discussed group in the most offensive and heart breaking terms. In recent months, African Australians have been judged by their worst day.

To be socially included, one's humanity and existence must be normalised in the society in which one lives. The frequent calls to exclude and expel are painful indicators that the society we call home and make many contributions to does not see us as a part of itself. *History tells us that it is always a red flag, when people are singled out, stories are constantly and consistently put out creating a lie that the worst behaviours by a few are the norm of the many.* The calls for expulsion will not solve the problem because all the young people caught up in the web of crime were born or raised here. One notes that the horrific crime that terrorized the city of Melbourne this month in its most popular intersection and street did not lead to calls for expulsion of people from the ethnicity of the perpetrator, and rightfully so. No group has an exclusivity on crime or good deeds.

As an increasingly multicultural society, it is imperative that as part of our maturation process, we (community, government and media outlets) collectively work with the media to stop inflaming and start informing through guidelines and protocols on reporting on vulnerable young people; similar to the evolved contemporary guidelines for the media on reporting family violence. The Australian community is sophisticated enough to deal with the complexity of social challenges that lead to youth crime by any group. While settlement

challenges may play a role, many people involved professionally in crime prevention share evidenced based research that tells us that crime is as a result of offenders, a place and a victim. In other words, a crime may occur when a likely offender and a suitable target come together in a space and time in the absence of capable guardians (see 'crime problem analysis' at the problem oriented policing website).

To properly understand this or any other crime wave, evidence based research must be conducted. As the African Australian population grows, with a number of academics in almost every university in Australia, it may be timely to create an African Australian studies centre where appropriate research can be commissioned and conducted. Victoria University in Melbourne has a large African student population and several African Australian lecturers. It would appear to be a prime centre of research into African Australian studies. Of course research centres yield many benefits, from social studies to trade and economic studies which deepen our understanding and create unseen opportunities.

Recommendations

7. Work with community to develop a media engagement protocol that informs rather than inflames the public.
8. Partner with community and academia to launch an African Australian research centre for more informed studies on the causes and solutions as well as studies into various economic opportunities.
9. Maintain social inclusion as a top priority to ensure social cohesiveness in our increasingly diverse society.

Inclusive Practices

One cannot discuss the challenges without identifying ways people are marginalised which can lead to social challenges for families and individuals alike.

Many new groups who speak multiple languages and are still building their English language proficiency are increasingly excluded from the labour market in a society like Australia where the manufacturing and low skilled entry jobs are fast disappearing. For a number of people from all communities, they are not fully prepared for the digitised, automation and service based economy that Australia is fast becoming.

While it is imperative for employment practices to be inclusive and non discriminatory, it also an opportunity encourage entrepreneurship with seed funding so that communities can build their own opportunities and wealth. A few community groups have developed entrepreneurship programs specific to community needs, however none have been funded as they don't have partnerships with more established organisations which unfortunately can be a barrier to funding.

We note also that the avalanche of negative and very incomplete and simplistic media coverage acts as a barrier to employment, the very thing that mitigates against poverty and assists social evolution out of places of concentrated disadvantage. Key pathways to success

and social inclusion into any society for any group include: inclusive employment practices, enabling entrepreneurial environments and civic education to increase civic participation.

Recommendations

10. Support groups and organisations to increase civic participation through training programs and information sessions.
11. Provide an enabling environment for pathways to entrepreneurship by providing seed funding and prioritizing entrepreneurship programs for new communities.
12. Support inclusive employment practices, with the public sector leading by example in employment appointments and opportunities.

Opportunities

According to the United Nations Population Division, in 2015, there were 1.2 billion young people aged 15-24 years globally. By 2030 the number is expected to grow by 7% to 1.3 billion. Young people can be a positive force for development when provided with knowledge and opportunities. However, young people are frequently characterised as challenges and problems, with society often using a deficit lens when discussing young people.

From our experience and observations, the young people in our community have demonstrated great sensitivity, creativity and made contributions to Australia. They have formed and continue to lead many community-based organisations without funding, they organise many social harmony events and festivals, they have created innovative tech enterprises and other small businesses, they raise funds for local charities and send money to family members abroad. When they have faced exclusion, they have created their own sustaining enterprises, an example being the annual fashion shows alongside Spring fashion week that have created a thriving eco-system of fashion designers, models, modeling agencies, event organisers, choreographers, photographers, graphic designers, film makers, MC's and performers.

The energy, enterprise and unbridled optimism of our young people has been harnessed to great effect in the United States, the United Kingdom and France in particular to create billion dollar industries. We have a thriving African Australian community and the young people are actively engaged in various inspiring pursuits. This community is unique in that it is African and Australian and the rest of world has not seen or experienced it. This is an opportunity to see it upfront and support and harness its great potential. Instead of the frequent characterisation of young African Australians as people to be feared or worried about, our experience tells us that they are a great source of untapped potential.

Recommendation

13. Create a social entrepreneurial hub to harness the potential of African Australian cultural, creative and entrepreneurial talents and share them with the wider Australian community.

Again we thank you for the opportunity to provide some insight into the lived realities of some members of our community and share a more nuanced context to how we can support young members of our Australian community.

For further queries, the contact details of the African Australian Communities Leadership Forum (AACLF) are included on the contacts page of the community issues paper September 2016 annexed to this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Zione Walker-Nthenda

On behalf of the African Australian Communities Leadership Forum (AACLF)