



**South Eastern Region
Migrant Resource Centre Inc.**

Serving the communities of Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia.

South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre response to Joint Parliamentary Standing Committee on Briefing Paper on the economic, social and cultural impacts of migration in Australia

Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

1. The role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda

- Australia has been a social laboratory for much of the twentieth century, with many reforms ahead of other nations. Multiculturalism has worked especially well in Melbourne for several reasons:
 - o our declining birth rate offset by the arrival of migrant workers
 - o presence of migrant communities in markets, food industry and hospitality even before 1901, when Melbourne was the capital of Australia
 - o industry need for skilled workers
 - o high numbers of migrants arriving as students and remaining to practise their profession and raise families
 - o lack of concentration of too many settlers from any one background in Melbourne's suburbs
- Since the 1970s, even before two significant events—the arrival of the first 'boat people' from Vietnam and the official abandonment of the White Australia Policy—there have been changing societal attitudes to the multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic character of Australia's towns and cities. To ignore this development is to ignore our growth as a nation and a society. Multiculturalism remains a work in progress. We still have some way to go before we achieve an ideal balance and cultural harmony, as these recent examples have shown:
 - o the Cronulla riots, violent responses at One Nation rallies, outbursts of racism in response to Tampa and to recent boat people arrivals, anti-migrant behaviour in the aftermath of September 11th, attacks on individual Indian students, death of a Sudanese boy in Noble Park
- Australia has been a migrant country since 1788, and our national face continues to change, particularly with our proximity to Asia and its emerging markets. As well as reconciling ourselves to the indigenous people and their traditional role as custodians of the land, we have a responsibility as world

citizens to acknowledge the increasingly globalised nature of our population, our workplaces and our neighbourhoods. With new technologies, including mainstream media outlets such as SBS, we are in touch with businesses, suppliers, customers, friends, family and extended family across the world. Multiculturalism is not only a social necessity, it is an economic necessity. We show the rest of the world that we are open for business and we don't fear or favour particular racial, religious or ethnic groups.

- It is precisely because we are an advanced democracy with many social and economic freedoms that most migrants come here. In the last 5 years, the top countries of origin for our migrants have been—India, China, United Kingdom, South Africa, the Philippines, Malaysia and Sri Lanka—a far cry from the days when most migrants were of Anglo-Celtic stock. This is the new Australia. To deny this multicultural character in social inclusion policies is to deny our present-day identity.

2. The contribution of diaspora communities to Australia's relationships with Europe, the UK, Middle East and the immediate Asia-Pacific Region.

- Our relationships with Europe and countries of the EU, including Britain, have been strengthened and deepened by migrants from these countries, many of whom have become prominent in Australian industry, politics and the media. Our current Prime Minister and Opposition Leader are two excellent examples, as is the CEO of the Australian Football League and many award-winning sportspeople.
- Our relationship with countries in the Asia-Pacific Region may have slipped once or twice during the era of the Keating and Howard governments, but mostly there has been a strengthening of our ties with Indonesia and other countries through the APEC forum and a series of successful trade arrangements. Occasional diplomatic problems—such as Indian media attention on the bashings of students here—remain isolated in the larger picture. Examples of successful communities from these countries include the contribution of Asian cuisine and restaurants to the character of our cities and towns. There are many prominent identities from this south-eastern region, such as Melbourne's former Lord Mayor John So, Senator Penny Wong, surgeon Victor Chang, chef Kylie Kwong and Australian cricketer Usman Khawaja.
- Our relationship with countries of the Middle East is less certain, due to inherent political instabilities in the region, and our continued involvement in Iraq. However, there are many successful examples in Australian public life of migrants and children of migrants from this region, such as former Victorian premier Steve Bracks, author David Malouf, businessman John Symond and Marie Bashir, Governor of NSW.

Settlement and participation

3. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society; and

- In the experience of our organisation, the most successful settlement experiences for refugees produce a sense of belonging. Our casework indicates that the major issues facing newly arrived refugees are (i) accommodation, (ii) employment, (iii) understanding our legal, financial and services/ systems, (iv) affordable and culturally appropriate child care, and (v) being reunited with surviving family members,(immigration advice.)
- Over the last 17 years we have continued to develop innovative approaches to successful settlement of refugees into Australian society, including the development of improved relationships with local property managers, improved coordination and partnerships among local service providers in our region, and programs and activities that help refugees to learn self-managing skills and relevant resources within their families and communities.
- Settlement programs (SGP) need to be funded longer term i.e. for 5 years, as is the HSS and AMEP programs (for the same client group) to ensure successful and longer term settlement outcomes. Currently short term funding is not in the best interests of the clients and creates a waste of resources in continual contract management for government and funded agencies and continual recruitment processes. Like many programs 12 months is often the time taken to establish a program and then you need time to operate and see the potential of the program and then the next phase is to further enhance the program to ensure it is operating at a maximum potential. Longer term funding would be a better use of resources and provide longer term sustainable outcomes.
- The funding to evaluate settlement programs would enhance the quality and service outcomes for programs and also provide evidence based information to inform and plan future programs. There is little research in Australia on settlement programs and services. Innovative programs need to be evaluated and documented so they can be shared and disseminated nationally.
- Settlement Funded agencies require assistance to engage with business /private sector as the two groups rarely meet and mix, so to form relationships and partnerships is often not possible. Business /private sector should be involved in supporting settlement and equally the social inclusion principles as they are key players in local communities and often employ local residents. This is an area that is untapped and there is a lot of potential however a link needs to be made for the different groups to merge and start a conversation.
- Innovation in settlement is not just the preserve of DIAC and its contracted agencies; we see this as a whole-of-government matter. All government departments should understand refugees as a defined group with particular needs. The definition of 5 years as a notional end date for settlement is generally recognised as inadequate, given that individuals who have experienced trauma

can have residual problems for much longer, and communities can take much longer to sort out adjustment issues.

- Two examples:
 - o Sudanese community: this is a collection of communities, from Africa's largest country. At one time our organisation employed 8 men from Sudan, and the only language they had in common was English, because they all came from different regions. They were among the more fortunate because they had certain skills. Many of their community members lack these skills. Our organisation mentored several of the Sudanese associations but we experienced a problem common to refugee communities: continuous turnover of key people—who would return to Sudan to help with the rebuilding of their homeland—and lack of skill in administrative and financial management, due to interrupted education. 5 years on and many of these people were still just developing basic survival skills in our society and economy. Too often courses are offered to refugees on skill development and leadership however there is nowhere for participants to go after these courses to practise what they have learnt. Pathways should be offered for refugees to pursue, once training has been completed, this is the same for any person who pursues a course or further education; you need to implement what you have learnt.
 - o Afghan community: this too is several communities, from a country that we are still at war with. The overwhelming number of asylum seekers currently arriving or in detention are from the Hazara Afghan community. They are facing resistance from established Pashtun Afghan communities who resent their arrival in large numbers and their overtly political approach. This mutual mistrust has persisted for over 5 years now and looks like continuing for the foreseeable future. Afghan community members are very entrepreneurial and have set up many food and other businesses and are an example of successful settlement and full participation in the broader community. i.e. Thomas Street, Dandenong.

While many migrants face a less traumatic time than refugees in settling in Australia, they have other difficulties. Arriving in far greater numbers than refugees, they often have an existing expatriate community willing to accept them as members, which may include extended family. But the most significant barrier for many is employment and the recognition of their existing skills and qualifications. Our recent highly successful project for skilled migrants, under the auspices of the Federal Government's Job Fund, has shown that the right approach to intervention can remove the blind spot from Australian employers regarding skilled migrants and at the same time boost productivity in their businesses with an infusion of new talent as well as showing leadership to their staff and competitors with an open-mindedness to our multicultural workforce.

4. Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole.

- This organisation's operating region, which includes Victoria's most culturally diverse municipality (City of Greater Dandenong) as well as one of this state's largest and fastest growing municipality (City of Casey) is a good example of successful migrant settlement. Unlike some parts of Australia where there has been a high concentration of migrants from one or two backgrounds, this region has more than 150 nationalities living and working within its boundaries. While there have been higher than average crime rates in the last few years, Victoria Police statistics indicate that it is the Australian-born who have been predominantly involved, and that the migrant community as a whole has been below average in negative social behaviours. At the same time the workforce and the local economy contains a huge diversity of racial, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds, including indigenous and new & emerging communities. Dandenong is now on the touring agenda for the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival, for its range of Afghan and Indian restaurants, and there is a spectrum of other cuisines from Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe on offer as well. Local factories, offices, retail, trade stores and shopping centres all employ a wide range of staff from countries all over the world.
- The fast-growing suburbs and housing estates of this region are seeing a similar diversity of population, which is also reflected in the classrooms of local schools. While this region has avoided the pitfalls of ghetto-style accommodation, the traditional dream of owning a quarter-acre block remains out of reach for many migrants and most refugees. Combined with the rising cost of land has been the shortage of housing stock and limited public transport options, plus increasingly congested roads.
- Access to services in growth corridors is a major barrier to successful settlement in this region and others, where residential and commercial development has outpaced local services such as medical, dental, social support and other welfare services, especially affordable interpreting services and culturally appropriate health care. This situation causes longer term problems as people can't seek assistance early in their time of need as there are no services readily available so they seek support when the issues are intensified and a longer term and more complex and costly service is required. Residents without a car are severely disadvantaged as public transport is scarce. Access in a physical sense to agencies and services is critical and then the service needs to be culturally appropriate and accessible, these are the basic foundations for refugees to access services of any kind in the community. These access issues can be addressed and would enhance longer term positive settlement outcomes. If social issues can be addressed early in the settlement period then refugees are then able to

gain suitable employment which in turn leads to economic benefits for refugees and the whole community.

- More programs should be funded to include refugees and the broader community to enhance the bringing together of different communities which also encourages sharing of cultures, learning, understanding and friendships which in turn lead to positive social benefits for the whole community.

National productive capacity

5. The role migration has played and contributes to building Australia's long term productive capacity;

- Migration has played a successful part for many decades in contributing to our economy. We depend on the language and cross-cultural skills of our diplomats and overseas representatives but, in a globalised economy with new media and technology, we need to depend on our Australian multicultural professionals and entrepreneurs.
- However, while many non-migrants pay lip-service to migration as a successful economic driver, there is less attention paid to the over-representation of migrants being used as unskilled and casual labour. Even leaving the 457 visa migrants out of this equation, there is a perception among migrant communities that they are being used as 'factory fodder,' and restricted in their economic opportunities to develop careers and long-term skills.

6. The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of all migrants; and

- Our very successful program for skilled migrants, under the Federal Government's Job Fund, has demonstrated a way to change the mindset of Australian businesses regarding skilled migrants, and to make the best use of our multicultural workforce. But it is only a start.

7. Too many skilled migrants are arriving with an expectation of work in their trained field, only to be told that their skills do not match Australian employers' expectations. So it is worth asking the question: are we adequately vetting applicants against the criteria of skills in demand by industry, or are some industries with skills in demand adopting a 'closed-shop' approach? Our organisation regularly sees applicants for jobs, people apparently with the right skills and qualifications, but doors have either been closed in their faces or no doors have opened. At the same time we hear reports of employers hiring Australian-born new graduates or school-leavers with no work experience. Setting aside considerations of ethnic or cultural bias, we suspect that many Australian employers are passing up the opportunity of hiring skilled migrants simply from fear of the 'different' and the 'other,' preferring a less skilled known quantity, even if this means a drop in productivity and workforce stability. The government could offer incentives for employers to take the risk and employ skilled migrants with all the qualifications required for the job and no work experience in Australia. The lack of work experience is the key factor in prohibiting very skilled migrants to gain

employment. With very little funding to produce long term employment outcomes, the government should continue funding employment programs for skilled migrants to gain a foot in the door of employment, this organisation has evidence of the success of these employment programs. The earlier skilled migrants are supported to find employment the longer term employment outcomes are achieved and this in due course enhances their participation and integration into the broader community and their skills and knowledge in particular industries provide the economic benefits to Australia.

8. Potential government initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises.

- Business enterprises offer an excellent opportunity for migrant communities however the following supports would be essential for success in this area:
 - o Training in Australian business practices, workplace culture, taxation and other compliance such as OHS, food handling, Workcover, First Aid and human resources management
 - o Start-up capital and/ or low-cost loans for outlays
 - o A separate fund for info tech start-up costs
 - o Business mentoring by established companies, auspice agencies or professional associations
 - o Targeted assistance limited to niche markets where a demand exists or an emerging demand is likely

I hope this information is of assistance and for any further comments or information please contact the MRC CEO, Jenny Semple on telephone 03 9706 8933.

Yours Sincerely

Jenny Semple