

## **SETTLING IN: HOW DO REFUGEE YOUNG PEOPLE FAIR WITHIN AUSTRALIA'S SETTLEMENT SYSTEM?**

*By Louise Olliff, Policy Officer, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues*

Australia is a country with a long history of effectively resettling refugees. However shifts in the make-up of our humanitarian intake, as well as changing political, international and socio-economic landscapes, all impact on the settlement experiences and outcomes of newly arrived communities. In supporting young people to 'settle well', it is important that the Australian Government is clear about the goals of our settlement program, how it measures and is accountable for good settlement outcomes, and how we, as a community, can create a socially inclusive and cohesive society where refugee young people are able to thrive.

In 2005-06, the Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues (CMYI) explored the question of 'What is good youth settlement?' through a policy forum and series of consultations with workers and young people. The resulting paper, *Settling In: Exploring Good Settlement for Refugee Young People in Australia*, explored definitions of 'good settlement', investigated our current settlement service system and made a series of recommendations. The following provides an overview of findings from this paper.

### **Why focus on refugee young people?**

In the past decade, 65% of those who arrived in Australia under the government's humanitarian program were under the age of 30 at the time of their arrival (DIAC Settlement Database). There has been a significant shift over this time in the proportion of young people represented within the humanitarian program. For example, young people under the age of 30 comprised 59% of the humanitarian intake in 1997 compared with 75% in 2006.

The changing regional focus of Australia's humanitarian program over the past decade has also shifted the demographic profile of refugee young people arriving in Australia and subsequently their settlement needs. A significant shift in the program has been away from the settlement of young people from the Former Yugoslavia and Horn of Africa (Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia), towards those from ongoing conflicts in Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan, and a smaller but growing number from countries in West and Central Africa (including Liberia, Sierra Leone, DR Congo, Rwanda and Burundi).

Increasingly, Australia is welcoming refugee young people who have had fewer years of previous schooling compared with earlier cohorts, have lived for extended periods of time in refugee camps and have moved from one unstable situation to another.

### **The experiences of refugee young people**

New arrivals from refugee backgrounds are likely, as a result of their pre-migration and migration experiences, to face common difficulties in adjusting to a new life in Australia. Young refugees also have needs that are distinct from those of older refugees. As well as adjusting to resettlement in a new country, recovering from trauma, navigating education, employment and complex bureaucratic systems, refugee young people must also negotiate family, peer, individual and community expectations within the context of adolescence.

There are risks for those refugee young people who are not able to access appropriate support or exposure to social exclusion and disconnection, requiring

assistance in the future to address issues such as homelessness, family breakdown, poor health, crime, drug and alcohol use, and other social problems. The Federal Government's *Review of Settlement Services* found that:

*Without early, effective intervention, there is a risk that the initial disadvantages of humanitarian entrants and some of the more 'at risk' family arrivals could become entrenched. Over the longer-term, a combination of interrelated problems such as unemployment, continuing reliance on income support, health issues and physical and social isolation can create a cumulative effect of social and economic exclusion from mainstream Australian society.*

(Commonwealth of Australia 2003: 320-1)

Despite the immense challenges of resettlement, it is important to recognise that refugee young people often make remarkable progress and bring a wealth of resources and strengths to the Australian community. The refugee experience can bring about qualities such as resilience and resourcefulness, adaptability, a strong commitment to the family and the value of community, and a strong desire to achieve educationally. Newly arrived young people often have broad international knowledge, multilingual skills and awareness of many cultures and communities. If well supported in the transition period, refugee young people have demonstrated their strong capacity to be able to rebuild their lives, achieve their goals and contribute dynamically to the broader Australian community.

### **What is 'good settlement'?**

There are varied understandings of what it means for a refugee to be 'well settled' in a new country. This is rarely articulated in government or other literature, although terms such as *wellbeing*, *citizenship*, *participation*, *self-sufficiency* and *social inclusion* are commonly referred to. It is important to enter into discussion about what Australia means when it opens its doors to refugees, what the expectations are for refugees settling in Australia, and how we evaluate the success and/or outcomes of our resettlement program. The policy implications of such a discussion would undoubtedly influence the services and systems that are put in place to facilitate these goals.

Currently, the two stated outcomes under *The DIMA Plan 2006-07* (which includes all migration streams) are to: "Contribute to Australia's society and its economic advancement through the lawful and orderly entry and stay of people"; and, "Promote a society which values Australian citizenship, appreciates cultural diversity and enables migrants to participate equitably".

A recent articulation of the goals of humanitarian settlement services involves a commitment to "helping new arrivals participate in the community as soon as possible after arrival. Settlement services funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs provide assistance to help new arrivals become accustomed to life in Australia. These services focus on building self-reliance, developing English language skills, and fostering links with mainstream services" (Commonwealth of Australia 2006a:3). Less clear is how these goals and programs are evaluated in terms of the settlement experiences and actual outcomes for humanitarian entrants.

Although it comes with some baggage, *integration* is one concept that has been used in research to define the goal of a well-settled person or community and may provide a useful starting point in defining the goals and evaluating the outcomes of Australia's humanitarian settlement program. Integration, as defined in Valtonen (2004:74), is "the ability to participate fully in economic, social, cultural and political activities, without having to relinquish one's own distinct ethnocultural identity and culture.

It is at the same time a process by which settling persons become part of the social, institutional and cultural fabric of a society". Integration, in contrast to the idea of assimilation, infers the full participation of new arrivals in the country of settlement without necessitating a loss of identity or a one-way process whereby migrants or refugees are simply absorbed into their new surroundings. Integration assumes that there are multiple parts, identities, communities and so on, that make up the whole society, and that new arrivals are able to contribute and become active citizens of a cohesive and diverse community.

The *UNHCR Integration Handbook: Refugee Resettlement* (2002) also provides a definition of settlement that is based on the concept of integration. According to UNHCR, the nine internationally accepted goals for integration of resettled refugees are:

- To restore refugees' security, control, and social and economic independence;
- To promote the capacity for refugees to rebuild a positive future in a receiving society;
- To promote family reunification;
- To promote connections with volunteers and professionals able to provide support;
- To restore confidence in political systems and institutions, human rights, and the rule of law;
- To promote cultural and religious integrity and restore attachments to community and culture;
- To counter racism, discrimination, and xenophobia and build welcoming communities;
- To support the development of strong, cohesive refugee communities;
- To foster conditions which support refugees of different ages, family statuses, gender, and past experience.

(UNHCR 2002)

Whether or not these goals of 'integration' are seen as the best means of measuring and planning for good settlement outcomes is certainly an area for discussion. Regardless, it is important that there is some framework within which the humanitarian program can be evaluated for effectiveness and which feeds back into planning and funding processes.

### **How are young refugees currently fairing?**

Australia's program of settlement support for humanitarian entrants is among the best in the world. While a similar level of assistance has not been accorded to those who have been recognised as refugees under the on-shore humanitarian program, those who have been assisted to migrate under Australia's off-shore humanitarian program have access to a range of services to support their resettlement.

Refugee young people have been identified as a priority group by the Refugee Resettlement Advisory Council (RRAC) since 2000 and by the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee (VSPC) since 1995. As such, there are a number of initiatives that have been introduced which represent good practice in the international arena, including: the development of the RRAC Refugee Youth Strategy in 2000; the allocation of youth-specific funding by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship within the Settlement Grants Program (SGP); and the funding of the Newly Arrived Youth Support Service (NAYSS) by the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

While recognising that there are many supportive services available to refugee young people, substantial gaps have also been identified, particularly if we perceive 'good settlement' as the goals outlined above. According to Aristotle (unpublished, 2000), Australia receives a steady flow of young people who have endured a wide range of atrocities, "yet we lack a cohesive and well-coordinated national approach which embraces a whole-of-life concept of recovery".

In 2005-06, young people and workers consulted by CMYI identified a range of other gaps within the existing service system. These included:

#### *Humanitarian Settlement Services*

- Lack of youth focus in the IHSS program – the family-focused assessment without specific focus on young people means that their needs are often not recognised at an early stage;
- Lack of co-ordination and collaboration between IHSS programs, SGP and other specialist and generalist youth services;
- Variation in support for young people, families and proposers being sponsored through the Special Humanitarian Program;
- Insufficient co-ordination between federal, state and local governments to ensure equitable resource allocation in areas of high refugee youth intake;
- Lack of bi-cultural youth and settlement workers and insufficient incentives and support to encourage newly arrived community members to enter the field.

#### *Education and employment*

- Lack of refugee loading in the funding of the ESL New Arrivals program, and therefore insufficient time for young people with disrupted schooling in English Language Centres/Schools;
- Paucity of out-of-school-hours learning support programs (such as homework clubs);
- Failure of job network services to effectively provide for the needs of those from refugee backgrounds;
- Reduced focus on refugee young people as a risk group within the DEWR-funded Jobs Placement Employment and Training (JPET) program.

#### *Family/Community engagement*

- Lack of consistently-funded programs to assist newly arrived families with the task of raising teenagers (cross cultural parenting programs);
- Poor level of understanding in generalist services around the need to engage with families of newly arrived young people;
- Little understanding of the Australian youth service system amongst newly arrived communities and reluctance for many families to allow their children to be involved in activities due to fears around appropriateness and safety.

#### *Social connectedness*

- Lack of adequate social supports and funding for group programs (including peer support models) that build connections between newly arrived and Australian-born young people;
- Inaccessibility of sport and recreation opportunities due to poor access to grounds, prohibitive cost, transport difficulties and lack of long-term community-based sports programs;
- Insufficient emphasis on the need to promote cross-cultural understanding and reduce racism and discrimination through program funding.

#### *Research and evaluation*

- Lack of research into refugee young people's needs and experiences;

- Little systemic analysis/evaluation of settlement outcomes for refugee young people;
- Poor level of data collection in relation to young refugees, including demographic trends and access to services, and therefore little way of ascertaining the degree to which young people are seeking support and having their needs met.

## **Ways to achieve 'good settlement' outcomes**

How we achieve the best settlement outcomes for refugee young people and their communities obviously requires a multi-layered response. In terms of a settlement service system, a number of recommendations emerged from CMYI's policy forum and consultation. These include:

- *Develop a national refugee youth settlement strategy* – CMYI recommends the development of an inter-departmental refugee youth strategy at the federal level that outlines a process of ongoing needs identification, provides analysis and incorporates findings into wider settlement planning frameworks and guidelines.
- *Develop an on-arrival case co-ordination model for young people* – CMYI recommends the development of an on-arrival case co-ordination model that would provide a holistic needs analysis and tailored support for all newly arrived young people and their families.
- *Provide enhanced youth orientation and information* – CMYI recommends the development of a comprehensive youth orientation and information provision strategy.
- *Develop programs that build social capital* – CMYI recommends the development of programs that build social capital based on existing peer support and sport and recreation strategies.
- *Co-ordinate the rollout of cross cultural parenting programs* – CMYI recommends that existing good practice models of parenting programs tailored to the needs of newly arrived communities be co-ordinated and supported through ongoing funding.
- *Support greater family-school engagement* – CMYI recommends that support be provided to enable schools to employ culturally sensitive strategies to increase the engagement of parents and carers.
- *Further support refugee community development initiatives* – CMYI recommends support for refugee youth leadership and youth-led initiatives in the provision of holistic support for young people.
- *Develop community education programs and intercultural dialogue* – CMYI recommends increased support for community education programs that build understanding of refugees and humanitarian entrants.
- *Enhance research and data collection* – CMYI recommends funding for a co-ordinated approach to national data collection.
- *Invest in sector support* – CMYI recommends professional development and training for generalist and government services be enhanced to support culturally and linguistically responsive practice.

## **An inclusive society**

It should be acknowledged that even if there were an ideal service system, positive settlement outcomes for refugee young people are also highly dependent on wider environmental factors. These include economic factors (such as employment trends, the cost and availability of housing and the state of the economy), social factors (such as racism and discrimination, community attitudes and social capital), and political factors (such as the government's stance on multiculturalism and citizenship or foreign policy in response to international events).

These broader environmental factors are not immutable and can be shaped through public policy. The question is how the Australian Government, which “recognises the valuable contribution migrants and humanitarian entrants have made to our society and is committed to helping new arrivals participate in the community as soon as possible after arrival” (Commonwealth of Australia 2006a:3), plans for, evaluates and supports good settlement outcomes. Ensuring refugee young people are able to integrate and thrive in Australia not only fulfils our international humanitarian obligations, but ultimately strengthens our whole society.

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## A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

*By Faten Mohamed, Youth Facilitator, Centre for Multicultural Youth Issues*

Young refugees have greater challenges settling in Australia due to their pre-migration experiences. Many of the young people coming from my homeland, Sudan, have lived in refugees camps in Kenya, Ethiopia and Egypt. Although these camps are coordinated by organisations such as the UN and have support from different organisations, the conditions do not differ much. Most are unsafe, unhygienic and have limited resources and services. Young people are often there for long periods of time, some with family and many on their own.

In a camp there is never a sense of settlement, considering that many of the young people are there for more than a decade. These camps are meant to be temporary settlements, but unfortunately they frequently become ‘home’ for years. When young people and families apply for visas to different countries (one of which is Australia) they can spend years waiting for a reply. For many all they want is to leave the camps and to find a new home in a country that can provide them with better support and opportunities.

When young people receive their visas and tickets to come to Australia, they have little knowledge and understanding of the legal, social, economic or political structures in Australia. They often are unprepared for what is to come. When they arrive in Australia they are expected to learn a new language, new laws and new social structures within a very short timeframe.

Young people are often perceived to have the same problems as their parents when they first arrive in Australia. So for many agencies providing the family with accommodation and ensuring they have an income is considered sufficient support. Young people have different needs; and are under more pressure to learn English so they can support their families.

There can be strong expectations for young people to assimilate into mainstream society. These expectations often clash with the pressure from the family and community for the young people to maintain their culture, customs and religious practices.

During the settlement process many young people take on a lot of responsibility due to having higher English proficiency than older family members and parents, so they are often required to attend visits to agencies such as Centrelink or the doctor to interpret for their family members. In the process, young people may neglect their own immediate needs, including the everyday challenges of being an adolescent, such as peer pressure, identity issues and sexuality. Refugee young people often have

limited education when they arrive and need assistance outside of school to catch up with school work.

Young people from refugee backgrounds are suspicious of authorities, through many dealings with corrupt officials and organisations. For many, a visit to an organisation in a refugee camp would have been a very unpleasant experience. Dealing with law enforcement agencies or agents is unfortunately a horrifying encounter for many. As a result of these experiences, the settlement process in Australia for young refugees is challenging, for having to deal with so many organisations and services is overwhelming. This feeling comes through the anxiety of not knowing what is expected from them when they visit an agency and how they will be treated.

This can be prevented by employing other young people who have been in Australia for longer and have a good understanding of the political, legal, social and economic structures in Australia. The young people should get training and an incentive to share their experiences with newly arrived young refugees/migrants. Although this kind of assistance exists within communities, the scope is limited. Due to the reality that many have jobs, families, responsibilities, and get limited support from settlement services, very little can be done on a volunteer capacity.

Getting assistance for young refugees when they first arrive from people who are from the same age group, speak the same language and have similar life experiences, can make the process of settlement less challenging, with a decreased feeling of isolation and estrangement from the country, services and opportunities it has to offer.

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*Settling In: Exploring Good Settlement for Refugee Young People in Australia* can be downloaded from [www.cmyi.net.au/ResearchandPolicy](http://www.cmyi.net.au/ResearchandPolicy)

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