



Engagement of the African Community in the Northern Territory: Their Settlement, Education, Workforce and Community Participation.

Summary and Items for Consideration

Background to Project

As part of Australia's contribution to resettlement of refugees who have been forced to flee their home country and who have no prospect of a safe return to that country, the Northern Territory takes a proportionate number of these off-shore refugees for permanent settlement through the humanitarian program managed by the Australian government Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (DIMA).

Humanitarian migrants from the African continent have constituted almost 95% of the offshore humanitarian settlement program in the Northern Territory since 2000. As of 30 June 2006, a total of 661 African humanitarian migrants have settled in the Northern Territory, almost all in Darwin. The recent arrivals through the humanitarian program have vastly increased the previously small African community in the Northern Territory.

The Northern Territory's first Multicultural Policy, Building on the Territory's Diversity was released in February 2005, with four underlying principles; valuing diversity, fair access, encouraging participation and mutual respect. In accord with the special interest in the needs of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) selected the African community for a pilot consultation project to determine the community's self-assessment against the above principles.

Research Design and Scope

Based on the total number, ethnic and family composition, and age groups of the African community in Darwin, a sampling of 54 individuals were selected from the four largest community groups; Sudanese, Liberians, Ethiopians and Somalis. OMA engaged an external research consultant to manage the survey and four interpreters to interview the 54 sample members of the African community.

Settlement Experience of African Respondents

The majority of respondents sought refuge in neighbouring African countries such as Guinea, Uganda, Egypt, and Kenya prior to their selection for resettlement in Australia. Most have had traumatic and violent experiences, including permanent and temporary loss of immediate family members, torture, and have spent long periods in refugee camps.

The respondents indicated differing satisfaction with their initial settlement information on arrival in Australia. Less than forty percent of the respondents indicated they received information about employment, welfare services, legal services, and Northern Territory government services.

In the settlement difficulties survey, the highest difficulty ratings were; finding work, learning English, access to housing and access to affordable housing, accessing and understanding health services, childcare, maintaining traditional culture and family life, homesickness, and understanding Australian culture. Under the same survey, the least difficulty rating was having enough money.

In the settlement areas that are good survey, the highest ratings were; climate, economic environment, and economic opportunities, while respondents gave a negative rating to understanding health services.

The consultation indicates that the respondents have not had adequate information on accessing services, and/or the stage they received information did not allow for sufficient understanding of government and community services available. The provision of information starts from orientation prior to leaving Africa, to intensive support systems on arrival, and is ongoing through local networks.

From the source of assistance questions, it was clear that government welfare services, refugee support services and community associations provide the primary source of assistance to the respondents. Therefore, these may be the most effective mechanisms through which to provide increased information and support to new arrivals.

As African community groups in Darwin reach a critical mass and mature each group's capacity to provide formal and informal networks for assistance to community members, including new arrivals, should also improve.

The following items for consideration are based on respondents' ratings of settlement difficulties. They are primarily aimed at the Northern Territory government and DIMA, however, all Australian government agencies and community service providers can use information from this survey to focus their services.



Settlement Difficulties - Pre-departure orientation

The respondents' need for adequate information on the Northern Territory could start to be addressed within the pre-departure orientation program in Africa, including initial information about the Northern Territory and the Australian culture. African community members could be assisted to develop a package of appropriate information to be used at the orientation.

Melaleuca Refugee Services has indicated that newly arrived entrants from the humanitarian program who have undertaken the pre-departure Australian Cultural Orientation Program usually have a less stressful initial settlement experience than others who have not undertaken a pre-departure orientation program.

Item 1 – Settlement - Pre-departure Orientation - for DIMA and the Northern Territory Government

A working group of key agency and community members should analyse existing pre-departure information provided through the Australian Cultural Orientation Program and provide DIMA with any additional or modified information that might provide a more appropriate orientation for potential Northern Territory humanitarian entrants to limit the initial culture shock and settlement challenges they face.

**The Australian Cultural Orientation Program outline is at:
www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/settle/_pdf/AUSCO_kit_version_11.pdf**

Arrival

Apart from the structured settlement services provided by government and non-government agencies, the African community would normally be an effective support network for new arrivals from Africa. As the Africa community becomes established in Darwin, there should be capacity within the community to establish semi-formal networks of support for new arrivals in the community.

Where the African community needs additional resources to build that capacity, key agencies can provide support, mentoring, and grants where appropriate.

Item 2 – Initial Settlement – for DIMA and the Northern Territory Government

A working group of African community members, with government and NGO support, can mobilize support networks within the African community according to identified settlement needs.

DIMA, through the Settlement Grant Program, should provide African community groups with capacity building and training for support and advocacy for newly arrived African migrants.

Employment

There was a clear gap between the employment aspirations of the majority of the respondents and the reality. The surveys indicated that 19 respondents are currently studying, while 17 respondents are employed but only half of those are in full-time employment.

When surveyed for reasons preventing access to employment almost half the respondents selected lack of recognition of qualifications, lack of Australian qualifications, and the need for training. Prior to arrival in Australia, 43 of the 54 respondents undertook some economic activity and the majority were professionals, paraprofessionals, teachers or self employed.

Given the stated desire of the respondents to join the Northern Territory workforce in a meaningful capacity, and the previous workforce experience of the majority of the respondents, this is potentially an underutilised group in a period of skills shortage in the Northern Territory. Through joining the Northern Territory workforce, the migrants gain benefits of participation and understanding of the Australian culture. Employment provides access to the informal and formal information and support networks that operate in the workplace and there is a potential for workforce participation to address other settlement concerns expressed by the respondents.

The Australian government inter-departmental committee on humanitarian settlement identified employment as the major factor in successful settlement, and that the workforce participation of newly arrived humanitarian migrants remains very low.

When the Northern Territory government is asked to respond to the findings of Australian government on employment, it will submit the findings of this survey.

Item 3 – Employment

The Australian government should recognise the factors within the current humanitarian migrant intake that create barriers to participation in the workforce.

The Australian government should replicate pilot employment programs for recent humanitarian migrants across a range of employment categories until there is a critical mass within the workforce to serve as role models and mentors for other newly-arrived humanitarian migrants.

The Northern Territory government's 2005 election promise of employment incentives for refugees and non-skilled migrants such as employment and training placements through Kick Start, a skilled apprentice program for mature age migrants, a skilled migrant work program and assistance to gain recognition of overseas qualifications, should be fully implemented.

English Language

English language tuition through the Adult Migration English Program (AMEP) at Charles Darwin University is optional for new arrivals. Take-up of this option is encouraged by the relevant agencies where the migrants do not have sufficient English language skills to be able to fully participate in the community and the workforce and access services.

However, attending English classes continues to be a source of frustration for some migrants who are anxious to join the workforce, but acknowledge that lack of English may prevent them reaching their employment aspirations

Item 4 – English

DIMA should review AMEP contracts to recognise the particular profile of the current humanitarian migrant intake and ensure that these migrants receive sufficient tuition to achieve basic literacy and numeracy.

DIMA should ensure AMEP courses are sufficiently flexible to meet a broad range of learning needs, from basic literacy to English for skilled employment.

AMEP and the job network agencies should continue to work together to develop course materials and programs that provide a range of skills and information for successful access the Northern Territory workforce and realistic workforce entry expectations.

Accommodation

While the majority of the respondents to the survey did not rate sufficient expendable income as a difficulty, access to housing and affordable housing were considered very difficult by a large percentage. The latter may indicate that they were not prepared for the high proportion of expendable income needed for accommodation in Australia.

Access to affordable housing is a problem for the majority of Darwin residents on low income, however, the lack of rental history and possible bias against African tenants by agents and owners compounds the problem for the respondents.

Territory Housing has provided, through Melaleuca Refugee Services, 15 units of accommodation for humanitarian migrant's short-term accommodation on arrival while they access the private rental market. Territory Housing also provides humanitarian migrants access to the bond loan facility, and to priority and normal public housing.

Item 5 – Accommodation

Current housing options are limited to the Darwin area to assist humanitarian migrants to access health and education facilities. In future the Palmerston area may need to be considered for ESL education units and health services in order for humanitarian migrants to access the expanding accommodation market in the Palmerston area.

The African community cannot be insulated from the current realities of a limited and expensive private rental market and a long waiting list for public housing, however, DIMA, through the Settlement Grant Program, should provide capacity building for the African communities to support newly arrived community members accessing the private rental market, including knowledge of tenant's rights and obligations and how to prevent a negative tenant rating for the future.

Service providers funded through DIMA programs should continue to assist with advice to newly arrived humanitarian migrants on how to access the most appropriate accommodation, their rights and obligations as tenants, and budgeting for accommodation expenses. The service providers should also provide regular community information sessions on accommodation, with input from key agencies such as Territory Housing, the Real Estate Institute of the NT, estate agencies, and Consumer and Business Affairs.

Health Services

Access to and understanding health services is clearly a problematic area for the majority of the respondents. Issues such as lack of access to doctors who bulk bill and doctors who take new patients are applicable to the wider community, but there are specific difficulties for humanitarian migrants. Medical professionals and the patients experience difficulty with availability of appropriate interpreters, lack of medical history, complex and unfamiliar medical conditions and patients' lack of understanding of the Australian health system, all of which necessitate long consultations and cause problems for the patients.

Territory Health has provided an initial screening clinic for new arrivals to ensure the humanitarian migrants are screened for infectious diseases and other medical conditions and referred for any ongoing primary health care.

Territory Health is participating in a state/territory/Australian government forum, convened by the Federal Minister for Health, in recognition of these difficulties and to jointly seek solutions.

It is clear that the current intake of humanitarian migrants is presenting with specific medical problems, including physical and psychological, which require urgent response from the Australian and Northern Territory governments. Northern Territory government medical services are already stretched to the limit with the complex health demands of the indigenous community, which is proportionately a much higher percentage of the overall population in the Northern Territory than other states and territories.

Item 6 – Health

The Australian government should make exceptional and immediate funding available for initial humanitarian migrant medical assessment and ongoing treatment of complex medical conditions in order for the Northern Territory government and private practitioners/clinics to provide adequate medical services.

The Australian government should recognise and provide additional resources for treatment of humanitarian migrants' complex medical conditions that require pharmaceuticals not covered by the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

A Northern Territory health working group exists and will be made aware of the comments from the respondents. The working group should determine strategies to improve community access to Northern Territory health services including appropriate cultural awareness programs that assist both health providers and users of health services.

The Northern Territory health working group should work with humanitarian service providers to increase the flow of information between health service providers and the humanitarian migrant groups in order to improve access and mutual understanding.

Education and Training

Overall education was not considered a problem area although the respondents did find difficulty understanding the Australian education system.

The Northern Territory government provides a multi-lingual teacher's aide for each ESL New Arrivals Program class.

Item 7 – Education and Training

The Australian government should recognise the factors within the current humanitarian migrant intake that create barriers to functional participation in mainstream education.

The Australian government should recognise that the Northern Territory government provides in excess of 100% of Australian government funding for the ESL New Arrivals Program for humanitarian migrant students.

The Australian government should extend the ESL New Arrivals Program to provide support for up to two years for students who have had minimal and/or disrupted education and who need a longer period to adapt to the comparatively more complex Australian education system.

The Australian government should provide a multilingual teaching aide for each intensive English group to facilitate communication with students and their successful integration into mainstream education, provide humanitarian migrants with an understanding of the Australian education system, and facilitate communication between teachers/schools and humanitarian migrants.

The Northern Territory government should offer intensive English units in additional primary and secondary schools to accommodate the increased number of students requiring longer periods of intensive English.

In addition to Australian and Northern Territory government initiatives to improve understanding and participation in education, DIMA funded programs should provide capacity building for the African community to support and advocate for newly-arrived migrants.

DIMA should fund ongoing programs such as Families in Cultural Transition to bridge the understanding gap for humanitarian migrants.

The Australian government should provide intensive generic and targeted training and work experience programs to improve humanitarian migrant's access to the workforce.

The Australian government should provide employer incentives to provide workplace training for humanitarian migrants to facilitate integration into, and understanding of, the Australian workforce.

See Item 3 for Employment

Maintaining Culture, Family Life and Understanding Australian Culture

The respondents' comments reflect the challenges migrants face in combining their traditional culture and Australian cultural practices. The respondents also identified problems understanding the legal system, including domestic violence and child protection.

The current intensive settlement support services provided through the DIMA's Integrated Humanitarian Support Scheme (IHSS) is limited to six months which does not allow for the more complex humanitarian clients who require ongoing intensive support through torture and trauma counselling and other generic services.

Item 8 – Maintaining Culture, Family Life, Understanding Australian Culture

The Australian government should recognise the extreme difference between the cultural, social, economic, political and legal institutions in Australia and humanitarian migrants' home/host countries, and the need for exceptional transition programs.

The Australian government should recognise the higher level of experience African humanitarian migrants have had with torture, trauma, forced dislocation, loss of family members through violence, and other experiences, which require exceptional support programs to achieve successful integration into Australian society.

The Australian government should provide graduated periods of intensive settlement support through the IHSS from six to 18 months with funding for the service provider to continue all services for successful settlement of the more complex client cases.

The Australian government should provide additional funding to ensure programs such as Families in Cultural Transition provide training and structure for communities to develop skills to mentor new arrivals through the culture shock.

Childcare

As there was no qualitative data for this item it is not known why this was rated as a high settlement difficulty. Free childcare is available for the primary carer when s/he attends AMEP classes. Several women from the African community have completed their childcare certificate and operate childcare facilities which may provide more culturally appropriate childcare options for the African community.