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Submission to the Evaluation of Humanitarian Settlement Services and Complex Case Support programmes Discussion Paper

Prepared by the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria, and the Multicultural Council of Northern Territory

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA), the Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV), and the Multicultural Council of Northern Territory (MCNT) welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the *Evaluation of Humanitarian Settlement Services and Complex Case Support programmes* Discussion Paper.

FECCA is the national peak body representing Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy, and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to the Australian Government and the broader community.

ECCV is the peak body for ethnic and multicultural organisations in Victoria, and a member council of FECCA. It aims for a culturally diverse and harmonious society that is just, fair and inclusive and where all people have the opportunity to participate in and contribute to, community life. ECCV advocates for freedom, respect, equality and dignity for multicultural communities and strives with others, to build a strong, vibrant Victorian community.

MCNT is a community-based non-profit organisation that advocates and provides direct services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the Top End of the Northern Territory. MCNT promotes empowerment for people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through culturally appropriate advocacy and direct service delivery to ensure full participation in the Territory's social, cultural, economic, political and civic life.

We believe that the successful settlement of migrants and refugees is dependent on the quality and level of support they receive as they begin their new life as Australians and upon appropriate and adequately resourced early intervention measures. As such, coordinated settlement services and enhanced levels of support, tailored to meet the specific needs of people from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds are essential to

successful settlement. While Australia's refugee resettlement programs are generally very good by world standards, the complexity of issues that humanitarian arrivals face means that there are always areas for improvement and there is a need for systemic research on the ongoing needs of this cohort in order to foster best practice settlement strategies.

As such, we welcome the evaluation of the appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency of the Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) and Complex Case Support (CCS) programmes, as the primary support tools for newly arrived refugees and humanitarian entrants.

This submission was prepared with assistance from Melaleuca Refugee Centre (NT) and a number of Migrant Resource Centres and ethno specific service providers. We would like to thank all of them for their contribution.

What are the key challenges and opportunities faced by humanitarian arrivals in Australia? And to what extent do these vary across different cohorts and geographical locations?

Most of the refugees and other humanitarian entrants have experienced torture, trauma, loss and long periods of displacement and dislocation from their homes due to civil war and ongoing conflict. Many of them have spent time in situations of protracted displacement, in which they had limited access to health, education or other services and support mechanisms, as well as limited employment opportunities. These pre-migration experiences shape the complexity of challenges that new humanitarian entrants normally continue to face in their settlement process in a new country.

Some of the key barriers to their full social and economic participation relate to their language proficiency, ability to gain and maintain employment, access to adequate and affordable housing, education and health. These issues are generally consistent across different cohorts of humanitarian entrants and geographical locations, although they can be exacerbated by various factors such as the availability and adequacy of support services, existing community or family links and support, social cohesion levels in regional locations and the local economy and employment opportunities.

Employment and income status

Access to meaningful employment is often quoted as the most significant and recurring issue for humanitarian entrants. Employment plays a foundational role in the successful settlement of humanitarian entrants and contributes to fostering social cohesion, independence, individual self-esteem and wellbeing.

As FECCA has highlighted previously, this cohort can experience acute disadvantages with regard to their employment status and/or income status. During the initial years of settlement in Australia, members of this cohort are often vulnerable to insecure employment conditions, and may lack awareness of, or the ability to access, supports and services available to the broader community¹. Income data available from the Australian Bureau of Statistics *2011 Census of Population and Housing* revealed that almost 42 per cent of the humanitarian stream migrants were in the lowest income group, receiving an income between \$1-\$299 per week, whilst 21 per cent earned between \$300-\$599 per week². With regards to youth employment, a recent report released by the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network, *The CALD Youth Census Report 2014*, noted that employment

¹ FECCA, *Submission to the Standing Committee on Community Affairs regarding the Extent of Income Inequality in Australia*, September 2014, available at http://fecca.org.au/images/submissions/income_inequality.pdf

² Australian Bureau of Statistics *2011 Census of Population and Housing*

rates can vary across different state and territories, with the highest rates of employment for culturally and linguistically diverse youth being in Northern Territory, and the lowest rates in Tasmania³.

Language barriers

Closely related to access to employment is the issue of language proficiency and the adequacy of the language classes provided, including through the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP). This has been a recurring issue throughout FECCA's consultations with different communities who were concerned that, for instance, the 510 hours provided through AMEP were not sufficient to allow them to reach an adequate level of English. Some of the feedback noted the frustration of many AMEP students who, after finishing their AMEP classes, were still struggling with the continuing inadequacy of their language skills⁴.

One of the identified reasons for the inadequacy of the program is the fact that it does not cater for people who had no previous formal education and are not literate in their own language. Therefore there is a need for AMEP to recognise the learning needs of people from humanitarian backgrounds based on their previous experiences with the education system, educational attainment or literacy in their own language.

Feedback provided to FECCA also noted that in addition to AMEP, it is also important to have language programs that cater for different levels of English proficiency, including advanced language classes for people who have a good level of English but need to improve and practice spoken and written English.

It should also be noted that language issues are sometimes exacerbated by the limited availability of highly trained and accredited translators for languages spoken by newer arrivals. This issue is believed to be even more important in rural and regional areas where general access to translating and interpreting services is sometimes limited.

Housing

Access to appropriate and affordable housing is an additional key challenge that many humanitarian entrants face. The limited availability of public housing or ineligibility, means that newly arrived refugees and other humanitarian entrants are required to enter the private housing market soon after their arrival in Australia. If housing in general is not a major issue in some regional areas, those humanitarian entrants settled in or around major metropolitan cities face numerous barriers to accessing the private housing market. Some of the challenges they face include a general shortage of affordable housing, financial issues, lack of rental history, lack of understanding of the private housing system and discrimination.

Organisations like FECCA, the Settlement Council of Australia and the Refugee Council of Australia have conducted exhaustive research into the above and additional challenges that humanitarian arrivals face in their settlement process. For a more detailed analysis of these issues please consult the reports produced by these bodies.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ FECCA, *Multicultural Access and Equity: Strengthening connections between communities and services*, June 2013, p.61, available at http://fecca.org.au/images/stories/documents/Submissions/2013/fecca_multicultural_access_equity_report_june2013.pdf

Is the initial settlement period of 6-12 months an appropriate length of time for HSS clients to achieve the desired settlement outcomes and competencies?

Feedback received by FECCA has noted that the successful settlement of humanitarian entrants is being compromised by the current limited period for intensive settlement support available under HSS which is inadequate in properly addressing the needs of more disadvantaged humanitarian entrants.

MCNT recommends that in recognition of the complexity of settlement issues faced upon arrival by humanitarian entrants, the current nominal timeframe should be 12 months as a minimum for HSS service providers and, in valid circumstances, this period should be extended for certain types of assistance for vulnerable clients with special needs.

ECCV has highlighted the evidence indicating that it normally takes up to five years for humanitarian entrant to fully settle in a new country. Therefore the programme needs to be more flexible according to specific needs, as some issues such as those related to mental health do not appear until after the initial 6-12 months period.

However, it is believed that for a vast majority of humanitarian entrants who continue to receive intensive assistance beyond the 12 months period, the extended assistance could provide a “comfort zone” and instil for clients a culture of reliance and dependency. In order to mitigate the effects of a sudden transition from intensive support to more independent living, it is important to foster greater collaboration and communication with well-defined transition pathways between the HSS provider and SGP and mainstream service providers after the first 12 months of settlement.

Feedback received from service providers reveals that even the five year settlement period assistance is no longer practical because although many people settle within the five year period, most fail to do so and need additional support after the first five years. Despite needing tailored assistance they are expected to get support from mainstream service providers such as Centrelink. FECCA’s annual Access and Equity reports have repeatedly showed that mainstream services often have difficulties in understanding the specific needs and challenges associated with coming from a humanitarian background and fail to provide adequate and tailored support⁵.

Failing to provide the required assistance, many services such as Centrelink refer their clients back to ethno-specific service providers and Migrant Resource Centres. This is particularly the case when mainstream service providers consider that the client’s level of proficiency in English is not adequate. The Migrant Resource Centres are therefore facing a difficult situation as they are required to assist the clients referred to them in those circumstances but they do not receive funding for providing that assistance. Furthermore, community feedback suggests that since recently, Migrant Resource Centres can be subject to penalties or have their funding withdrawn if they are found to be providing services outside of their contracted settlement service agreements.

Settling clients who indicate they have links in Australia (e.g. family or friends) at the settlement location closest to their preferred link

Anecdotal evidence and community feedback note that family or community links play a significant role in facilitating successful settlement. Most of the humanitarian entrants come from collective societies where families and the community at large are at the core of an individual’s social and economic life.

⁵ FECCA’s Access and Equity reports are available at <http://fecca.org.au/projects/current-projects/access-and-equity>

Settling in a new country involves a series of intersectional challenges which can be mitigated if new arrivals have access to family and cultural networks which could provide a sense of belonging and can be a source of information, especially when language is an issue. Experiences of refugee settlement in rural and regional areas show that despite the availability of settlement support services, it is difficult to retain humanitarian entrants from specific ethnic groups in such locations if there are no established community networks and supporting infrastructure from their particular ethnic or cultural group.

As an instance, this has been a factor that has been considered in the effective resettlement of recent arrivals of Congolese humanitarian entrants in Darwin. The existing established Congolese community in Darwin is an effective and welcoming host community that provides mentoring and logistical support to recent arrivals. In general, the positive and productive settlement outcomes for humanitarian entrants in Darwin have been dependent on the maintenance of sustainable HSS service provision and an effective “critical mass” for the populations of recently-arrived and emerging refugee communities. A reduction in the quotas of humanitarian entrants settled in a region can have effects on the “critical mass” locally and can impact on the identity and viability for some smaller refugee communities.

How successful is regional settlement?

Refugee settlement has been the subject of numerous studies over the years, the most recent and relevant of these being the *Regional retention of migrants: critical success factors* produced by the Department of Immigration and Border Protection and available at: http://www.immi.gov.au/media/publications/research/_pdf/regional-retention-migrants.pdf

FECCA believes that regional settlement provides both opportunities and challenges for both host communities and those settled. As FECCA has highlighted on previous occasions, refugees and other humanitarian entrants often live most of their lives in rural or inland communities that are similar to the environment in rural Australia. As a result, they may be used to living in remote areas and may feel like they 'don't belong in the city'⁶.

Encouraging their settlement in rural areas may therefore not only provide a suitable settlement options for them, but would also benefit the rural society and economy in which they settle, help to maintain populations and economies, address labour shortages and foster innovation. Moreover, regional settlement utilises existing capacity in regional areas, recognises the potential of humanitarian entrants, and reduces the load on settlement services in metropolitan areas.

However, attracting and retaining humanitarian entrants in rural and regional areas can pose various challenges and require coordinated and adequate planning and funding. Local communities, local governments and local businesses are required to work together to ensure that appropriate and integrated support services are available to people settling in such areas.

Some of the key challenges for refugee communities are similar to those faced by all mainstream communities living in rural and regional Australia. These include remoteness and social isolation, poor infrastructure, limited transport options, limited provision of health, employment and education services, difficulties in finding adequate housing as well as limited employment opportunities. However these issues are exacerbated for humanitarian entrants due to their specific circumstances, such as low English proficiency,

⁶ FECCA, *Submission to the Inquiry into regional skills relocation*, June 2010, available at http://www.fecca.org.au/images/stories/documents/Submissions/2010/submissions_2010028.pdf

limited access to cultural and religious institutions, experience of torture and/or trauma, racism, labelling and stereotyping.

With regards to the challenges faced by service providers in regional areas FECCA has received mixed feedback. Some perspectives noted that refugee settlement in rural and regional areas had some benefits, because communities were more intimate, and it was easier than in large cities to achieve collaboration between service providers. However, other perspectives believed that the resources invested by settlement workers and organisations in regional areas to welcome and settle new arrivals can at times prove unsuccessful and can result in a loss of investment for the community. This happens when despite the significant resources invested, many humanitarian entrants leave the region soon after their arrival there due to having difficulties with securing employment or reasonable housing or because of a lack of family or community links.

For a more detailed discussion about the key challenges faced by culturally and linguistically diverse communities in rural and regional Australia, including recommendations towards fostering sustainable regional immigration and humanitarian settlement, FECCA recommends consultation of its previous submissions to the *Inquiry into the Development of Northern Australia*, available at:

<http://fecca.org.au/images/submissions/fecca%20submission%20-%20jsc%20northern%20australia.pdf> and

<http://fecca.org.au/images/submissions/fecca%20submission%20on%20the%20green%20paper%20on%20developing%20northern%20australia.pdf> .

FECCA, ECCV and MCNT are grateful for the opportunity to make a contribution to evaluation of HSS and CCS, and invites E&Y to contact the FECCA Office on (02) 6282 5755 or at admin@fecca.org.au for further information.