



FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE REFERENCES COMMITTEE

**SUBMISSION TO THE INQUIRY INTO**

# **ISSUES FACING DIASPORA COMMUNITIES IN AUSTRALIA**

*August 2020*



*Photo courtesy: NRAAG's Inaugural National Refugee Dialogue 2020*

# 1 About NRAAG and this submission

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The National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group (NRAAG) is a refugee led entity that envisions to create spaces, platforms and strong voices led by former refugees, people from refugee-like backgrounds and people seeking asylum in key decision-making tables, policy, public and media discourse. NRAAG aims to inform key policies, service delivery, campaigns, research, and key initiatives affecting the lives of its constituents with a range of partners and allies. NRAAG is a national entity, whose steering committee is composed of highly engaged individuals who are connectors, drivers and bridges between the diaspora communities and the wider community.

## How have we informed our submission

In addition to important feedback our steering committee, diaspora individuals have provided, we held a focused consultation with over 16 representatives of refugee communities from across Australia. We conducted this consultation online through ZOOM and workshops as focus groups.

## The importance of NRAAG's voice on subject of refugee diaspora issues and solutions

Our steering committee is composed of individuals who are highly connected to their communities and who share important and trusting relationships with their individual diaspora communities. We share important local, state based and national and transnational links with diaspora communities across the world, and with their communities in their countries of origin. While our communities have been forcibly displaced from their countries of origin with many leaving our immediate families and communities behind to seek safety, we maintain an ongoing and active relationship with our countries of origin and communities across the world. To this end we also have an active interest in political affairs, development programs and responses by the Australian Government in relation to our countries of origin across the world and our communities in Australia and elsewhere. This presents an opportunity for us as diaspora communities as well as the Australian Government to be informed by our lived and work experiences as well as active links, and contributions. Due to direct interest and stake we put significant value on being part of an inclusive, accepting, strong and cohesive Australian society.

Hence, NRAAG welcomes the Senate Committee for this important opportunity for diaspora organisations like NRAAG whose feedback is entirely informed by the community. While the experiences of refugee diasporas are marked by displacement and loss, refugee diasporas are deeply committed to rebuilding, strengthening the health, economic and social well-being of their communities and give back to their regions of origin and contribute to peace building, humanitarian responses and challenges. Australian government plays an ongoing and important role in the countries of origin that many refugees come from. We hope that our feedback helps foster better coordination between the Australian government and refugee diasporas in Australia.

We also would like to take this opportunity to strongly endorse the submission made by Refugee Council of Australia.

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## Summary of Recommendations

### **Support offered to community associations**

- 1. The Government should invest in essential programs and co-design funding opportunities with refugee communities based on core needs addressing emerging needs of diaspora communities otherwise left unaddressed due to lack of funding.*
- 2. The government must ensure that fundings targeted towards refugee community members are accessible by diaspora organisations and associated support.*
- 3. Structures and entities within diaspora communities should be better supported to facilitate Government social policy objectives.*
- 4. The Government should undertake more qualitative and quantitative research on diaspora communities to better inform its services, trade and other policies.*
- 5. The Government should actively consult diaspora structures on issues of importance through a dedicated diaspora liaison unit.*

### **Safety, legal protection, and challenges**

- 6. The Government must end temporary protection visas, both TPVs/SHEVs to protect refugees from mental, economic and familial harm in the short term and long term.*
- 7. The Government should amend Direction 80 (or issue a new Direction) removing any distinction based on refugees' mode of arrival in Australia when assessing their family or spousal applications.*
- 8. The Government should allow family sponsorship of TPV and SHEV holders who have engaged Australia's obligation to be protected.*
- 9. The Government should reinstate legal assistance at all states of the asylum procedures to ensure a just outcome.*
- 10. The Australian government and communities should consult with well-connected refugee diaspora members in the process of producing official country reports.*
- 11. The Government needs to draw inputs from a range of sources, including civil society groups for better merited country reports.*
- 12. The Government should take into account the significant harm the current policies have had on the refugee diaspora.*
- 13. The Government should adopt policies that give refugees who have arrived by boat long-term safety and abolish the current temporary protection arrangements to maintain refugee diaspora's overall safety.*

### **Barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers**

- 14. Political leaders should adopt inclusive language and avoid exclusionary and diminishing language when addressing refugee diaspora communities to promote participation.*
- 15. The Government should support programs led by diaspora communities to better understand youth needs and issues.*
- 16. The Government should invest in community-specific contexts when designing and funding programs.*

- 17. Australia should encourage permanent residents to take up citizenship and to commit fully to Australia.*
- 18. To encourage participation, Australia should expedite citizenship applications of refugees who are affected by direction 80 to resolve the double barriers.*
- 19. Australia should create realistic pathways for TPV/SHEV holders to reunite with their families.*
- 20. To enable effective participation of refugees, enabling access to tertiary education through HECS-HELP and CSP is vital.*
- 21. The Government and health authorities should consider co-design approaches with the diaspora communities and inclusion of bilingual and bicultural workers as mandatory for Government responses that concern refugee diaspora communities.*
- 22. The Government needs to enable better employment transition through a targeted approach that caters for the needs of refugees.*
- 23. A specific and targeted entrepreneurship support program should be designed in collaboration with communities to encourage the growth of more refugee businesses given the empirical potential such through startup capital and ongoing mentoring*

#### **Strengthening communication and partnerships between diaspora communities and government**

- 24. Government consultations should inform priorities and raise issues should ensure a diversity of voices – in terms of gender, ethnicity, generation, and geography (spread of representation of earlier vs recent settled communities).*
- 25. The Government must ensure that refugee diaspora communities are represented in advice roles to inform Government priorities in a range of areas.*
- 26. A diaspora liaison unit be established by DFAT so that a clear and targeted strategy could be formed that can channel the role of relevant diaspora communities relevantly and accordingly internationally.*
- 27. The Australian Government to undertake further research to explore the roles played by refugee community organisations, the challenges they face and how they can be strengthened.*
- 28. The Australian Government should explore partnerships with diaspora aid and development initiatives and long-term projects in a streamlined approach.*
- 29. The Australian Government should utilise diaspora humanitarianism and their significant experiences as an asset that can complement government's aid and development objectives overseas.*
- 30. The Australian Government should improve its engagement with the diaspora communities in their diplomatic and bilateral aims.*

# 1. Support offered to community associations vs the need

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## Resourcing the strength within

- 1.1 The strength arising from social and cultural bonds within diaspora-based groups and structures are incredibly enduring and important to diaspora groups connected to them in Australia and other diasporas across the globe. Ethnic and diaspora community structures evolve and remain relevant many decades after initial settlement, as we are bound together by our deeply rooted social and cultural bonds. For example, children of Vietnamese refugees may still associate with Vietnamese ethnic organisations, although their reasons for connecting to these organisations may be very different from those of their parents.<sup>1</sup>
- 1.2 Diaspora organisations are strategically placed to flourish internal strength in members of diaspora communities, intra diasporic relationships, subgroups and family units. They are best placed to strengthen their community members' capacity to participate including the elderly, adults, and those otherwise marginalised within marginalized communities. The ability of diaspora communities to do this important work stems from the degree of trust attached to community centers, faith groups and cultural groups. They are best placed to work towards goals of building bridges, increase participation, solidify the unique identities and sense of belonging diaspora communities have.
- 1.1 Community run and led entities and groups both cultural and faith groups are trusted within majority diasporas. This may be because communities perceive external initiatives that are not community driven and informed as "attempts to fix them". Conversely, due to the nature of ownership and closeness diasporas feel to their internal community structures. Diaspora organisations carry their work from within and with a bottom-upwards approach and community members see these structures as extensions of their homes. The nurturing effects of these structures are extremely important in navigating the refugee diaspora's sense of identity in Australia. As some community members articulate how they see their community and cultural centres,

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*"These structures nurture us, give us a sense of purpose, home and belonging".*

## The need for upskilling of community structures

- 1.2 Considering many challenges facing diaspora organisations, such as reporting requirements, and other regulatory compliance requirements, it is essential to insert such resources as advice, expertise, ongoing mentoring to strengthen and enable the maximum benefit to diaspora members connected. Over the course of the last decade there have been numerous upskilling programs, including more tailored programs by organisations like Diaspora Action Australia, the Communities in Cultural Transition (CiCT) Program.<sup>2</sup> There is a need for these programs to be longer in duration and wider in reach across Australia to be effective in the long term.
- 1.3 Refugee Diaspora organisations need upskilling in such matters such as grant writing, fundraising outside their own ethnic communities, evaluation and monitoring, project management and

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<sup>1</sup> Gio gas D (2000) *Community formation and social capital in Australia*, Paper delivered to the 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.startts.org.au/services/community-services/communities-in-cultural-transition/>

understanding legal and regulatory requirements. There is also an ongoing need for mentoring with an intention of driving community structures to be sustainable, robust and responsive.

### The role of diaspora community structures in their own settlement

- 1.4 The role of the Australian Government has been instrumental in settlement of refugees, however, the role of refugee diaspora communities should not be underscored in their own settlement. The Australian Government's national settlement framework defines someone who is "settled" in terms of their social participation, economic well-being, independence, personal well-being, life satisfaction and community connectedness, ultimately under the banner of Australian citizenship. As noted above, refugee community organisations are extremely diverse structures and play varying roles depending on their organisational capacity and how and why they are formed. Most do, however, make a significant contribution to supporting good settlement outcomes as defined by the National Settlement Framework. Although by no means an exhaustive list, some roles that are played by refugee community organisations include fostering social participation, economic well-being, independence, personal well-being, life satisfaction and community connectedness.

### Barriers to sufficient and accessible funding including Government grants

- 1.5 Despite the many benefits, the full potential of diaspora structures become limited due to access issues for ongoing financial support. Currently, most streams of funding for diaspora organisations are limited to small and project based fundings that trickle down from other support organisations. This means that the tradition of applying for more substantial funding, for meaningful resourcing, has not been established yet. This is indicative of the fact that there is no community ownership over funding objectives nor there is a provision for much-needed community growth and empowerment.
- 1.6 Majority of diaspora refugee communities currently do not have sufficient skills for writing good grant applications that breaks them into the funding environment. An aspect of the issue is the language difficulty; whilst the other difficulty is the competitive nature of other applicants who supersede diaspora community organisations in understanding the requirements and likelihood of success. As for major funding there are no other equivalent funding, lack of success in securing funding means missing an important resource and a missed opportunity to strengthen diaspora communities.
- 1.7 Refugee diaspora are known to place great value on volunteering and fundraising displaying the community strength in times of need. Methods of fundraising however are limited to goodwill and the capacity of the diaspora community often with no external funding. Often this support is rooted in their moral conscience and religious obligations, and remains to be irregular, inconsistent, and ad hoc. This then carries the risks of fundraising fatigue, where donations appeals are sourced from the same supporters who are often spread very thin between financing their families here in Australia, overseas and community needs.
- 1.8 The good will to fundraise is limited to emergency needs and responses as opposed to forward-looking initiatives necessary for diaspora communities. Diaspora communities are the first respondents to the needs of their own community members both in Australia and in their home countries internationally when it comes to material goods, medical supplies and food. The lack of recognition of these qualities in relation to roles that refugee diaspora organisations perform has led to only short-term funding and grant opportunities for communities such as Harmony Day or community grants limited to a short project. There is a dire need of Government investment in enabling community structures and bodies to build robustness and capability to serve their communities' needs.

- 1.9 Donation fatigue and volunteer fatigue in refugee diaspora communities is rampant. Diaspora communities are predominantly run on volunteer capacity, and financial resources are gathered based on the amount of goodwill by diaspora community members. Refugee diasporas have internally raised funds for their entire lifetime. While this shows great self-reliance, it compromises diaspora community priorities on inward and subjective community goals rather than objective goals, goals shared mutually by the wider Australia. This also means that essential needs of emerging diaspora communities such as community cohesion, creating links and connections, issues pertaining to youth and family, their mental health and well-being are deprioritised as they may be considered as less urgent in the priority list of refugee diaspora communities.
- 1.10 Inability to financially resource the employment of dedicated staff, means that a significant aspect of is that the secretariat work or diaspora organisations depend on the “leftover” capacity of community members. So steering and daily responsiveness of community organisations becomes ad hoc and sporadic, and inevitably an afterthought second to individual’s primary commitments. Lack of a dedicated staff both weakens forward planning, developing better strategies, the ability to respond and follow up on everyday work of community organisations. There is an urgent need for funding as well as upskilling in fundraising beyond diaspora groups, and grants application to employ a dedicated staff and secretariat to enable capacity to respond and prioritize.

### **Recommendations**

- 1) *The Government should invest in essential programs and co-design funding opportunities with refugee communities based on core needs addressing emerging needs of diaspora communities otherwise left unaddressed due to lack of funding.*
- 2) *The government must ensure that fundings targeted towards refugee community members are accessible by diaspora organisations and associated support.*
- 3) *Structures and entities within diaspora communities should be better supported to facilitate Government social policy objectives.*
- 4) *The Government should undertake more qualitative and quantitative research on diaspora communities to better inform its services, trade and other policies.*
- 5) *The Government should actively consult diaspora structures on issues of importance through a dedicated diaspora liaison unit.*



*Photo courtesy: NRAAG's Inaugural National Refugee Dialogue 2020*

## 2 Safety, legal protection, and challenges

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2.1 Refugees seek protection through diverse modes to find safety in Australia. However, there are many refugees on temporary protection visas and bridging visas who fail to find safety even when they find themselves in a safe country in Australia. It is important to note at the outset refugee diaspora communities are very collective in nature locally, nationally and globally. Many refugees whether they have come to Australia through the humanitarian channels or have sought onshore refuge come from collectivist cultures which emphasise family and group goals. In the same way that they are culturally group oriented, they vicariously share the impact and dilemmas of their group members who include refugees on temporary protection visas and people seeking asylum on bridging visas. There are many issues relating to safety and legal protection that the refugee diaspora are grappling with. Some key challenges in relation to safety, legal protection and related issues are outlined below.

### Temporary protection is unsafe and insecure

2.2 Amongst many solvable policy challenges negatively affecting refugee communities is the temporary nature of protection offered to refugees after they have engaged Australia's laws and obligations to be protected. The current temporary protection regime for those who have arrived by boat after 13 August 2012 negates any sense of protection for people on Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) 3 years visas/ Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEVs) 5 year visas and Bridging visas (BVs) from rebuilding their lives.

2.3 Our community members report that the temporary protection regime has caused them further isolation, further complex mental health issues, separation from their immediate families, and inability to grow economically, socially, and personally. Temporary protection of refugees who need permanent and long-term protection is no protection at all and has directly limited the growth and

potential of extremely ambitious and industrious individuals. As such temporary nature of protection has been an antecedent of protection to a vast number of refugee diaspora members. A community member on SHEV provided that:

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*When we are constantly reminded that we might be sent back to persecution we have fled, the dreams of living in safety is taken away, and motivation for rebuilding cease. Our days become filled with anxiety, stress and lack of productivity. This anxiety can only be resolved when we are not constantly reminded about facing death again.*

- 2.4 Temporary Protection visas have posed serious mental health issues especially considering COVID-19. Refugee trauma is exacerbated when future visa security is not granted, disabling them from a conducive circumstance to feel safe. Lack of immediate and present safety takes away the trajectory to recover from the trauma they have gone through before and while fleeing for safety in Australia. This trauma is not only exacerbated but multiplied by up to 8 years of ongoing anxiety about their legal status, job insecurity, expiration of protection visas they have been granted that are limited to 3 or 5 years, separation from family members in urgent need of protection. So permanent protection visas have an especially important role to play in reversing these acute and long-term mental health implications for refugees currently on temporary protection visas. A community member on SHEV said:

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*If the Australian Government could take away our predicament very easily. They could do so with a stroke of a pen. Yet that is not happening, and we are feeling like a liability to ourselves, our loved ones, to our community and to the Australian Government and feel the need to engage mental health services, another imposed liability. We could be an asset if granted certainty after almost a decade of ongoing limbo about long term home and safety.*

- 2.5 The economic devastation of temporary protection is also evident in our communities for temporary protection visa holders. Their ability to secure long term, meaningful work and long-term economic investment and goals are hampered by the nature of their insecure and temporary visas. Insecure visas have led to joblessness and homelessness. The uncertainty of situations relating to refugees and people seeking asylum inhibit them from rebuilding their lives; most of them will not be able to secure a stable job and end up in exploitative workplaces without any employee protection or confidence in legal protection. People seeking asylum are often on short-term bridging visas which decrease their chances of securing and maintaining employment. This combined with the perpetual limbo they are in have had significant and long-term negative impacts on their ability to secure any job.
- 2.6 In light of COVID-19, people seeking asylum in particular are not entitled to any COVID-19 economic package, or extra support that Australian communities are afforded. The absence of this has already left thousands on the verge of homelessness and without basic shelter and food, thousands of people are not able to access the basic safety net payment, the Status Resolution Support Services payment due to very strict eligibility criteria. While states have stepped in an ad hoc manner to fill those gaps for their residents, the role of the Commonwealth government cannot be filled by emergency responses by the states. NRAAG specifically released a report “*Leaving Nobody Behind*” as a result of nationwide consultation with refugees and people seeking asylum.<sup>3</sup> However, while some recommendations have been taken on, it still remains to be seen whether the federal government will

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<sup>3</sup> NRAAG, *Leaving Nobody Behind* (May 2020) <[NRAAG National Consultation Outcomes Report.pdf](#)>.

issue people seeking asylum the same relief as everyone else and close the equity gap at a time of crisis.

- 2.7 Many of our community members report that they cannot plan for beyond 5 years (the maximum years of protection offered under the current temporary protection regimes for those who have arrived by boat after 13 August 2012.) Many report that they are not willing to invest in larger entrepreneurial ventures, as they might risk losing what they would potentially build by the time their visas expire where grant of another temporary protection visa will be subject to Government's recognition of their protection needs as a refugee. Hence, this economic loss for individuals and for Australia is significant especially in light of their likely success in entrepreneurship which will be detailed below.

### Recommendation

- 6) *The Government must end temporary protection visas, both TPVs/SHEVs to protect refugees from mental, economic and familial harm in the short term and long term.*

### Prohibitive family reunion policies

- 2.8 Members of the refugee diaspora who have sought asylum via boat and have been granted permanent protection visas (subclass 866) are affected by direction 80 that came into effect in December 2018. Direction 80 puts applications for family visas made by people who came by boat at the end of the queue. The only time applications can depart from the "end of the queue" rule is when there are compassionate and compelling circumstances present. However, our community members report that the circumstances need to be very extreme and the current criteria is vague and arbitrary. One man reported that,

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*My family escaped Taliban takeover of my village and were nearly captured on their way out where my wife's father was killed. They were traumatized in addition to suffering from years of psychological issues resulting from separation of almost 9 years. While in Kabul, there was a bomb blast near my house. My wife and my child missed being killed by few meters and few seconds. When I emailed the department to expediate my Family visa application, the department responded that their circumstances was not compassionate enough and that in case I was suffering from mental health issues resulting from years of waiting, separation and anxiety attacks, I should call the mental health hotlines instead. I was shocked at the lack of compassion and lack of reasonableness.*

- 2.9 Temporary protection visa holders such as TPVs and SHEVs, do not allow thousands of refugees the right of family reunion in Australia at all. Refugees on a SHEV have been separated from their family members for over seven years and are unlikely to be reunited for at least four more years under current policies. COVID-19 has deteriorated the level of anxiety for refugees. Delay in processing, the temporary nature of their protection visas has meant that many refugees have waited for 9 years to reunite with their wife and children who have grown up with one parent, predominantly a female in countries classified as dangerous for women. The family separation is having psychological, social, and financial costs for the individuals, while the wider Australian community also suffers from increased financial and social cohesion costs. Many of our community members have raised that their core families are breaking down due to prolonged separation. One man on SHEV said that:

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*What is of a symbolic, temporary safety when my wife and children can get slaughtered any minute? What is of the recognition as a refugee under the Australian*

*laws when my own child calls me uncle due to family breakdown and lack of familial relationship?*

## Recommendations

- 7) *The Government should amend Direction 80 (or issue a new Direction) removing any distinction based on refugees' mode of arrival in Australia when assessing their family or spousal applications.*
- 8) *The Government should allow family sponsorship of TPV and SHEV holders who have engaged Australia's obligation to be protected.*

## Lack of legal support

2.10 Members of our communities, especially people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary protection visas, put forward lack of legal assistance as a long-standing barrier in accessing a just outcome to their protection claims. Legal assistance has been particularly important because people seeking asylum may experience language and cultural barriers, trauma and vulnerability in the community. People seeking asylum's inability to afford legal representation while their protection visas are determined at departmental, review and appeals at Judicial review levels have led many to succumb to legal predicaments that they have not been able to navigate through in many cases. Many communities' members report that often they fall prey to exploitation at the hands of migration agents or legal representatives who charge exorbitant fees. Many endure long and hard days working at construction sites and single-handedly pay tens of thousands of dollars for legal fees. They also report that most community legal centres are inundated and may take on their cases where there is less chance of succeeding. Legal assistance is crucial to ensuring that people seeking asylum are afforded a due process, enabling them to navigate a complex legal system, properly present their protection claims, and challenge erroneous decisions.<sup>4</sup>

## Recommendation

- 9) *The Government should reinstate legal assistance at all states of the asylum procedures to ensure a just outcome.*

## Role of diaspora communities as knowledge holders in informing country information

2.11 Diaspora communities are important local knowledge holders in relation to their countries of origins. A particular issue that has arisen by our communities is the misalignment of the country reports available officially to the rapidly changing local situations. Many community members raised that country reports about the conditions of their countries of origin are often flawed with inaccuracy compared to what they hear through their families and friends. These official country reports play a major role in the refugee status determination of people seeking asylum. Even though these reports are produced with an intention to put the best judgement and assessment at time of writing independent of government policy with respect to the countries in question; many of our community members raised that it is unfair that the Department of Home Affairs (DHA) is assessing claims based on these country reports. Community members have raised with us that it would be mutually useful for the Australian government and communities if the knowledge of the transnationally connected diaspora community in Australia are utilised in the process of producing official country reports where relevant.

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<sup>4</sup> Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law, *Do People Seeking Asylum Receive Legal Assistance?* (Oct, 2018) <

2.12 Community members also raised that often DHA country reports can be one-sided and miss particularities of cases that need to be taken into consideration. This includes disparity in how varied ethnic groups are represented in facing the same levels of harm in their countries of origin in many cases. To address these disparities, there needs to be input from a range of sources, including civil society groups and other sources, to input into country reports. A community member raised that:

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*“Some reports say there are no issues and the country is safe equally for all, but we have families and communities in those countries that say otherwise.”*

### **Recommendations**

- 10) *The Australian government and communities should consult with well-connected refugee diaspora members in the process of producing official country reports.*
- 11) *The Government needs to draw inputs from a range of sources, including civil society groups for better merited country reports.*

### **Collateral damage to the wider diaspora communities**

2.13 Refugee communities come from collective communities where they have lived communally, have been collectively displaced and have sought asylum based on similar grounds of protection based on similar identifiers of protection. Hence, a state of prolonged limbo being faced with one group inside the refugee diaspora in Australian means great difficulty for the rest of the community members who are permanent residents or Australian citizens.

2.14 The large protection gap that has been left by the Australian Government in relation to people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary protection visas has left thousands in an indefinite limbo, and other diaspora members vicariously in limbo. Many of our community members feel constant survival guilt. While those of us who have arrived through the Humanitarian program have been offered full suites of settlement services to rebuild our lives, recover from experienced traumas and participate in the wider Australian society, others are stranded on insecure and temporary visas who had similar serious need for long term protection visas. Therefore, the diaspora overall feels vicariously in limbo, an overwhelming sense of helplessness and desperation to fix complex asylum issues thousands of our community members are facing.

### **Recommendation**

- 12) *The Government should take into account the significant harm the current policies have had on the refugee diaspora.*
- 13) *The Government should adopt policies that give refugees who have arrived by boat long-term safety and abolish the current temporary protection arrangements to maintain refugee diaspora’s overall safety.*



Photo courtesy: NRAAG's Inaugural National Dialogue 2020

### 3 Barriers to the full participation of diaspora communities in Australia's democratic and social institutions, and mechanisms for addressing these barriers

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#### Addressing the Impact of negative media and political scapegoating on social cohesion

- 3.1 The role of political leaders and their messages have an impact on all groups that sought protection in Australia including those arriving through Australia's humanitarian programs and those who have sought protection through onshore mechanisms. The constant negative media discourse and demoralizing messages from political leaders have greatly damaged the morale of the refugee diaspora from social connections to the wider Australian community. The ongoing debates about our community members who have sought asylum via boat as negative have made the entire community feel as scapegoats in the wider social and political spheres. This has created feelings of defenselessness, stereotypes, licensing xenophobia. In many cases, diaspora leaders have found themselves unsavvy to deal with the volume of wider community backlash towards them. As a community member on permanent protection visas said,

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*"We are human beings who have been born in a conflict zone, without having any choosing in our fate. We constantly feel blamed for finding the courage to leave and find a sanctuary for ourselves in our families. We are being punished one decade on due to policies that limit us."*

- 3.2 As a result of political scapegoating specific refugee communities, many of our community members find sanctuary within their own circles in isolation leading to more disjointedness. An example is the African youth in Victoria. Following a very loud scrutiny about South Sudanese youth as being criminals, African communities at large felt limited to their own devices and circles. This surveillance is exacerbated during periods of heightened attention on the 'black' African diaspora community such as when public figures, including politicians, and the media single out the community. The young people in our research described, for example, that they could rarely walk down the street or gather in parks in some suburbs of Adelaide without police coming to question them. These experiences of surveillance result in marginalization and exclusion of these young people from the broader Australian community.

### **Recommendations**

- 14) *Political leaders should adopt inclusive language and avoid exclusionary and diminishing language when addressing refugee diaspora communities to promote participation.*

### **Tailored and specific support to diaspora youth**

- 3.3 First generation or Australian born diaspora youth often share a different sense of connection to their countries of origins and culture and ethnicity compared to their parents. Whilst they may have some similar settlement needs, the way and the rate at which they integrate and participate in the broader Australian society is significantly different to the elders members of their families and communities. Oftentimes as the ones with better and faster grasp of the English language, they are also tasked with supporting their families to navigate complex systems and structures as they set on a settlement journey of their own. This coupled with the expectation to thrive due to the abundant nature of opportunities in their new home and to live a better life than their parents, contributes to an ever-growing intergenerational divide.
- 3.4 Due to growing intergenerational differences, survival guilt, and at times misaligned expectations to succeed against all odds, diaspora youth require tailored and specific support to meet their needs as they make Australia their home. Programs provided by settlement agencies must consider the complex nature of the relationship diaspora youth share with their culture, communities, and homeland. They cannot be catered for as individuals in isolation and their challenges removed from their communities. A lack of consideration to these factors when designing and funding youth settlement programs can lead to further segregation of young people from their communities and cultural circles.
- 3.5 Youth settlement and development agencies have historically placed young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the same population category and designed programs responding to their needs as one and the same. Young people from refugee backgrounds often come from highly persecuted communities and/or conflict zones with significant hindrance in their education and development. These highly sensitive and complex experiences are often overlooked and affect their participation in programs that are more inclined towards meeting the needs of their peers who have not experienced similar challenges or to the same degree.

### **Recommendations**

- 15) *The Government should support programs led by diaspora communities to better understand youth needs and issues.*
- 16) *The Government should invest in community-specific contexts when designing and funding programs.*

### Enabling family reunion

- 3.6 Positive settlement and meaningful participation of refugee diaspora individuals socially and economically require reunion of families. Full economic participation and optimal health and well-being – is only possible when people are assured of the safety of their family members. Majority of the refugee diaspora come from places where they put an extremely high value to the family, family roles and kinship. The current prohibitive family reunion issues for all stand in direct opposition to any type of meaningful participation in the Australian community. As people on TPVs and SHEVs have been found to need refugee protection, it is likely that their immediate families require urgent protection as well. Studies show that people cannot settle and start a new life while separated from their family while family reunion policies drift them further and further away.
- 3.7 Participation of individuals separated from their immediate families is seriously compromised. Social and economic participation trajectory remains untouched as primary needs for wellbeing remain out of reach. Participation in Australia's democratic institutions begin only when policies enable the reunion of families.

### Enabling access to Australian citizenship

- 3.8 Citizenship is a stepping stone social inclusion for refugees and an ultimate enabler to maximise participation of refugee diaspora communities in the Australian democratic institutions. The current delay excludes thousands of our community members from the Australian's government's own objectives of social cohesion and inclusion. Thousands of refugees have been waiting for up to 6 years for their citizenship applications to be processed. The government's focus on citizenship as a mechanism for exclusion in its rhetoric and some proposed changes is, therefore, counterproductive. We have heard from community members that attainment of Australian citizenship is both metaphorical in its representation and an ultimate bridge to ultimately finding another home.
- 3.9 Furthermore, for thousands of refugee diaspora community members, lack of citizenship has meant lack of political participation and delay in practice of their rights in the democratic system. Participation in the political decision-making process is crucial in promoting community cohesion and is a responsibility, refugee diaspora members who are Australian citizens; due to prolonged political scapegoating of their communities, face estrangement from confidently participating in the Australian politics. As one community members said,

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*"The political system is different here; the political parties have alienated refugees in the wider community. From the fear of getting absconded, It has been a discouragement for otherwise politically bright and influential leaders to pursue politics. In my community, we haven't been actively encouraged to participate in the political system".*

### Grant of permanent protection to refugees

- 3.10 Ultimately, the type of protection is determinant of whether refugee diasporas can participate in democratic institutions in Australia or not. As discussed in section 2 of this submission, temporary protection visas offer no meaningful safety that can form the basis for wider participation of an individual such as socially, economically, or politically. Importantly, while refugees who are recognised under Australian domestic laws to be protected as a matter of Government's obligation, offering a temporary protection (TPVs/SHEVs), at the very basic level does not fulfil the spirit of protection and safety underpinning our domestic laws in relation to protection. It is clear that

temporary protection visas will form as a specific barrier to social, economic and political participation.

### Extend federal government HECS loan to refugees on TPV/SHEV

3.11 Government policy effectively denies people seeking asylum and refugee on TPVs and SHEVs from access to further tertiary education. This is because they cannot access Commonwealth Support Places (CSP) and federal government loan schemes such as HECS-HELP and FEE-HELP. If people seeking asylum and refugees on temporary visas want to go to TAFE or university, they need to pay international student fees, often in the tens of thousands of dollars. With many of them struggling to find long term and standard work are forced to spread their income across many expenses such food, shelter and utilities, which makes it impossible to pay the rate an international student is required to pay. Many young people, university hopefuls and those who have survived great struggles are effectively barred from the lives they have sought to build. Many students report that they have scored and ranked very well in year 12 exams, yet unable to pay the fees and have discontinued studies. Many people have found themselves socially isolated and discouraged pre and post year 12 when they are effectively locked out from further studies as opposed to their peers indefinitely.

#### Recommendations

- 17) *Australia should encourage permanent residents to take up citizenship and to commit fully to Australia.*
- 18) *To encourage participation, Australia should expedite citizenship applications of refugees who are affected by direction 80 to resolve the double barriers.*
- 19) *Australia should create realistic pathways for TPV/SHEV holders to reunite with their families.*
- 20) *To enable effective participation of refugees, enabling access to tertiary education through HECS-HELP through CSP is vital.*

### Adoption of co-design and partnerships

3.12 There is a long-term underutilisation of diaspora communities to be part of their own solutions. Many community members say that although there are instances of consulting diaspora communities on some matters, the partnership on solutions is very underwhelming. A relevant example cited in our consultation related to the outbreak of COVID-19 in Melbourne public housing towers where many refugee community members resided. The manner of total lockdown, and lack of engaging any diaspora group beforehand, in the planning, during the targeted lockdown demonstrated that effective engagement with different levels of the government could have replaced the reactive approach put in place. Some community members pointed to the importance of bi-cultural workers and co-design methods in government responses with multicultural communities including refugee diaspora communities in the current context of COVID-19 as a necessity.

#### Recommendation

- 21) *The Government and health authorities should consider co-design approaches with the diaspora communities and inclusion of bilingual and bicultural workers as mandatory for Government responses that concern refugee diaspora communities.*

### Adopting a targeted employment support program

- 3.13 Finding employment is an important milestone from the perspective of a refugee diaspora individual as it marks for many the start of becoming active citizens and self-reliant. Finding meaningful work is a mark of prestige in the refugee diaspora communities as it signifies overcoming barriers, challenges and resilience in a new environment. However, despite the willingness, value and meaning attached to finding work, there are many barriers.
- 3.14 As Australia's refugee and humanitarian entrants are far from a homogenous group; they come from enormously diverse backgrounds and bring with them a range of skills and life experiences. There are, however, some common barriers that people from refugee backgrounds face in entering the Australian labour force which require a range of targeted employment transition initiatives, particularly in the early stages of settlement. Meaningful and adequately enumerated employment is an important factor in creating an enabling basis for the refugee diaspora communities to rebuild their communities in Australia, recover. Conversely, lack of meaningful employment opportunities, provides an impediment to meaningful civic participation in Australia.
- 3.15 Recurrently, refugee communities have reported that Jobactive, the federal employment program has not fulfilled their needs due to its lack of targeted nature as it is a mainstream program.<sup>5</sup> Research time and time again has found that there is a need for targeted approaches to supporting the employment transitions of refugee diaspora communities. In particular, targeted approaches meant service providers recognising the barriers that refugee entrants' face in entering the Australian labor market and that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to be successful in meeting the needs of such a diverse group of job seekers. The Government's Enhanced Network of Services which is currently being piloted, need to include the following approaches to fulfil the targeted nature of support required to promote better economic participation of refugees:
- Individual casework and referral to other services
  - Support with applying for work: job search, applications, and interview skills
  - Work experience placement
  - Career advice, guidance and planning
  - Pre and post-employment support and mentoring
  - Orientation to Australian work culture and systems
  - Employing bi cultural/bilingual workers, and
  - Addressing workplace and labor market racism

### Tapping on the opportunity of refugee entrepreneurship

- 3.16 Refugee diaspora out of necessity and inherent resilience start their own businesses. Refugees have had a remarkable success in entrepreneurship in Australia. They have created an important entry point into the Australian labour market and economic participation. Empirical evidence time and time again have proven that members of refugee diasporas are the most entrepreneurial groups of migrants in Australia. In particular, studies have found that Humanitarian entrants are nearly twice as likely to be entrepreneurs as Australian taxpayers as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Centre for Policy Development's recent report Seven Steps to Success provided that the latest figures from which data is

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<sup>5</sup> Refugee Council of Australia, *Not Working* (August 2017), <<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Jobactive.pdf>>.

<sup>6</sup> Seven Steps to Success (2019). Available at <https://cpd.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Seven-Steps-to-SUCCESS.pdf><https://cpd.org.au/wpcontent/uploads/2019/04/Seven-Steps-to-SUCCESS.pdf>

available, Humanitarian migrants earned a quarter (25.6%) of their income in 2013-14 via their own businesses.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, only 14.8% of other migrant group who arrived through family visa and 11.8% of migrants who had arrived at a skilled visa since 2000 earned their income from their own unincorporated businesses.<sup>8</sup> In 2013-14, refugees had a higher median income from their own businesses (\$15,716) than Australian taxpayers in general (\$10,960), and then either skilled migrants (\$11,717) or family migrants (\$13,559). Overall, refugees are disproportionately entrepreneurial than the average population and other groups of migrants not just in Australia but throughout other advanced countries.<sup>9</sup>

- 3.17 While the economic breakthrough of otherwise disadvantaged groups is a cause for optimism, there are challenges that refugee entrepreneurs face. Many people struggle to find capital required to start a business. Many lack Australian business literacy in relation to competition, markets, regulatory compliance frameworks and even available opportunities to have a start. In light of the huge potential, it is an important opportunity for the Australian Government to increase investment and targeted entrepreneurship support programs to further promote their economic participation which will lead to their social empowerment. To best inform what works best, it will be necessary to collaborate and co-design with communities and community structures directly to ensure that entrepreneurial capacities are directly strengthened, and that they could benefit from the full and direct support they are provided without numerous intermediaries.
- 3.18 There are many reasons as to the high rate of success of entrepreneurship within the refugee population. Both refugees on permanent protection and refugees on temporary protection visas face many barriers to integrate into the labour market, primarily due to lack of qualification recognition, lack of local Australian work experience, discrimination and downward mobility in jobs they are allocated by employment service providers. These factors both take away their agency in determining their careers and hinder their professional and career growth. The pre-migration experience, such as fleeing violent conflicts, being pushed to make difficult and life-threatening decisions to find safety either through boat, plane or on foot have given them extra agility in taking business risks. Agility combined with necessity has made them significantly important entrepreneurs in Australia and globally. There is a real opportunity for the Australian Government to invest further entrepreneurial growth in refugee diaspora communities.

## Recommendations

- 22) *The Government needs to enable better employment transition through a targeted approach that caters for the needs of refugees.*
- 23) *A specific and targeted entrepreneurship support program should be designed in collaboration with communities to encourage the growth of more refugee businesses given the empirical potential such through startup capital and ongoing mentoring.*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## 4 Strengthening communication and partnerships between diaspora communities and government

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### Improved linkages between new and emerging refugee diaspora communities and Government

4.1 The landscape of the refugee diaspora has been changing and the current community and government partnerships do not adequately reflect partnerships between new and emerging refugee diasporas such as refugee communities in the Asia Pacific, the African diaspora, and the Middle East. While some settled refugee diaspora who have come to Australia a long time ago may be better connected and synchronised with different levels of the Government, newer and emerging communities don't feel as supported with usually much more 'urgent' issues to be addressed. Community members provided that:

### Developing clear and targeted coordination with diaspora communities to advance Government objectives

4.2 While the Foreign Policy White Paper recognises the importance of diaspora communities positively influencing trade, aid and development, there are no clear policy structures to partner and engage with diaspora communities to their strength. Diaspora communities with lived experience, ongoing community interest and significant effort inside diaspora community pockets are an asset that can be better utilised to positively influence Government priorities and objectives.

4.3 As raised throughout this submission, refugee diasporas are directly informed, and engaged in their rebuilding and resolutions in their homelands. However, due to lack of clear method of engaging with the Australian Government, the refugee diaspora effort, volunteerism, humanitarianism fall underutilized and does not directly engage Australian Government's objectives despite close complement and alignment.

4.4 While we acknowledge that there are ad hoc engagements with members of diaspora, a collective effort with representative and central bodies within the diaspora communities have not taken place yet. This means that engagements are ad hoc and may lack long term impact. Instead, engagement with diaspora communities can mean that larger diaspora communities can have a better, enduring, and strategic influence on decisions made to fulfil specific Government bilateral objectives.

4.5 It is also important to keep in mind that the refugee diaspora community is composed of remarkably diverse groups. While community leaders who are contact points for many Government communications, communication needs to extend to the wider community and reflect the diversity, intersections, and regions within the refugee diaspora population in Australia.

4.6 The role of diaspora communities justifies a dedicated space that enables a seamless, clear, and centralised space for communications to take place in relation to diaspora communities. This is both needed both for diaspora communities to inform ongoing government policies, and a unit where the Government can easily navigate communications with diaspora communities over a longer period.

### Recommendations

- 24) *Government consultations should inform priorities and raise issues should ensure a diversity of voices – in terms of gender, ethnicity, generation, and geography (spread of representation of earlier vs recent settled communities).*

25) *The Government must ensure that refugee diaspora communities are represented in advice roles to inform Government priorities in a range of areas.*

### Role of refugee diaspora in peace building, aid and diplomacy

- 4.7 Experience of seeking asylum and seeking protection via all means is indeed a painstaking, difficult and out of sheer desperation. Refugee diaspora communities having fled situations of war and conflict seek closure by way or contributing to the rebuilding of their ruined “homelands”. Hence, refugee diaspora communities have an intrinsic tendency to contribute to resolution of situations of conflict they have left behind. While this has been done so far via aid and development by diaspora groups, the refugee diaspora is immensely interested in diplomatic, political and meaningful solutions to situations in their countries and places of origins. This is because they often have a large segment of their communities either contemplating flight or being directly affected by situations of conflict and instability. Therefore, there is a huge interest in the refugee diaspora communities to engage with the Australian government to support its peace building efforts internationally.
- 4.8 As also acknowledged by the Australian White Paper, diaspora local knowledge and unique networks help build on the international work of the Australian Government. As many refugee diasporas come from countries where there is ongoing conflict and instability, given the important role they could play in informing Australian Government priorities where the Government is engaged, it is a particularly important opportunity.
- 4.9 Diaspora led aid and development initiatives with wide outreach and impact have the potential to become important aid partners for DFAT in the long term with impactful outcomes. Hundreds of diaspora organisations are involved and highly experienced in raising funds for the purpose of aid and development and have built strong local connections, relationships with local communities in their countries of origin where aid and development is needed. However currently the structure of partnering with smaller, but effective diaspora aid and development initiatives do not exist. This is both a missed opportunity for the Australian Government and the subjects of aid and development in developing countries as the knowledge and inbuilt structures of diaspora are not utilised.
- 4.10 Given refugee diaspora’s long history of volunteerism, and of mobilising interest and resources to assist their communities back in their countries of origins, an important term of reference is formed to engage diaspora communities where mutual interests exist. For example, the Australian Government has played a significant role as part of the coalition forces, members of NATO, in aid, development and security in Afghanistan since 2001. There are thousands of refugee diasporas who have fled the protracted conflict in Afghanistan in the past 20 years. Refugee diaspora have formed community structures that mobilise and centralise diaspora communities in Australia and are on gathering support for aid and development for their communities in Afghanistan. Many are active advocates for the betterment of the system and enrich the research about the complexity and solutions to the conflict. These types of diaspora informed, and diaspora led effort is immensely useful in complementing the current Australian foreign policy objectives.
- 4.11 Another example is the negotiated peace process in Afghanistan. While Australia holds a position of influence as an ally state, diaspora engagement to inform its position, can be a very useful engagement which can both help the Australian Government and ultimately build on the 20-year worth of effort in rebuilding Afghanistan. For instance there is a huge interest within the Afghan refugee communities, especially diaspora communities belonging to minority groups in Afghanistan in shaping the negotiated peace process so that the outcome of a peace process does not compromise the rights of their communities back in their countries of origin.

## **Recommendations**

- 26) *A diaspora liaison unit be established by DFAT so that a clear and targeted strategy could be formed that can channel the role of relevant diaspora communities relevantly and accordingly internationally.*
- 27) *The Australian Government to undertake further research to explore the roles played by refugee community organisations, the challenges they face and how they can be strengthened.*
- 28) *The Australian Government should explore partnerships with diaspora aid and development initiatives and long-term projects in a streamlined approach.*
- 29) *The Australian Government should utilise diaspora humanitarianism and their significant experiences as an asset that can complement government's aid and development objectives overseas.*
- 30) *The Australian Government should improve its engagement with the diaspora communities in their diplomatic and bilateral aims.*