

Submission to the Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee inquiry into issues facing diaspora communities in Australia

By Ma'di Community Council of Australia Inc (MCCA), 18 July 2020

MCCA welcomes the opportunity to participate in this important policy process focusing on issues facing diaspora communities in Australia.

About MCCA and the Ma'di Community

MCCA is a federal not-for-profit community organisation that represents the interests of over 1500 proud Australians of Ma'di heritage. The Ma'di people in Australia originally came from the now Pageri County in the Eastern Equatoria State of South Sudan. We are a relatively young and new community, with most of our members having arrived in Australia 15 to 20 years ago through Uganda and Kenya where we lived as refugees for many years. We are a very close-knit community where members know each other very well.

Issues facing the Ma'di community

The Ma'di community has made a good start in Australia. Our members have embraced our newfound security, stability and opportunity to reconstruct our lives. Most of us have secured employment and some are investing in longer term social security, including housing, for themselves and their families.

Despite these, longer term prospects of a sustained upwards socioeconomic mobility of our community looks dim. We are concerned this could have adverse impacts on the safety of the community; weaken the resilience of our already vulnerable people; and preclude the community from fully participating in Australia's democratic and social institutions.

Higher unemployment is an ongoing concern among the 50 to 60 age demographic, or the *Elders*, in our community. The Elders arrived in Australia as adults with older children. Before arriving in Australia, most of them were self-employed or skilled professionals (teachers, healthcare and social workers) with secondary-level education and/or vocational training.

On arrival, this group was not adequately supported to transition into sustainable employment or any employment at all, either through formal training, retraining or other long term skills development programs. They also faced the most difficulties in navigating life in Australia during the early years of settlement.

Most members of this group are now renters, and have not accumulated retirement savings. A large number of them are not coping well without the dignity of work and self-sufficiency, particularly given most had worked all their lives, and in some cases were highly respected community leaders through their professions. We fear this group is at a real risk old age poverty, including homelessness and mental illness. The women in this group are at a particularly higher risk.

The Ma'di people have strong kinship structures and a well-developed culture of altruism, which form the bedrock of Ma'di social safety net. These virtues may guard against the above risk of homelessness, but may come at a significant strain on the younger generation.

Recommendations

- Treat this group as a special, vulnerable cohort in designing policies for older Australians, particularly in relation to retirement.
- Consider specific, targeted employment pathways to socially connect this group and give them meaning, dignity of work and opportunities to earn and save for retirement. An example of such pathways could include a specially-designed government-supported old age employment placement program with private and government organisations.

A career and income bottleneck is another issue facing our community. The 30 to 49 age demographic, or the *Young Parents*, is the hardest hit by this problem. Most members of this group arrived in Australia as teens and single young adults, having attained stable and competitive primary and secondary (and in some cases tertiary) education in refugee camps mostly in Uganda. Additionally, most did not migrate to Australia as a family unit.

On arrival in Australia, the group easily transitioned into further education, training and professional work – mostly of their own agency. By comparison to the broader community, this group has fared best. However, it is becoming evident that the progress it has made is plateauing now. The group faces particular challenges in transitioning into leadership and higher-paying roles within their professions.

Recommendations

- Support for professional development and career progression opportunities to improve their career progression pathways.
- Provide incentives for career transition opportunities, including entrepreneurial support.

Poor educational and training outcomes among the 18 to 29 age demographic, or the *Youth*. This group arrived in Australia as children and commenced or settled into schooling here. At the time of settlement, the community expected the Youth would attain the best educational and training outcomes. However, this has not been the case. With the exception of a few very bright spots, the group's educational and training results have been somewhat wanting, and there is a real risk these may diminish their professional prospects. Moreover, within the group, boys fare worse compared to girls.

In hindsight, we suspect the group's results reflect a significant failure of refugee settlement policy around the time of our community's settlement in Australia. For example, their school placements were not matched to their capability. The schools that some members of the group attended were not equipped with necessary support to understand and tailor teaching to their needs. Their parents and guardians, mostly the Elders, were unable to support this group as they did not know how and/or were themselves struggling to navigate life in the new country.

Recommendations

- Urgent intervention to deeply understand where things may have gone so wrong for this group, and design remedial policy interventions to improve their socioeconomic prospects. Possible interventions could include incentive structures such as mentorship and professional development programs geared towards supporting entrepreneurship and meaningful and stable work.

The Ma'di Community is ready to partner with the Government to design any such initiative. MCCA has initiated an annual Youth Conference in which this group comes together to discuss issues affecting them and participate in cultural events. The Conference has been running for five years now, which is encouraging. However, its outcomes have not found ways into public policy development. Additionally, MCCA has not been able to implement the outcomes due a lack of expertise and funding.

Grants, at both state and federal government levels, are often made available for specific purposes that do not necessarily cover all, if any, of the issues that this group raises. We suspect this reflects the limits of the current grant schemes. Broadly though, the Annual Youth Conference is an example of community initiative to tackle its own problems. Government can leverage this to maximise policy interventions.

- Provide professional 'apprenticeship' programs for our youth who have good educational outcomes and want to be winners, to enter and build careers in politics, law and business.

Inadequate social and educational support for the 0 to 17 age demographic, or the *Children, in our community.* Members of this group were born in Australia, mostly to the Young Parents. They have had it relatively better, and can carry the hopes of the Ma'di Community if they can be supported and prepared to face the challenges of their generation.

However, the prospects of this group are being hamstrung by the adverse career and financial circumstances of their parents, who have been hit by the double whammy of career and financial bottleneck on the one hand, and the rising cost of living (particularly housing and childcare) on the other.

As a direct result of the confluence of these two factors, the Young Parents have been pushed further out into lower socioeconomic areas. The Young Parents have been forced into longer work hours, leaving less time for them to mould their children, including through supervising their education. Financial pressures, longer work and work-commute hours mean less time for the Young Parents to support their children to access extracurricular tuition (such as in music and other arts).

Additionally, having been educated in Uganda, some members of the Young Parents also do not understand Australian school curriculum and pedagogy well, and are therefore unable to adequately supervise the education of their children. Other pressures on this group also adversely affect the fortunes of the Children.

Recommendations

- Relax the Parent Visa criteria, including possible elimination of the 'balance-of-family test' to ensure members of this group are able to bring to Australia (temporarily) their parents and other parent figures to relief them of childcare costs.

We think this would have added benefits of strengthening familial relationships, enriching the lives of our children and above all let our children experience the joys that grandparents bring.

This is important to us because most of our children have never met their grandparents in person. What is as normal as celebrating ‘Grandparents Day’ for their Australian peers is not normal for them. To the contrary, it is a sad day. Traveling often to South Sudan is not an option, given our financial circumstances outlined above, even if the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade’s travel advice level for South Sudan were not to be ‘Do not travel’.

- Support this group to understand Australian school curriculum and pedagogy to ensure they are best able to supervise their children’s education.
- Support opportunities for children in lower socioeconomic areas to broaden their networks, and access extracurricular tuition. An example could include an incentive program to enable talented students from disadvantaged areas to join elite schools in their states. The professional ‘apprenticeship’ recommendation above applies to this group also.

Broader recommendations

And finally, a large number of our members are often not aware about the range of government initiatives designed to support them. We suspect this partly owes to the fact that not all government initiatives and announcements reach our members, either directly or through the media. For example, our members do not ordinarily visit government websites, where announcements and initiatives are often published.

We recommend the government give consideration to funnelling policy announcements through a central portal to which Australians can subscribe and receive notifications as announcements are made– similar to the function on the Government’s *GrantConnect* website.

Acknowledgment

MCCA is grateful to Mr Moi Dominic Odubasa, Mr Philip Leke, Mr Julious Clement and Mr Martin Ja’Amme for their insights and advice in shaping this submission. MCCA thanks them for uplifting the Ma’di community.