

14 February 2014

Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

via email: jscna@aph.gov.au

Dear Committee Members

Inquiry into the Development of Northern Australia

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) thanks the Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia (the Committee) for the opportunity to make a submission to the *Inquiry into the Development of Northern Australia* (the Inquiry).

About FECCA

FECCA is the national peak body representing Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to the Australian Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are designed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion, and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

Introduction

New immigrants and refugees have increasingly been settled in rural and regional areas. Over the last several years, around 20 per cent of humanitarian entrants have been directly settled in regional locations. It is argued that regional settlement helps utilise existing capacity in regional areas, recognises the potential of humanitarian entrants, and reduces the load on settlement services in metropolitan areas.¹

¹ Commonwealth of Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship), 2013 *Getting Settled: Women Refugees in Australia*

While there are certain incentives for rural and regional settlement, such as economic conditions or existing CALD ties, it is critical that rural and regional communities, structures and services are responsive to and supporting of new immigrants. Adequate supports and equitable access to settlement programs and services are also imperative for maximising the economic and social value of Australia's cultural diversity, as well as fostering social cohesion and harmony.

The submission targets one of the Committee's objectives, namely, to *"identify the critical economic and social infrastructure needed to support the long term growth of the region, and ways to support planning and investment in that infrastructure"*.

The submission discusses barriers faced by CALD communities in regional areas by addressing key issues and focusing on specific challenges. It also makes recommendations towards fostering sustainable regional immigration and humanitarian settlement.

For the purposes of this submission, "Australian Government" refers to Commonwealth, State, Territory and Local Governments, as appropriate.

Key Issues

FECCA acknowledges that there are certain challenges faced by all people living in rural and regional locations in Australia, such as limited availability or lower quality of services (particularly health and aged care, education, and transport services), poorer infrastructure, limited employment opportunities, and social and cultural isolation.

For CALD Australians, however, these issues can be exacerbated due to specific circumstances, such as low English proficiency, limited access to cultural and religious institutions, experience of torture and/or trauma, racism, labelling and stereotyping.

The 2013 Mapping Social Cohesion Report, based on responses in a locality representing non-urban traditional Australia, indicated relatively low levels of support for immigration and cultural diversity among those who reside outside of metropolitan areas.

"Thus 59% consider that the immigration intake is too high (national 42%), 48% disagree with the proposition that 'accepting

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immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger' (national 29%), and 43% 'strongly disagree' that 'ethnic minorities should receive government assistance for cultural maintenance' (national 25%)."²

While encouraging the growth of CALD communities in rural and regional Australia is a welcome initiative that would contribute to Australia's regional and remote communities being more reflective of the diversity of the Australian population as a whole, it is particularly necessary for the Government to foster socially and culturally inclusive communities in rural and regional locations and to support initiatives in this regard.

Recommendation 1:

Australian Government should support and promote initiatives that foster social cohesion and harmony in rural and regional locations, including through multi-faith, multicultural and educational initiatives;

With growing CALD populations in rural and regional areas, it is important that the principles associated with the Government's Access and Equity policy are fully implemented in these locations. It is also critical that adequate planning and funding underpins inclusive structures, systems and supports to encourage the growth of regional communities.

Recommendation 2:

Australian Government should ensure sufficient, culturally appropriate and adequately resources support services for new immigrants in rural and regional areas, including effective settlement services, employment and training of culturally competent staff, and provision of interpreting and translating services.

With work underway to extend vital infrastructure into remote locations, it is important that all Australians, including those from CALD backgrounds, are able to access information about the services and understand how it will affect them.

Recommendation 3:

Australian Government should continue to extend vital infrastructure and services to rural and regional Australia and, in doing so, ensure that information provision and

² Monash University, 2013, *Mapping Social Cohesion: The Scanlon Foundation Surveys National Report 2013*

community engagement is culturally appropriate and linguistically accessible.

Employment

Employment is a crucial factor for empowerment and successful social integration of refugees and immigrants into broader Australian society and is one of the most effective means of fostering social cohesion in Australia. Employment is intrinsically tied to health and well-being, independence, dignity and the ability to settle into a local community. It also facilitates a sense of participation in, and belonging to, the community.

In rural and regional areas of Australia, where communities are often smaller and more tightly-knit than in larger cities, it is acutely important that refugees and immigrants be supported to contribute and develop a sense of belonging through employment. Moreover, the participation in community life that employment enables can decrease experiences of racism and exclusion, as racism often arises where social divisions lead communities to focus on their differences rather than commonalities, while also disregarding the economic and social benefits that accompany diversity.

Refugees and immigrants in rural and regional areas face distinct disadvantages in the labour market, both in and beyond the initial settlement period. Significant employment barriers in rural and regional areas include limited employment options in skilled vocations, limited training and professional development opportunities, limited cultural competence in organisations aimed at helping job seekers, difficulty in engaging with local Job Services Australia (JSA), discrimination and racism among employers, and lack of adequate support services in rural and regional areas which previously may not have had large enough numbers of CALD individuals to engage full-time culturally-competent and/or multilingual workers. In addition, low English proficiency and lack of awareness about employee rights often result in immigrants and refugees being taken advantage of by employment companies.

Recommendation 4:

Australian Government should increase provisions of employment support services through settlement services providers, multicultural and ethno-specific organisations in rural and regional areas.

Recommendation 5:

Australian Government should ensure adequate resourcing of JSA and other employment support services, including for employment and training of culturally competent and multilingual staff, provision of interpreting and translating services.

Recommendation 6:

Australian Government should support development and provision of CALD-specific education and training about employee rights, workplace requirements and expectations, avenues for reporting racism and discrimination, as well as professional training and upskilling opportunities in rural and regional areas.

Healthcare

Refugees and immigrants can face distinctive health issues that can be exacerbated by inequitable access to health information and assessment services, low English proficiency, lack of transport options to public health services, and lack of cultural awareness among health professionals. In addition to overall limited availability of specialist medical services, including torture and trauma counselling services for refugees, medical practitioners often experience difficulties in sourcing face-to-face professional interpreters.

Ensuring that rural and regional areas have sufficient and culturally-competent mental health services for immigrants and refugees is imperative in order to address pre-migration torture and trauma issues, as well as settlement barriers, discrimination, and financial insecurity, that can significantly impact on individuals' ability to participate in the community.

With many ageing immigrants, it is important to recognise the differing needs of ageing people from CALD backgrounds and ensure effective, culturally appropriate and inclusive aged care system in regional Australia.

Recommendation 7:

Australian Government should appropriately address complex health conditions of immigrant and refugee communities in rural and regional areas by ensuring adequate resourcing of appropriate health services and professionals, including refugee health nurses and trauma

and torture counsellors, and cultural awareness training health practitioners.

Recommendation 8:

Australian Government should support coordination between settlement services and mental health services to ensure appropriate support for refugees and immigrants in rural and regional areas who may have suffered trauma in their pre-migration experience.

Recommendation 9:

Australian Government should factor ageing CALD populations in rural and regional areas into policy design and implementation to ensure provision of culturally appropriate aged care services.

Recommendation 10:

Australian Government should continuously encourage, including through policy and practical measures, GP surgeries and specialist medical and health services in rural and regional areas to engage professional translating and interpreting services.

Recommendation 11:

Australian Government should support wide implementation of telehealth (videoconferencing) consultations to facilitate CALD patients' access to both specialist medical practitioners and professional interpreting services in rural and regional areas.

Education

Education is not only instrumental in facilitating employment opportunities but, for refugee and immigrant youth, plays a key role in fostering social inclusion. In order for rural and regional areas to be welcoming of and supportive to refugees and immigrants, schooling and the education system must be able to support and assist CALD students to participate in and achieve throughout and beyond their academic lives.

Recommendation 12:

Australian Government should support the development and implementation of cultural awareness training across school system in rural and regional areas, as well as the provision of support services to assist CALD students who

may be struggling with aspects of Western education, including English language training for primary and high school students.

Recommendation 13:

Australian Government should continuously encourage education facilities to engage with local CALD communities through outreach, providing language-appropriate information to families with low English proficiency.

Recommendation 14:

Australian Government should support English language training beyond the initial settlement period, with adult education taking a life course approach and recognising that language acquisition involves understanding a new and often alien culture, belief system, and customs.

Transport

Transport is intrinsically tied to employment opportunities, access to health and education services, and the ability of refugees and immigrants to engage in social activities, in particular in rural and regional areas of Australia where public transport is limited or non-existent. Many refugees and new immigrants, particularly women, arrive in Australia without driving ability or training. This proves a significant barrier to sustainable settlement in rural and regional areas, where driving is frequently identified as a key means of participating fully in the society and employment. Language, time, and financial restrictions hinder refugee and immigrant women's ability to take part in driver training programs.

Recommendation 15:

Australian Government should support and adequately resource linguistically and culturally appropriate driver training programs in rural and regional areas, with particular consideration given to the distinct issues faced by CALD women.

Recommendation 16:

Australian Government should prioritise public transport infrastructure as a key focus of town planning in rural and regional areas.

Legal and Policing Services

Refugees and immigrants from countries experiencing internal political conflicts can arrive in Australia with anxiety towards authority figures who, in their country of origin, may have been perpetrators of violence. This, along with cross-cultural conflict perpetuated by negative stereotyping and community racism, can create significant conflict between CALD individuals and the police in rural and regional areas, as well as Australia overall.

Issues around family violence and child protection can prove particularly problematic and damaging within CALD communities in rural and regional areas, as barriers such as stigma, lack of knowledge of, or access to, support services, and limited availability of culturally competent support may be disproportionately prevalent and damaging in rural and regional Australia.

Conflicts between culture, community and individual rights, ideas of family, and the Australian legal system can cause distress for new refugees and immigrants. Different cultural understandings of what constitutes appropriate childcare can lead to children being removed from their families, intergenerational conflicts, isolation of people from their own communities.

In regional areas, difficulties around refugees' and immigrants' interaction with the legal system are compounded by frequent limited availability of professional interpreters and translators for legal and court proceedings or within court support agencies. Lack of knowledge about legal rights can further inhibit refugees and immigrants in rural and regional areas from reporting family violence or accessing support.

Recommendation 17:

Australian Government should support the development and implementation, including via community outreach, of awareness-raising and education programs about the role of the police in Australian society towards eliminating myths and strengthening relationship between the two groups.

Recommendation 18:

Australian Government should support the development and implementation, including via community outreach, of awareness-raising and education programs about family violence and child protection issues, as well as about the Australian legal system in this regard.

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Recommendation 19:

Australian Government should support the development and implementation of cultural competence training within the police force, family violence prevention and child protection services, as well as the employment and training of multilingual staff.

Recommendation 20:

Australian Government should encourage, through policy and practical measure, resourcing of professional interpreters and translators for legal and court proceedings, as well as for family violence prevention and child protection services.

Yours sincerely

Joseph A. Caputo OAM JP
FECCA Chair

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