

6 The 'Resettlement Process'

6.1. It is apparent to the Committee that 'resettlement' is a complex process which requires co-operative and well co-ordinated action by government agencies, voluntary agencies and individuals. In spite of existing tendencies to think of 'resettlement' mainly in terms of settling people into new houses and jobs, it is clear to the Committee that much more is involved in the process; it commences prior to the refugees' arrival in Australia and continues until the individual has integrated into the Australian community. Furthermore, although a number of phases are involved in the process, e.g. pre-selection, selection, arrival, reception, orientation, post-hostel settlement, community support and so on—each are related and usually merge from one to the other, often overlapping several stages at any one time. It follows, therefore, that the formulation of a national policy for the admission of refugees cannot be viewed as two distinct and unrelated parts, viz. intake and settlement. (In many respects the process is similar for both refugees and migrants).

6.2. It is the Committee's strongly held view that as far as possible resettlement should be promoted through existing agencies, services and facilities. Full use should be made of these whether they take the form of Federal, State, local government or other official agencies or services, or whether they find their support in voluntary organisations (both national and international), community action or private interests. In the Committee's judgment this important principle did not underlie the 1975 intakes of Vietnamese refugees. In fact the evidence shows that the non-government agencies—and particularly those bodies with overseas counterparts—were regarded as nuisances by some Ministers and their departments. At the practical working-levels of departments, however, settlement has been dependent on the work of voluntary agencies and did not really commence until they were drawn into the various Commonwealth hostel situations as participants.

6.3. In some areas the role of official agencies will be to act as a catalyst to assist or to prompt non-governmental bodies in developing additional services. In others, new measures may well have to be taken by government agencies, particularly in those situations where refugees arrive or are brought to Australia *en masse*—whether as a result of the refugees' individual endeavours to obtain refuge or by means of assisted passage.

6.4. The resettlement process extends to all aspects of living within the Australian community, and within the different groups and associations that make up our society—including cultural, ethnic, economic, religious, social, sporting and other bodies. The Committee believes that a community response is an essential ingredient to the effective promotion of

resettlement. Accordingly, there must be a continuing awareness at all levels, of the special needs of the new settlers, particularly refugees and their families, the problems they face, and of their different cultural and economic backgrounds. In one way or another, the active participation of all sections of the community is called for.

Co-ordination of settlement work

6.5. Needless to say many problems arise when attempts are made to co-ordinate the work of voluntary agencies. Nevertheless co-ordination is required if we are to harness the experience, enthusiasm and energies of personnel within these agencies. Co-ordination must be effective but not heavy-handed and must allow for adequate cognizance to be given to the desire on the part of the voluntary bodies to maintain their own individuality and essential freedom. Clearly voluntary agencies prefer to give their help directly and to give it as an individual agency rather than to pool resources and to 'be organised' by some other body.

6.6. The type of co-ordination which the Committee envisages as working most successfully, is that which has evolved in practice within the hostel-based settlement committees discussed previously. We believe that in keeping with its responsibilities for the post-arrival care of migrants and refugees, the Department of Social Security is the appropriate co-ordinating body. It should assume this role formally—and with the support of its Canberra headquarters—without stultifying the spontaneity of those who are involved at the working level. Co-ordination should not be imposed from above on passive voluntary agencies who are seen 'to require organising'. Nor should there be any sense of competition with the voluntary agencies. Rather the atmosphere should be one of mutual co-operation and sharing of the particular tasks which crop up with each refugee group and situation.

6.7. Accordingly we envisage a situation where representatives from the Department of Social Security would chair settlement committees in each State or region. We believe that the voluntary bodies would welcome such an idea—providing they are not told what to do—particularly as they often prefer to direct their relatively scarce financial and manpower resources to getting on with the job in hand, viz. of providing practical assistance to the refugees. If adopted, such a role would relieve the Department of *some* of its burden of providing additional professionally-trained social workers.

6.8. In the context of these remarks, the Committee notes that representatives of both the Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs and the Department of Social Security indicated at the recent Austcare seminar on refugee settlement in Australia,¹ that government departments are not able to and nor should they be expected to meet all the settlement needs of refugee groups and individuals. Voluntary agencies, however, by virtue of their standing in the community are uniquely positioned to provide the

¹ Austcare (Australians Care about Refugees) 'Seminar on refugee resettlement in Australia'—Sydney, 22-23 July 1976

supportive services which are essential for successful resettlement. Furthermore, their services have been utilised heavily and at considerable savings to the departments concerned.

*Financial support
for voluntary
agencies involved in
settlement work*

6.9. The question of the cost of the aid provided by voluntary agencies is an important matter. While the Committee is appreciative of the considerable financial costs which voluntary agencies have assumed in providing settlement assistance to the Vietnamese refugees, we question the propriety of expecting voluntary agencies to carry such costs at what could be fairly regular intervals.

6.10. It is the Committee's view that the Government of the day must acknowledge the financial commitment which it necessarily incurs in voluntarily accepting 'hard-core' (and other) refugees into the country. Its acceptance (on behalf of the Australian people) carries with it an obligation to meet a far greater proportion of the costs—including those which are hidden—in resettling the refugees, for whom it agrees to provide a new homeland than is recognised at the present time. Insofar as we now have, and will continue to have, a resettlement 'scheme' which depends on joint partnership and participation of government and voluntary community agencies, this necessarily means an increased financial commitment to and support for the agencies involved. The Committee notes that this view is apparently shared by the former Minister for Housing and Construction, whose Department¹ stated in its submission that 'Notwithstanding the cheerful willingness of the agencies to provide this help it is our view that it would be inequitable to leave them to shoulder the burden of settling refugees into the community—at least without an appropriate measure of financial assistance from the Government'.

6.11. Although the Committee has not considered in detail the best ways of providing this support, scope exists for the provision of additional grant-in-aid social workers, revolving funds and resettlement grants. The particular support which is required in a given refugee situation should be worked out in consultation with the agencies themselves (and could well be a major task for consideration by the Refugee Policy Council which is recommended in the final part of the report).

*Requirement for a
comprehensive
policy to be worked
out for refugees*

6.12. It is apparent to the Committee that further refugee situations will arise in the years ahead. Needless to say, they will be of varying kinds and of differing magnitudes and may involve persons seeking refuge from Southeast Asian situations as well as from Europe, South America, Africa and other areas. Unfortunately, they are almost an inevitable and permanent feature of the modern world.

¹ Now the Department of Environment, Housing and Community Development.

6.13. In the Committee's view Australia will be confronted with many situations in which she can act to alleviate the sufferings and hardship experienced by refugees. Furthermore, in the world context, we are a technologically and economically affluent society and thus are in a unique position to play a significant role in this regard.

6.14. It is our judgment that Australia should be in a position to respond quickly to refugee crises and to offer assistance. We conclude that in the case of the Vietnamese crisis our response was neither quick enough nor effective. It could also have been greater. Our response to the plight and circumstances of refugees now in the Thai-based camps has been similarly inadequate.

6.15. Clearly the decision as to whether or not a particular refugee/evacuee situation is one in which Australia can and should offer resettlement opportunities or other forms of assistance, is one for the Government of the day to decide and will depend on a number of factors which apply at the time. The extent of our assistance will depend also on the particular conditions which prevail both domestically and internationally at the time. And, of course, this must be so. Nevertheless, we are concerned that in the future, adequate weight is given to the need for 'humanitarian concern' in the context of the other competing and often pragmatic arguments which will be put forward, such as our ability to provide employment opportunities, housing and welfare support.

6.16. In reaching the conclusion that Australia should be in a position to respond quickly and effectively to refugee crises, it is essential that there exist an approved comprehensive set of policy guidelines together with the necessary administrative machinery which can be applied to refugee situations. The absence of these inhibits our practical ability to respond to such crises and in turn can become justification for not responding to particular refugee situations.

6.17. The purpose of having a well-planned and considered program is to enable refugees to adjust quickly to life and work within a new environment—irrespective of the particular disadvantages from which they suffer in being forced to find a new and permanent place of residence. To the extent that this is achieved, two benefits will occur. The individuals themselves will be able to enjoy a full life. They will also be enabled, without unnecessary delay, to make their particular contribution to the country's economic well-being, and to its social and cultural development.

Termination of funds for the five year study of the Vietnamese refugees admitted to Australia during 1975

6.18. During the course of Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee's inquiry, concern has been expressed at the curtailment of funds for the study of the settlement of the Vietnamese refugees who were admitted to Australia during 1975. The project which was to have been conducted over a five-year period by Dr Jean Martin, a Senior Research Fellow in Sociology at the Australian National University, was initiated

by the former Prime Minister on 23 April 1975 and subsequently terminated by the Hon. M. J. R. MacKellar, Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs on 13 February 1976 as one of a number of economy measures undertaken by the present Government.

6.19. The Committee understands that the purpose of this study was to provide factual and objective data on these 'hard-core' refugees and thus lead to a basic and detailed understanding of the resettlement process. Such understanding would clearly be of assistance to the Australian Government in future policy decisions.

6.20. During the course of our investigations we received a considerable amount of evidence about the lack of a detailed refugee selection and settlement policy and the *ad hoc* nature of decisions over the admission of refugees from South Vietnam and other Asian countries during 1975 and the early part of 1976. Unfortunately, many decisions concerning the Vietnamese themselves, have been taken not on the basis of factual information but rather on the basis of preconceived notions or assumptions. Many of these matters have been mentioned in the preceding pages.

6.21. As a consequence, the Committee is concerned about the medium and longer-term settlement prospects facing many of these refugees and, perhaps, more importantly, other refugees who may be admitted to Australia as a consequence of international disturbances which will occur inevitably in the future. Clearly the effectiveness of the response which Australia can make to such situations, depends on the extent to which we understand how refugees differ from other migrants and what in fact has been the outcome of our manner of dealing with and responding to those refugees who are already here.

6.22. Although the Committee wrote to the Prime Minister on 20 April 1976 to express concern at the termination of the survey and to seek further explanation for the cessation of funding, we were informed that as a result of the Government's review of over 50 bodies of various kinds, it had been decided that 14 including Dr Martin's study, should be terminated immediately—in spite of the modest sum of money required for its continuation.³ The Committee regrets this decision and recommends that funds be made available urgently to enable the inquiry to continue into a second phase during 1977.

6.23. A copy of Dr Martin's brief progress report which was provided to the Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs on 1 June 1976 and to Senate Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee on 6 August 1976 is reproduced at Appendix 4. As many of the matters raised by Dr Martin have relevance to our own inquiry, we have drawn freely from her report.

³ viz. \$20 000 to complete a two-year study program.

*The need to
reconsider
prevailing
departmental
attitudes*

6.24. The Committee wishes to comment on several deeply-seated attitudes which we believe prevail within the middle and upper levels of a number of government departments.

6.25. In reply to information which the Committee requested concerning the bases which after-care services are provided to the refugees by the Department of Social Security, the Committee was informed that:

It has been Departmental practice to rely heavily on the professional judgment of its Social Work staff as to whether the onus of seeking assistance should be left with the former refugee or whether positive follow-up action should be taken by the Department. In some cases efforts are made to follow-up families who leave the hostel, especially when there is some doubt concerning their ability to cope while in others follow-up action is considered to be unnecessary and even undesirable.⁴ In taking this position the Department is prompted by the dangers of fostering long-term dependency relationships which militate against the successful settlement of these people. Efforts are made to encourage the former refugees to become fully integrated members of the community as soon as practicable.

There are, of course, cases where follow-up action may have prevented a subsequent crisis and provided relief from hardship which developed after the refugee family left the hostel. These cases are unpredictable or occasionally stem from an error of judgment but they should not be used to justify the extension of follow-up activities which tends to differentiate the former refugees from the rest of the community.

6.26. The Committee rejects the notion that the provision of post-hostel supportive services necessarily leads to the fostering of long-term dependency relationships. Indeed, we have stated earlier that after-care responsibilities may extend, in some instances, for a period of up to two years after the refugees' arrival in Australia and are an essential means of assisting the 'hard-core' refugees to integrate meaningfully into the Australian way of life. Rather, it is passive acceptance on part of the refugees themselves—cultivated in an atmosphere of mutual misconception and ignorance—which undoubtedly results in an ever-growing reliance and dependence on social welfare payments for their support. Contrary to the position taken by the Department, we see the post-hostel visits by trained social workers as effective means of encouraging the very qualities of self-help, self-reliance, and the desire for economic independence which, from our own first hand observations, we believe to be fiercely evident in the Vietnamese and which the Department acknowledges as vital for their successful integration.

6.27. The Committee is concerned also about the attitude expressed in the final sentence—that everybody should be treated as equals. In reality—and as demonstrated throughout much of our report—this is not so, and refugees clearly require differential treatment in order to have *equal*

⁴ In fact, the Committee is informed that prior to May 1975, i.e. for a period of 11½ months since the first arrivals at East Hills Hostel, little official contact was made with refugees once they left the hostel. The decision to pursue post-hostel contact work with the refugees in New South Wales was first taken at the 'Resettlement Committee' meeting on 5 May 1976, when the Department of Social Security allocated a social worker to the task of co-ordinating the program of follow-up contact work being carried out by the voluntary agencies—as well as making visits to individual refugee families.

opportunities in making new lives here in Australia. Nevertheless we believe that such an attitude is rooted deeply in the thinking of officials within the Departments of Social Security, Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Employment and Industrial Relations and in the Commonwealth Employment Service and Commonwealth Hostels Limited.

6.28. It is clear to the Committee that some considerable reorientation of basic thinking must occur within these departments. In particular there is need to accept the principle that in order to give refugees and migrants equal opportunities and equal access to services and benefits, the assistance which is provided to various ethnic groups must be tailored to suit their particular circumstances. While it is pleasing to note evidence on this occurring at the professionally-trained, lower, working-levels of departments, this is absent within the higher levels where a great deal of concern exists to ensure that departments are seen by the public to be giving equal treatment to all refugees, migrant groups and residents generally. If this principle of discriminating positively in favour of under-privileged groups is accepted by the Government and by departments, it carries a corresponding obligation for them to embark on a positive program of educating the general public as to the propriety of this approach.

*Ministerial
directions and
initiatives*

6.29. Finally, the Committee draws attention to the need for positive Ministerial involvement in the matter of the settlement of the Vietnamese, Timorese, Indochinese and other refugees. We regret the failure of Ministers—in the face of available evidence—to react decisively and with sensitivity to the refugees' needs. These latter qualities are basic requisites to the Ministerial directives and initiatives which are required, if the problems which have been raised in the preceding chapters are to be resolved and the recommendations which are made in the final chapter are to be implemented. Until this is done, some refugees may be little better off in Australia than they would have been had they remained in their own countries.