



## **The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory**

### **Submission on Australia's 2009-10 Humanitarian Program**

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Humanitarian Program Submission  
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#### **Introduction – The Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT)**

First established in 1977, the Multicultural Council of the Northern Territory (MCNT) based at Malak in Darwin's northern suburbs, is a community-based non-profit organisation managed by a board of dedicated volunteers. The MCNT receives operational funding from the Northern Territory Government's Office of Multicultural Affairs and project funding from various Commonwealth Government agencies.

As the peak multicultural community organisation in the Top End, the MCNT is dedicated to representing and advocating the interests, concerns and aspirations of migrants and refugees – many from non-English speaking backgrounds. It is the aim of service providers such as the MCNT to identify and address barriers to social and economic participation. The MCNT supports cultural diversity and promotes social cohesion.

The MCNT is funded by the Settlement Grants Program (SGP) to provide services and activities that promote participation and self-reliance for recently arrived migrant and humanitarian communities and encourage the settlement, inclusion and integration of these new arrivals within the Australian economy and society.

#### **Improving and Enhancing Australia's Humanitarian Program for 2009-10**

Australia has a commendable history in meeting its international humanitarian obligations in terms of refugee resettlement in the size of its program as well as in the quality of the settlement services provided. On a per capita basis, Australia settles more refugees and spends more on the settlement needs of these refugees than any other country.

Refugee families, having suffered persecution, social dislocation and protracted displacement, inevitably face serious challenges in successfully adjusting to their new environment and re-building their shattered lives in Australia. The MCNT has the following positions and recommendations about aspects of Australia's Humanitarian Program.

- The MCNT believes that that the size and composition of the Humanitarian Program should be based on protection requirements and not on perceptions of integration capacity. Australia's humanitarian response should be determined on the advice of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and an objective global assessment of circumstances and needs.
- The MCNT believes that the quality and quantity of information provided to refugees in countries of first asylum through the Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) Program has a significant impact on the adaptability and pace of successful settlement for refugees. A longitudinal study of refugees who have undertaken differing AUSCO classes, or none at all, would be beneficial in determining the optimal level of information for refugees to enhance settlement outcomes in Australia.
- The MCNT believes that there should be an increase in the number of places and more efficient processing of entrants under the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP). Individuals and families who have settled in Australia as refugees are often able to trace misplaced family members (usually residing in refugee camps) and apply, as a proposer, for the misplaced family members to join them in Australia.
- The MCNT believes that SHP entrants who are supported by proposers should be considered to be of equal status to refugees and be assisted with the costs of travel to Australia and accorded full access to funded settlement services upon arrival.
- The MCNT supports the abolition of the Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) and Temporary Humanitarian Visas (THVs) and believes that these categories of asylum seekers, now granted permanent protection, should be considered to be of equal status to refugees and be accorded full access to funded settlement services.
- The MCNT believes that all workers involved with refugee communities, including staff in the Job Network and at Centrelink, should undertake compulsory cultural competence training to create awareness and to communicate and interact more effectively with newly arrived refugees from diverse cultural backgrounds.
- Over the past decade 65% of refugees arriving in Australia are under 30 years of age at the time of arrival. Young refugees have specific needs that are quite distinct from older refugees and there are strong expectations for young people to assimilate into mainstream society. The MCNT believes that there should be a greater recognition and focus in the Humanitarian Program on youth issues.
- Although admitted on the basis of critical need and eligibility for protection, refugees are in general a highly resourceful and resilient group of people with a strong desire to succeed. While suitable employment and career development is critical to social inclusion and economic participation, refugee communities have lower participation rates and higher unemployment rates than for the mainstream community. The MCNT believes that in this era of a global recession there should be a focus in the Humanitarian Program on funded community-driven employment programs that provide work experience and mentoring, address structural and cultural barriers, and achieve sustainable outcomes for refugees.
- Families in Cultural Transition (FICT) and parenting programs for refugee families have had a significant impact on both individual and refugee community capacity to achieve successful settlement outcomes. Individuals and families in ethno-specific community groups gain confidence as they progress through these programs. The MCNT supports the continued funding and resourcing of FICT programs.

## **The Benefits of Multi-Year Planning and Funding for Community Agencies**

Over a number of years of experience in community development, the MCNT has become aware of the need to ensure longevity and sustainability of its programs and activities in funded projects. Project officers invest a lot of effort and emotion to gain the trust and respect of recently arrived communities. It is the MCNT's experience that intensive engagement and interaction with refugee communities during settlement, particularly for SGP projects creates expectations of continued support.

Community development projects are essential for social sustainability but are usually formulated according to short-term funding cycles. This has been a major issue for community agencies because community development does not easily yield results promptly. The complexity of client needs is not amenable to short-term project funding. Empowering communities and promoting self-reliance takes time.

When programs and activities become successful and achieve a level of acceptance in refugee communities there, is an expectation of continuity. Community expectations can cause frustration and disappointment when successful programs and activities are abruptly discontinued. The MCNT's clients are conditioned to intensive assistance and settlement services and not familiar with the intricacies of annual funding cycles.

The MCNT is aware of not promising the future of programs, activities or events which may be ultimately unsustainable and cause a loss in confidence from the community and employs strategies wherever possible to ensure sustainability for its successful initiatives and ventures beyond the funding period.

Eligible SGP clients are provided services from funded community agencies for up to five years after arrival. The MCNT would contend that in the interests of maintaining longer-term relationships with newly arrived refugees, there should be seamless delivery of services over a number of years to these clients without disruption.

All community organisations expend a lot of energy, time and resources throughout the year into preparing funding applications. The annual SGP funding cycle is a case in point. Service providers such as the MCNT need to fill out complex SGP application forms annually, even after the capability to deliver to clients has been demonstrated for a number of years.

Short funding cycles and the uncertainty of funding beyond the end of the current financial year have adverse impacts on staff recruitment, morale and retention. It also inhibits forward planning and the continuity of operations and can expose community agencies to high levels of financial risk and the lack of incentive for staff professional development and training.

Extended funding cycles will provide more effective longer term strategic planning by community agencies, the development of sustainable relationships with clients, and ensure more effective project delivery. Multi-year planning and funding cycles will improve the performance of community agencies through ensuring greater financial stability and flexibility to focus on successful activities and develop infrastructure for refugee communities.

SGP clients and service providers such as the MCNT would benefit from multi-year planning and longer funding cycles. Given that SGP service providers usually provide broad range of services other than SGP, there would be the capacity to quickly adapt SGP funded services and activities to suit the cohort of clients at any given time.

In conclusion, the MCNT supports the proposal for multi-year planning and funding cycles. This policy will optimise planning and provide greater stability and certainty for the organisation and the MCNT's employees and clients.