EU RESETTLEMENT SKILLS SHARE DAY – 15 MAY 2012

‘FOR US, BY US’ – INVOLVING AND EMPOWERING RESETTLED REFUGEES

Presentation by Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia

In February, Australia hosted a meeting of the Working Group on Resettlement (WGR) in Melbourne, with 65 delegates from 18 countries in attendance. The Refugee Council of Australia worked with the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship and many local NGOs in organising two days of site visits to local projects to support and involve resettled refugees, prior to the two-day WGR meeting. Delegates saw projects in Melbourne and in the rural cities of Geelong and Shepparton, in on-arrival orientation, housing, language learning, employment support, youth work, community capacity-building and government-NGO planning of services.

The feedback from delegates was overwhelmingly positive, with people commenting on the comprehensive nature of the support programs offered, the scale of the government financial commitment to making resettlement work, the constructive relationship between governments and NGOs, the fact that cultural diversity is widely seen as a strength rather than a threat and the very active role taken by former refugees.

Australia hosted additional visits of its two resettlement twins, Romania and Argentina, with the Department of Immigration and Citizenship organising visits to the regional cities of Coffs Harbour and Wagga Wagga. I participated in a discussion at the end of this program where we noted that the Romanian and Argentinian delegates, being from countries new or relatively new to resettlement, were observing the results of 65 years of mistakes and improvements to Australia’s post-war work in resettlement.

Australia began large-scale resettlement in 1947 and our early efforts to integrate refugees, while well-meaning, were somewhat patronising and much more about the welcoming society than the refugees. Much of the early focus was on getting the new arrivals to “assimilate” with little understanding of how Australia might benefit from other cultures and new ways of thinking. Our settlement programs have improved incrementally as we have increased the engagement of former refugees in the process.

The involvement of refugees cannot be tokenistic. We have to recognise that those of us who have not been refugees don’t fully understand what newly arrived refugees are experiencing. We need the expertise of people who do. To be effective, our resettlement programs need the involvement of former refugees in program planning and in direct services to new arrivals. We need to encourage and support refugee communities to develop their own structures and their own responses to the needs of community members.

There are many good examples in Australia of organisations involved in engaging former refugees in supporting newly resettled refugees. I will briefly mention two organisations whose work was highlighted during the Melbourne WGR meeting.

Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) is the organisation contracted by the Australian Government through the Humanitarian Settlement Services program to provide post-arrival support to refugees settling in Melbourne and the state of Victoria. Over the past seven years, it has employed more than 700 former refugees on a casual basis to assist new arrivals, through its Community Guides program.

Working as a Community Guide is often the first paid job the former refugees have in Australia. While many of them bring significant qualifications and work skills with them to Australia, getting these qualifications and skills adequately recognised in Australia is a real struggle. Australian employers tend to give far more weight to Australian work experience than to any previous experience in countries of origin or asylum. So the Community Guide program meets a pressing need to give recently arrived refugees the opportunity to demonstrate their capacities and reliability in the Australian labour market.
In recruiting community guides, AMES looks for former refugees with basic English language skills, links to their respective refugee communities, some familiarity with Australian services and the capacity to assist new arrivals. The role of Community Guides is to assist newly-arrived refugees to undertake practical tasks associated with their settlement, as a part of a case management plan. They provide refugees with a voice, becoming their advocates, supporters and educators as they settle.

Being a Community Guide gives former refugees a much-needed start to their working life in Australia. Many go on to work in associated fields as support workers, case managers, settlement information officers, employment consultants, housing workers, youth workers, counsellors in the Adult Migrant English Program and teachers’ aides.

The Community Guides program has been independently evaluated by the Centre for Refugee Research of the University of New South Wales. This report, titled “Unsung Heroes”, gives background to the Community Guides program and testimonies from Community Guides and others associated with the program. It is available at [http://ames.net.au/files/file/Research/Unsung_Heroes.pdf](http://ames.net.au/files/file/Research/Unsung_Heroes.pdf)

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) has programs for refugee and migrant youth in Melbourne and the state of Victoria. After my presentation, we will be crossing by video conference link to CMY to hear from the centre’s CEO Carmel Guerra and three young people of refugee background, Ahmed Dini, Munira Yusuf and Farah Faiq, about their work with refugee communities.

From its years of work with refugee young people and from specific consultations with its bi-cultural staff, it produced a guide to the strengths and complexities of bi-cultural work. This is very useful for organisations which are involved in engaging former refugees as staff in their programs. The report is online at [http://www.cmy.net.au/Assets/1780/1/BiculturalWorkerReportonConsultation.pdf](http://www.cmy.net.au/Assets/1780/1/BiculturalWorkerReportonConsultation.pdf) Attached is a two-page summary of some of the key points.
Strengths and complexities of bi-cultural work

From Addressing the strengths and complexities of bi-cultural youth and family work
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Strengths (identified by all)
“lt’s amazing how much better we work with communities with the knowledge and expertise of bi-cultural workers.” (Community services manager, CMY Bicultural Worker Network 2007)

- Greater service access by clients from refugee and migrant communities – workers who are trusted by communities can provide pathways for clients to access services.
- More culturally appropriate services – refugees and migrants who access youth and family services often feel more comfortable talking with someone from their own cultural background.
- Stronger connections and credibility with communities – particularly providing a link between services and new and emerging communities.
- Greater understanding of issues within communities (especially politics), and how to navigate these sensitively.
- Greater sensitivity to the needs, issues and experiences that young people and communities are facing, and ability to translate this into the service context.
- An opportunity to provide educative roles within organisations – informing/up-skilling other workers so that they can provide more effective and culturally competent services.
- A culturally and linguistically diverse workforce who can bring different perspectives and creative ideas to solving problems.
- An opportunity to break down barriers of ‘dependency’/need – new communities are not just seen in deficit as ‘clients’, but as workers as well.

Issues identified by bicultural workers

- There is a high degree of pressure to help – from individuals and community. The expectation is that you will be able to solve all problems and provide for everyone. Community can expect availability 24/7 – in work and private situations;
- Hard to maintain boundaries without risking offence;
- It can be hard to convince young people about working with their family – there may be more shame, fear;
- Young people may not want to talk to you – shame (depends on issue), keeping up appearances;
- Fear re: confidentiality being broken (this is sometimes the case, so it breaks down trust);
- You can feel caught between two cultures – you can see both sides;
- You may not be using all the generalist services that could help the client – want to take everything on yourself – maybe lack of trust in generalist services being able to really understand and do a good job;
- Worker may personalise the problems in the community more – ‘lt’s my issue/responsibility’;
- Other workers not taking responsibility for working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities;
- Hard to engage your community about the Western ways of doing things (like work practices);
- Workplace may not recognise the extra complexity of the work;
- Limited number of workers in many communities – workload can be very high. Worker burnout and exhaustion can be a problem;
- May be expected to work outside area of knowledge. Need to be very aware of the Australian system – may be new/unfamiliar to you too;
- Expected to understand every aspect of culture – other workers can be insensitive to the complexity of community politics;
- Where there are particular ideas/perceptions within own community about the organisation that you work for, this can create pressures (e.g. if an organisation is perceived negatively by community, worker can also be labelled as such).

Issues identified by managers

Recruitment of bicultural staff

- Recruitment processes can be a barrier to employing bicultural workers. The process in obtaining a job can be daunting, and the recruitment process itself may not necessarily give the worker the opportunity to ‘sell’ themselves. It could possibly be a worker’s first formal interview experience.
- Tokenism – Employing a bicultural worker for the sake of ‘diversity policy’ without proper support can set them up to fail. The organisation then thinks: ‘Recruiting bicultural workers is too hard/didn’t work’.

Skills development and career pathways for bicultural workers

- Workers sometimes get stuck in bilingual/bicultural worker roles (junior roles) and are not provided opportunities to move into other roles. This requires support for workers to develop different skills, recognition of existing skills, and willingness to invest in bicultural workers for future of organisation.
• All staff needs support in developing skills and advancing their careers within organisations. Where opportunities for advancement within organisations are not available, or there is a lack of recognition of the professionalism/skills of bicultural workers, then relationships between bicultural workers and organisations can appear paternalistic.

Providing effective supervision
• Supervisors making generalisations can be a problem i.e. sometimes things are seen as a ‘bicultural worker issue’, but actually it affects all workers.
• Issues with workers becoming client – Personal issues that impact on a workers’ capacity to do their job are invariably experienced by all workers (bicultural or otherwise) at some time, although the nature of difficulty may be different (e.g. illness, trauma, family obligations). Supervisors may not distinguish between temporary issues that arise and ongoing patterns.
• Managing staff in a cross cultural context – being able to negotiate age/gender/cultural/power issues is a complex issue for all supervisors in establishing good working relationships with those they supervise. Negotiating the complexities of power imbalances can be particularly difficult where the worker and supervisor have different cultural expectations of this relationship
• Tension around discussing issues of race and culture – Cultural issues and norms regarding respect for authority and workplace customs can be difficult for the worker and supervisor to discuss comfortably. Avoiding or ignoring the discussion of the influence of culture within the supervisory relationship may only worsen the tension between supervisee and supervisor. Also over-interpreting or emphasising the influence of culture on the relationship can have the same detrimental effect.
• Supervisors need to be cognisant of power dynamics within communities and between bicultural workers – potential of punitive relationship between workers from same community developing.

Managing workloads and stresses
• There can be unrealistic expectations placed on bicultural workers by organisations – bicultural workers are sometimes expected to respond to everything related to a particular community and be expected to know everything about a particular community. Unrealistic expectations can be linked to worker burnout.
• Managers may not recognise or have difficulty knowing how to support bicultural workers to negotiate the complexities of working within their own communities i.e. boundaries are naturally blurred and it can be very difficult for a bicultural worker to ‘close their door’ on someone from their own community, even if this contravenes an organisation’s policies or is outside a worker’s role.
• Workers may be called upon frequently by co-workers to interpret or to provide advice/support in situations drawing on their cultural knowledge. The skills, expertise and advice inherent in this may not be explicitly recognised within a bicultural worker’s work plan.
• Workers may be experiencing their own settlement issues, requiring flexibility from employers.

Workplace culture and practices
• Bicultural workers may be unfamiliar with the workplace culture and expectations of Australian community services. Managers/organisations can make assumptions that workers will have the same expectations and understanding, which can lead to misunderstanding if not appropriately and sensitively addressed. Issues around acceptable workplace practices can apply for any worker and should not be seen as a ‘bicultural worker issue’ unless related to a lack of familiarity.
• Those with limited English may experience problems using accepted ‘sector language’ i.e. terminology and phrasing. For example, the term “bad person” could be used to describe a client displaying a whole range of behaviours that are of concern. In relation to case notes where clear and concise language is needed, managers and supervisors often need to spend extra time to ensure work is appropriately documented.

Meeting funding requirements vs creativity and flexibility
• Managers must take into account the issue of having to meet funding body requirements as well as securing future funding. This can create difficulties in trying alternative and creative ways of working.
• Difficulties in recruiting bicultural workers include high demands of some work programs, particularly 12 month projects, where workers are expected to ‘hit the ground running’ and there’s no time for upskilling.
• Emphasis on output and efficiency can override the needs of the community. The ‘west is best’ view can infiltrate the workplace and can be dictated by mainstream services that are not fully aware of community needs and how they should/could be met.

Bilingual workers and interpreting
• Bicultural workers who are also bilingual are often called upon to act as interpreters, often without organisational policies or guidelines around whether or not a professional interpreter is required, and how/where this fits into their workplan.