

An unequal partnership: resettlement service providers in Australia

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The relationship between government and government-contracted refugee resettlement service providers in Australia needs to be based more on autonomy and trust.

In September 2015 the Australian government announced that it would provide an additional 12,000 places to resettle refugees from Syria and Iraq, begging the question of how the government would facilitate their resettlement. In Australia, the government relies on Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) to fulfil its commitment to refugee resettlement but there was little said about providing enhanced support for CSOs to cope with the increased workload.

Australian CSOs are key agents for supporting refugees who are on the path to becoming citizens, by advocating for their needs as well as providing immediate and ongoing support such as housing, health and education. In Australia in the late twentieth century, CSOs were encouraged to adopt a New Public Management model that emphasised competition and privatisation. CSOs had to tender for government service contracts that have now become the norm in the delivery of refugee resettlement support and whose contractual obligations challenge the CSOs' autonomy and model of partnership with government.

Support for refugees immediately after they arrive into the country is contracted

out by government to a range of CSOs. Resettlement services provided by these CSOs include assistance on arrival, information, referrals (to government agencies that provide income, health care, etc) and housing services. After a period of six to twelve months, refugees can access the Settlement Grants Program (SGP) which is also contracted out to CSOs to assist refugees with a range of skills including driving and job development.

Resource limitations

Although the range of support to refugees is not homogeneous across all CSOs in Australia, they are all equally affected by resources determined by government contracts. Agency frontline workers struggle to meet the needs of their refugee clients because they cannot find appropriate venues for their refugee programmes and have too few staff to share the workload and fulfil administrative duties related to their contracts.

For example, a key challenge for frontline workers is having to meet the needs of their refugee clients with part-time staffing. In Australia, the traditional employment of part-time workers in CSOs has resulted in

many CSOs relying on volunteers to run their refugee programmes, a situation supported by the government's National Volunteering Strategy. On the one hand, government contractual arrangements leave a gap between resources and the needs of refugees by limiting the amount of resources available to CSOs to employ full-time workers and, on the other hand, the government conveys a sense of concern for the welfare of refugee communities by encouraging volunteering among civil society to fill these resource gaps. CSOs are being forced to devise innovative solutions to meet needs in what is clearly becoming an increasingly precarious environment for refugee resettlement.

It is becoming more and more difficult for CSOs to fulfil their responsibilities to refugees within the market-like structures of government refugee resettlement programmes. CSOs advocate for individual refugees' needs and at the level of government policy. However, advocating for refugees particularly at the policy level is difficult for organisations that are in a contractual relationship with government.

There is a common perception among CSOs that their contractual relationship with government takes away any opportunity for advocacy work. For example, the re-introduction of Temporary Protection Visas (TPVs) in 2014 prevents CSOs from providing the full range of support to refugees as those on TPVs are not allowed to access the same types of education and training that are available to other humanitarian entrants; furthermore, CSOs are severely limited in their capacity to advocate for these refugees, whose resettlement is uncertain and under review every three years.

Recommendations

While the Australian government characterises its relationship with CSOs as a partnership, this relationship is in fact unequal and the government shows little appreciation of the views and concerns of CSOs on the resettlement of refugees:

"...there exists a cultural, absolute and total disconnect between civil society organisations like

me and government, a total disconnect on the issue of refugees. There needs to be a shift in the way contracts are written, a shift in the relationships and this needs to be on an equal footing and a true partnership in the true sense of the word." (CSO manager)

Frontline workers and managers of CSOs recognise that a contractual relationship with the government is the norm; however, they also assert that this collaboration must revolve around the main goal of fulfilling the needs of all refugees, including those on temporary visas. To ensure that Australian CSOs are fully supported in their efforts to resettle the new refugees without compromising the government's well-established processes of contracting out refugee services, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Government contracts must prioritise the resource requirements of CSOs to fulfil their service delivery obligations to refugees.
- The government should utilise the expertise of CSOs in refugee resettlement, beyond conversations with contract managers, to encourage different perspectives on how best to support the resettlement of refugees.
- As rural areas of Australia are fast becoming key sites of resettlement for Syrian refugees, CSOs operating in these areas will need improved levels of infrastructure and social networks to support the resettlement of refugees.

Enhancing the responsibility of and resources afforded to CSOs has the potential to improve the outcomes for refugees as they settle in a new land. Respectful government-CSO relationships – a true partnership – would serve to strengthen Australia's resettlement strategies.

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