

International Dialogue on Migration
Intersessional workshop on
**Societies and identities: the multifaceted impact
of migration**

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**Addressing the Complex Relationship
between Migrants and Societies**

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- Acknowledgements
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and gentlemen
- Fellow speaker – Ali El Mhamdi

Opening

I'd like to thank the International Dialogue on Migration for the opportunity to participate in this conference.

Migration and its multiple impacts on societies lead to on going challenges and opportunities for individuals, societies, and government.

Which is exactly why forums, such as the IDM, are so important, and why Australia is keen to be part of the ongoing dialogue.

The exchange of ideas, experiences and research are critical as these issues are, by nature, dynamic and inter-connected.

I am pleased that so many key agents in the discussion are participating in this workshop.

So I hope to give you today a brief flavour of the impacts migration has had on Australia and how we address the complex relationship between migrants and societies.

Australian migration

Let me begin by stating the obvious.

Australia is an island nation. We do not have the land-border migration issues many of your countries experience.

Australia is also a traditional migrant country. Today, our 22 million people come from a wide variety of backgrounds.

We:

- speak over 260 languages, including Australia Indigenous languages
- identify with 270 ancestries, and
- observe a wide variety of cultural and religious traditions.

In fact, about one in four people in Australia was born overseas and some 45 per cent of all Australians were born overseas or have at least one parent who was born overseas, including myself.

As a result, in less than a lifetime, Australia has changed from a primarily Anglo-Celtic society of fewer than eight million to a multicultural society of over 22 million.

Since 1945, we have accepted over 7 million immigrants under our nation-building immigration program, which has transformed our society and economy for the better.

The composition of our immigration program has also changed fundamentally. While Australia's large post war immigration program was sourced mostly from European countries, in recent times only 22% of Australia's new arrivals are from Europe.

In more recent times temporary migrants have also become a more prominent component of Australia's immigration program. This presents both new opportunities and new challenges, as seen with our large international student population.

On the whole, migration has made Australia a more cosmopolitan, outward looking and tolerant society.

68% of Australians agree with this proposition that accepting immigrants from many different countries makes us stronger.

Our immigration program has and continues to benefit us immeasurably. An Australian study by the respected economics consultants, Access Economics, released in 2008 show that migrants from that year's intake benefited

the Australian economy by \$610 million in the first year and by \$1.5 billion in the 20th year.

This is due in large part to our strong emphasis on skilled migration, whilst not ignoring the social imperative of our important family and humanitarian immigration streams.

Australia's immigration, citizenship and settlement policies and programs help strengthen social cohesion and support the successful integration of migrant communities.

- They begin with immigration planning and settlement assistance for humanitarian entrants;
- They include policies and programs which bring together migrant communities and the wider Australian society; and
- They continue with programs which encourage participation in Australia's civic society and the acquisition of Australian Citizenship.

The relative success of Australia's immigration, settlement and social cohesion programs can be put down to careful planning and management.

This has been overseen by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship which is now celebrating its 65th year of operation in its various guises.

However, as incidents such as the Cronulla Riots in Sydney in 2005 have demonstrated, we are not immune from some measure of racial violence.

There are inherent challenges in engaging with communities on sensitive issues. Ignoring community tensions is not a productive strategy.

Our approach is to enter into respectful dialogue to try and identify community tensions before they become serious.

At the core, it means having a strength-based approach to immigration and integration – the conviction that migration contributes positively to Australia's present and future.

People who migrate to Australia bring with them talent, skills, and experiences which enable our young country to have a global perspective to compete successfully in the international arena.

It means bringing everyone into the Australian story – without exceptions. Under our democratic and legal framework all Australian citizens are equal, whether they are original indigenous inhabitants, fourth or fifth generation Australians, or our most recent arrivals.

Introduction

I will focus my presentation on two key themes which guide our approach to develop and sustain a resilient and harmonious society.

These themes are:

- everyone belongs, and
- people need support sometimes

Societies, like the people who comprise them, are complex.

Of course, people who have moved to Australia from other countries are migrants.

However, like Australian-born people, migrants live in the wider society. Australians, regardless of their cultural or religious background may:

- participate in sports or cultural activities
- work in an office or factory
- use government services, and
- care for their children and loved ones

One of our tasks, as the federal government, is to ensure of such opportunities and activities are inclusive so people can

- engage with each other and
- benefit from government services.

So, how do the two themes, belonging and support, provide direction for policies and programs? Let me begin with belonging.

Everyone belongs

One sense of belonging means that everyone has a voice.

Having a voice can help migrants to integrate into the Australian economic, social and political environment.

There are three key structures for the government to engage with migrant groups:

- First, the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia, funded by the Australian Government, is the national peak body representing Australians from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Second, through specially tasked Community Liaison Officers, the government maintains contact with a wide variety of ethnic community organisations and individuals across Australia.

The network:

- provides advice on community relations issues
- disseminates information about government services and programs, and
- engages directly with migrant community groups.
- At another level, the Australian Multicultural Advisory Council advises the federal government on issues relating to Australia's cultural and religious diversity.
 - Throughout 2008-09, the Council developed its advice on cultural diversity policy, informed by views of a range of stakeholders.
 - Its cultural diversity statement, entitled *The People of Australia* was provided to government earlier this year.

- The government has begun the process of considering its response to the council's statement and recommendations.

Having a voice is also necessary in our everyday lives - to communicate with our neighbours, shop keepers, school teachers and friends.

Migrants can benefit from the government's Adult Migrant English Program which provides free English language tuition to eligible migrants. The AMEP has been administered by the Department since 1948.

- As well as English language tuition, some people can also take an employment focused course which includes vocational-specific English tuition and information about Australian workplace culture and practices, including work experience placements.
- This program also provides tuition and support to prepare for the Australian Citizenship test.

A sense of belonging means that everyone is welcome to participate.

Australia's experience indicates that programs and policies which assist migrants to engage with their local communities can enable them to participate and settle more effectively.

The government's Diversity and Social Cohesion Program funds local community organisations to bring people together.

- This work is undertaken through projects that address cultural, racial and religious intolerance by promoting respect, fairness and a sense of belonging for everyone.
- Some projects incorporate sports, interfaith and volunteer activities which bring together people based on shared interests.

- The value of such activities in building a resilient society should not be under-estimated.

A sense of belonging also means that everyone has equitable access to necessary government services.

Government services which are intended for all Australians will be most effective if they are appropriately delivered and responsive to the diversity of Australia's population.

The government's Access and Equity Strategy encourages and supports all federal agencies to respond to the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the Australian population in the design and delivery of policies and programs.

A final sense of belonging includes the opportunity to acquire Australian Citizenship. Eligible permanent residents are actively encouraged to secure Australian citizenship.

The government recognises that migrants who aspire to citizenship may require a range of assistance in understanding the obligations of citizenship.

- Consequently, tools and resources have been developed to provide all eligible migrants the best opportunity to become citizens, including learning about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.
- Around three-quarters of people born overseas who are eligible to take up Australian citizenship have already done so.

The Australian government has long recognised that citizenship is critical to ensuring migrants can participate fully and equitably in Australian society. That is why full Australian Citizenship is open to all eligible Australian permanent residents regardless of background.

Of course, English language skills and citizenship do not preclude people from people seeking additional support from government at various times during their life.

This brings me to the second theme: people need support sometimes.

People need support sometimes

Some migrants may have several reasons to seek government support, particularly when they first arrive in Australia.

Most government departments provide information in many languages.

- For example, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship provides information about life in Australia in 37 languages, including information specific to each state and territory.

For people who come to Australia through the refugee and humanitarian stream, support begins prior to their arrival.

The Australian Cultural Orientation program is provided to refugee and humanitarian visa holders who are preparing to settle in Australia.

- The program provides practical advice and the opportunity to ask questions about travel to and life in Australia.
- It is delivered overseas, by the IOM, before they begin their journey.

Support for this group continues after arriving in Australia.

The Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) delivered by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship provides initial, intensive settlement support to newly-arrived humanitarian entrants through a case management approach.

- IHSS services are generally provided for around six months, but may be extended in particular cases.
- IHSS services provided include:

- initial information and orientation assistance, including assistance in finding accommodation
- a basic package of goods to help humanitarian entrants establish a household
- information and assistance to access services and become part of the local community
- and if required, short term torture and trauma counselling.

For the first five years after arrival, the Settlement Grants Program provides organisations with funding to deliver settlement services to meet the specific needs of people in the community.

- Service support is provided not only to recently arrived humanitarian entrants, but also to
 - some family stream migrants who have low English proficiency, and
 - the dependants of skilled migrants in rural and regional areas who have low English proficiency
- This program aims to deliver services which help people to become self reliant and participate equitably in Australian society as soon as possible after arrival.

The Australian Government's proactive settlement and social inclusion policies help:

- ensure migrants settle effectively, and
- ameliorate the concerns that some established host communities may have with new arrivals.

While new humanitarian arrivals in Australia may experience higher levels of disadvantage than more established Australians, Australia's experience has been that most second generation Australians tend to do as well as longer time Australians.

Australia's multicultural policies also allow for, and encourage the celebration of any individual Australian's cultural, ethnic or religious heritage.

But there is a reciprocal obligation on new migrants to integrate, to the best of their abilities, with the host society.

They are expected to support key Australian values, such as:

- democracy
- the rule of law
- the equality of men and women, and
- religious tolerance

While most Australian migrant communities have successfully subscribed to those values, the government is alert to the need to ensure that new arrivals are fully aware of them.

The success of Australia's immigration program and its continued support by our host community depends of this mutual reciprocity.

That is, the acceptance and celebration of our cultural diversity under our shared legal and democratic framework.

Conclusion

To conclude, the dual themes of belonging and support are relevant to all Australians, regardless of their cultural, linguistic or religious background.

Our experience is that policies and programs which reflect these themes of belonging and support assist in integrating new migrants into the wider community. They also build mutual understanding and promote the benefits of cultural diversity.

They contribute toward the prevention of isolated or segregated communities which, at the extreme, can lead to serious social consequences, such as violent conflict, or growing support for extremist ideologies.

At a more basic level, isolation and separation undermines opportunities for many migrants, and robs Australia of the full potential of their contributions to our shared future.

By working to ensure that everyone in Australia can:

- have a voice
- participate in society
- access government services
- apply for citizenship, and
- receive government support when needed

the government reduces these risks.

But more importantly, this approach also provides confidence in all Australians that they are a respected and valued part of society.

The impact of migration on Australia has been overwhelmingly positive. Despite global tensions, research indicates that the Australian people, on the whole, remain optimistic about our society and our future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to discuss these issues and I look forward to continuing the conversation.

ENDS