

# Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration

Inquiry into Australia's Migration System

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## About CPD

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is an independent, values-driven, and evidence-based policy institute. Our motivation is an Australia that embraces the long term now. CPD exists to solve the biggest policy challenges facing Australia and the region, and to take people on the journey solving them. Our policy development seeks to advance the wellbeing of current and future generations.

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## Introduction

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) is grateful for the opportunity to make a public submission to the Parliamentary Joint Standing Committee on Migration and the inquiry into Australia's migration system.

CPD is an independent, values-driven, and evidence-based policy institute. We believe in: a society that expands opportunity and social justice; an economy that is clean, innovative and productive; a government that is active and effective; and a country that is respected for its leadership and cooperation.

In providing this submission, the Centre for Policy Development acknowledges the lands and people of the Wurundjeri of the Kulin nation and the people of the Gadigal of the Eora nation, who are the traditional owners of the land on which the Centre for Policy Development offices are located in Melbourne and Sydney respectively.

The Centre for Policy Development recognises that themes of welcome, cultural understanding and national sovereignty are integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and also feature within the discourse about migration. For thousands of years, Australia has been a country of movement of people from place to place. Traditions that preserve cultural practices, recognise national sovereignty, acknowledge country and welcome to country have been cultivated and nurtured throughout Australia's history, and after many years of neglect and suppression, are being reconciled in the present day through the acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture. Understanding and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture is an essential first step towards settling in Australia and becoming Australian.

CPD has a well-developed body of work on migration and settlement through the Cities and Settlement initiative and the Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration (ADFM). Established in 2015, the

ADFM pursues more effective, durable and dignified approaches to forced migration in the Asia Pacific through informal dialogues between participants from ten countries in the region. CPD's recent report [Future Ready](#) identified how Australia can help play our part in the region in managing forced migration crises in a way that is durable, effective and humane through its role as Co-Chair of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Exploitation (Bali Process). In 2017, CPD's report [Settling Better](#), outlined the shifting environment of humanitarian migration and emphasised the importance of economic participation as a central element of the settlement process.

CPD's body of work is informed by a human-centred approach to developing public policy and CPD believes that migration policy should be:

**Principled** - guided by values, with human rights, agency, welcoming and inclusion as some of the fundamental principles.

**Holistic** - inclusive of all migration programs and aware of the social, economic and cultural uncertainty that exists within the migrant experience. Focused on ensuring that supports are provided throughout the migration process and across all the areas that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and families.

**Well-designed** - intentionally coordinated throughout all the stages of migration, data-informed and embedded in all the parts of government that play a role in helping people to settle well and extending into the community service and private sectors.

The submission proposes that Australia is stronger if it is a nation of permanent settlement and that there are substantial social and economic benefits to simplified, clearer processes, and people and place-centred policy and service delivery.

CPD's submission is organised under three headings that revolve around three headline recommendations:

**Migration that Helps Build a Nation** - Permanent migration should be seen as a building block of

national identity and social cohesion. A dedicated Immigration and Citizenship Department that is focused on simplifying migration programs, positions Australia as a country that is welcoming and provides clarity and choice for people as they navigate the process.

**Migration that Strengthens Communities Through People- and Place- Centred Approaches**

- Migration programs should be built around the needs of the people that are coming to Australia, rather than focused on what visa category they arrive on. Migration programs will be effective if they are built around welcoming future Australians, enabling them to fully participate in all parts of society and help to grow and strengthen communities.

**Migration that Builds Strong Economies and Enables Individual Economic Security and Mobility**

- Strengthening labour market participation through skilled migration, local employment and entrepreneurship enables access to opportunity, economic mobility and provides an overall boost to Australia's productivity.

## Migration That Helps Build a Nation

### Take a Holistic View of Migration Policy

Taking a holistic view of migration policy would involve bringing the refugee and humanitarian program together with the migration program and considering them under the same umbrella. It is an opportunity to reframe how we look at visas and the people who apply for them. Migrants and refugees contribute to communities regardless of the visa category they come in on; indeed many people who arrive on a humanitarian visa contribute significant economic benefits to the Australian economy.<sup>1</sup> The 1977 establishment of the Humanitarian Program, as distinct from the existing Migration Program, was an important step in Australia's contribution to global refugee resettlement. However, while it is arguable that there is still value in having two distinct programs, in reality the needs and very definitions of individuals can change over time.

One example of the overlap is on family reunion visas. Family reunion is critical for individuals to thrive.<sup>2</sup> Refugees can apply for family reunion either through the migration program (where there is no ceiling to partner and child visa applications<sup>3</sup>) or as part of the Special Humanitarian Program (SHP). Most tend to use SHP as it is considerably cheaper. In practice this lowers the number of refugees who can move to Australia as they are not able to make the most of the uncapped regular family reunion pathways available because of the high costs involved. A more holistic view of migration policy would take into account the range of people seeking to come to Australia and allow for considerations, such as concessions for humanitarian migrants to apply through uncapped streams.

Bringing together migration and humanitarian policy and programming functions would also allow clearer exploration and expansion of complementary pathways for protection. The government has made existing commitments to expanding complementary pathways, including the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative

and Talent Beyond Boundaries. Australia is also Co-Chair of the Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility, indicating ambition to be an international leader and collaborator in this space. Complementary pathways can open up additional avenues to migration to refugees if they are used in addition to existing humanitarian quotas, based on assessments of vulnerability. Taking a higher proportion of UNHCR-referred refugees as part of the quota would address this.<sup>4</sup> It could also be a good time for the government with the opportunity to review the costing models that underpin migration policies.

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### Ensure Clearer Pathways to Permanence

The past decade has seen a rise in the proportion of people living in Australia long-term on temporary visas, transitioning from one to another without a clear pathway to permanency.<sup>5</sup> Not only is this out of keeping with a democratic citizenry, it also leaves people in potentially vulnerable situations. The uneven impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, felt disproportionately by those on temporary visas, is evidence of this.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath of the pandemic, it has never been more important to build back better. We need to position Australia as a country where migrants

can thrive, regardless of background, ethnicity or religion.

Not every person on a temporary visa will wish to stay in Australia permanently and attain citizenship, but for those who do, there should be clarity over their eligibility and clear pathways forward. This will extend to migrants the same rights that long-term residents of a democracy hold, encourage people to feel part of their communities, and avoid situations where individuals become dependent on employers for their visa status, which has been repeatedly shown to lead to exploitation.<sup>7</sup> There are also substantial mental health and psychosocial impacts on people who are forced to live with visa uncertainty, separated from family.<sup>8</sup>

The Government's recently announced pathway to permanency for those who have been living in Australia for years on temporary protection visas to permanent protection visas is welcome and will finally allow them to apply for family reunion visas for their partners and families, some after a decade of separation.<sup>9</sup> This will necessitate addressing the backlog of family and partner visas, and could benefit from a one-off increase to the quota of partner and family visas so as not to disadvantage any other groups.

Establishing simple, clear pathways to permanent residency for those on temporary visas would:

- ⇒ Remove administrative burden of processing successive temporary visa applications;
- ⇒ Lead to greater integration of migrants into communities;
- ⇒ Decrease risks of exploitation and stress; and
- ⇒ Align with Australia's position as a strong and vibrant democracy.

## Rebuilding Immigration and Citizenship Expertise

The Department of Home Affairs was created in 2017 as a merger of national security, counter-terrorism, emergency management, immigration and citizenship and multicultural affairs. This

inclusion of immigration policy within broader national security architecture has subordinated immigration policy expertise to national security interests over time. Rebuilding an autonomous immigration and citizenship function, either in a standalone department or autonomous division within the Home Affairs department, is an opportunity to strengthen migration's role in "nation-building, social cohesion and cultural diversity."

This new department or autonomous division could become a centre of expertise in migration policy, grounding policy and program decisions in what works in helping people to settle, and be more coordinated and strategic in helping Australia to yield the maximum social and economic benefits of migration as well as providing maximum benefit to the migrants themselves. The appointment of an Associate Secretary for Immigration is a welcome step in this regard. This new department or division could benefit from some or all of the following:

- ⇒ Embedding First Nations perspectives of welcome and relationship with land;
- ⇒ Establishing branches in each state and territory to ensure immigration policy is informed by and able to respond to needs on the ground;
- ⇒ Liaising closely with other levels of government, peak bodies, academics, non-government organisations and diaspora groups, and auspicing the existing Centre for Population;
- ⇒ Establishing a migrant and refugee advisory group to provide lived experience advice on policy, similar to models that exist in [Canada](#) and [New Zealand](#); and
- ⇒ Establishing dedicated pathways for migrant and refugee Australians to work for the department, drawing on their lived experience expertise.

## Migration That Strengthens Communities Through People- and Place- Centred Approaches

### Treating People According to Their Need Rather than Their Visa Status

While nation building is a worthwhile goal of migration policy and programs, it is the local and community experience of government policy and programs that achieves the outcome. For migration policy and programs to be successful in welcoming people to Australia and helping them to settle well and progress to permanent residency or citizenship, a people- and place-centred approach, with stronger communities as a primary outcome, should be central to the planning and implementation. Migration and settlement programs that strengthen communities are structured to provide choice and agency, have a holistic approach to understanding and addressing vulnerability and help people to find a sense of belonging in a new place, while offering consistent support across streams and categories.

Currently, the Commonwealth provides and limits support and assistance to migrants on the basis of visa status rather than their individual needs. A myriad of visa categories, conditions and requirements are applied to people depending on where they have come from, how they arrived and where in the immigration process they are and with little consideration of the particular needs of individuals and families. While migrants, including refugees and people seeking asylum, have challenges and vulnerabilities in common,<sup>10</sup> support and assistance is dramatically varied.

Migrants have to navigate a maze of requirements to understand what services and supports they are entitled to, and how to progress through the stages of migration; a process that often takes several years. When it comes to accessing those services and supports there is disparity in who is eligible for what and when. This disparity compounds vulnerability and creates disadvantage. For temporary migrants on

a pathway to permanent residency and citizenship this experience limits their choices, exacerbates vulnerability and erodes a sense of belonging.

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CPD believes that a migration system that is principled, holistic and well-designed would respond to this in a number of ways:

- ⇒ Acknowledge that there is a cost, as well as a significant benefit, to supporting people in vulnerable situations and that by limiting eligibility to Commonwealth assistance, community organisations and local communities are left to pick up the tab, while people and communities also miss out on the benefit;
- ⇒ Identify where these gaps in the social safety net exist for migrants and develop a framework that rationalises who is eligible for what and when based on what is known about the migration experience and the challenges and

vulnerabilities in common across visa categories; and

- ⇒ Work with the states and territories, local governments and the non-government sector to design programs that bridge the gap between what the Commonwealth can provide through patching the holes in the social safety net and what can be provided in communities.

This approach would enable funding contractual arrangements that support non-government agencies to respond to the diverse needs of people, instead of further isolating people based on their visa categories and rigid eligibility criteria. It would expand agency for migrants, address vulnerabilities that emerge and contribute to building a sense of belonging. People and communities can share in the ongoing societal benefits that come from connecting migrants into the right supports at the time it's needed most.

### Ensuring Holistic and Culturally Appropriate Mental Health Support at Every Stage

Another area for reform is in the area of mental health support and assistance. This area is identified separately to the discussion above about social assistance in general because mental health is a critical enabler to navigating transitions, healing from trauma and settling well and because there is evidence that migration has a negative impact on the mental health of migrants.<sup>11</sup> There is also stigma associated with mental health within many migrant communities, so a deep understanding of these cultural differences is critical to facilitating access.

As a country of migrants, many newly arrived people in Australia shoulder mental health concerns due to the strain of migration and settlement and the impacts of war and violence. And when crises and natural disasters occur overseas, they affect diaspora communities in Australia. Migration programs should respond more comprehensively to this through:

- ⇒ Increasing community-led mental health services in transit countries, especially

for humanitarian migrants. This could be done through accords or greater support to local migrant and refugee-led groups, and the United Nations Refugee Agency;

- ⇒ Ensuring that mental health supports acknowledge the trauma of displacement and the challenges of settling in a new place; and
- ⇒ Providing training and support for mental health services to have an inter-cultural lens, which would be mutually beneficial across the streams of migration and also help to address discrepancies in service eligibility based on visa category.

### Centring People and Places in the Migration Journey

Ultimately, nation building is done most practically at a local level, through direct relationships, in schools, workplaces, places of worship, community centres, sports clubs and in all the spaces and places that communities meet together. While the framework that holds migration together is conceived at the Commonwealth level, it is the states and territories, along with local governments and locally-based community organisations that provide access to education and housing, introduce migrants to social networks and grow social capital, welcome them to community and exchange cultural insights. Involving communities in the process of settlement, especially for humanitarian migration provides wrap-around support that complements government programs.

People- and place- centred approaches are being demonstrated through community-led initiatives in many parts of the country. In New South Wales, the NSW Growing Regions of Welcome (GROW) pilot program aims to connect interested people from migrant and refugee backgrounds living in Western Sydney with lifestyle and employment opportunities in regional NSW.<sup>12</sup> GROW provides an example of a people- and place- centred approach to migration and settlement. Through the GROW pilot, local stakeholders are demonstrating how systems and supports can be principled, holistic and well-designed. This principled approach centres human rights and lived experience in the settlement process and acknowledges the cultural, social and economic



value that is created by welcoming migrants to the region. Local actors coordinate processes across state and local government within the region that is welcoming migrants, but also within the communities where people have settled originally.

Another approach, which centres people and place in migration programs is through Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia (CRSA).<sup>13</sup> CRSA provides the opportunity for people in communities to sponsor refugees and help them settle in community from day one. Based on successful programs in the UK, Ireland, New Zealand and Canada, CRSA takes a holistic approach to settlement and is intentional about how people are welcomed, how their basic rights and needs (housing, education, physical and mental wellbeing) are met, how support for essential registrations, employment and transport are provided as well as how overall orientation to community and connectedness is initiated and sustained.

What features across both of these approaches is the principled, holistic and well-designed aspects and how they have the ability to adapt, increasing or decreasing supports, based on the specific needs and circumstances of individuals and families. These approaches are also led through local and regional leaders, which tailor responses to the places in which migrants are settling. These locally-tailored responses have the ability to seek, understand and utilise feedback about what migrants think is important as they make their life in Australia, and respond to challenges and aspirations in real-time. And, while these two examples focus on humanitarian migrant settlement, the experiences held in common across migrant streams present the opportunity to leverage the lessons, experience and infrastructure present within communities to help migrants feel welcomed and progress through to Citizenship with the confidence that comes from a sense of belonging.

## Migration that Builds Strong Economies, and Enables Individual Economic Security and Mobility

### Designing Effective Skills Recognition Systems to Support Diverse Pathways

In the 2022 Federal election, The Australian Labor Party committed to increasing annual humanitarian intake from 13,750 to 27,000 per year. The increase in places presents a key opportunity to address Australia's under-resourced labour market, which emphasises the importance of strengthening labour market participation among migrants.

Labour market participation is key to successful settlement and can be achieved through both formal employment and entrepreneurship. However, high levels of unemployment persist among humanitarian migrants, with a sizable proportion working below the skill level of the positions they held in their former country of residence due to a variance of qualifications that are not recognised in Australia. Other barriers to labour market participation also include a hesitancy to employ people who don't have permanent residency, a lack of local experience and bias, prejudice and racism.

The matter of skills recognition is a longstanding issue in Australia and continues to be an area for improvement. There is also a diversity of approaches across migration programs internationally, which a re-designed Australian program can draw on to improve practice. An effective skills recognition system not only streamlines the process of determining the eligibility of incoming migrants, but also informs the support that enable economic participation across migrants from diverse educational and professional backgrounds.

Labour shortages are classified based on the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ANZSCO).

However, the gap of 5 years between major updates is too large to capture important changes in the labour market, such as the effects of the pandemic. There is a broad diversity of approaches internationally in how to tackle labour shortages through skilled migration. For example, during the pandemic, Germany addressed the shortage of doctors by adjusting licensing requirements and prioritising the training of Syrian refugee doctors waiting for their licences to be approved<sup>14</sup>. Well-designed migration programs would better integrate diverse approaches that show results and see the economic benefit that migrants provide be realised sooner.

An improved skills recognition system can also inform complementary pathways for migrants across the skill spectrum. One pathway offered by Australia is through Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB). Under TBB, displaced people can access employer-sponsored skilled migration pathways and a number of concessions, including waiver of skills assessment and reduction of minimum English language requirements. This approach means that the economic benefits of migration are realised sooner as a result of an engaged employer that provides a range of supports that echo the people- and place- centred approaches outlined in the previous section.

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While the concessions offered by TBB allow migrants to participate economically, there is also a need for better skills assessments. One such example is Germany's innovative skills recognition system, which includes standard tests and training modules.<sup>15</sup> Compared to traditional skill assessments that require extensive documentation, this approach enables employers to assess the level of job readiness and identify where more training may be

required. Certifying authorities and peak bodies in Australia play a critical role in streamlining skills recognition processes to ensure economic participation of migrants are not hindered by laborious paperwork.

Migrants should also be offered pathways to higher-paying roles through continued education and accreditation. In 2007, Sweden introduced 'step-in' jobs that provide employer subsidies contingent on participation in language courses.<sup>15</sup> These payments ensured new migrants did not stop attending courses when they started a job and compensated employers who were able to provide a flexible training environment and promoted continued language proficiency. As migrants will potentially progress to permanent residency and citizenship, these pathways embed individual economic security within the migration journey and enable a more engaged, skilled and productive population.

## Increasing Economic Participation of Migrants Especially for Migrant Women

Women on temporary visas are more likely to experience intimate partner violence compared to women on permanent visas and Australian citizens.<sup>16</sup> They are most often subjected to immigration-related violence, driven by fear of deportation or losing custody of their children. As most of them are ineligible for financial support (e.g., Centrelink, childcare subsidies) and do not have access to social and community housing, they often have no option but to remain in a dangerous situation.

While this lack of social safety also needs to be addressed, this issue can be alleviated, at least in part, through increased economic participation. However, the employment rate among migrant women is consistently lower than migrant men. Women are four times more likely to not have a job after 18 months in Australia compared to men, and only 20% of female humanitarian migrants are participating in the labour market compared to 60% of male humanitarian migrants.<sup>15</sup> Supporting this cohort into decent work fosters equity, productivity and economic mobility.

CPD's reports [Settling Better](#) and [Seven Steps to SUCCESS](#) outlined several ways to strengthen labour market participation among migrant women. These reports show that humanitarian migrants are among the most entrepreneurial migrants in our society, and almost twice as likely to be entrepreneurs as Australian taxpayers as a whole.<sup>17</sup> This suggests an unmet demand for business loans and microfinance, which involves providing entrepreneurs with access to small amounts of credit at reasonable rates. This is not a new idea in humanitarian settlement policy.

The United States has a well-established microfinance program under the Office for Refugee Settlement which has achieved high loan repayment and business survival rates.<sup>15</sup> A major design feature of the United States' microfinance program is its reliance on localism and devolution. Support for projects and loans are decided by organisations in the areas where support will be delivered. Local organisations work directly to the Office of Refugee Resettlement on their application for funding support. This helps match up the funding source with communities where a framework for successful loan delivery is already in place.

CPD's [Blueprint for Regional and Community Job Deals](#) demonstrates that migration settlement is concentrated in place, which makes microfinance particularly applicable. Microfinance also has the potential to boost labour participation rates of women through home-based business to foster business experience among female humanitarian migrants. Economic participation can be further enhanced through complementary pathways such as through CRSA and TBB. With increasing momentum on complementary pathways, Australia is well placed to be international leaders on migration and settlement as well as realise the economic benefits that come from a growing population with a diversity of skills.

## Enabling Place-Based Approaches to Economic Participation

CPD's work on settlement and employment has highlighted the importance place-centred approaches that enable economic participation

and social and economic inclusion. The research and policy recommendations that underpin those recommendations are described in [Settling Better](#) and the [Blueprint for Regional and Community Job Deals](#). Through this body of work, the evidence is clear: Place-based approaches to delivering critical services have been widely commended and are achieving good results through using local networks to lift social and economic participation.

The Blueprint for Regional and Community Job Deals highlights the Wyndham Employment Trial, which was designed to boost economic participation for young people and humanitarian migrants. The trial was developed using human-centred design and reflected feedback from the Wyndham community that having a job or running a business (a way to earn an income) is essential to belonging. The employment trial grew into an initiative called Opportunity Wyndham, which from 2020 to 2022 supported 1,355 residents to take part in education and career building activities, 1,158 local employment opportunities to be broadcast to employment service providers, 165 businesses to be engaged in inclusive employment activities and resulted in over 200 people being placed into employment with a focus on people from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, migrant women and young people.

The partnership that delivers Opportunity Wyndham is led by local government and includes ten organisations across education, employment and settlement services and across multiple State and Federal funding arrangements and service delivery contracts. The partnership maintains direct links to local community leaders and locally-owned businesses who provide input into and benefit directly from the work. The partnership operates through a clearly described governance framework, is enabled by funding and authorisation flexibility from the Victorian Government, includes human-centred and employer-centred engagement and demonstrates coordinated approaches to delivering services, influencing systems change and solving complex challenges.

Working arrangements established during the trial and continued through Opportunity Wyndham helped local organisations to coordinate responses to the challenges of finding work for jobseekers in the wake of COVID-19.

The success in Wyndham sheds light on how we can better support refugees and vulnerable migrants to settle in Australia and access the economic opportunity available in communities.

## Conclusion

In summary, CPD believes that permanent migration is a key building block of national identity and social cohesion and should be given more prominence. Migration programs should be oriented towards Australia's economic interest, while also recognising the people we are welcoming into the country as future Australians. Policy settings can and should do more to help migrants of all categories and across all streams to settle well and ensure that people who are new to Australia, including those with a temporary status, are fully included in all parts of society and feel like they belong.

These overarching goals are summarised through the key recommendations this submission makes for purposeful resources and structures to build a migration system that is principled, holistic and well-designed through:

- ⇒ A dedicated Immigration and Citizenship Department that simplifies and clarifies migration programs and streams;
- ⇒ A focus on the needs of people that is also centred on the places and

communities where migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum are settling; and

- ⇒ Leveraging the economic opportunities that migration provides to Australia in growing skills needed for productivity and the economic benefits that come to migrants from having a job or owning a business.

There is a substantial body of evidence that identifies the social, economic and cultural benefits on offer by being a country that is welcoming to migrants. The mission is to align the intent, structure and delivery of migration policy and programs to ensure that Australia does not miss out on these benefits.

The Centre for Policy Development is keen to continue this dialogue with the Commonwealth and lend our policy research, capability in convening networks and stakeholders and policy and program design expertise to the work that is underway in this area.

## ENDNOTES

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