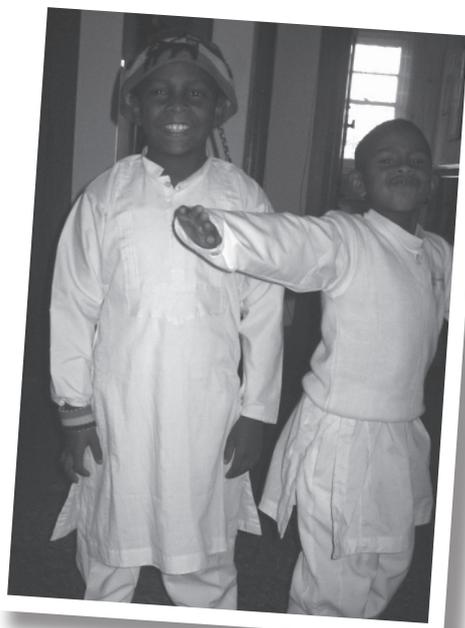


# SARC *briefs*



## Dropped from the moon: the settlement experiences of refugee communities in Tasmania



This study explored the settlement experiences of people from refugee communities who arrived in Tasmania in the period 1996 – 2006. It was undertaken by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania. Information was collated through interviews and focus groups with 78 men and women from different refugee communities who are living in different parts of the state. Their stories were analysed against the indicators of good settlement outcomes. This summary outlines the main findings and recommendations from the research.

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*I said to my husband, “Tasmania! Oh my God! It is at the end of the world! What will we do if we have to leave here? Where will we go? Antarctica?” And everything was so different. It was like we had been dropped from the moon.*

Woman, Southern Europe, Burnie

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## What is good settlement?

For all refugees there is a period of adjustment before they begin to fully participate in Australian society – this is called the settlement period.

The capacity of new arrivals to settle varies according to their pre-arrival backgrounds and personal histories, and also their experiences on arrival. A useful picture of how people are faring in the settlement process is gained by looking at indicators such as the status of their physical and mental health, whether they are employed, their occupational status, whether they have secure and affordable housing and their satisfaction with life in Australia. Research has found that effective intervention and support in the early settlement phase enhances the opportunities for long term integration and participation in the community.

## Refugee arrivals in Tasmania

- 13,000 refugees are accepted into Australia each year. Just over 2000 people have been sent to Tasmania through this programme since 2001 – this is 1.2% of the people arriving through the national refugee programme.
- The Australian Government is sending an increasing proportion of refugees to regional Australia, that is, outside the capital cities.
- Tasmania has the highest regional settlement rate of all states and territories - 38% of all arrivals compared to a national average of 6%. The majority of these arrivals have gone to Launceston with the remainder to Burnie and Devonport.
- In the last five years most refugees arriving in Tasmania have been from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Ethiopia, Former Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Eritrea and Uganda. Other small new communities in Tasmania are from Burundi, Liberia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Rwanda.
- The people from refugee communities arriving in Tasmania are relatively young (67% of new entrants since 2001 are under 25 years of age).

## The settlement experiences of refugee communities in Tasmania

### Key Finding 1: Housing

**Lack of affordable housing.** Members of refugee communities in Tasmania are having enormous difficulties finding housing, especially housing they can afford. They report experiencing financial crises caused by high rental costs. Many have been subjected to substantial rent increases in short periods. Under current assessment criteria, refugees do not necessarily qualify as priorities for public housing.

**Poor quality housing.** Research participants are competing for houses at the bottom end of the private rental market. Common problems listed by members of refugee communities were that the houses they were renting were dirty, leaking, poorly ventilated, had moisture on walls and roofs, had no heating or malfunctioning wood heaters, no hot water, dirty and bad smelling carpets and stoves which did not work. Members of refugee communities report that they, their spouses or children had developed respiratory problems as a result of this poor quality housing.

**Difficulties as tenants.** An inability to communicate with landlords or real estate agents, fear of losing their tenancies, a lack of knowledge of their rights as tenants and a lack of knowledge of Australian housing and legal systems all act to stop people from refugee communities from asserting their rights as tenants. Many do not understand bonds or know about the need for condition reports. Refugees report feeling vulnerable to being exploited in the private rental market.

**Moving constantly.** People from refugee communities interviewed for this research reported high levels of housing insecurity. Moves were due to a range of reasons including high rental costs, rent increases, the inaccessible location of the housing, overcrowding and evictions.

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*I don't want to move around Hobart. I just want to settle. I just need places to settle down. Today here, tomorrow my kids at another school I don't want to do that. It's no good for my kids; moving school all the time! We just need a place to settle one place. That's all I needed.*

Woman, Northern Africa, Hobart

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*When you come over here you have a lot of dreams and then when you get here your dreams narrow. You want to get a job, at least part-time, but you can't get that here. It is hard to settle as a single, very, very hard because if you go full time student you go on Austudy. And then if you have some people back home you want to support them but you can't do that. Because you can't even get a kitchen hand job doing washing at night during the time you can sacrifice.*

Man, Northern Africa, Hobart



**Homelessness.** Some people from refugee communities are experiencing homelessness or the risk of being homeless while they are trying to settle in Tasmania. After they leave the first house which is found for them by settlement services, people often find themselves in difficulties. Some are being housed in short-term emergency housing, others are forced to move in with friends or into shelters due to homelessness.

**Housing stress and settlement.** People from refugee communities report a need for housing in which they feel safe because of their experiences of trauma. Housing insecurity, constant moves and a belief that they are being discriminated against in the private rental market all undermine their feelings of safety and lead to feelings of alienation from the Australian community.

## Key Finding 2: Unemployment

**Difficulties finding work.** People from refugee communities are finding it enormously difficult to find work in Tasmania in spite of a depth of work history in the countries of origin. People from refugee communities are finding it enormously difficult to find work in Tasmania. The specific problems facing refugee communities in this state are poor networks, disrupted education, lack of recognised qualifications, a lack of success in the Job Network system, discrimination against them as 'different' job seekers and the erosion of their self-confidence caused by their failure to find work.

**Employers' discrimination against difference.** People from refugee communities reported repeatedly being told they could not be employed because their accented English was a problem. Others had been told that wearing a headscarf was a barrier to employment.

## Key Finding 3: Family reunion

**Anxiety for families and loved ones** One of the most difficult problems faced in settlement was anxiety about the fate of family members, particularly ones they feared were vulnerable to harm. Learning English and settling in can be impossible when people are grief-stricken at what now appears to be life-long separation from children, step-children, parents, siblings, grandchildren, fiancés, and orphaned nieces and nephews whom they regarded as their responsibility.

**Difficulties in reuniting with families** People from refugee communities are making applications to bring their families to Australia through the Special Humanitarian Program but are having little success in doing so. Common problems reported include long waiting periods for appointments, long delays in waiting on documents from overseas, problems establishing that the people they wish to bring to Australia fit the visa criteria, and a lack of information from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship on the reasons for refusing the applications.

### Settlement challenges for refugee communities

- In recent years many refugees have experienced long periods of hardship prior to arriving in Australia, with lengthy disruptions to their education and working lives. They also have larger families and lower levels of English proficiency than some of the communities settled in earlier decades.
- National research has found that in the current national affordable housing crisis, refugees are particularly vulnerable to being in housing crisis and to homelessness.
- Nearly one quarter of the refugee families arriving in Tasmania 2001 – 2005 were families of 6 people or more. The average number of bedrooms per house in Tasmania: 2.9. Number of public housing properties for larger families in Tasmania: 11 (all full).
- Nationally the Job Network does not appear to be working effectively for refugees. In spite of Australia's economic success, refugees continue to have higher unemployment rates and lower earnings than other migrants. Labour market research has suggested that a lack of appropriate post-arrival support is contributing to this.
- Settlement service delivery to regional areas is difficult, with the greater costs associated with a dispersed client group, higher operating costs, and an absence of infrastructure such as housing and transport.

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*I only have one daughter... I don't understand why she has to stay [in the refugee camp]. I tried to sponsor her and nothing happens, it is really distressing... she has three children, my grandchildren. When I speak to them on the phone they say, "Where are you? Why don't you come? Why don't you take us?"... that is why I am feeling unwell. I am really upset. I can't understand the language, I can't understand the life. I can't. I can't. I go to school and everything is blocked. I get stressed. I get upset. I cry; that's what I do.*

Woman, Horn of Africa, Hobart

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*Knowing that [IHSS provider]'s help is about to stop, it's like life has stopped, we are worried, we have no family around, with [IHSS provider] you feel you have protection so we are very worried. And sometimes we get letters from Centrelink or somewhere else and because we don't know, they can't understand us, just [IHSS provider] will come and visit you several times and you show to them.*

Woman, Central Africa, Hobart



## Key Finding 4: Service gaps

**Need for longer settlement support.** People from refugee communities experience language, cultural and trauma issues which leave them vulnerable and requiring support from settlement services for up to 12 months after arrival. Many of the new arrivals interviewed were juggling complex health and adjustment issues which appeared to require case management by specialist settlement services. However, many of the interviewees who have arrived in the last 2 to 3 years reported being required to navigate their own way into mainstream community services within 6 months of arrival.

**Need for specialist help from housing services.** People from refugee communities can fall through the gaps in the system of services that exist to help low income people to find housing. Refugees may be deemed not to meet service criteria or the services provided do not meet their particular need. Lacking resources and networks, with a lack of information and English, people from refugee communities often need an intensive level of support. Assistance with house hunting and assistance to complete forms are not available from housing services.

**Need for a specialist help from employment services.** Refugees are facing huge barriers to finding employment in Tasmania, even in unskilled and semi-skilled work. The need for post-secondary qualifications and a lack of recognition of qualifications combined with disrupted education and work histories, language and cultural barriers are all making finding work difficult. People from refugee communities are aware that their lack of networks needs to be specifically addressed by a specialist employment assistance service, models of which exist in mainland states. Such a service could also provide work experience, mentoring, individual support and referral to specialist services.

**Need for more assistance with driving instruction.** Getting their drivers' licence is a high priority for members of refugee communities and is one of their main requests for assistance. They see getting a driver's licence as essential to getting work. The barriers to achieving this for them are significant: financing driving lessons and tests, getting access to a car and a driving instructor, being able to complete the 50 hours of tutored driving, and passing the driving test. Innovative driving instruction programs which are being run by settlement services cannot keep up with demand.

## Anglicare recommends

**Housing** That the Department of Immigration and Citizenship fund the purchase and/or construction of housing to be managed by settlement service providers for members of refugee communities as part of the suite of settlement services provided to new entrants.

That specialist workers be employed within housing support services to work with refugee arrivals who have to find housing in the private rental market to assist them to find housing and learn tenancy skills.

**Unemployment** That the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations fund the development of a specialised labour market programme for refugee jobseekers in Hobart and Launceston.

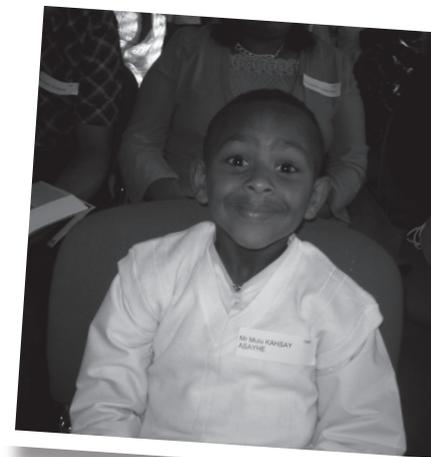
That Tasmanian employers be targeted for a public education campaign about the impact of discriminatory cultural assumptions on recruitment practices and the value of a culturally diverse workforce.

**Family reunion** That funds are provided to extend the free migration advice service to assist people with sponsorship applications for friends and family.

That spaces be made available in the humanitarian programme for family reunion visas and that this does not take places in the programme away from the overall refugee quota.

**Service gaps** That promised Australian Government funding for a Complex Case Support Network be tied to current settlement services contracts to ensure that specialist services can provide intensive support to new entrants for up to 12 months.

That further resources be directed into driver training initiatives run through settlement support services.



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*We thought Hobart was a suburb in Sydney. We saw lots of bush and we thought, “Oh no! They are just going to throw us down there!” When we came here nobody speaks our language and we thought, “Oh no, it is the end of the world. “ You better trust me, it was not easy. It was scary.*

Young woman, Central Africa, Hobart

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The photographs in this brief were taken by Dan Tipping, aged 9, on the day his good mates Melesse, Desalgn, Kenfe, Mulu and their family became Australian citizens. They are reproduced with the permission of the people photographed. The boys' family did not participate in this research.

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## For more information

The full report, *Dropped from the moon: the settlement experiences of refugee communities in Tasmania* by Jo Flanagan, is published by the Social Action and Research Centre at Anglicare Tasmania.

It is available by calling **6234 3510**. It can be downloaded at [www.anglicare-tas.org.au](http://www.anglicare-tas.org.au)



## Social Action and Research Centre (SARC)

Anglicare's SARC team work with low income Tasmanians to identify the structural barriers that impact most severely on their lives. The Centre pursues policy change on these issues at a State and Federal level.

