

# Community, belonging and the irregular migration

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The movement and migration of people is one of the most pressing issues of our time. It has gone to the top of the political agenda globally at the United Nations, regionally in places like the European Union and domestically in countries including Australia.

Political and public policy debates are concentrated mainly on the people who move irregularly across borders. ‘Migrant caravans’ attempting to enter the United States, those crossing the Mediterranean to Europe and the arrival of people by boat to Australia are all recent examples of irregular migration that have generated heated debates. Governments and their leaders have choices in how they respond to and develop public policy for irregular migration. Civil society organisations also have choices in how they respond to policy and how they deliver services to irregular migrants.

Since 2001, both major parties in Australia have introduced deterrence measures in response to several waves of irregular migration by people seeking asylum in Australia by boat.<sup>1</sup> A look at the international context shows more western countries resorting to a deterrence framework in response to the

growing number of people around the world being displaced from their countries of origin.<sup>2</sup>

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* recognises the right all people have to seek asylum from persecution.<sup>3</sup> While grounded in this declaration, the *Refugee Convention*<sup>4</sup> takes this concept further by stipulating that refugees should not be penalised for their irregular entry or stay provided they are ‘coming directly from a territory where their life or freedom was threatened’<sup>5</sup> and ‘show good cause for their irregular entry or presence.’<sup>6</sup>

Australia is a signatory to the *Refugee Convention*, but makes a distinction between people who seek asylum by plane and those who do so by boat. Both major political parties in Australia are in general agreement on the key measures to discourage ‘unauthorised boat arrivals’, including mandatory detention, offshore processing and the introduction of temporary, rather than permanent visas — even for those people who have been found to be legally entitled to Australia’s protection.<sup>7</sup> In her analysis, Phillips also highlights the sheer volume of recent changes to government policy concerning



Saman Khaladj started his own business, supported by the SSI Ignite Small Business Start-ups initiative (Settlement Services International)

people seeking asylum, which showcases the complexity and ever-changing nature of working in this space.<sup>8</sup>

Around 30,000 people came to Australia by boat between August 2012 and January 2014.<sup>9</sup> As a result of government policy during this period, this cohort has faced a number of different rules and has no pathway to permanent protection in Australia.<sup>10</sup>

My organisation, Settlement Services International ('SSI'), is a community organisation that has, for almost seven years, provided support to the people who sought asylum under various Australian government programs in this area. As a values-driven organisation, we have a social compact with the community, not just our funders. This means we have had to find a way to put our values of social justice, compassion and respect into practice without conflicting with our contractual arrangements — and to do this in a way that actually complements and adds value to these services.

Unlike refugees who are settled in Australia as part of our humanitarian intake, people who arrive as irregular migrants by boat are rarely considered when we talk of 'integration'. While these irregular migrants do not have a pathway to permanent residency, the key markers of integration — employment, housing, education and health<sup>11</sup> — are just as important for these individuals and families while they are living on our shores. Building social connections is a critical step on the pathway to achieving these outcomes.

Up until December 2014, people who arrived by boat did not have the right to work in Australia.<sup>12</sup> Financial barriers also restricted their capacity to study, so SSI's challenge was to create an environment in which people could get out into the community and have the opportunity to build social bridges, bonds and links.<sup>13</sup>

In 2012, we launched Community Kitchen — a fortnightly event where all SSI clients were invited to join community groups and volunteers for a free lunch. Since then, we've served more than 19,000 meals. Community Kitchen is so much more than a lunch. It is a welcoming, safe space where people in vulnerable situations can connect with members of the wider community, along with individuals and families who are in similar circumstances to their own.

Over time, people who had originally come to the kitchen as guests began to look

for ways they could contribute. They offered skills like singing or haircutting. They began to rebuild their sense of worth and purpose. Through interactions with volunteers and community groups, we also saw people improving their 'language and cultural knowledge' — another important building block towards fully participating in economic, social and cultural life.<sup>14</sup>

We also began to hear stories of women and children who had few reasons or opportunities to get out into the community and connect with other people, which was having a detrimental impact on their physical and emotional wellbeing.

Therefore, in 2014, we launched Playtime — a weekly playgroup where mothers seeking asylum could connect with other families. The playgroup offered parents new ways to connect with their children and feel a part of a community, which was particularly beneficial for families with limited family or social support. Health and social services outreach to Playtime so over time, we saw the wellbeing of women and their young children improve as their social bonds grew.

But there was only so much we could do by reinvesting in these value-adding initiatives. There were broader issues that required a response from outside our sector, and we identified the need for greater systems of advocacy.

At that time, people seeking asylum were not entitled to transport concessions.<sup>15</sup> This meant that in order to travel to appointments or new areas of the community, they had to allocate a portion of their limited income towards a full travel fare.

Mobility is instrumental for people to participate more fully in society. In 2015, then-NSW Premier Mike Baird recognised this need and championed a travel concession initiative for people seeking asylum. In unveiling the initiative, he said: '[b]eing unable to travel creates social isolation which leads to deteriorating mental and physical health.'<sup>16</sup>

The travel concessions allowed people seeking asylum to use more of their limited financial support to cover basic living expenses. It was a critical step that enabled people to participate more fully in the community, which in turn helped them feel more at home in Australia.

In 2017, the NSW government once again stepped up with an important initiative to support the ability of people seeking asylum

to participate in education. They extended fee-free TAFE places to this cohort.<sup>17</sup> Prior to this, people seeking asylum were considered international students, which meant they were effectively barred from studying due to high costs.

This cohort of people seeking asylum still live in a precarious position with no certainty of remaining in Australia in the long-term. Through activities like those outlined above, my hope is that we have helped these newcomers participate more meaningfully in the economic, social and cultural aspects of our communities.

As a country, we have control over how we welcome and include people. We can help

people new to our country establish a sense of belonging, which is essential for their wellbeing. Regardless of their visa status, newcomers deserve to feel connected to their community, to feel included and to feel like they belong for however long they call Australia home. 🇦🇺

Violet Roumeliotis is a social entrepreneur with an extensive not-for-profit career characterised by collaboration, growth, adaption and innovation. In her time as Settlement Services International CEO, she has identified service gaps for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and invested in tailored initiatives that capitalise on their unique strengths.

#### References

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- 3 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, GA Res 217A (III), UN GAOR, UN Doc A/810 (10 December 1948) art 14.
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- 6 *Ibid*.
- 7 Phillips (n 1) 1–13.
- 8 *Ibid* 1–17.
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