Its not all right:

Rights in refugee families in Australia

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In Partnership with
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The Centre for Refugee Research (CRR) is an interdisciplinary research centre at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). CRR focuses on international refugee flows, internally displaced people, forced migration and resettlement issues. It conducts research, education and advocacy programs, partnering with community-based refugee organisations, in relation to:

- The nexus between refugee circumstances overseas and the resettlement experience in developed countries;
- Identification of and response to the most vulnerable refugees, in particular women and girls at risk;

CRR adopts a human rights framework and engages principles of social justice and community development in all its work. (www.crr.unsw.edu.au)

In 1951, Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) began providing English language education to new settlers in Australia. More than half a million students have attended AMES programs and services since its post-war inception.

Today, AMES is the largest provider of English language and resettlement services in Victoria in addition to being a major supplier of specialist employment and training services in Melbourne.

AMES has a vision of full participation for all in a cohesive and diverse society. The organisation successfully educates and services over 40,000 people every year providing an extensive range of adult education and employment programs and settlement support services to a culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) client community. (www.ames.net.au)
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Introduction and key recommendation

Background to this project

In recent projects of the Centre for Refugee Research, issues of family conflict, violence and separation in settlement have arisen as amongst the most pressing and painful problems being experienced by refugee families and communities settling in Australia. Refugee communities have described how family issues are exacerbated by other challenges facing new arrivals, such as inadequate and overcrowded housing, language difficulties, unemployment, financial stress, and the stresses of adjusting to new physical and social systems. Conversely, family conflict and breakdown contributes to the social, financial, housing and emotional pressures on resettling refugee families, and has adverse effects on physical and mental health, education and employment. It negatively impacts refugee communities, refugee service providers and the broader community.

Concern about challenges facing refugee families resettled to Australia is shared by refugee communities and refugee service providers with whom we work, including AMES Victoria. AMES provides settlement support, English language training, employment programs and other services to resettled refugees in Victoria, and observes the negative impacts of family disharmony in their work with refugee clients. A joint research project of AMES and CRR in 2009 also identified family conflict and breakdown as a key settlement challenge, even though family issues were not a focus of that research project.

In 2010 CRR initiated a project, with AMES in Victoria as one of three partner organisations, to begin to explore challenges for refugee families and identify policy and practice changes to improve family settlement outcomes. The anticipated outcomes of this small project are:

- To further explore and identify issues of concern affecting families and community cohesion to refugees arriving from protracted refugee situations.
- To identify one or more small service delivery modules which can be developed and trialled in response to this.
- To provide the basis for an application for significant funding from the Australian Research Council to fully explore these important areas.

As part of this project, an analysis of data from previous CRR projects was undertaken, which identified four key issues of concern to refugee communities:

- The incidence of intimate partner and family conflict and violence in refugee families leading in many cases to family breakdown and separation;
- Child protection and parenting issues, including high levels of interaction with and fear of child protection agencies;
- Severe intergenerational conflict, in particular between adolescents and their parents, leading to family breakdown;
- The continuing violence and risks experienced by women who enter Australia on a 204 Women at Risk Visa (and other visa categories).
An overarching issue is confusion in newly arrived communities about the meaning of rights in Australia, especially women’s and children’s rights, the responsibilities which accompany these rights, and the legal, social and cultural implications of ‘rights’ for individuals, families and communities.

A second part of this joint project was to conduct community development-based staff and community consultations with CRR’s project partners, AMES, Relationships Australia and STARTTS1. A key element of these consultations was the engagement of the knowledge and capacity of refugee community member and service providers in identifying solutions to family problems in their communities and client groups respectively, utilising the Centre’s reciprocal research methodology2. The consultations were designed to explore these issues and identify a range of strategies to address identified problems, including small, practical projects that could be implemented by the service or by refugee community organisations. With AMES, the targeted family issue explored was the understanding and experience of rights in Australia.

Reciprocal research consultations

Three days of consultation were conducted with AMES clients and staff in Melbourne in July and August 2010 using the Centre For Refugee Research’s reciprocal research methodology. Fifty refugee men and women from Africa, Burma, Afghanistan and Iran participated in human rights training, group activities and storyboarding, to explore their understandings and experiences of rights in Australia and identify strategies to address family problems related to conceptions of rights. Thirty AMES’ refugee settlement Case Managers participated in the same consultations process, with an additional focus on how family problems and conflict impact on them and their capacity to deliver effective settlement support. Many of the Case Managers are themselves from a refugee background. The final part of this consultation brought both groups together to share their perspectives with each other, and participate as a mixed group in a strategic planning session. The strategic planning session brought together the findings of the separate consultations and identified a range of practical and advocacy strategies to remediate refugee family conflict and breakdown.

This report and next steps

This report presents the outcomes of these Reciprocal Research Consultations including strategies identified by participants to address refugee family conflict. The next stage of the project, pending approval by the AMES management team, will be the development of a set of Information Materials on Family Rights and Responsibilities accompanied by a short Train the Trainer program, which will be trialled and evaluated by AMES staff and refugee communities.

The overriding concern in the consultations was the enormous impact of the change of culture between country of origin, the “refugee” culture of camps and prolonged urban refugee settings, and the new culture in Australia; and the impact of this cultural change on resettling families and communities. This was strongly articulated in terms of confusion over “Rights” in Australia - what this actually means, how these are incorporated into the provision of social services, and the impact of this on new arrivals. In particular there was focus on the rights of women and men, and the notion of children’s rights, which often challenge the traditional patriarchal structures that were considered the norm in their previous existences. The role of the ways in which Centrelink family payments are made and the impact of this on newly arrived families was also a recurring theme in discussion. These

1 Service For The Treatment And Rehabilitiation Of Torture And Trauma Survivors.
2 See Appendix 1
themes were strongly articulated by all of the groups which took part in the consultations and are common across all ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

The consultations outcomes also highlighted the inter-connectedness of family issues with other settlement challenges. This reminds us that addressing family issues cannot be separated from the range of settlement stressors and precipitants of family conflict. For this reason a holistic approach to the problems within refugee families is necessary to ensure good outcomes for family members, and for the wider community.

This is reflected as well in the strategies identified by both refugee participants and AMES staff members to address issues raised during the consultations: the varied range of recommendations underlines the intersectionality of problems experienced by new arrivals and the need for a holistic approach. The strategies are contained below in the section “Solutions Identified by Participants” and are grouped into categories. Some recommendations are specifically for AMES and others focus on advocacy for the broader service provider community.

KEY RECOMMENDATION

In response to concerns raised in the consultation and strategies suggested by participants, we propose that as a first step, we develop a package of materials to assist new arrivals to understand the meaning of rights and responsibilities within family life in Australia. These will include a series of plain language booklets with explanatory graphics, which forms the basis of a simple training package which can be delivered by suitably trained professionals working with new arrivals. These could be community guides, case managers or AMES training staff. The Booklets will focus on family rights, women’s rights, children and young people’s rights and fulfilling rights in Australia with a focus on Centrelink. They will be based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), The Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In each case the text of the Convention will be grouped into thematic areas as we have already done in our Human Rights Training package on the UDHR. Using the illustrator who has done the graphics for previous training materials, we envisage that for each of the Booklets, we will present the groups of rights, and then a clear explanation about how these are interpreted in Australia. This will address the issues raised in the consultations, including the rights of women, of children, and the role that Centrelink and other agencies take in ensuring that people enjoy their rights. Importantly, they will explore the responsibilities which accompany these rights, and explain, for example, the reasons for the way Centrelink pays benefits and why young people receive their own money. Ideally these will be translated into community languages. DVD’s could also be developed for those who are pre literate, or who prefer multimedia presentations.

Once the booklets are developed and trialled with community groups, a short Training the Trainer session will be developed. This will introduce the Booklets to communities and use a series of exercises and discussion points to assist service providers to explain and explore the content with new arrivals.
Refugee families and settlement in Australia

We are free to live our lives, have education, have health support. We are equal, we all have equal rights. …. We are human beings again. We live with dignity in Australia. [Community member]

Resettlement to Australia is an opportunity for refugees to rebuild their lives. They arrive with hopes for safety and happiness and value the opportunities that resettlement promises. However, to settle well takes a long time and is very challenging, and one of the many challenges is adapting to new social systems and changing family and social roles and dynamics. Each family and each individual family member experiences settlement differently, and participants in the consultations described how difficult settlement is for many new arrivals.

This one is representing individual members of the family, females or males, boy or girl: their sense of confusion coming to their new home in Australia. There is cultural and social expectation; how are you supposed to act according to new customs and tradition? Also of your family; how can you be assimilated into the new ways? Then there are [service providers] feeding you all new information about Centrelink etc. Then there is the person themselves – thinking about what they want to be, caught up in between, and not having a sense of identity. There is pressure from every angle and it’s reached the point the cloud shows – confusion. [AMES staff member]

With individual family members having to work through their personal challenges of learning and adaptation, families and communities are also affected by the impacts of settlement. Many families are experiencing conflict, violence and separation. It is difficult to quantify the extent of family conflict and breakdown in refugee families, but the evidence from CRR’s research (including from this consultation) is that the fragmentation of family and community in refugee families is a very deep issue and a very significant problem that interacts with all other areas of settlement.
The biggest problem is broken families; broken families. As we can see it happens in many families: the man is left alone; the woman, the wife and the children are taken in different places. This is a very stressful situation. [Community member]

The kids yelling, screaming at the mothers and father, and they don’t respect the parents and still the husband is abusing [the mother] too. She gets pushed by her own kids in the corner too. [Community member]

Me I don’t want to grow old in Oz, I don’t want to stay in a nursing home where my children and my grandchildren forget about me. If only I can change some of the things in Australia, I would change the love between the parents and the children, so even when they are old, they are not always apart, not always “I need my space” all the time....The children they say: who are they?? I won’t respect my elders! The other child says, I will do what I want, when I am 16 or 18, I will move out of the house.... The mother, the father start crying, become depressed. When this happens the family breaks, the children in drugs, the girls in young pregnancy. [Community member]
The children are running away from parents. Our women are trying to bring back the children. The children are not there, the husbands are not there. Everyone in a separate place. [Community member]

Participants in the consultations described how family relationships in settlement are challenged by issues related to the pre arrival experiences of individuals and families and by the settlement barriers families and individuals face. But overlaying all of these issues, they described ways in which families are affected by ‘rights’ inherent in Australian law and institutions, and in Australian social mores and culture.
Experiences of rights in Australia and its impact on family

All of these rights we are getting here in Australia, I am very happy and proud, but [there is] problems with… family pressures and children’s behaviour. [Community member]

Settlement in Australia enables men, women and children to access rights they have been denied in their home country and during the refugee journey – rights as diverse as access to health care, freedom of speech, the right to be free from violence. However, much of the family change and stress described by the Community members and staff in the consultations was attributed to the impacts of different family members accessing their ‘rights’ in Australia. Many participants in these consultations described rights as a negative element of settlement in Australia. They provided examples of how rights, or different understandings of rights, result in changing roles, responsibilities, power relations and expectations within the family. They felt that access to rights, particularly for women and children, is responsible for problems within their family – problems between husbands and wives, problems between parents and children.

However, the stories and discussion shared by participants also demonstrate that the intersection between ‘rights’ and family conflict relates not only to changing roles but also to misconceptions of rights and misunderstandings of Australian culture, including Australian family life.

There is an assumption and misunderstanding of how Australian families live – that separation is common and acceptable in Australia. There is a question about whether it is good – that is, people separate in Australia so maybe I can too. [AMES staff member]

There is change in family relationships and roles, obviously these are changing; [but] there can be equality in the roles in a family, and this not being understood. [AMES staff member]

There is a perception by some new arrivals that there is no discipline in Australian families. Participants felt that this leads to protective behaviour by some parents as they struggle to shelter their children and maintain their traditional and cultural practices; but that it also influences the behaviour of young people, as they seek to fit in to, and test the boundaries of, their new life.

Kids are not getting accurate info about what their rights are – we deliver the information in a way and their understanding is different, they don’t have responsibility. [AMES staff member]

The way [youth] are understanding is different to what the rights are, what it actually is they need to understand is the responsibility also. [Community member]

Misunderstandings about rights is attributed by staff and community members to inadequate or inconsistent information for new arrivals.

[There is] limited first language information; kids are educated at school and learn different information from parents, parents learn different information from kids. It results in misunderstandings. [AMES staff member]

All the human rights abusing in the family whether intentionally or unintentionally is because they don’t understand human rights. [Community member]
Men’s rights, women’s rights

Women’s rights were seen as particularly transformed by life in Australia.

Here we [women] have our freedom. What are our rights? Talking freely without worrying about the man or other community person saying something. We go to school. The right to be in charge in the house, because back home the man is in charge of everything. The other is freedom of practicing our religion. The other is cultural respect and choosing your own partner - you know, forcing underage marriage and all that, back home - but over here we can choose our partner. No tolerance to domestic violence. Health care. ... The other thing is here in Australia, we got our home - it's not the same as back home, back home we don’t have property, the property belongs to the man, here its both of us. So we are happy. [Community member]

Another one, we have sexual freedom here: At home the man is "I married you, at any time I have sex with you", but here we have the freedom, I say “ok today I want you” but [back home] we do all the jobs, all the work and they don't know whether we are ready or not, they say “I am ready you are ready”. [Community member]

The fact of women’s rights in Australia is not seen as a positive aspect of settlement by many. The elevation of women’s rights was seen in direct opposition to men’s rights. Women are enjoying the rights but knowing it is causing distress for their husbands and other men in their community; many men are seeing it negatively. The prominence of women’s rights is seen as disrupting the balance of family life.

The men are not happy with us here, because here, we have got all the rights. They think they are down there. Because, [at home], they are the boss. They always say “I am, I am, I am the boss!”. But here it is different. The rights in the family for the women is good, but for our men is not good. [Community member]

Here they teach us that when something happens, we have to call police. That is not going down well with our men, here. The men are saying “ohhhhh, these people are saying they want our wife now to be the boss” And we are getting problems with them. And then, ... when the police come, they always say, oh we have the rights. [Community member]

The police say we have the rights, it’s good for us, but it’s not good for our husbands. [Community member]

One negative impact of the womens rights, and one of the most disturbing issues raised in the consultation in relation to the relative freedom for women is Australia, is the locking up of some women by their male family members for fear they will be corrupted by access to their rights and exposure to Australian social norms.

There are husbands wanting to block their wives learning English so as not to increase their power. [AMES staff member]

Too much freedom is dangerous for women [in my community], because the man can’t see women have too much freedom. Even they can’t call the police in some case because they will kill us. ....Changing the man is difficult, like their attitude toward the woman and the freedom. In some cases the woman situation in Australia is worse than in Afghanistan because the husband don’t let the woman don’t let them go to market or shopping and so they face depression. [Community member]
This is one of the problems: the men feels that the wives shouldn’t go outside in Australia; they are the leaders of the family and they feel threatened by that. He is yelling and screaming at her, the kids are feeling left out and seeing it happen over and over, they are seeing her being told to do this and do that. She is being pushed in the corner from society and she is homesick too, it is going to end up big problem for the families. Male [Community member]

Participants also discussed an incongruity of women’s rights in Australia: that many women would prefer to continue their role as family carer and homemaker, but are required by regulation or circumstances to be away from the home in education or working. They may be subject to government regulations, for example those requiring single parents to work, or they may have to work because their husband is unable to find employment.

A lot of women want to stay at home and look after the home and kids, they don’t want to look for a job or go to school, but if they don’t then Centrelink will cut off their help, they are forced to go and that doesn’t sit well with some women or the families dynamics. The kids say “who’s going to look after us if mum goes to school?” There is no element of choice as to how to move forward. [AMES staff member]

Many of the women felt that their absence from the home, the multiple time demands placed on them in settlement, and the general ‘busy-ness’ of all family members as they do the work of settlement, contributes to the schisms occurring within families.

If only the parents have more time with their children... As soon as we arrive in Australia, we have to run every day to medicare, health care, English learning. So the children and the parents never meet together. [Community member]

The children spend time more with the teachers, when we come home it is 6 o’clock, we don’t have time to spend with the children. [Community member]
While women experience an increase in their rights and freedoms, for many men their roles, status and identity are challenged by life in Australia, not only by women’s relative freedoms but by their loss of control of major aspects of their lives.

_Men [feel they are] being disempowered or emasculated – men seeing the women and children with more rights and they having less, exacerbated by less money and [women] being paid directly._ [AMES staff member]

Much of the loss of male authority and identity in the family relates to the financial independence of women and children and the loss of his role as provider and his status in society. Difficulties in finding employment and direct Centrelink payments to women and children (see below) also contributes to the erosion of the male’s role as head of the household.

_In Africa, men is in charge of everything and here women start to have problem with you because we are at home and idle and it is problem with the women and for us._ [Community member]

_Back home men is the head of the family, and here they still are, but there is many things that have changed. Now the head of the family for the money is the women and it cause lots of problem, now the men have no more the purse in the pocket and have to ask the woman and it becomes a problem._ [Community member]

_They cannot find a job and they cannot earn money to bring extra money to the family – which creates disharmony in the family as well._ [Community member]

AMES staff raised an additional important and paradoxical aspect of the role of men in the family in settlement. Men feel responsible to provide for their families and are held responsible by them for their situation. Service providers frequently look to men as head of the household to make decisions on behalf of the family; yet so many aspects of that situation is out of their control. This can lead to frustration and feelings of inadequacy, and some men take their frustration out on the family, and sometimes on service providers.

_The man is at the front because he is trying to stand up for them and trying to provide for them, but feeling disempowered because he is feeling responsible and trying to cope but not getting there._ [AMES staff member]
Parents rights, children rights

We are very happy in Australia, but we have issue with our children because they have too many rights. [Community member]

Participants described conflict between parents and children and family breakdown, with parents unable to control the behaviour of children. Parents are happy that their children are able to access rights such as education and healthcare, but they related children’s disrespectful and disobedient behaviour to the child having “too many rights” and “rights without responsibility”. They are worried about the influence of local peers and the adoption of behaviours by their children that they find unacceptable but which they feel powerless to control.

Here, some children are learning from their friends at schools, they smoke cigarettes in school, in uniform, even when they see their teacher, they don’t even get scared, standing in front of their teachers, or in the train station, smoking. All that are problem for us. Our children are learning all those bad lies from here, we are getting problems with that. [Community member]

Yet parents feel they have no means to discipline and no authority because of the way children’s ‘rights’ manifest for their children: attempts to impose their authority or discipline their children will be met by threats to call the police.

We have, parents have a hard time to discipline the children, every time we try, the children respond “we have our rights” and they ring the police. [Community member]

I want human rights to tell us what is the responsibility of the children – not only the rights. When you smack the children they call police, we are not practicing our culture in Africa here. When they call police, they have the right to take away our children. [Community member]

These are the arrogant children, they know their rights, and they know to call 000, but they don’t know their responsibility to elders. [Community member]

Participants associate children’s rights in Australia to the loss of cultural and family practices that they value from their background. Two aspects of this cause conflict between youth and parents – the erosion of the traditional authority of parents and elders, and the struggle by parents to maintain their culture while they see their children rejecting it.
The children here are losing their culture, because they don’t allow us to teach them, they just grow up in this Australian culture. They living without, losing their African culture. We are having problem with that. [Community member]

Families are very troubled about the separation of children from their families, through the independence possible from youth allowance, or because of intervention of child protection agencies. Community participants expressed profound sadness about their relationships with their children and the breakdown of their families.

Many of us have lots of problems, but the major for one for [our community] is we are very sad about the children in Australia. They have too much rights, they are so disrespectful, they don’t respect elders, this gives us a big heartache and sadness. [Community member]
Centrelink payments

Many participants discussed the conflict arising around the direct payment of Centrelink benefits to women and youth. The payment of benefits to women and children challenges the traditional patriarchal structures that were considered the norm in their previous existences. With many men unable to find employment and the family dependent on Centrelink, the man no longer controls the family resources.

There is a change of family dynamics with the roles that people have in their family and the changes they have when they come here, particularly for the father where they had control and power of decision, land and money and now feel the challenge of loss of control and power. Reasons [include] Centrelink payments for children and mothers....How can they come to terms with this? Also they are challenged by us as a culture that this is the way it should be. [AMES staff member]

Same as our sister says, husbands feel like we are abused by the wives with the money. Husbands have arguments with wives to get pocket money, they are being abused by the wives because they used to be able to do what they want. [Community member]

The payment of Centrelink benefits directly to youth is also seen as a significant contributing factor to the problems between youth and parents. In particular, the payment of benefits to youth causes difficulties in the family if the young person does not believe they have to contribute any part of their Centrelink payment to household expenses, creating a shortfall in the family budget and causing conflict between parents and children.

Young people getting their own money – they don’t want to contribute it to their own food and living etcetera. They just want to do what they want: your dad and mum pay for the school and food and house. The reality is that we calculate the whole family’s income in terms of where they can rent a house etc. And young people work out if they move out they can get an independent rate. Parents think that this is encouragement for the young ones to move out, I’ve had young people talk about it, they say it to their mum and it causes conflict. [AMES staff member]

Their financial independence allows them to buy things not approved of by the parents, including some youth buying cigarettes, drugs and alcohol. It also allows them to separate from their family to live independently.

So, managing their own money for themselves, living all by themselves, because the government giving money to children, that is a problem for us because when they give them that money, they think they are now above us. [Community member]
The role of agencies in the understandings of rights – schools, police, social services

Social workers and counsellors putting ideas into people’s heads – ideas of separation and you will be ok so that women think she will be better off from her family. [AMES staff member]

Community members and AMES staff referred to the role of different agencies in influencing new arrivals’ understandings of rights in Australia. The common understanding among community members about women’s and children’s rights and what to do in the event of any family conflict, appears to be to call for emergency assistance.

Of course, everyone knows, 000. When any problems arise, 000. Everyone knows 000. The police will intervene. [Community member]

Social worker says to the children, if you have problem with your family then dial 000. We have no more say, we are afraid to speak to them. [Community member]

While it is appropriate and important that all members of the community can seek assistance if their safety is threatened, community members felt that there was too much intervention in their family life. They felt that “parenting should be left to parents”, but reported how many children use the threat of police intervention to subvert the parenting role and avoid discipline.

Parents have a hard time to discipline the children, every time we try, the children respond “we have our rights” and they ring the police. [Community member]

In particular, schools, counsellors and police were mentioned as sources of information about rights in Australia. While staff and community members referred to the importance of all family members having the same information and understandings about rights, there appears to be different information available to different family members, and different understandings of what rights entail.

Children have been given information on their rights without understanding what their responsibilities are, not understanding the consequence of their action. [AMES staff member]

Kids are not getting accurate info about what their rights are – we deliver the information in a way and their understanding is different. [AMES staff member]

There is misunderstanding between schooling and home – what they teach them at school, there is disconnect from home. [Community member]
Many feel that, if child protection agencies are contacted, only the child is paid heed and there is no opportunity for parents to be heard or for mediation to occur.

Child protection is becoming a big issue in African families, when the police and everyone come, they don't speak to everyone, it is splitting the families. [Community member]

Just imagine 20 years in suffering, then you reach here and face some of these issues, [and] for someone to take away our children from us. [Community member]

The ‘disconnect’ and conflict that arises from understandings and manifestations of rights in Australia among many refugee families may be exacerbating situations for families already under pressure from significant settlement stressors and barriers and pre-existing tensions.
Barriers to settlement and their impact on families

Many settlement barriers were raised in the consultations by community members and staff, who described the ways in which these barriers impact on families, in particular because of the interconnectedness of the various challenges faced by new arrivals.

We have the language problem....We cannot speak the language, we cannot solve the problems, we can’t go anywhere, we can’t get anything, we can’t do anything by ourselves. We are living in rental properties and the housing is not giving us a house. The Centrelink is not paying for everything, it is not enough for bills - gas, rent, petrol, food and everything... We are worried about our families overseas. If the government helped us in sponsoring the families quicker, then it would stop our worries and tension. Plus Centrelink is pushing us to find a job, but if we don’t know where to go and how to go and how to speak then we cannot find job, language barrier means we cannot get a job.[But] because we have so much tension and worry we cannot pick up the language and solve the problems. [Community member].

Challenges for refugee youth

While community participants in the consultation described significant conflict between youth and parents, they expressed great anxiety about the pressures on their children and the consequences of these pressures on the child and on the rest of their family.

At school the kids are... having problems, getting screamed at by other kids, and, getting cyber bullied. That’s becoming a big issue in the family and they are coming and taking all their aggression out on their mother, out on the family. They don’t understand half of their homework and they get discriminated in the parks and the schools and all that. The best option they are looking at, as a young kid, as a youth, they just go with the wrong crowd, they are going smoking, drinking, drugs, they are getting with the wrong crowd. They are having problems with their learning, how to use the buses and the tickets and seeing the doctors and the markets and everything like that. [Community member]

Schooling is age matched; this is so difficult - the children not understanding anything. Next day, or couple of months, they drop out. We cannot put blame on woman or man, they are dropping out of school and sitting down in the gutter. [Community member]
In our country the children they didn’t smoke, but now they smoke, and also sometimes they use the drug - but it is not good for our children. At first they are happy, when they use the drug. But then they lost their education, their work and then everything, and maybe they lose their life. Because of this reason, the women in our community want from the government …. to help us. [Community member]

While children are dealing with challenges external to the family, they are also having to adapt to changes in the relationships and dependencies brought about by settlement, especially relating to them learning language and accepting new cultural norms more quickly than their parents.

Everyone comes to this country with different beliefs and cultural background and the children are very curious about the new culture. They observe things that they might want to do as well. They get stuck in between two worlds – the new world and the old culture. Parents...have had more time to get in touch with their own culture. When [children] go to school they just try to fit in, they try not to be bullied by others....It can create lots of conflict with the children. And children are put in roles where to some extent they run the family in different ways, the children who learn English quickly become the voice of the family. So they are stuck between 2 worlds: They are juggling what they do in their daily life, and the priorities of the family....That’s where we see they become lost in the process... They are not in the same situation as the ordinary teenager who doesn’t have to worry about these things. [AMES staff member]

Financial stress
As in the wider Australian community, financial stress is strongly associated with domestic and family violence. Like all low income families, new arrivals struggle to pay all their expenses. However, their ability to budget for everything is further challenged by unexpected financial demands such as high utility bills, rent increases, and unexpected expenses.

Budget is a big problem; woman and man always having argument because of their lack of [money for unexpected expenses], because of budgeting. [Community member]

One of the unexpected expenses out of the family’s control is the obligation to support family members still living in refugee conditions, especially when requests for help are urgent.

Men and women always have arguments because of the lack of money and the unexpected expenses, it is not that they don’t know how to do the budget, it is the unexpected things, for
example your mother or child or daughter has been put into hospital overseas and you need to send money and it leads to problems; but it is a right to send money overseas. [Community member]

Participants described how the financial stress in families relates not only to insufficient income, but also because the allocation of Centrelink payments to women and youth in many cases challenges previous roles, authority and power relations within the family, as discussed above. This issue of financial stress highlights the links between settlement challenges and experiences of rights in Australia.

The main problem is in our community is money, related to lack of language. As soon as we arrived here, we were given money by Centrelink, to go to school, and then to find work and then to stand on our own foot. However that is not what happened. As soon as we arrive, we have money, but the problem is, the money is given more to the mother than to the father....It is not equally distributed and it has created disharmony in the family. The money is given to the family but it is not shared equally. This created disharmony between mother, father and children. [Community member]

The family violence normally starts from when the money is not shared with the parents, the men have no money in the pocket they can’t do anything. [Community member]

Some refugee families described how, even if they budget well, they face discrimination.

Our economy rights, we feel they are abused by other Australians. Some of us are able to save some money to buy a second hand car, but some say “why is you able to buy a car when even we cannot buy a car?” But we don’t buy chicken breast - we eat just chicken wing instead, and then we save and are able to buy a car – not a good car, just an old car, but we face discrimination. [Community member]

Unemployment

Unemployment contributes to financial stress but also impacts on family roles and individuals’ sense of self and self-worth, particularly for men who have traditionally been the head of the household and responsible to provide for their family.

As soon as we arrive, we get some payments from Centrelink, but they are very limited and in order to get beyond this, we need to get a job, but the majority of the populations have lack of English skills, so it is very difficult for the father to get a job and provide family money. [Community member]

It our experience not that our women don’t like us, but because we don’t contribute something to the family and we rely on social security, it is a problem for our women. [Community member]

Even highly qualified arrivals are often unable to find work, with overseas qualifications not recognised, job seeking-strategies different to what they are familiar with, and a great challenge to rebuild their career and social position. Each of these factors may contribute to family conflict.

Some are highly qualified and had respected careers and then come here and have no status and lesser jobs and that can be stressful. [AMES staff member]

Sometimes their backgrounds are that they lived in big houses, then the camps, so when they come to Australia they expect to have their old life back and they realise they cannot, then this dissolves into conflict and violence and they realise it’s not even possible to earn the kind of money that might make having their old life back possible. [AMES staff member]
Lack of suitable and affordable housing

Inadequate supply of affordable and appropriate housing results in refugee families having little choice about what to rent, frequently causing conflict especially if one family member has been involved in the rental of a particular property the rest of the family finds unsuitable.

Expectations about housing, and disappointment about what is available is influenced by what they have been led to expect prior to arrival.

We are being introduced to families who are coming with their set of expectations, and men are also facing these as head of the family. [AMES staff member]

Inadequate housing leads to overcrowding, splitting of families between homes, and living conditions unsuitable to harmonious family life if the needs of individual family members cannot be met. High rents also take a high proportion of family income, further contributing to the critical problems of financial stress, overcrowding, and conflict within the family.
Some families are big and when they come here, and the housing is not big enough so they split them up and it divides the people. [Community member]

The significance of home and land ownership in the home country, particularly as a measure of male worth, adds an additional dimension to the importance of housing, and the man’s role in housing.

*Many come from backgrounds where their land has been passed down from generations, so there is pride in ownership from land. Where is this going to come from in Australia? [AMES staff member]*

*A man in African families means, something he owns, property: land, house. But in some situations in Australia it is not like that for us. The major problem is, human is related with land and property. It is natural. [Community member]*

**Language difficulties**

Participants described how the problems of learning English interacts with many other areas of settlement stress and family disharmony.

*Because of the lack of language, those parents have been going to English class for years and years. Because they didn’t have any basic language knowledge, that’s why it is hard for them to catch up, and still now they are not able to [speak the language], hence they cannot find a job and they cannot earn money to bring extra money to the family – which creates disharmony in the family as well. [Community member]*

They also described the problems that stem from parents and children learning English and adapting to a new life at different rates.

*English is learnt faster by young people than parents – so then becoming the leader and cultural bridge which may not be healthy for their age…. Children are learning language and getting in sync faster, then take on the role of teaching the parents….The change in role of kids [and] parents changes respect and behaviours in the family. [AMES staff member]*

*Kids learn faster and adapt quicker to change resulting in family fights as parents don’t understand the Australian systems for kids, how Australian kids live. [AMES staff member]*
Pre-existing issues and the impact on families

Its difficult because family relationships are so complex, and some of the issues are going on long before they came here, but being so new they are trying to learn what to do and about their rights. [AMES staff member]

Participants in the consultations provided an analysis of the many experiences and expectations before arrival in Australia that may contribute to and compound stress in families during settlement.

Family reunion stresses

Many families are reunited by resettlement – after years of separation, family members are back together. They may struggle to adapt to and accept the growth, change or trauma experienced by individual family members during their separation, including the changes in roles and rights for women and children stemming from the settlement environment.

Suddenly the father is back in the household, there are issues for the mum, or children meeting parents who’ve they not seen for many years, not understanding reasons for the huge change or knowing how to deal with it. [AMES staff member]

Disappointed expectations

Expectations of settlement may be unrealistic, either from information provided through Ausco training, rumour among refugee communities, or from family members already in Australia.

When a family overseas might be reunited, they think everything will be fine when they get here, they think its happy ever after. But dad might have been putting on a really brave face, saying it’s great, built up their expectations; and when they arrive it’s not and then he bears the weight on his shoulders of bolstering family support.” [AMES staff member]

Unmet expectations results in disappointment and conflict: “Unrealistic expectations ... results in family fights, the proposer guilty for not being able to provide more for the family, huge responsibilities.” [AMES staff member]

Pre-existing family tensions

Participants described how family tensions sometimes relate to political and social problems from the home country or refugee experience, for example mixed marriages, religious conversions during the refugee journey, or shame and stigma related to trauma and rights abuses experienced by a family member. They also described how for some families, resettlement itself is a source of conflict as different family members either wanted resettlement or wanted to remain where they were in the hope of returning home.

Loss of support networks

Loss of extended family, community and cultural support means that families are often facing the stresses of settlement in isolation from the previous sources of practical, emotional and/or spiritual support. “They have lost their own system, and maybe the new one contradicts the old one” [AMES staff member]

Split families

The continuing trauma caused by families being split across nations impacts family members’ ability to settle well: “The government defines family in one way and that may be different to the community - so really half of them are still overseas” [AMES staff member] This is a problem echoed by community
members, who experience guilt, worry and anxiety over their missing family members, with a sense of being unable to settle until all family members are safe and reunited.

*We are worried about our families overseas. If the government helped us in sponsoring the families quicker, then it would stop our worries and tension... Because we have so much tension and worry we cannot pick up the language and solve the problems.* [Community member]

The dire needs of family members left overseas also frequently impacts on the financial circumstances of resettled families, as they struggle to meet their own needs on a limited income while also sending money to family left behind.

**Impact of torture and trauma**

Manifestations of torture and trauma affect the coping and behaviour of family members: “there may be mental health issues – being angry all the time” [AMES staff member]. However personal or cultural barriers may prevent community members from accessing support for mental health problems even when it is affecting their relationships and family life.

*We were asking [the client] about mental health, he said I cannot ask and I cannot talk about this. It is a huge shame to talk about this. So... this is often put away.* [AMES staff member]
Solutions identified by participants

The third day of consultations involved community members and AMES staff in a strategic planning session, working together in small groups to identify solutions to issues identified during the consultations. These small staff/community working groups then presented their suggestions to the combined groups.

The range of strategies recommended by participants is outlined below. Some strategies were discussed in detail in the larger group. Other strategies were mentioned or listed on posters presented by the working groups without further discussion. This is reflected in the following sections, with some suggestions well documented and others listed as dot points. All suggestions and quotes derive from the combined community/staff working groups, or from the separate community consultation and AMES staff consultation, and are attributed accordingly.

The working groups suggested a range of advocacy, policy and practical strategies to create conditions that support family harmony and avoid family breakdown in settlement. They recognised that achieving better family outcomes for new arrivals will require multiple strategies, in the same way that AMES staff identified multiple strategies to achieve secure and affordable housing for new arrivals:

“There is not really one thing that can solve the housing issue. These [strategies] are like bricks because they build together and make a new house.” [AMES staff member]

This recognises the many complex and interrelated factors contributing to problems being experienced in many refugee families. The suggestions also reflect a desire to gain mutual understanding and collaboration between community members and service providers to achieve better outcomes for refugee families.
Practical strategies

Education about rights and family life in Australia

• A rights guidebook and education strategy
Participants stated that more education about rights and family life is needed for new arrivals, as they see the impact of rights in Australia as one of the root causes of family conflict.

Solution 1: a family guidebook which clearly explain rights and responsibilities. All the human rights abusing in the family whether intentionally or unintentionally is because they don’t understand rights. They understand rights but not responsibility. It would help our society here. [Community member]

A family guidebook that explains rights – not only blaming the children – we have to listen to the children. If we listen to them we can understand them a little bit. Something is forcing them to do something. So we need a guide book about this stuff. [Staff/Community working group]

A guidebook would best be accompanied by a holistic training program in rights, delivered in first language by a member of the new arrival’s own community. This would enable communication of the information in an effective and understandable way. It would open up opportunities to discuss and understand the issues to be addressed.

Training on the Australian way of life and what people can expect here... initially the thoughts were about having someone to do ongoing presentations about it, but then the idea of train the trainer come through. Train someone and then they train the next people and then there is a turnover of people in that role. [Staff/Community working group]

Lack of consistent information on rights was identified as a problem in the consultations; so this education strategy would also enable family members to receive consistent information, “Educating the whole family about each person in the family’s rights.” [Staff/Community working group]

It was suggested that education about living in Australia was a critical need for new arrivals that should take precedence over other learning.

The clients to be educated first in their language about living in Australia, then followed by English classes, because often we learn English, but still don’t understand the culture of living in Australia. [Staff/Community working group]

• Use of community radio to share information about rights and family issues in Australia
AMES to work with community radios as a means of community education; pass on information about settlement or other issues. [Staff/Community working group]

• Production of a DVD about rights and family life in Australia

Producing a DVD or film regarding topics we have discussed this week – including the challenges of bringing up children in Australia, communications between teachers, children and parent and how this can be done. [Staff/Community working group]

Other topics suggested included employment, education, men living on their own, family separation etc. It was recommended that the actors and presenters in the DVD be from the community, with all communities represented on the DVD: A multi-community DVD, but in one language for each community; the narration and “talking head” to be different and specific for each community.

3 A multimedia/radio project for African parents is currently being developed by Information and Cultural Exchange (ICE) in NSW – see www.ice.org.au/projects/parenting-stories/
• Promotion of the benefits of women’s and children’s rights to community members

• Employment of family liaison officers

  Similar to the Settlement Information Officer – have a Community member to be trained up and have the role of visiting the families and speak with them about the challenges they are experiencing and some of the suggestions. There is a lot of need for people to be trained or helped or informed. [Staff/Community working group]

Family support services

  The most important thing is .... to recognise the strength of the parents, and that these are some of the strongest parents in the world. Problems affecting families in Australia are not the fault of the family; it is the result of coming into Australia and requiring significant adjustment from their previous lives. [Staff/Community working group]

Participants identified that refugee families need particular and specialised support due to the multiple stressors and complex background factors that impact on their functioning as a family.

• Regular and structured community information programs or groups about problems affecting families and functioning of families in Australia.

It was recommended that family information and support programs be developed in consultation with refugee community members and families, as well as families’ specialists. “Group discussion sessions in the post-honeymoon period to help the family identify that these are the challenges and this is what might happen next and this might be something we can do about it.” [Staff/Community working group]

Groups that can be attended by all family members was seen as desirable. “A gap is around discussing these issues in groups. We do it individually in families when there are [problem] situations, but this doesn’t happen in groups.” [Staff/Community working group]

• Dispute resolution and mediation options for refugee families

Participants acknowledged a critical need to provide more support to families experiencing conflict, with a goal of mediation rather than separation. They suggested the necessity for services to work with all members of the family rather than in isolation.

  When there is a family dispute, we thought it is not necessary to call 000; sometimes it is necessary, but not always. It would be better .... to try some kid of mediation. You discuss the problem, people listen to you, and try to get you reconciled. [Community member]
This shows the mother and father and the children feel isolated, but we try to bring them together for discussion and get the family to decide together what they need or what they want. [Community member]

The use of trained community members to provide support to families was recommended, with appropriate selection, training and employment of support workers to facilitate family communication and conciliation. Providing training for Community Guides or community leaders/elders, both paid staff and volunteers, to provide family support was suggested particularly as staff and community members recognised that this is a role that many of them are already called on by the community to play.

Community guide, community leader, he will visit the family who has problems, he would negotiate, try understand the problems, and then bring the family together .... He can encourage them and help them. [Community member]

Gender specific support was considered necessary; “Gender issues – women talk to women and men talk to men. In some cultures a man can advise a man and a woman a woman.” [Community member]

Specific suggestions were that:

- AMES to work closely with community leaders about confidentiality, conflict management and the implications of family violence,
- AMES to train community leaders about the importance of privacy and confidentiality, conflict management and family violence issues;
- SIO and other community leaders to be trained to become mediators between families, for family violence issues, for parents and children and this conflict;
Liaising with the case manager and linking family members to appropriate agencies was seen as an important part of a family support role, not just to specialist family services but to other services to assist settlement, such as employment support. This recommendation highlights participants’ awareness of the inter-linkages between family problems and settlement difficulties. Where specialist services are needed, participants recognised the critical importance of these services understanding and taking into account the special needs and past experiences of refugee communities. For example, it was recommended that when police are involved, a teacher or counsellor also be involved, as many community members have experienced severe human rights abuses at the hands of police during the refugee journey.

- **Mentoring, information and support groups**

  *We also must advocate for information groups on family conflict and how to manage conflict in the home; for men’s and women’s groups to discuss family conflicts in a supportive environment, [in a way that] does not exclude their own cultural communities. [Staff/Community working group]*

It was also recommended that small support groups for different family members – men, women, boys, girls – would assist in sharing information and developing support, and could be combined with different activities to facilitate participation.

Mentoring programs for individual family members were recommended, to operate similar to a big brother/big sister program.

**Youth support**

- **Culturally appropriate youth support services**

  *Youth services are western based, and the families don’t understand them. Efforts to establish youth services programs that understand and take into account the cultural backgrounds of the community, and the people themselves involved in developing this and extensive involvement in the communities themselves in managing and leading this program. [Staff/Community working group]*

- **Improved supervision of youth living out of home**

Participants perceived a lack of support and guidance for youth living out of home, with consequent poor outcomes for the young person, including school drop out, drug and alcohol use and teen pregnancies. They recommended that a person from the youth’s community be assigned to provide supervision, mentoring and guidance.

*When the children is living all by themselves, who is going to tell them what to do? If they are at home, they are just watching TV...from 9am to 7pm. They are not going to study, they are just doing what they want to do. What is going to be their future in this land? Will they having education that can bring them to parliament? That can make them lawyers? Or doctors? What is their future in this land? Will they not end up in the factories? There are women out there working in factories because of lack of education, instead of benefitting from the fruits of this land. They have opportunities more than we do if they have the opportunity to learn. Let there be community people to supervise how they are living, how they are coping - the way they have representation in courts. [Staff/Community working group]*
• Review of age-based school placement and increased schooling support for refugee youth
  Assist youth with education as the youth are placed in education according to age and they cannot keep up so they drop out. [Staff/Community working group]

• AMES Youth worker to support youth to stay at school
  AMES to have a youth worker with education to combat the youth being placed in school according to age and stop dropouts. [Staff/Community working group]

• Community homework programs – for primary, high school, and language support

• Support for cultural backgrounds of new arrivals - Cultural education for children
  Opportunities for parents to share their culture with their children; in our community we think of our children very highly. We should have time to celebrate our culture so that all the good things we have back home the new generation will never forget. [Staff/Community working group]

Strategies to improve relations and communication between new arrivals and authorities

• Two way education between communities and police/ social workers/ teachers to improve understanding
  We have lots of problems with teaching of police. We think that SW and teachers should be given good education according to the cultures, if they don’t understand what we stand for. We need social workers, police, teachers, parents to be put together and given education. If we have good education, it would help with … everything. [Staff/Community working group]

It was recommended that AMES take an active role in education of mainstream services as to the cultural backgrounds of refugee communities.

  The community can educate AMES and help to have cultural awareness about the communities – this is my culture, this is how we can be treated and this is how we can settle in Australia. [Staff/Community working group]

• Using interpreters in school/family meetings, improving parent/ teacher cooperation
  Participants recommended the need for increased liaison and communication between parents and schools. Regular meetings with interpreters were recommended as a way to better engage parents with their child’s schooling and the community, improve retention at school, and reduce reliance on the child as interpreter and liaison between the two.

  Schools and parents working together – they call a meeting but no interpreter or anything. They need to talk to us without the children there. The point is how to work together, how to put it together for the children. Family and teachers should have good relationship with the children. They have more time with the teachers than the family so the relationship between children and teachers and parents is important. [Staff/Community working group]

Settlement support and settlement services

• More training for Community Guides, to enable Community guide role to include cultural and rights education
  Provide more training for Community Guides in basic settlement information, so they can do more than taking us to different appointments. We should know about Australian culture,
about the rights of women etc. We should know this in our first 6 months, the more training they get and they give, the more relaxed we will become in the first 6 months. This should be in Basic Australian Law, Education system and school culture, culture awareness. About how to work, about the news, about politics – not just going to school and listening without knowing what’s going on.

• Longer periods of settlement and complex case support

  Complex case support service or support worker could be longer; Because the family needs continuity and time to build trust instead of having to retelling the story to many different people, and also easier referral process that’s faster and easier to access. [Staff/Community working group]

• Development of strategies to ensure inclusion of women and children in decision making processes such as housing choice

  In response to male headed household: we could seek to be more inclusive in the decision making process – especially the spouse. Also for mothers and wives to be more included in the education about orientation and settlement processes. [Staff/Community working group]

• Increased access to family reunion through a centralised information point and increased access to migration agents

  • Centralised information point on family reunion/ sponsorship

    I want to go back to families torn apart. It is too much in my mind. When we say sponsor – we all know we can but we don’t know the way and we don’t know who to ask. We go to MRC or someplace or immigration and we are not satisfied with how we are being advised. Every one of us is torn apart. We can never be well settled here. This is one of the biggest issues I think. We are asking if this only one place where we can go and get advice and help, an expert to help up and put our mind at rest. [Staff/Community working group]

  • Seeking funding for more migration agents

    Lobby DIAC at high level for more funding for migration agents; Shortage of migration agents, many clients cannot get right service and cannot lodge the right applications to sponsor their relatives. When people get relatives around them, they get relief from anxiety and depression; it is an integral part of settlement. [Staff/Community working group]

  • AMES to develop a paid position for a migrant worker to work with the community on issues around the process of family sponsorship

    Funding for more migration assistance within AMES itself, rather than needing to go to another agency like IRC; Scholarships for case coordinators and community leaders as migration workers. [Staff/Community working group]

  • Advocacy for increased access to sponsorship for split families

    We must also advocate for Women and other new arrivals being able to more easily sponsor their families, to loosen the tight policies. [Staff/Community working group]

Community programs

• Health and women’s well-being groups, run by refugee health nurses;

  To reduce isolation of women and provide an acceptable women-only environment for the communication of health and settlement information and the development of supportive community networks.
• Men’s resume writing group

• Community ‘walking bus’ to support parents in ensuring their children can travel safely to school

• Community day care program

• Community learner driver program;

• Develop a Pilot community program for Aged Day Care – to relieve some responsibilities of younger women in the family;

• Women groups for crafts, arts, socialising with each other –
  
This is part of the culture that we have and we want to keep that part here too – so organise women’s community groups. [Staff/Community working group]

Housing support

Participants drew a strong link between family conflict and violence and settlement stressors, in particular housing and employment problems. Therefore strategies to improve access to housing and employment were seen as very important parts of an overall strategy to reduce conflict, violence and family breakdown.

• Female housing support workers
  
We ask AMES to expand the men’s housing workers to also be for women.... as housing is also another burning element in settlement process, AMES to employ women housing people to assist women housing problems. [Staff/Community working group]

• Longer initial accommodation
  
AMES to expand the initial accommodation model – when people stay in this accommodation for some time they can explore the environment and they will have choice about their long term living, they will have more time to contact their relatives and have more time to make the long term decision. ....This will reduce the tension in the family when deciding about the rental property and give higher opp for settlement outcome. [Staff/Community working group]

Advocacy needed for policy and practice changes

• Increased budgets for and focus on interpreters; specialised interpreters for family issues

• Review of information provided by IOM, to ensure new arrivals have realistic expectations

• Review of Educational placement policy for refugee children, and for more support of refugee children and youth in the schooling system
  
Many children drop out of school as they don’t fit in because the criteria for attendance is age dependant and not skill specific. Schooling should be according to knowledge not in age. [Staff/Community working group]
• Innovative housing solutions for new arrival families
AMES to lobby for funding similar to the first home owners grant but for refugee home buying programs; and also for increased rent assistance and low interest loans. [Staff/Community working group]

• More flexible language learning options
  • Part time language class attendance options
  The other thing is to add: Education and going to language school is not enough. Going every day to school creates more problems, we should go 3 days to school and then other 2 days, find a job or do handicraft or something! Three days is enough and 2 days do something else. Going every day is too much! [Staff/Community working group]
  • Have more traineeship opportunities which allow people to learn English on the job
  • More time for older people to learn English
  We need more time for learning English for the elderly because if we don’t, Centrelink will cut off, and if you don’t learn then you just end up doing a little job, once you get this, then Centrelink cuts your payment and then the finance issues start again. [Staff/Community working group]
  • More hours for women who are at home – for more home tutoring hours
  • Traineeship opportunities which allow people to learn English on-the-job

• A different approach to settlement support – intensive training in first language in settlement orientation, then training in English language.
  Be educated in the first language for a short period of time, informing about life in Australia, then followed by the English classes; People are learning parallel, English and the new country – see if we can postpone it for three months, orient in the country and then learn the language, when a little bit of culture and country is understood. [Staff/Community working group]
Conclusion

These consultations demonstrated the deep desire of new arrivals to hold their families together, become engaged in community life in Australia and contribute to their family and new society. They enabled the sharing of the significant knowledge amongst Community members and AMES staff of the many challenges facing newly arrived families in settlement and the impacts of those challenges on family relationships. The materials to be developed as a result of this consultation will be a small step to address those challenges.
Appendix 1 “Reciprocal Research - Problem Identification and Response”

An action research methodology.

The training/ consultations with AMES staff and refugee communities utilised CRR’s reciprocal research methodology to explore and analyse what the participants see as the key issues or problems being experienced by refugee families. The consultations involved participants in identifying potential solutions to the identified problems, answering such questions as: What do we do to address the identified problems; what could we do to address the identified problems; and what help or support would be needed to implement identified solutions. The training/ consultation with staff also explored the challenges they face providing services to this client group and enabled them to share their expertise and ideas to address the problems.

The focus of the reciprocal research method is the collection of information from vulnerable and at-risk populations in a way that is empowering, that is not harmful or exploitative, and that has the potential to bring about social change. It involves a combination of training, community consultations and more traditional research methods. It was developed for use with community groups, and was strongly informed by input from refugee women on the Thai-Burma Border. They requested that human rights and gender training be provided as part of the research process, and that they be trained to undertake their own training and research.

In this model of participatory action research, human rights training provides a context to guide participants through an examination and articulation of issues of concern to their communities. “Story circles” and other participatory strategies are used to share stories or analysis of particular issues, positioned within the human rights framework. Participants also use ‘storyboarding’ to move from a focus on the problem, to an analysis of what is happening in response to the problem at a local level, what needs to be done and who might be involved in the solution. Working in small groups, participants prepare a series of posters that illustrate and analyse the identified issue of concern. Storyboards are used to explore the nature of the issue of concern, its impact on communities, identification of existing relevant services or service gaps, potential solutions to problems including who may be able to assist, and hoped-for outcomes.

The storyboard technique allows participants to name problems and issues within their communities in a safe, positive and empowering environment. It recognises the skills, knowledge and experience and human rights of participants. The underlying premise is that all people have capabilities and capacity to understand, analyse and identify solutions for community issues if the resources are available to support them. Storyboarding can and has been used with people of all levels of education, including people who are pre-literate. The focus is not on artistic ability, but on preparing a clear message for presentation to the larger group in the consultations, and service providers, NGOs or other people in power.

The storyboards are an excellent communication vehicle and often provide the first opportunity for a group to interact with those who have power over their lives. However no information or material is shared with any person outside the consultations without the express permission of the participants. A confidentiality agreement negotiated at the beginning of the consultations is binding on the researchers as well as the participants, facilitating an environment of trust and mutual respect.