



**MDA**

**Multicultural Development  
Association**

**African Australians: a Report on Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues**

Submission by the Multicultural Development Association Inc. (MDA)

31 July 2009

## **Executive Summary**

In response to the Human Rights Commission's report into "*African Australians: a Report on Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues*", the Multicultural Development Association (MDA) is pleased to have the opportunity to provide a submission.

From the consultations we conducted, MDA proposes a number of discussion points addressing the issues that were repeatedly raised in consultations with African Communities.

### *Cross-Cultural Competence Training*

1. A large number of community organisations, government departments and the private sector deal with culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) clients on a regular basis however, many have a limited understanding of how to relate to them on a culturally appropriate level. MDA believes that Cross-Cultural Competency Training should be provided on a regular basis to all organisations and businesses that work with CALD clients, to enable smoother communications, greater understanding of clients' cultures, and an enhanced appreciation of the need for interpreting services and special needs.

### *Education*

2. African Australian students in schools have reported feeling isolated, frustrated and ultimately disengaged with learning. MDA believes that the transition to Australian schools can be eased with the presence of African teaching staff or aids, bi-cultural school counsellors, or even an African support counsellor.
3. Consideration should be given to funding more intensive support programs throughout the Brisbane / Logan City region, plus in other areas of Queensland where needed, to help African students feel ready to enter mainstream classes with confidence, giving them a greater chance to engage with the learning process for the long-term.
4. MDA believes that Education Queensland should commit to introducing a formalised ESL policy in schools, as concerns are frequently raised about patchy implementation or even a complete lack of ESL programs in schools.

### *Employment and training*

5. The majority of respondents articulated the need for more training opportunities that are tailored to CALD people in order to increase future employment opportunities. This should work in with AMEP providers to provide flexible programs to incorporate English language classes and also work placement training.
6. To increase the scope of work experience, respondents are interested in having a wider choice of experiences to choose from in terms of professional development opportunities. Employer engagement strategies should be employed by employment work placement providers to encompass areas like child care, aged care, Trades and Industry Associations and the broader private sector.
7. MDA believes that state government departments should form partnerships with universities and TAFE colleges to create a nation-wide program of qualification recognition which is accredited by an appropriate educational institution. The

program should be consistently followed in each State, and be recognised by educational institutions and employers.

### *Housing*

8. Ongoing tenancy education that has follow-up sessions is vital for people of CALD backgrounds so they are fully aware of their rights and responsibilities as tenants.
9. African families face a number of extra problems when trying to find suitable housing. They are competing against smaller families, with higher incomes, and strong rental histories. As one of the more visible minority ethnic groups, they are also more likely to be subjected to direct discrimination. MDA believes that governments should work with real estate agencies and the private sector to deliver an incentive scheme so that agencies can still meet their business requirements, but are educated about meeting the needs of African families. MDA also believes that Governments should develop strategies in addressing affordable and appropriate housing needs for Africans.

### *Health*

10. A number of the issues raised centred on the lack of interpreting services available. For this reason, MDA supports the recent directive by Queensland Premier Anna Bligh that all State-Funded organisations will now be funded for the use of interpreting services for their clients. MDA believes that all State governments departments must develop standard protocols for providing interpreter services across the board and should ensure that there is an active monitoring of its implementation.

## **African Australians: a Report on Human Rights and Social Inclusion Issues**

The Multicultural Development Association (MDA) is a lead specialist settlement, advocacy and community development organisation with highly respected credentials in the provision of services to refugees and a strong organisational track record in systemic advocacy for the last 10 years. We belong to a consortium with 4 Walls (a community housing provider) and QPASTT (Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma) which delivers a range of settlement services for refugees and migrants.

MDA employs an African advocacy worker through the Community Action for a Multicultural Society (CAMS) program, which is funded by the state government through Multicultural Affairs Queensland (MAQ), and is grateful for the opportunity to share our working knowledge of the issues that affect African communities in Queensland.

For the preparation of this report, MDA conducted eight (8) forums for collecting feedback from various African Communities. These consultations took place on:

1. 9<sup>th</sup> May with Eritrean, Ethiopian and Rwandan Communities in Brisbane (ERCB)
2. 23<sup>rd</sup> May with the Congolese Community in Brisbane (CCB)
3. 30<sup>th</sup> May with the Liberian Community in Brisbane (LCB)
4. 2<sup>nd</sup> June with the Sudanese Community in Brisbane (SCB)
5. 11<sup>th</sup> June with an African Refugee Women's representative group in Brisbane (representing Afghani, Burundi, Sudanese, Somali, Ethiopian, Rwandan, Congolese and Liberian communities) (ARW)
6. 16<sup>th</sup> June with Sudanese and United Western African Communities in Toowoomba (ACT)
7. 11<sup>th</sup> May with the Multicultural Employment Assistance Network (MEAN)
8. 14<sup>th</sup> May with the Community Health Action Group (CHAG)

There were a number of issues raised during these consultations, largely in the areas of education, employment, housing and health. These issues are reported below. (Many of the points raised were common to each consultation, but in the case of specific examples or issues, the consultation will be identified by the three-letter code.) The questions asked were picked from the range of questions from the Human Rights Commission's discussion paper that for the ease of this paper has been grouped into broad headings under: barriers, case studies of discrimination and possible solutions.

## ***Education***

### *Barriers for African Australians in accessing education opportunities*

#### *Emerging themes:*

Language difficulties have been identified as the major barrier in accessing education. This was raised in all consultations. It can manifest in a number of ways. Consultations revealed that the pace at which classroom lessons are taught, and the natural assumption that all students are proficient in English, means that African students coming from a refugee background can often struggle to keep up, and have little or no opportunity to improve their English skills. Those coming from disadvantaged backgrounds often have limited written skills in their own language, let alone English. This problem is compounded by the lack of or inadequate English as a Second Language (ESL) support services in schools. We were advised that ESL support offered in schools is sometimes viewed as a separate learning component, rather than an integral learning strategy that is only on offer one or two hours per week. Furthermore, the importance of ESL programs in schools is highly dependant on the level of commitment by the relevant schools rather than as part of an education policy for CALD students.

The language barrier also sits within a broader problem of age appropriate based education. A percentage of African refugees MDA consulted have had extremely disrupted education, often missing years of school at a time due to war or strife in their home country, or extended periods of time in refugee camps. Upon arrival in Australia, they are placed in a grade appropriate to their age, rather than their level of education. This means the syllabus covered can be several grade levels beyond their current ability, which puts major barriers in front of students before they even begin.

The language difficulty does not end in the classroom. When socialising with other students, some African students feel isolated and ignored, due to their problems communicating effectively. Combined with the frustration of falling behind in classes due to undeveloped English skills, this can lead to students acting out and misbehaving out of embarrassment or frustration. Consultations revealed that students regularly become disengaged with the schooling process. This has seen a worrying percentage of students dropping out of the system.

Compounding the language problem is the use of technology. Respondents articulated that many students have never used computers before arriving in Australia. This is an issue when students are required to use them daily, including conducting research, as well as submitting assessments and other school work electronically. This can put them further behind other students who have been using computers regularly.

#### *Other factors influencing access to education*

In rural and regional areas, reliable public transport is an issue which can also affect education. The consultation in Toowoomba revealed that it can limit or impede the ability of students getting to school and English classes on time. This is compounded by the fact that many parents do not own a vehicle. Single mothers who spend a great deal of time on or waiting for public transport when taking their children to childcare and school are particularly encumbered by lack of reliable transportation. Reliance on public transportation also means students have less time for work and other activities outside of school hours, making socialising and integration more difficult.

The ARW consultation revealed further challenges for African women regarding access to education. Settlement in Australia and the opportunities for education for women has seen the dynamics in carer duties for children shift to African men. What must be taken into account is that these new responsibilities for African men can be as steep a learning curve as learning a new language. This can sometimes be a major disincentive for women. What this often means is that African women who are not able to access education or English classes remain completely dependent on their husband and children as interpreters, which further increases their isolation. The lack of adequate childcare available to parents also compounds this issue.

#### *Case studies of discrimination in the education sector*

During the consultations, questions were asked of respondents in regards to cases of discrimination they may have faced during their experiences in accessing education. It is noted that discrimination itself can be difficult to quantify as cases are not always outright but can manifest in underlying tones of prejudice in assumptions that are made.

In one example brought up during consultations, a student was denied a higher grade for an assignment because the teacher did not believe that an African student could produce work at the calibre he did. The fact that the teacher had based these assumptions according to perceptions of Africans in general rather than marking each student on an individual basis is regrettable but concerns were expressed that this is commonplace in the education system (SCB).

In another example, a respondent articulated instances at a high school in Brisbane where education counsellors were actively discouraging African high school students from taking on Grade 12 OP subjects. The main reason for this was to safeguard the reputation of the school in case students performed poorly and contributed to lowering the school average. The counsellors based this on assumptions that African students were less capable than the other students.

At the university level, a respondent observed that African students were often left out of tutorial or study groups by other students who were discouraged by strong African accents and the assumptions that they were not able participate in discussion or to produce work of quality.

#### *Possible solutions to assist in overcoming barriers for newly arrived African Australians*

The majority of respondents gave overwhelming support for an intensive schooling system like Milpera State High School and Woodridge State High School that prepares newly arrived immigrant and refugee students for participation in mainstream secondary schools. Intensive schools like this can go a long way in bridging the gap, and preparing African students for Australian schools (ACT). In Queensland, these intensive schools operate in Brisbane and Logan only and not out in regions like Toowoomba, whose students would benefit immensely from an intensive support system like this (ACT).

It was suggested that schools and TAFE employ more African teacher aides or bi-cultural tutors to assist African students in establishing connections to the school system sooner, and possibly allow longer-term engagement with the education process (ACT) (ACB). This would provide more opportunities for African students to learn English, or practice speaking English, with other Africans who have been speaking English for longer (ERCB). Bicultural teachers also have a greater appreciation for what African students may be experiencing, and

could integrate a bicultural approach to the class learning process, rather than keeping these students separate (SCB).

### ***Employment and training***

#### *Barriers for African Australians in accessing relevant employment and training opportunities*

##### *Emerging themes:*

The major issue raised in accessing relevant training and employment opportunities also centred around language barriers, which as with issues around education can manifest in various ways.

At the outset, the lack of support from job network providers for people from CALD backgrounds, let alone Africans, is a major gap in which many fall through. The services are often not individualised enough to cater to the specific needs of refugees, many of whom are unfamiliar with the use of computers and IT. Therefore browsing online for jobs, in English, which may be their second or third language, on a keyboard that is foreign, searching with programs or engines they are unfamiliar with, is an extremely difficult and overwhelming process. Respondents stated that refugees really need CALD specific job network agencies or services.

Respondents also felt that there should be more training programs or work placement programs available for CALD people. Respondents knew of some, such as those run by the Brisbane City Council (BCC) and by several community organisations, but were thwarted by the limited number of places available and also the specific focus in areas like administration or IT. Particular areas of interest that were raised for training opportunities were in child care, aged care and trades, which are all areas that people had been unable to find available opportunities.

For respondents who progress to interview stages, different cultural interpretation can often confuse a situation. Body language can be misleading—Africans may not look an interviewer in the eye because it is culturally inappropriate, but a mainstream Australian interviewer will interpret that as disinterest or indifference.

In situations where Africans do manage to find employment, the language barrier again manifests in a number of ways. There may be a lack of understanding of instructions from an employer, which can lead to mistakes by employees and increased levels of frustration in employers. If African employees lose their job, it can be very difficult to obtain a second job, as they may not receive good references from their first employer. Following from this, some respondents suggested that employers would be reluctant to hire someone that they may have trouble communicating with. Related to this are perceptions by African respondents that employers may be discouraged from hiring African employees if it could potentially affect their business or trade.

##### *Other factors influencing access to employment and training*

Other barriers include age discrimination for respondents who were aged forty or over and also a lack of suitable training programs for African youth to engage them and to keep them interested in work programs.

African women are also particularly disadvantaged in accessing training opportunities which are mostly run during business hours, as they are often the primary care givers in the home and do not have adequate childcare.

The need to possess a driver's licence is also a barrier for many to get to a job, if public transport is not available. Many Africans take a while to qualify for a driver's licence, and have trouble acquiring one until their proficiency in English develops and they are more settled. They also require employment to afford expensive driving lessons.

Facing all of these problems, it is perhaps not surprising that lack of confidence was also an issue that was raised regularly. With numerous barriers to finding employment, it is difficult to stand up and ask for help, or retain the confidence to keep trying.

#### *Case studies of discrimination in the employment sector*

Language barriers, coupled with not fully understanding rights and responsibilities in the workplace, has led to cases whereby respondents have been discriminated and exploited by unscrupulous employers.

An example was given of a forklift driver who was being paid a lesser rate compared to other workers. In raising this issue with his employers, he was told that he could find another job (CCB).

Levels of discrimination occur in situations where Africans may not be given the same levels of training on how to operate heavy machinery. A respondent gave an example of a friend who was not properly advised on how to operate a power tool. An accident occurred which saw the employee almost severing two digits and being later informed that he was fired.

Lack of language proficiency in these instances, as well as different cultural values mean that many Africans and people from other CALD backgrounds are reluctant to lodge complaints for fear of recrimination and also loss of future opportunities.

#### *Possible solutions to assist in overcoming barriers for newly arrived African Australians*

The majority of respondents articulated the need for more training opportunities that are tailored to CALD people in order to increase future employment opportunities. This should work in with AMEP providers to provide flexible programs to incorporate English language classes and also work placement training they are undergoing. Education on their rights and responsibilities in the workplace should also be built into the program to ensure that Africans are informed of their rights and are therefore equipped to know how to respond to certain situations.

Respondents believed having a wider choice of work experience opportunities to choose from would enhance professional development and future employment opportunities. Employer engagement strategies should be used by employment work placement providers to encompass areas like child care, aged care, Trades and Industry Associations and also the wider private sector. These strategies should involve cultural competence training so employers feel equipped to employ CALD workers as well as developing work mentoring/shadowing program for both students and adults alike (MEAN).

## ***Housing***

*What barriers do African families face when seeking suitable housing in Australia?*

*Emerging themes:*

The major point raised across consultations reflected the problems in finding suitable and affordable accommodation for large African families. It is common for African families to be large and close, and it is culturally important for families to live together. Traditionally the family unit in Africa is a communal one that involves extended family, with cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles all living together. This is quite different to the traditional Australian family unit, in which homes are most commonly suited for two parents and two or three children. Respondents articulated concerns that landlords and real estate agents often have about renting to such large families, including the fear of possible damage to property and the implications of having multiple children in one room, which is commonplace in Africa.

In some of these cases, respondents have resorted to misrepresenting the actual number of people intending to live in the house. In instances where this has been discovered, families have been evicted from the property with no other housing alternative.

A flow-on issue from this is that while larger houses might be more suitable, African families can rarely find affordable large retail properties. Alternatively renting two houses can be beyond their means or difficult to find adjacent to each other. In fact, many Africans receive Centrelink payments while they are still looking for a home, and most landlords and real estate agents prefer to lease to people with regular employment and a higher income. Affordable and suitable housing options that are close to schools, public transport and amenities are almost non-existent for large African families.

Another issue raised by respondents pointed to the significant lack of tenancy education for refugees, who have trouble filling in application forms. This can lead to unsuccessful applications, loss of bond and other unfavourable outcomes. Often this can result in developing a negative rental history, which compounds the problem, and makes it very difficult for African families to find suitable housing. People who are settling in Australia are loaded with information every step of the way, and every process can feel like a complicated event.

*Case studies of discrimination in the housing sector*

An example of discrimination raised in one consultation related to a Zimbabwean man who was unsuccessful in his rental application because he was African. His real estate agent disclosed that the neighbours, landlord, and the suburb in general did not want Africans moving to the area, for fear it would become a 'black suburb'. The agent suggested that the man try to stay close to the African neighbourhoods. The respondent was appalled and affronted by suggestions that he should have to live with those perceived to be 'his own people'. There are many African nations and cultures, and identifying them all simply as 'African' is overly simplistic.

The result of these issues means that there are many Africans living in cars, couch surfing or squatting in empty properties.

### *Possible solutions to assist in overcoming barriers for newly arrived African Australians*

Ongoing tenancy education that has follow-up sessions is vital for people of CALD backgrounds. This must take into consideration the fact that refugees who are newly settling are often bombarded by copious amounts of information, which can be overwhelming. Respondents also felt it necessary for landlords and real estate agents to have the benefit of mandatory cultural competence training in working with newly arrived refugees, as well as the need to use interpreters. Respondents have been disempowered by real estate agents refusing to use interpreters, as vital bits of information are often lost in translation. This means that renters are not fully aware of their rights and are not aware of important caveats to their leasing agreements.

### **Health**

*What barriers do Africans face when accessing health services in Australia?*

*Emerging themes:*

Consultations revealed that a significant issue in health, as with many other areas, is the lack of use of interpreters. Currently, use of interpreters is patchy and uncertain, with some areas using them for some services but not others, and others not using them at all. In the Toowoomba consultations, respondents said that General Practitioners (GPs) generally seemed unwilling to use telephone interpreting systems preferring to use an interpreter *in situ*. Problems arise in cases of emergency as interpreters generally have to be booked in advance. This means that people in critical health situations are left waiting for long periods of time before they are being treated. Interpreters are essential for health management, but the system is difficult to comprehend, and Africans are often doing without.

Health issues for women are a particular problem as in many cases, African women feel uncomfortable and embarrassed when talking to male GPs in instances where a female GP is not available. Gender appropriate health delivery is particularly problematic in rural and remote areas, where GPs are mostly male. Another problem can be the cultural competence of health professionals and staff in general. Therapists need to be aware of the background that refugees come from, which may include war, separation from family, trauma and torture. Respondents from Toowoomba were particularly aggrieved about this issues stating that there were no African health workers in the area, and locating culturally appropriate health care services was difficult.

The CHAG consultations reflected a view that the Australian health care system at present does not adequately meet the needs of Africans. There are cases of medical centres that decline to take refugee families requiring on site or telephone interpreting. Additionally the number of bulk billing GPs that are available is also limited and shrinking.

### *Possible solutions to assist in overcoming barriers for newly arrived African Australians*

In the first instance, access to interpreters is a major issue in being able to adequately access health services. For this reason, MDA supports the recent directive by Queensland Premier Anna Bligh that all State-Funded organisations will now be funded for the use of interpreting services for their clients. MDA believes that all State governments departments must develop

standard protocols for providing interpreter services across the board and should ensure that there is an active monitoring of its implementation.

***In conclusion***

In conclusion, the various issues raised above are a sample from African communities in the Brisbane and Toowoomba region, but would not be exclusive to Queensland alone. MDA believes that State governments have come a long way in developing strategies to assist settlement issues for African communities in Australia, which is commendable.

However, there are still many areas of need that require systemic change in order for African communities to fully integrate and feel part of society.

We hope that this submission is of assistance in finding solutions to the problems identified.