






The PeaceWork Project

Refugee and Immigration Legal Service, West End, Queensland

This project also relates to:

-  Families
-  Community Harmony
-  Education

The *PeaceWork Project* is designed to build awareness in new refugee communities in Brisbane about family cultural practices in Australia. The project also aims to develop an understanding of Australian legal practices within refugee communities, service agencies and the wider community, as a way of promoting practical peace building in a multicultural democracy.

Following consultations with refugee communities, the Refugee and Immigration Legal Service developed resources containing information on the rights, roles and responsibilities of spouses, women, men and children in the family. The Service held a series of information sharing workshops, and produced and distributed a bilingual Arabic/English booklet, and a spoken CD in Dari, the main language used in Afghanistan. The resources explore how people from different cultures can better understand each other and live in peace.

The project aimed to:

- develop knowledge skills and strategies that can be passed on to specific refugee community groups by working collaboratively with them with the support of professionals and people from the broader community
- develop the capacity of refugees to deal with their resettlement experiences
- provide practical awareness of the realities of the law, democratic freedoms and responsibilities
- provide practical sustainable strategies to respond peacefully to conflict and build peaceful relations and ways forward
- produce material to inform a future model to enable refugee communities to operate confidently and effectively within a democracy, and to promote peace building within a multicultural society.

Newly arrived refugees suffer from a range of disadvantages that are barriers to their effective settlement in Australia. These disadvantages often include culture shock, poverty, language difficulties, separation from family, and family role confusion. By developing greater knowledge, skills and strategies to live as families in Australian society, refugees are given a greater capacity to deal with their own refugee experience and settle well in Australia.

The project was developed by the Refugee and Immigration Legal Service, a not-for-profit, community legal centre that provides free legal advice, assistance and community education to disadvantaged people. Brisbane City Council provided the initial funding.

The Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs is funding current activities. Project partners were initially the Sudanese Community Association, the Afghan Community Association, and prominent community members from these refugee groups, and local community settlement agencies. Further project partners and supporters became involved as the project developed (see Further project partners below).

Identifying a need by consulting community organisations, community leaders, and the broader refugee community

The Refugee and Immigration Legal Service took a grassroots approach to the project by developing relationships with newly arrived refugee communities to understand what issues were of most concern to them. It asked ethnic community organisations and local community settlement agencies to become project partners and engaged prominent community members to assist with the project.

Initial meetings were held with the Afghan, Eritrean, Liberian and Sudanese communities in 2004. Project officers organised an in-depth dialogue with community leaders and held focus groups with the refugees to determine the communities' most immediate legal needs. The Sudanese and Afghan refugee communities agreed to become more involved and a project reference group was formed.

The meetings with communities revealed that new refugee communities need information about Australian cultural norms in relation to family, including the roles of husbands and wives, adults and children, as well as the rights and responsibilities of each member of the family and how they are reflected in Australian law. Communities were particularly concerned to obtain more knowledge about child discipline and protection issues and authority roles within Australian families.

The project

The *PeaceWork Project* commenced in 2004 using \$35,600 funding from Brisbane City Council to address urgent legal needs of emerging refugee communities through education and awareness building. Two Refugee and Immigration Legal Service staff members (a coordinator and a social worker) are involved in the project.

The workshops

The Service wanted to look at peace-building activities that could be run within and between culturally diverse communities. It held a series of dialogue workshops focusing on the key areas the Sudanese and Afghan communities had identified: family, culture and law. Members of the Afghan and Sudanese communities were employed to promote the workshops, to facilitate communication and to organise the catering.

The Service conducted extensive research before developing the materials to guide the workshops. It held consultations with a Sudanese youth drama group (Ebony Drama Group) to develop a presentation on cross-cultural family law issues facing newly arrived Sudanese refugees in Australia, which was delivered at three Sudanese workshops. Consultations were held with Community Legal Centres, the Queensland Department of Communities, the Queensland Department of Child Safety and the Queensland Police Service to develop workshop materials and presentation plans.

Developing the materials

The Refugee and Immigration Legal Service used the outcomes of the workshops and ongoing dialogue with community leaders to inform the development of materials aimed at sustaining awareness building.

The Service worked with audio engineers to produce 200 spoken CDs in Dari that it launched at Afghan New Year celebrations in

March 2006. Material in Dari was recorded using male and female, young and old voices, and music was incorporated into the soundtrack. The Service initially distributed 100 CDs to Afghan refugee families and distribution is ongoing. The material has also been used in an Afghan community radio program.

A booklet was prepared in consultation with the Sudanese community and 500 copies were published in Arabic and English and distributed through the Sudanese Community Association. These materials specifically address the rights and responsibilities of spouses and the roles of women, men and children in the family.

The Service undertook a long period of consultation to develop the content of the materials, ensure cultural understandings, and obtain translations into Dari and Arabic. Consultations were held with the interpreters and community leaders to confirm the accuracy of the translations. Drafts were revisited, sent out to community leaders for comment, revisited again and sent out for confirmation.

The information

Australian law and culture are placed in historical perspective to explain how culture and laws everywhere evolve over time, and that law both reflects and helps shape cultures. The booklet explains when the British first arrived in Australia, their law was harsh and not democratic. Only wealthy males could vote and over 200 offences carried the death penalty, mainly for offences against property.

The background to the White Australia Policy is explained. Its demise is situated in the historical context of the establishment of the United Nations and the development of human rights documents establishing the equal rights of all human beings. Anti-discrimination laws, gender equality and the rights of children in Australia are presented against this backdrop.

As well as explaining human rights, the materials explain the responsibilities set out in multicultural policy such as the duty to respect the right of others to express their culture, and the duty to support democratic principles and structures that help bring about freedom, equality and diversity.

The published materials ensure the sustainability of the project and allow for ongoing awareness raising.

The *PeaceWork Project* CD and booklet provide information about:

- Australian law
- marriage law
- parenting and the law
- the protection of children
- rights and responsibilities from childhood to adulthood
- family violence and marriage breakdown
- dealing with family disputes
- discrimination and respecting difference.

Achievements

Since the *PeaceWork Project* started there has been an increase in the awareness of newly arrived refugee communities about the Australian legal system, particularly in relation to family law.

Members of the refugee communities have also been better able to deal with sensitive issues, such as parenting, discipline, divorce and family conflict, in a culturally aware manner, based on information sharing and an increase in knowledge and confidence among the participating communities.

An Afghan Hazara participating in the *PeaceWork Project*, Ali, said:

I feel a strong responsibility to do something with the community. I tried my best to pass this kind of understanding on to my community. I asked them to understand they have a new responsibility to the new country in which they are living. We have come from such war torn countries that people do not understand their responsibilities. It was very useful because the whole family understood their rights and responsibilities, even the children understood.

The *PeaceWork Project* CD and booklet are of a sufficiently high quality as to increase awareness in the broader community and the media about refugee issues and dispel some negative views of refugees. Family law information from the project has begun to be used in TAFE *Adult Migrant English Program* classes.

Other achievements stemming from the project

The Queensland Department of Justice, Dispute Resolution Branch, has held two workshops on conflict management for refugee community leaders.

Relationships Australia has partnered with the Refugee and Immigration Legal Service to hold a series of workshops to build leaders' skills in communication, anger management, parenting strategies and relationship building.

The Refugee and Immigration Legal Service is engaging with major settlement agencies, volunteers and government departments to develop and implement a coordinated approach to providing ongoing family, culture and law education. Through this collaboration, a program of dialogue sessions about family, culture and law issues, using trained volunteers, is being developed to continue to educate newly arrived refugees in an area identified as high need during early settlement.

A further resource, *Building Peace in Families – Culture, Family and Law Workshops*, has been produced to assist community workers' ongoing work with refugee families.

Challenges

The *PeaceWork Project* took much longer than originally envisaged. The relationship-building phase needed a great deal of time in order to adequately engage community leaders who already have numerous demands on their time.

Working with culturally diverse communities requires patience and understanding. For example, one particular workshop was cancelled three times before it could take place due to clashes with important cultural events. Numerous workshops were cancelled due to personal issues such as community funerals and other events.

It was sometimes difficult to gain access to an effective interpreter to use at the workshops. There are, as yet, very few qualified interpreters in Tigrinya, Sudanese Arabic, Swahili, Kirundi and Karen, as these languages are not widely spoken in Australia.

Profile > Ali

Ali arrived in Brisbane from Afghanistan in 2000. He arrived alone. His wife and five children joined him in February 2005.

Ali began to have regular contact with the Refugee and Immigration Legal Service when he first arrived in order to resolve the many legal issues relating to his visa, and to assist his community. The Service created the *PeaceWork Project* in response to the specific legal needs of the community.

Ali translated the CD into Dari and distributed it to families in his community. Thus began a useful dialogue between these families and the Service that allowed the families to clarify their rights and responsibilities under Australian law.

Ali was interested in the *PeaceWork Project* because he wanted to promote peace in his community, and in other communities. He understood the importance of the information in the project to newly arrived communities.

photo > Robert Lachowicz, RAILS Coordinator and Ali,
a member of the Hazara Association of Australia



Some communities sent only males to the workshops. It was important to suggest to the community, in a sensitive manner, that females needed to be included in the workshops and learning process.

The lack of ongoing substantial funding is a major hurdle. However, the Australian Government, through the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, has provided two more years of funding to promote the coordination and monitoring of an ongoing program of dialogue sessions, and the training of community workers, leaders and volunteers to provide education and support in this vital area of family law and culture.

Further funding will allow for more workshops to be conducted around specific areas of concern that emerged from the consultations, such as parenting skills.

A major challenge is to train community members to become facilitators in this process, so that the learning is integrated within communities. This is difficult because enormous demands are already placed on community leaders' and workers' time.

Key factors in the project's success

A key reason for the success of the project was the close consultation with the communities and community leaders that enabled the project workers to connect to the communities and work through the issues with them. It also helped that the Refugee and Immigration Legal Service had a long history of work with refugee communities.

Working in a culturally sensitive manner was crucial. Project workers showed respect for positive aspects of the legal systems and cultures of the participants' countries of origin, acknowledged the wisdom and skills already possessed by community members, and openly discussed defects in Australian systems. The workers were careful to avoid stereotyping and using labels to describe different cultures.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

Developing mutual respect is vital. Agencies considering establishing a similar project should closely consult the community, demonstrate respect for community leaders by including

them in the consultation process, and show appropriate respect for the laws and cultures of the refugees' countries of origin. It is essential to spend time and effort fostering these relationships.

Securing adequate ongoing funding is of great importance to promote the development of skills in conflict resolution, peace building and parenting.

Further project partners

With the further development of the project, partners and agencies who became involved include:

- ACCES Services Inc.
- Congolese Community Association
- community leaders from the Burundi, Eritrean, Sierra Leonean, Ethiopian, Rwandan and Burmese communities
- Family Court Cultural Diversity Committee
- Inala Community House
- Liberian Community Association
- Multicultural Development Association
- Multilink
- Queensland Program of Assistance to Survivors of Torture and Trauma
- Queensland Department of Justice and Attorney General
- Relationships Australia
- Toowoomba Refugee and Migrant Support Group.

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