

Asylum seekers: effective policy is based on evidence, not emotion

July 25 2013, by Andrew Markus

Many of us want to believe that there is a just and moral solution to the asylum seekers issue.

For two decades arguments based on a variety of interpretations of what justice and morality may involve have been presented again and again.

And since prime minister Kevin Rudd announced plans to process and resettle boat arrivals in Papua New Guinea and deny them asylum in Australia, the same arguments are in evidence.

This process of [repetition](#) points to entrenched positions and absence of dialogue.

There are, however, a number of issues and costs which reasonable assessments need to confront, especially on the side of the debate that calls for "compassion" without recognising the need for government to formulate policy based on evidence and to balance competing needs.

The scale of population displacement

During 2012, worldwide conflict and persecution forced an average of 23,000 persons per day to leave their homes and seek protection. At the end of 2012 there were 45.2 million forcibly displaced persons. This included 10.5 million refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with a marginal decline of refugee populations in the Asia and Pacific region.

Developing countries hosted over 80 per cent of the world's refugees, with 1.6 million in Pakistan and 862,000 in Iran.

Australia's contribution

According to the UNHCR, Australia makes little contribution in hosting refugees and [asylum seekers](#). The UNHCR indicates that at the end of 2012 Australia protected 30,083 refugees and 20,010 asylum seekers, a total of 50,093 persons.

The way these statistics are presented is, however, open to question. In contrast to countries which provide temporary protection, Australian governments – whether Coalition or Labor – have chosen to make their major contribution through resettlement.

Between 2001 and 2009, Australia, acting in co-operation with the UNHCR, resettled 109,000 refugees: 13.5 per cent of the world total over these years. The Howard government worked closely with the UNHCR on resettlement, and between 2003 and 2008 it provided visa grants to 18,527 refugees from Sudan.

In overall numbers of resettled refugees Australia does not rank 50 or 100 among the nations. On a per capita basis, it ranks close to first, which is not to say that it cannot do better. But Australia does maintain a world-class resettlement program, providing short-term accommodation, assistance through Centrelink and Medibank, and access to the Adult Migration English Program.

Push and pull factors

The argument is often presented that Australian policies do not determine the flow of asylum seekers – rather, population flows are

determined by push factors. There is, however, much evidence which points to the interplay of push and pull factors, with overseas perception of Australian policy being a significant determinant.

Between 1999-2000 and 2001-02, arrivals of asylum seekers by boat averaged close to 3,500 a year. Following the introduction of Howard government's policies, there was an average of 40 boat arrivals per year for six years. Following changes under Kevin Rudd, 668 asylum seekers arrived by boat in 2008-09, then 4579, 5174, and 7379 over the next three financial years.

In 2012-13, close to 25,000 arrived, far exceeding projections based on appraisal of push factors. Budget projections for 2012-13 had provided for 5,400 arrivals.

Financial cost

What are the current costs of managing arrivals by boat? There is no easy answer as costs are carried by more than one department and governments have not provided a one-line total. But a parliamentary research paper indicates an increase in the core budget allocation from A\$111.5 million in 2008-2009 to \$1.05 billion in 2011-12. This included an increase in community and detention services from \$35.2 million to \$709.4 million and a rise in departmental costs from \$59.2 million to \$233.3 million.

This, however, is not the full amount. The 2009-10 budget allocated \$654 million to combat people smuggling, while the 2010-11 budget provided for \$1.2 billion to "bolster Australia's border security". Offshore asylum seeker management is estimated to reach \$2.867 billion in 2013-14.

It has been argued that costs would be dramatically reduced with fewer

asylum seekers in detention. But some costs cannot be cut – including the very substantial cost of air and sea patrols and administration. There is also a reasonable assumption that the flow of asylum seekers by boat would increase with relatively favourable reception policies.

Long-term costs also need to be included. Australia carefully selects immigrants to maximise integration. Asylum seekers have made wonderful contributions to Australian life, but many arrive without skills and English language ability, and traumatised by their experiences.

Public opinion

What weight should be accorded to domestic concerns about boat arrivals – and potential impact on social cohesion? The record of polling over more than a decade demonstrates that only a small minority (generally in the range of 20-25 per cent) support the right of boat arrivals to be eligible for permanent residence.

Lest such findings be dismissed as a function of bigotry or a reflection of frenzied media, three Scanlon Foundation surveys between 2010 and 2012 found between 70-75 per cent of those polled were in support of Australia's humanitarian program, specified as entailing overseas selection of refugees for resettlement.

Most recently, Newspoll found that 59 per cent of respondents considered that either Labor or the Coalition was best to handle asylum seekers arriving in Australia. Just 12 per cent indicated "someone else", while the remainder were either uncommitted or opted for no one.

Competing needs and balance

It is often stated that there is no queue for asylum seekers – hence it is

reasonable for individuals to take the initiative to save themselves and their families by trying to reach Australia. Would we, placed in similar circumstances, not do the same? The answer may well be a resounding yes, without such answer being compelling.

The unfortunate reality is that there is no queue in many fields of life. Typically demand far exceeds supply. Governments decide where to put queues and how to allocate scarce resources – for urgent domestic needs, such as public housing, child protection, education, medical care and infrastructure.

There are also desperate needs to contribute to the alleviation of international poverty. While globally there are 10.5 million refugees under UNHCR mandate, there are over one billion people living in extreme poverty. Every day an estimated 22,000 children under the age of five die from preventable conditions. Some 67 million children do not have the opportunity to attend primary school.

Australia's foreign aid program is designed to deliver (by 2015-16) vaccination to 10 million children, increased access to safe water to 8.5 million and increased access to basic sanitation to 5 million. In the 2012 budget, \$375 million was removed from the planned foreign aid allocation to fund domestic asylum needs.

There is one stark statistic to be considered in the context of balance. The current Australian budget allocation for dealing with asylum seekers and people smuggling may come close to the total UNHCR budget for dealing with global refugee needs.

There are stories that we like to tell ourselves – such as the way in which compassion could have saved the Jews of Europe from Hitler, or the applicability of Fraser government policies to the circumstances of today.

And then there is recognition of the magnitude and complexity of problems.

Provided by Monash University

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