What Makes a Welcome?

Exploring Karen refugee settlement in Bendigo

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Australian Catholic University in partnership with Bendigo Friends and Mentors
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Commonly used Acronyms

ACU – Australian Catholic University
CBO – community-based organisation
DKBA - Democratic Karen Buddhist Army
KHRG – Karen Human Rights Group
KNLA – Karen National Liberation Army
KNU – Karen National Union
NGO – non-governmental organisation
LCMS - Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services.
KDDOB - Karen Democratic Development Organisation Bendigo
SPDC - State Peace and Development Council
TBBC – Thailand Burma Border Consortium
UNHCR – Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Background

The following research project was undertaken by the Australian Catholic University (ACU) in partnership with Bendigo Friends and Mentors. The project was conducted in the second half of 2010.

The project involved exploring the resettlement process of the Karen community in Bendigo. Approximately forty-two families have been settled in Bendigo in rural Victoria. All of them come from refugee camps in Thailand after fleeing oppression in Burma where the longest-lasting civil war in the world still rages. The refugees, most of them from rural backgrounds, seem to have settled well in Bendigo and have attracted other Karen from Melbourne to move there. In addition to Karen groups such as the Australian Karen Refugee Support Group, local people set up the Bendigo Karen Refugee Project, providing a host of needs and ensuring the new arrivals were welcomed. The committee overseeing this project has representatives from the churches, St Vincent de Paul Society, Knights of the Southern Cross and Amnesty International. They have now changed the name to ‘Bendigo Friends and Mentors’ to extend the work of the group to other refugees who have settled in the town. There are few studies of how Karen (and other ethnic groups from Burma) have settled in Western host countries. Resettlement is seen as the main durable solution for the refugees on the Thai-Burma border given how entrenched the Myanmar military regime is and the attitude of the Thai government which does not want to integrate them.

The Australian Catholic University has a special interest in Burmese refugees from the camps along the border with Thailand as it, since 2004, has run a program to offer young refugees in the camps tertiary education. Many of the past graduates have gone on to work for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations (CBOs) in the camps and those who have been resettled have gained, on the basis of their qualification from an internationally-recognised university, entry to scholarship-funded degree programs in host country universities.

The project involved investigating the resettlement of the Karen in Bendigo. There are varied understandings of what it means for a refugee to be ‘well settled’ in a new country. This is rarely articulated in government or other literature. There is difficulty in defining abstract and subjective concepts such as ‘well-being’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘social connectedness’. Nonetheless, it is important to enter into discussion about what Australia means when it opens its doors to people fleeing persecution, what the expectations are for refugees settling in Australia, and the policy implications that arise including decisions about which services and systems should be put in place to facilitate the goals of settlement. Those models which appear to have provided good principles for
resettlement require exploring and documenting. Therefore, this project investigated the ways this particularly vulnerable refugee community had been welcomed into Australian society by examining what is unique about the Bendigo example.

The Karen, the struggle and the current situation inside Karen state

Myanmar or, as those who oppose the military junta still call the country, Burma, is divided into seven divisions, called regions in the 2008 constitution, and seven states. The former are mostly Burman, the majority ethnic group, and the latter areas minorities whom the Burmese call “races” after the Burmese lu myo (literally, ‘people type’). The Karen form one of these groups and is third largest after the Burman and Shan (Steinberg 2010: xxiii – xxiv).

The Karen population is estimated to be approximately 7 million. Some sources claim up to 14 million with the vast majority of Karen inhabiting the eastern mountain areas in Burma along the Thai border. A smaller number reside in the Burmese delta region and in Thailand. Hinton (1983:157-ff) illustrates a difficulty in classifying Karen as a homogenous ethnic group due to a variation in religion, dialect, custom and other characteristics, although generally they are divided into two main groups, the Sgaw Karen and the Pwo Karen after the two principal dialects. Nevertheless, the Karen are united through a history of oppression at the hands of the majority Burmans, and a present armed struggle for self-determination against the authoritarian state of Myanmar. Karen nationalism, the distinctiveness referred to as Pan-Karen identity or umbrella identity by scholars, unites regional, social, cultural, linguistic, religious and occupational differences among people referring to themselves as the Karen, although there are some tensions between the various Christian denominations (Baptist, Seventh Day Adventists, Roman Catholic and others) and between Christian, animist and Buddhist Karen. Brown (1988: 51-ff) describes Karen minority-consciousness as based on a reality of displacement and a sense of communal vulnerability and ethnic distinctiveness as defined by culture and history in a home territory “Kawthoolei”.

When Burma gained independence in 1948 and the Karen failed to achieve the autonomy they had been promised by the British, an armed struggle erupted. Since then, the Karen have been fighting for some form of self-determination, ranging from outright independence to devolution, and against Myanmar’s totalitarian politics of repression, cultural homogenisation and the centralisation of political power. The main and widely supported political organisation representing the Karen is the Karen National Union (KNU), often referred to as the Karen government in exile. The KNU, together
with its military wing, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), demand a sovereign Karen state, “Kawthoolei”, within a democratic Burmese federation. Significant and strategic territory under Karen control has been gradually lost to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC), the Burmese government, leading to renewed guerrilla tactics by the Karen military. The Karen people continuously suffer from a SPDC-led counter-insurgency strategy targeting the civilian population through attacks, summary executions, use of landmines, confiscation of land and food supplies and forcing men from the villages to be porters for the generals’ army – which means that they would be the first to tread on the many landmines that are scattered throughout Karen state. Surveys carried out by NGOs estimate that 99,300 Karen are currently internally displaced due to human rights abuses and military attacks (TBBC, 2006a:17-ff). In addition, there is a public health emergency in the Karen state, due to no or very limited access to healthcare, with high mortality rates, deaths from malaria and mine-related injuries and deaths (TBBC, 2006a:110-ff). Schools and clinics are frequently attacked and destroyed, school and medical supplies confiscated or destroyed and international aid organisations refused entry (KHRG, 2007:76-ff). Since 1984, this situation has resulted in many Karen and other ethnic groups fleeing to camps in Thailand. Since they have fled persecution and crossed an international border, they would normally be considered *bona fide* refugees but Thailand is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and regards them as “temporary displaced persons fleeing fighting” and so their rights under the Convention are reduced. 78.8% of the camp population along the border is Karen (TBBC 2011). As life in Burma deteriorates and the shelling of villages, rape and forced labour practices continue in Karen State, many more are expected. Planned large-scale hydro-electric dams will also involve mass relocation, destruction of villages, large-scale flooding and isolate the Karen from Thailand, cutting off humanitarian aid and making access to the camps nigh impossible in the future (KHRG, 2007:5-ff).
Resettlement Literature Review

UNHCR regards refugees as having secured a solution to their situation if they have found one of the following durable solutions: voluntary repatriation to their home country in safety and dignity, local integration in the country hosting them or resettlement to a third country (Pressé and Thomson, 2008: 49). In the case of the Karen, as well as other Burmese in the camps, repatriation is in most cases out of the question; the Thais have shown no interest in integrating them; and that leaves, as the most durable solution, resettlement, mostly to the USA, Canada or Australia with smaller numbers going to European countries and now Japan.

The literature on hearing the voices of resettled Karen refugees is relatively scant. Dunford (2008) wrote a useful report on his observations of the Karen resettled in the USA, as Executive Director of the Thailand Burma Border Consortium (TBBC), the main NGO network engaged with refugees on the Thai-Burma border. His interviewees repeat many of the concerns of those interviewed in the current study over costs, jobs, education, limited resources, the struggle to learn English, dependency and even shopping in Asian stores. In Australia, Mansouri (2006:82) studied Iraqi refugees in Melbourne, Brisbane and the regional centre of Shepparton and found that the refugees felt more valued by Australians in Shepparton than the two big cities. This was further underpinned by research carried out in Shepparton by Piper and Associates (2007:6) into the settlement of refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo which was deemed a success. An evaluation of a pilot program of refugees from the camps on the Thai-Burma border by the same authors is of more interest (Piper and Associates: 2008). This pilot was in Mount Gambier, a regional town in South Australia 450 kilometres from both Adelaide and Melbourne and keen to attract new blood into the community. The report reveals that “the settlement of the Burmese refugees in Mount Gambier has been a great success” (Piper, M. and Associates, 2008: par. 1.1). The refugee families were, in fact, Karenni, Karen and Burman with six being Baptists, two Buddhists and one Seventh Day Adventist. While the refugees felt welcomed by the local community, their entry was low key but very well prepared to the extent of even inviting a cultural awareness trainer from Adelaide to work with staff of key service providers (ibid.: par. 4.5). It offers many lessons to the present study in Bendigo.
Bendigo

Greater Bendigo is a major regional centre servicing the towns and rural areas of the Loddon region, about 150 kilometres north-west of Melbourne. While still significant, traditional reliance on manufacturing has diminished in recent years, with the development of a strong health, education and retail sector in the city. Commerce, finance and government administration are also important activities. Bendigo is Victoria’s fourth largest city and Greater Bendigo contains a significant rural hinterland. Smaller townships are located at Axedale, Elmore, Goornong, Heathcote, Marong and Redesdale. The City encompasses a total land area of 3,000 square kilometres, of which a significant proportion is national park, regional park, reserve or bushland. Much of the rural land is used for agricultural purposes, including poultry and pig farming, sheep and cattle grazing and vineyards.

The original inhabitants of Greater Bendigo area were the Jaara Aboriginal people. European settlement dates from 1837 when sheep stations and farms were established. Significant growth occurred following the discovery of gold in 1851. The goldfields soon changed from small operations to major mines with deep shafts, with the early discoveries of alluvial gold giving way to quartz-based gold. By the end of the first gold rush in the 1860s, the township had established flour mills, woollen mills, tanneries, quarries, foundries, eucalyptus oil production, food production industries and timber-cutting. From 1860 through to the 1880s the township grew rapidly, aided by the opening of the Bendigo to Melbourne railway line in 1862 and a mining boom in the 1870s. Growth continued at a slower rate until the early 1900s, with mining continuing in some capacity until the last mine was closed in 1954. From the start of the 1900s the population began to decline, especially in the rural areas. Significant population growth occurred in the post-war years. Growth has continued since the 1980s, aided by local economic and employment growth. Recent growth has been most heavily concentrated in areas such as Epsom, Kangaroo Flat, Kennington, Strathdale and Strathfieldsaye. The population has increased from 78,000 in 1991 to nearly 92,000 in 2006. Bendigo has consolidated its position as one of the fastest growing regional centres in Victoria, with growth expected to continue.
The Karen Community in Bendigo

The Karen participants in this study came from the refugee camps on the Thai-Burma Border and have been living in Bendigo for between two to three years. The first Karen family arrived in April 2007, following three Buddhist monks. The Karen community steadily increased to forty-two families. The most recent arrivals are two monks who came in September 2010.

The Karen community migrated to Australia on one of two visas: the Refugee Visa (Subclass 200) and Global Special Humanitarian Visa (Subclass 202), the latter requiring sponsorship by an Australian citizen. The application for a humanitarian visa is a long and arduous process. It is common for the visa to take around three years to be evaluated and processed. While in the camps, the Karen are provided with information about countries that accept refugees and usually the Karen choose between the United Kingdom, the United States or Australia. Owing to the different criteria in accepting refugees some families have to be separated depending on the country that accepts their application. Some Karen refugees living in Australia have other family members in the UK or US. Others have family members whose applications were not accepted so they are still in Thailand.

Many families are attracted to Bendigo because of the recommendations of their friends or family living in the area. Whilst the majority of settlement in Bendigo is via secondary migration, some of the participants in this study came to Bendigo directly from the refugee camps. One interviewee commented, “They did not know much about Bendigo before they arrived - they were just told that it is a nice place to live in”. When asked if their expectations of Bendigo were realised, the participants said they were happy living in Bendigo “because it is quiet with fewer people”. There are also families who moved to Bendigo from interstate (Melbourne, Darwin, and Brisbane). Those who moved to Bendigo claimed that the reduced cost of living in Bendigo, in particular with rent, was an incentive in moving.
Diagram 1

The Process of Karen resettlement in Bendigo and the support that is provided to them at each stage

**Application**
- Relatives/friends
- Government or volunteers sponsors

**Arrival**
- Relatives/friends
- Volunteers or friends offer temporary accommodation

**Introduction to the country**
- Support workers-teachers, church workers, volunteer tutors and mentors
- Accessing basic services (Centrelink etc.), doctors, agencies, trauma and torture counsellors, case workers

**Starting life in Australia**
- TAFE - Learning English- homework, work experience for parents while children go to formal school
- Finding a job (few are employed) - Centrelink interpreter, assistants to teachers, chicken factory workers, help of friends
- Volunteers helping some Karen how to drive
- Local council giving funds for Karen New Year celebrations to Karen organisation
Research Methodology

This study utilised qualitative research methodology in its exploration of the Karens’ journey of resettlement. Qualitative research investigates natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them (Creswell 1998). As a theoretical framework, this study made use of symbolic interactionism which postulates that people respond to situations according to the meaning these experiences have for them (Crotty 1998).

The Karen refugees’ experience of conflict and state-sanctioned violence understandably makes them cautious in talking about their experiences to researchers. For this project, the researchers sought assistance from volunteers who are currently working with the Karen community. Given language limitations, various strategies were explored to enhance communication with the research participants. Aside from the Karen refugees, the observations and experiences of volunteers and support workers were also sought.

‘Contractual’ relationships developed through research in most western societies, such as surveys or questionnaires, can be useful in obtaining particular information (Guerin and Guerin 2007). However, in more complex social situations these methods alone are not as effective. With close communities and groups, research cannot be undertaken without the building of a ‘rapport’. This means that a greater amount of time is required and that research methods and approaches need to be flexible and responsive to community needs. In addition, the ‘data’ to be obtained does not ‘reside’ in one individual but is spread across the community, so the methods must change (ibid.). This was indeed an important lesson to be learnt throughout this project. Rapport-building was a constant activity and integral to being able to undertake the research.

In the research, we used informal interviews, conversations with ten Karen adults and story-sharing with two families. As most of the Karen People, especially parents, could speak little English, the research team explored ways to make the participants comfortable to share their ideas. Informal conversations worked well with adult participants while sharing stories through drawing was successful with the children.

To obtain additional perspectives on Karen resettlement in Bendigo, interviews were also conducted with seven volunteers and four support workers. The support workers were involved in programs providing settlement services to the Karen people during their first year of arrival in Bendigo while the volunteers offered support with learning English, children’s homework and school projects, teaching them to drive and establishing friendships.
The process of recruitment of the research participants was undertaken through Bendigo Friends and Mentors. The volunteers of the organisation helped identify Karen people who were keen to participate in the research. The teachers at BRIT TAFE (classified as support workers) were also helpful in organising meetings with Karen people. The data gathering was conducted from September to December 2010.

With the assumption that the Karen people are culturally relational and communal, the researchers planned to work with friends and community networks for this study. It was hoped that, after informal conversations with some members of the community, they would introduce friends or relatives whom they thought might be interested to share their ideas for the research. This strategy worked for a few of the participants but, overall, the researchers worked with the volunteers and teachers at BRIT to arrange meetings.

In order to be respectful and to gain the trust of the prospective participants, the research assistant joined the Karen women’s weaving classes and introduced herself and the research to the group and asked if anyone was interested in participating. During lunchtimes at Brit TAFE, the research assistant also went to ‘hang around’ at the ‘Karen corner’ of BRIT where she met students and shared stories and ideas about the research.

In terms of respectful and culturally appropriate ways of communicating with the community, the research assistant used her own culture as a non-native English speaker to connect and, in some way, ‘identify with them’ thereby developing trust so that they would feel relaxed in sharing their stories and holding conversations with the researcher.

Due to their prior experience in Burma, some participants were hesitant to recommend names to be interviewed. They feared that what they would say might affect the support that was being given to them. S, for example, a single 26-year old young woman prior to agreeing to have a chat with the assistant researcher requested that nothing negative against the Australian government should be written as a result of the conversation with her. She said she was happy with all the support of friends (Australian and Karen), that she did not have complaints against the government. When S was asked if she knew someone who could participate in the research, she said she did not want to talk for others because she was not sure if people would like to participate.

GM, EP and AP also explained that even if the Karen people were one community in Bendigo, everyone was trying to survive. They had their own struggles and could not live like the community that they used to be in Burma or in the refugee camps. In Australia, the Karen people are still
adjusting to life in a new and very different culture so at this point, they did not yet feel they could be responsible for each other.

In keeping with ethical requirements, the participants’ identity in this study is kept anonymous. At first, the participants expressed anxiety at being interviewed because of their experience back in Burma where they could be suspected of being an insurgent by the military government if they spoke against them. They were assured that their identity would not be revealed in this study and that in Australia, they were free to express their opinion.

Data Analysis

Researching refugee populations is like peeling the layers of an onion. The realities and experiences are full of complexities that take a long time to unravel (Guerin and Guerin 2007). With the time and logistical limitations of this research, it could be assumed that the information gathered was just one of the surface realities of Karen Refugee Settlement in Bendigo.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using techniques appropriate to the analysis of narrative data. While content and semantic analyses were drawn on to some extent (Becker, Beyene and Ken, 2000), the main analytical technique was narrative analysis. This process involves breaking the narrative down into idea units in the interview transcript, which are numerically coded. Common themes were then determined from these units and collated. The product of the analysis is a “core narrative” (Garro, 2003) and accompanying themes.

Research Participants

There were twenty-seven participants in the study further divided into three categories: sixteen Karen community members resettled in Bendigo (nine males and seven females); seven volunteers (four female and three males); and four support workers (four females). The Karen participants ranged between 18-60 in age and had been living in Australia for between 2-3 years. Most were enrolled in English classes. The majority of participants also relied on Centrelink benefits and only a couple had part-time jobs as a source of income. All the participants were able to communicate in English during the conversations with them. Occasionally children helped their parents by translating their answers if they felt more comfortable answering in their own language. Most of the participants were being supported by volunteers and friends.
The volunteers in this study are individuals who are involved in helping the Karen and other refugees in Bendigo. The age range of the volunteers is between 30 to 60. Many of them were retired and viewed volunteering as being able to help those in need in the community. They are currently members of a volunteer organisation set up for this purpose. The volunteers have worked with Karen families since their arrival in Bendigo. They assisted with family needs and issues, accessing basic health services and driving them to and from the train station, helping them with their homework and tutoring and teaching them how to drive. The volunteers’ motivation in helping the Karen peoples according to them is primarily a commitment to promoting social justice and part of their ‘mission’ in life.

The support workers are those who are currently working with the Karen community as part of their employment. There were four support workers interviewed in this study. These support workers are involved in the resettlement program for the Karen refugees in the areas of education, health assessment and counselling and assisting them to access services such as housing and capacity-building for the Karen organisations.

**The Findings**

This section seeks to document the perceptions of Karen community members, volunteers and workers. The Karen arrived in Australia with vastly different cultures and beliefs, carrying traumatic life experiences unfamiliar to the wider Australian population. Their cultural identity is challenged by navigating a society with different beliefs and traditions from their own, learning a new language, adapting to new foods and learning new systems for health, welfare and education. The Karen tackle these issues with coping mechanisms diminished by experiences of loss, grief, torture, dislocation and family disruption. The stress of resettlement can be eased by social connection and community ties which increases a sense of belonging and social identity (Colic-Peisker 2006). In order to understand these factors we have presented the material so that the Karen people can tell their own story and describe their own experiences of settlement.

Some Karen have offered suggestions about areas for improvement in service provision, while others have expressed a wish for their children and families to make the transition from Burma to Australia with a minimum of difficulty.
Resettling in Bendigo: Voices of the Karen

Experience in Burma

All the participants in the study claim that they came to Australia because they were not safe in Burma. They recalled Burmese soldiers killing people in the Karen and other Burmese states. They also mentioned that there were many civilian casualties when Burmese and Karen soldiers fought. The participants told of Karen soldiers trying to protect the Karen people while the Burmese soldiers were cruel. “They just get what they want from the people” said one refugee. EK shared that when the Burmese soldiers attacked a village, they could just kill anyone:

*The Burmese soldiers fight with the Karen soldiers. The Burmese soldiers can kill anyone in the community but the Karen soldiers try to protect the Karen people. It is supposed to be that the Burmese government protect the people but they kill anyone that is why many people go to refugee camp.*

Application to come to Australia

Applying as a refugee is a long process, usually taking anywhere between one and three years. The participants said they had to be registered first with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and a process of screening and an assessment of their application followed. As refugees, the participants had options of countries where they could apply for resettlement. Many Karen people chose Australia because they either had friends or relatives in Australia or had heard about the country.

GM who was an English teacher at the refugee camp in Burma applied three times to Australia before his family application was accepted. The first two applications were rejected because his skills did not match what was needed in Australia. GM said he used the same CV in all his three applications. He believed his application was accepted the third time because of the changes in Australian laws on refugees and said he was comfortable with his choice of coming to Australia as it was the best outcome for his family. His father, brother and sister went to the United States and he believed that they were not receiving the same support as the Australian government was giving to him and his community.
Arrival in Australia

All the participants who came directly to Bendigo were met at the airport by members of their community or volunteers when they first arrived. They were housed either by a church, a member of Bendigo Friends and Mentors or staff at the Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS). Immediately after their arrival, the volunteers and host families assisted them to access income, open bank accounts, go to doctor’s appointments, shopping, preparing food and other household activities. They were also enrolled to learn English at BRIT. The volunteers and the settlement workers also helped them find permanent accommodation. After a few months, all participants transferred to their own rented accommodation and the volunteers continued to support them.

Migration and Settlement

Whilst settlement difficulties and hurdles were identified in the interviews, the lives of the migrants had improved immeasurably and their opportunities increased through settling in Australia. A priority for resettlement and the common response to being in Australia were peace and harmony. The opportunities given to children, young people and those with no previous education to learn English and further their studies closely followed this. Some participants were participating in formal education for the first time. Volunteers and services assisting new arrivals were identified as helpful and beneficial to communities. For many participants, access to essential services was something they had not previously experienced. There was much to take in and many systems and practices to learn.

‘Australia is a wonderful country to live in because it is a free and safe country and the government takes care of its people’.

‘People are willing to help here, the system is much better and it is safe’.

However, settling into a new country, while offering peace, education and support services still presented difficulties. Nearly all respondents identified that they required assistance to overcome settlement problems.

Many services were new and unfamiliar to the Karen. Most participants were still not familiar with services and places in Bendigo beyond the ones they usually attended (i.e. Centrelink, school, church, friends’ houses). For example, most Karen could not distinguish between the different agencies helping them. They were only able to recall the name of the workers who had helped them. This is understandable given that receiving assistance from a variety of different services is an
unfamiliar concept for many Karen. The volunteers play a crucial role here as many people said they would not know who to contact without the volunteers’ support.

Most of the participants cannot drive so they walk to places they want to go and sometimes take the bus. Some volunteers observed that most preferred to walk because they were not confident to ask for directions in English. The participants who had a car and could drive (with the help of volunteers) said that driving provided them with more confidence and better time management because they could go to places quickly, freeing up time.

Language

Language acquisition is one of the major problems identified by the Karen. Most of the male participants thought that learning English was the key for them to be able to settle well in Bendigo. They were worried that they wouldn’t be able gain employment until they learnt how to speak in English. Participants said they had been working in the camps where they did not need professional qualifications. In Australia, however, they needed to study before they had the chance to find work. EP shared:

I am been doing Certificate 2 in English now and I hope that I will be able to get a job when I finish. I have three kids and my wife stays at home because she has been sick for about a year now. My kids are all going to school. I got married early when I was twenty-two years old. Now, I am 34 years old….I find it hard to find a job here. Unlike in the camp, I can look for jobs anywhere but here, I have to have certificate to be able to apply for jobs. I hope I will find a job soon.

Although the Karen are motivated to work, many find it difficult to obtain work. This can lead to low self-esteem, family conflict and depression. There is also the problem many migrant communities face – a lack of Australian work experience which often disadvantages jobseekers from a new migrant background.

Young people mentioned that meeting new friends and a lack of English was a major difficulty in their first few months in school but that things had improved. They said they were now more comfortable and they liked going to school. Although there were times where they still found it difficult to understand teachers, they still enjoyed attending. PL who is in primary school shared her experience of how other children in school at first found it hard to pronounce her name;
Hmmm, at first it was hard because we didn’t have friends and I was a bit scared to go to school. But I like when I first went people asked “what’s your name”, “what’s your name” and I said Pam... Pam...and I... like... and they said Pamela and I said yes... and your name Boo Gay (my sister) and they said... hmm... “I don’t know Boo Gay”... (laughs).... “It is little bit hard for me”... It is hard for some people to say my name, some people can... And when I went to class, people coming around me and sitting next to me and I was a little bit scared... but not anymore now... I am used to it now.

Intergenerational Conflict

Karen families have to adjust to a new culture and lifestyle. Such adjustment is not new to refugee families. Problems arise from conflict between parents and young people. In Australia, Karen parents are finding the changes in parental roles difficult. Power is transferred to young people, away from parents. Children and young people often pick up language and customs more quickly than their parents. These changed relationships can be disempowering for Karen parents, especially if they come from an area where traditional values have been in place for generations. In Australia, children observe other families and often act as a cultural interpreter for their own families. This creates a change in family power relations, and often the family structure is inverted. Young people take on a position of relative power.

One of the workers interviewed had to intervene in a case where a Karen young person started dating. The father started to hurt his daughter physically to stop her going out with her boyfriend. The mother started to feel angry towards the daughter. At first, the family kept the situation to themselves but later they asked for mediation from workers and the other volunteers in order to try to resolve tensions. Some volunteers also observed that the parents and elders in the Karen community were worried with their children were quickly learning the language and the culture of Australia primarily ‘to get accepted’. The parents struggled to keep alive their traditional culture in their children. Young people were strongly identified as the future leaders of the community. This was despite commonly held perceptions that young people were adopting elements of Australian culture too readily, forgetting the past. The perspective of young people however was different and highlighted the tension between generations regarding acculturation and the rate at which this was occurring. Young people were in fact highly motivated to integrate into mainstream education, employment and social opportunities.
Changing Life and Maintaining Culture

The participants also admitted that they now rarely participated in the type of community life and sharing that they were used to back in Burma and in the refugee camps. GM reflected:

.....we used to be a community back in the camps but here we just have to survive and get used to being on our own. Here, you just greet your neighbour hi and hello and that’s it.

.....Community interaction is lessened when we came here because everyone is busy starting their own life... I cannot share because I don’t have enough, I have struggles too....

Food, cooking and gardening still connect them back to their home country. According to volunteers who provided accommodation for families when they first arrived, shopping, cooking and food were the most important areas of life to which they were introduced. It is natural for families to look for places which remind them of home. One of the support workers believed that the reason why many Karen families in Bendigo travelled a long way (two hours by train) to Footscray Market to buy their food at the Asian market is not only because of the cheaper price but also because of a psychological association to a ‘similar place’ back home. The families continue to cook their food (rice and vegetable-based) as they would back in Burma and some volunteers shared that they have learned to like Karen food.

The Karen families also love working in the community gardens in Bendigo because in this way they can maintain a connection with the agricultural activities that they were used to back in Burma.

One crucial last point is the time it takes to secure accommodation. Most of the participants had to stay with a friend or at a volunteer’s house for a few months before they moved to their new accommodation. One of the women participants who lived in a support worker’s house for about three months with her one year old baby, said that living in someone’s house was very helpful but at the same time very hard for her and the baby.
Education

Although Karen resettlement in Bendigo is generally working well, the participants identified some issues and struggles that they continued to deal with. Foremost is the lack of language as earlier mentioned. AP shared the difficulty of his wife and other members of the community to learn English, especially those who had never gone to school back in Burma:

*My wife for example, she is going to school to learn English here but she did not join us here because she is shy; she thinks that she cannot speak and write English. She did not go to school before...*

*Our elderly people especially and women who have not gone to school find it hard learning English in the school here. Back in the camp, it is usually the men who go out and look for job that is why the women need not to study. But here, it is required by the government that all refugees should learn English. If not because of the regulation, the elderly would not want to go to school...*

*Older people are scared because it is a struggle for them to learn English. Even if they go to school to study English, they still speak in our language all the time....*

Some of the women participants told us about feeling sick when they went to school. In this situation GM also added that those who had never gone to school were sometimes afraid to be on their own so they stayed together and talked in Karen and did not have the chance to practice their English. GM thought that it would help if the teaching of English for this group were incorporated into a skills training. Whatever they were interested in (e.g. gardening, weaving, and mechanics), they could be trained in this area while learning the language.

View of current life in Bendigo

Overall, the participants said that they were happy with their life in Bendigo. They felt relieved that they were able to escape from the chaos of their home country. Although they are concerned with family members and relatives left behind in Burma, the Karen people are determined to re-build their lives in Australia. Z was the first Karen person to obtain Australian citizenship. Z arrived in Australia from Burma in April 2007 as one of the first monks and was housed by the Catholic
Community before he moved to the small Burmese monastery in Bendigo. At this point he decided to become laicised.

Z shares his story:

When I was still in Burma, I was a Buddhist monk but we wanted to go to other country and join the Karen people from Thai-Burma border who live there. We were sponsored by the members of the Bendigo Refugee Project. Martin West (who lived in Thailand and Burma before) and other church leaders came to Bendigo to talk to churches to ask people who would like to sponsor Karen refugee to come to Australia. He talked about the suffering of the refugee people in the camp. Martin helped the people but not take care of the people individually like what the Karen Refugee Project did. At that time, Martin West was a leader at the Karen community in Melbourne. And then, he helped organise the Karen Refugee Project here in Bendigo with Fr. Rom, Helen, Heidi, Dr. Mary Holland and Marie Boone, the teacher at TAFE... they are very nice people, they have many volunteers and they organised for some Karen people to come here and they knew each other before.....

In Burma, I moved to the refugee camp before I moved here. Then I decided to disrobe about two years ago. I am not a monk anymore. I disrobed about one year after I arrived here. I wanted to find my own place, find a job and help my family back home. If I remain a monk I cannot do that. I now work as centre link Interpreter and I also do other jobs whenever possible. I think it is good to live here and in any part of Australia. I think I will stay longer here in Bendigo as long as I can.

When I was studying at Brit TAFE, I studied Certificate II in English course and then I met a friend in School (who comes from a Chinese background) and then she asked me what course I am doing and I said I only study but I want to look for a job. When she went home, the Chinese friend asked her husband if he knows someone or somewhere where I can get a job. Then, her husband’s friend contacted me, went for an interview and gave me the job. Later, when I learned how to speak English I asked people I know if they somewhere where I can get an additional job because my work as an interpreter was not enough for my needs (no more money from Centrelink). And then, my boss organised for me to work at another place for two hours; still four hours is not enough for me and I again went to my boss and said “can you give me more job please, I need a little bit more”.... so again people helped me to get a job at DHS and business centre for about six hours and this was helpful for me. When I learned English, I also met other Karen people needing translation so I applied as Centrelink...
interpreter. I work in four places now but I have to organise my time during the week. Not bad.

My position as a Buddhist monk, I cannot hold it anymore. Being a monk in Buddhist law which is very, very strong, we are not allowed to work, you are not allowed doing things for others like your family... very strict... The monk’s job is for meditation, to study, to help people, but not allowed to do paid job or receive money payment, that is against the Buddhist law. You will be called a bad monk if you do that....

Relationships are affected by the diversity within the host community, which can be both welcoming and hostile to the newcomers; by the size and visibility of the refugee group; and by the diversity within the refugee group itself. From their compatriots, the refugees may experience both support and pressure, and their key relationships may be both local and international. The Karen we interviewed generally felt welcomed in Bendigo. For some Karen, being able to live in peace was in itself welcome enough. Some, particularly women with little English, lived fairly contained lives within their community, while most had considerable and positive social contact with members of the host community through volunteers. Having a common language to communicate is clearly an important aspect of social inclusion, but openness to difference and goodwill on both sides are also crucial for successful settlement in regional areas.

When asked about the reasons for the Karen people choosing to come to Bendigo, most of them said that they had a friend or a relative living in the area. One of the participants for example shared how she came to Bendigo.

I came to Bendigo only this year. I used to stay in Melbourne. I heard from a friend that it is cheaper to live in Bendigo so I decided to move here. When I first arrived in 2007, I was pregnant and then I stayed with a friend in Melbourne until I had my baby. When I first moved to Bendigo, I stayed in someone’s house and then after few months, I finally found a place where I and my baby currently live.

Church affiliation has been identified as a great help to the Karen people in their settlement. The Karen participants belong to different Christian denominations or are Buddhists and most attend
church or the temple which they say is a great support to them. Aside from the church or temple, volunteer organisations, community-based organisations and local council support are considered by the Karen people as very important in their settlement.

The Karen participants also expressed appreciation for the opportunities for work and volunteer experience at the local opportunity shops and community gardens. They also expressed how much they appreciated all the support being given to them by the Australian government (the services of Centrelink and Medicare and the opportunity to study English).

The City of Greater Bendigo organises events such as multicultural parades, festivals and cultural exchanges for refugees and migrants in the area and representatives from the Karen community (usually the KDDOB Officers) are invited to participate.

**Dreams for the future**

The Karen interviewees look forward to a better future for their families, especially their children. They believe that Australia can provide their children with a good education and greater opportunities. The children’s group shared that they loved living in Australia and in Bendigo. Their dream is that they will become professionals, help their families and relatives and visit Burma someday. DD, who is currently in year 8, dreams of being a nurse:

*My life in Australia- I like living in Australia and I can learn many things from school. At first, it was hard to study and learn English. The first time I went to school, I felt scared because I don’t understand English. My dream is to finish my study, to become a nurse. When I finish my studies, I will get a job, buy a house for my family and buy a car. When I have money, I will help and visit my aunt and my friend in Thailand.*
Findings from Consultations

Volunteers

It is acknowledged that volunteers play a crucial role in refugee resettlement (DIMA 2003). This is evident in Bendigo where a group of volunteers had been working with resettling the Karen community. There is a presence of volunteers and volunteer organisations in Bendigo dedicated to working with refugee families resettling in the area. Volunteers show two levels of involvement with families. The first group of volunteers have helped the families from their arrival up to the present. These volunteers claim that they have developed relationships with the families and they no longer consider themselves volunteers but as friends and mentors to them. They assist the Karen with more detailed needs like internet access at their homes, driving the children to school when the weather is bad, taking them to the doctor when a family member is sick, helping them to read and understand letters that they receive and regular homework support. In this kind of relationship, the Karen people contact them anytime that they have issues or concerns.

The other group of volunteers assist the families in acquiring skills that they need for resettlement such as learning how to drive, English conversation and helping to teach English at the local TAFE. Volunteers groups are the main support for the Karen community especially in their early months of arrival in Bendigo. Volunteers from different community groups provide varied services such as sponsoring a Karen family, providing temporary accommodation to some families in the first few months of arrival and ongoing mentoring and tutoring.

It is through the volunteers’ initiatives that the idea of sponsoring Karen refugees emerged in 2005. Information about the Karen people was shared in churches and parishioners contributed to the sponsorship and resettlement of the first families and monks in 2007. The friends and mentors do not only seek support for sponsorship of Karen applicants to come to Australia but also provide them with support upon their arrival.

When the families start English classes and the children go to school, the mentors and friends help them with their homework and after-school mentoring at their homes. Volunteer participants claim that they have worked with families from a range of one to three years.
Karen community members consider the volunteers their friends who have helped them greatly in settling in Bendigo and in learning English and the Australian way of life. One male participant for example said:

Since we arrived in Australia, our friends and have been taking care of my family, helping us with many things. I am very thankful to all of them.

Some Karen participants consider their friends as part of the family. In one of the home visits conducted for this study, the Karen household was happy and proud to show the researcher framed photos with some volunteers.

Most of the volunteers are retired people from professional backgrounds (teaching, business) and others are still working (community gardens, parish worker, and manager). Their motivation to help the Karen people is that they empathise with their horrible experience in the camp, they see the need to help, they are passionate about volunteering, they have overseas experience of volunteering and volunteering gives them satisfaction.

H, a worker at a Catholic parish thinks that it is a very rewarding experience:

I have no young kids so I wanted to help them. I see that they are in need of help so I do what I can to help them as I cannot imagine surviving if I were in their situation. I help them and they also help me. Simply by giving me a hug, showing their appreciation and gratitude when I do something for them are the great rewards that I get.

The volunteers who offered their home as temporary accommodation to some families in the first few months in Bendigo did so because of their involvement in church work.

On the other hand, there are also volunteers who offer help in a less ‘personal’ way such as contributing funds to sponsor Karen people to come to Australia through their church or community organisation, teaching driving skills and practising conversational English. They consider themselves volunteers but they do not interact at a deeper personal level. According to S who works at the community gardens with some Karen parents:

..The easiest thing for me to do as a volunteer is to stay outside of all of the personal and group issues. I do not belong to any of the groups and it helps me to work freely with the Karen people without being associated with the conflict.
For many of the volunteers, developing friendships with the Karen families is working well especially in the early days of settlement. The families say they feel ‘welcomed’ by the wider Bendigo community even though the volunteers recognise that many people in Bendigo are ill-informed about the Karen.

**Issues for volunteers**

Some of the volunteers were informed on what to expect from working with refugees, highlighting that even a straightforward task such as taking a family to the doctor could be complicated and time-consuming. Some identified that they could be regarded as *de facto* elders during resettlement, being expected to fulfil the traditional roles of community leaders. They highlighted the difficulty of establishing boundaries in such situations.

For those assisting children with their homework, some said the assignments given to the students were sometimes beyond their level and capacity and in the end, the volunteers ended up doing most of the work. The volunteers thought that the school curriculum could be more sensitive to the type of learning, not only of refugees but for local students as well; that students could be assisted more on the basics, developing their capacities and critical thinking rather than just concentrating on using technology and letting students do tasks on their own. It should be noted too, according to one of the English and Maths tutors, that not all children have the technology at home. Most Karen families do not have a computer or internet. The difficult assignments from school tend to disrupt the tutoring sessions and there is the tendency for the Karen children to be too dependent on their tutors to do homework and school tasks.

For volunteers who have developed friendships with some of the families, they said they were now used to responding to whatever needs the family might have. However, Karen people sometimes request volunteers to make decisions for them, placing them in an uncomfortable situation. Sometimes, the Karen families also require assistance at short notice and volunteers find it difficult to separate volunteer time from their own free time.

One volunteer mentioned his strategy in maintaining friendly, professional dealings with the Karen:

*In my case because I teach those who are ready with specific skills, I chose to work with the families by focusing on the tasks that we needed to do when I met up with them. I do not go to their homes, neither do they come to mine but we meet somewhere neutral. We are*
friendly to each other and I try to be mindful of how I deal with them (as a male or female) because I know that they have their traditional way of dealing with both sexes.

The volunteers also find the Karen families very private in their family concerns. There are times that they have been called upon to help with a family concern which they did not know was happening (e.g. the father drinking too much). The volunteers feel that the families are careful not to do anything that might displease the volunteers who are helping them.

According to one volunteer:

There is a danger that students may become too dependent on the tutor. They may think that it does not matter if they do not understand maths or another subject in class, as the tutor will sort it out for them later. I encourage my students to always try to follow the teacher in class and to ask questions. I tell them that the aim is always to reach the stage where they do not need me anymore.

This reflects wider concerns about education with these volunteers emphasising that it is very important for teachers to understand the level of the students. One of the volunteers shared his experience in working with two high school students:

... I am working with this boy on his English grammar, writing and conversation but, oftentimes, we had to abandon the lesson because he came home with a big project that he had to do and he had no idea how to do it.... I end up helping him (and sometimes end up doing most of the work). I think this is not only for refugees but for all students. It is hard for them to do a project that is not within their level of knowledge (e.g. a high school student coming up with an architectural design). And with so many projects, the learning often is not focused on what they are supposed to learn.

I think there is a need to improve the teaching methods in the school to focus on making the students learn effectively.

Despite the difficulties, the volunteers love helping the Karen people and they are committed in helping them in any way they can.
Agencies

There are a number of community organisations and agencies working with the Karen Community: Bendigo Friends and Mentors (volunteer-based); Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS - which implemented the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) from 2007-June 2010); Team Bendigo (assisting refugees through sports); Bendigo Community Health Services (health referrals); St. Luke’s (contracted by Foundation House to provide Torture and Trauma Counselling); the City of Greater Bendigo (Cultural Diversity department) providing funding for multicultural group activities; Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT), providing an English Course, work experience and placement and Bendigo Fire Brigade, giving training to young volunteers and male members of the Karen community.

The conversations with support workers and volunteers revealed that until recently there had not been a formal process of information sharing and collaboration amongst the organisations working with the Karen community. Agencies blamed the fragmentation caused by the formation of the Karen Democratic Development Organisation Bendigo (KDDOB) in 2008. That led to organisations concentrating on their own programs and services with minimal communication between the organisations affected by the conflict.

Despite these issues, inter-agency meetings were held in 2010. An inter-agency committee was formed and committee members include the representatives of agencies, community groups and organisations working with the Karen community. The aim of the committee is to share information with one another on the updates of their programs and services for the Karen people. Support workers have also noticed that, as the Karen become more proficient in English, they are becoming more confident to ask questions. It is the hope of the support workers that they will continue to participate in meetings, discussions or events and be able to share their views on how to improve settlement services.

The nature of the Burmese conflict has created an environment where trauma, torture and instability are common experiences, leaving many Karen refugees to carry complex psychological injuries with them into resettlement. However, a worker supporting Karen new arrivals similarly indicated that while some are keen to tell their story of survival, the Karen rarely seek help to explore personal issues related to their traumatic past. This is reflected in the low number of self-referrals for psychological support, as Karen clients are more inclined to indicate they are managing
well despite displaying symptoms of anxiety and stress. The worker did however mention that trauma-related symptoms do appear, largely in men after their initial settlement. These are made manifest in excessive drinking and domestic violence.

Major barriers for accessing support services for mental health include higher priorities being placed on immediate settlement needs, particularly housing, language acquisition and income, and the shame attached to mental illness. The Karen community needs to find a way of understanding mental illness and erasing negative perceptions about its causes and effects in the community. Community education strategies need to be established and sustained for the long-term by the community itself, emphasising the importance of addressing emotional health.

Most Karen feel unable to fully explain their or their children’s health problems to doctors because of language difficulties as there is little knowledge of the names of illnesses and other medical terms. The shame of not knowing causes some people in the community not to access doctors, or access them at later stages of the illness. Information sessions and translated written material is therefore needed not only to increase understanding but remove fear about accessing doctors whom they might not understand.

Workers also spoke about the importance of fostering Karen community networks as a way of providing opportunities to discuss issues that living in a new culture present. Interviewees were of the opinion that by discussing issues using different experiences and perspectives the Karen community can facilitate the exchange of ideas and solutions, providing comfort and increased confidence to overcome problems. The social aspect of community was emphasised with one worker noting “It plays an important role in addressing the isolation and disconnection experienced by new arrivals, particularly where there were language barriers”. It was suggested that special sessions could be facilitated by volunteers or support workers. The sessions could be for a group of mothers, or fathers and male members of the community or for young people. The City of Greater Bendigo Multicultural Diversity office holds gatherings of migrants and refugees at the local council level facilitated by the mayor. Some members of the Karen community usually are invited to join other migrant group representatives. The participants think that it would be very useful if similar sessions were held at the community level.
Development of the Karen Community Organisation

The Karen Democratic Development Organisation Bendigo (KDDOB) is the recognised organisation of the Karen community in Bendigo. It was formed in 2008 with the aim of supporting the needs of the Karen. KDDOB officers organise Karen New Year and opportunities for the Karen to meet together. Officers are elected every two years.

According to some of the officers, they often view their organisation (KDDOB) as an organisation “in name only” (PW, personal communication). This is because the organisation has no funds and therefore they cannot organise activities that they really want for the community. Given the financial situation of their members, they feel they cannot ask for contributions from their members. Some families also live far from the city centre and because they do not have cars, they are not able to attend some of the activities.

Volunteers and support workers believe that KDDOB was formed for political reasons. Its formation, believed to be initiated by a non-Karen person, apparently has caused divisions among the community members and the organisations working with them. Nevertheless, KDDOB and its officers are the recognised as the formal representatives of the Karen community in Bendigo.

One of the Karen participants said that a new organisation would be set up for the Karen community. One of the first Buddhist monks who first settled in Bendigo said this organisation was in its initial phase of being established. The purpose of the organisation is to provide a space for Buddhist Karen people to gather together. This unfortunately reflects the divisive situation within Karen state where the Buddhists left the Christian-dominated KNLA to form their own army, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA) which largely acts as a proxy for the SPDC.
Conclusion

This research shows that the resettlement of the Karen in Bendigo is working well. However, due to the unplanned and secondary migration nature of Karen settlement in Bendigo, the increase in arrivals has not been matched by resources.

The successful settlement of migrants and refugees is dependent on the quality and level of support they receive as they begin their new life as Australians and upon appropriate and adequately resourced early intervention measures. This is particularly important for refugees and humanitarian entrants who have experienced long periods of displacement and dislocation from their homes due to civil war and ongoing conflict. As such, coordinated settlement services and enhanced levels of support, tailored to meet the specific needs of the Karen, are essential to successful settlement. Bendigo has more than ably demonstrated its capacity as a regional settlement location and steps should be taken to formalise this status without delay. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship should assess as soon as possible the feasibility of Bendigo as a regional settlement pilot location. This would ensure that settlements services were increased in the area.

The successful Karen settlement in Bendigo is largely owed to the work of the volunteers. It is hard to imagine that entrants in a large city could have experienced the breadth and depth of contact with the local community that has occurred in Bendigo. The people of Bendigo were keen to become involved. This outpouring of generosity has not, however, been without issues. Given the way settlement has occurred in Bendigo, there was no structure in place at the beginning to coordinate the volunteers. These volunteers received no training and can at times be unfamiliar with the intensive settlement needs of refugees, leaving them unprepared, often overwhelmed and at times suffering from burnout as they attempt to provide essential support. It is unclear whether the Karen have been given enough time and space to themselves. Volunteers were keen to visit them, take them places and interact with them, but there was no way of monitoring whether the Karen were given adequate privacy or opportunities to make their own decisions. The willingness of the volunteers to become involved meant that help was provided whenever the Karen asked. While this has been valuable at times, it may also have encouraged dependency. This works against the Karens’ progression towards independence and has built up a set of expectations that will be hard to sustain.
It is imperative to consider the primary role played by the volunteers in supplementing the settlement services available and the need to recognise these efforts through increased funding and support. Coordination of volunteers is critical. Resources should be sought to ensure a structure is put in place to enable recruitment, training, supervision and monitoring of volunteers. Volunteer activity should be guided by principles of developing independence and encouraging self-reliance. Volunteers also need to have clearly defined roles. It is also suggested that holding monthly meetings should be considered in order to discuss relevant information and important issues and where issues such as maintaining boundaries can be reinforced.

With even more limited access to training and support than their metropolitan counterparts, the situation for service providers requires attention. Due to their location, Bendigo providers are frequently unable to access essential services such as face-to-face interpreters. Yet, despite their limited resources, these support agencies are often able to provide a level of personalised support and assistance that would not be possible in a metropolitan setting. This is often due to the close-knit nature and smaller geographical area of Bendigo. Despite the difficulties experienced in the past, in the most part, everyone has been prepared to put aside any differences in the interests of ensuring the best possible outcomes for the Karen. The monthly information sharing meetings are vital and should be encouraged to continue.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects raised in the research was the importance of developing a range of community-strengthening strategies for the Karen community. Initial steps could include family reunions and maintaining ethnic identity. Family reunions would strengthen the Karen community in several ways including improving health and well-being, providing supports for women to participate in community capacity-building activities and offering guidance and support to families, young people and communities. Supporting the Karen who are involved in community activities such as the community garden, is of vital importance as it is not only enjoyable for them but brings the Karen into contact with local residents. The Karen residents need encouragement to mix with the local community. It has been noted that the Karen are very cautious and want very much to do the right thing and cause no offence (Piper 2008: 60), making it very easy for them to stay within their comfort zone. There is a danger that they will turn inwards over time if not presented with safe and enticing opportunities to participate in activities that bring them into contact with the wider community.

It was also very clear from the research that religion is a very important aspect of the Karen community. The Karen attend the Catholic, Baptist and Seventh Day Adventist churches and several
families are Buddhist. It appears all the churches have a respectful and welcoming approach to their Karen members. This is something that could be built upon ensuring that the Karen are included in church activities. In Mount Gambier where there is a significant Karen community Margaret Piper notes the process and importance of this involvement:

While the congregation might be predominantly Anglo-Saxon, the Minister is experienced in cross-cultural ministry and has a respectful and responsible approach to supporting his new parishioners. Not only has he welcomed them but is gradually encouraging them to take an active part in the activities. Recognising their diffidence, he has offered a variety of things that they might wish to do (singing during the service, collecting the offering, serving tea and coffee etc.) so that they can choose the activities with which they feel most comfortable. They have also included the entrants in church social activities, such as a barbecue, and recognised how much easier it was for the entrants to mix when there are activities such as cooking and soccer where language is not such a barrier. The children, of course, are much less reserved than their parents and are more confident in English so they have joined into the children’s program at the church with enthusiasm (2008: 52)

The high level of support the Karen have received, combined with the extraordinary generosity they have been shown, has resulted in the Karen expecting help to be on hand when they need it. Instead of building their own skills and taking responsibility for achieving goals, many have learnt to ‘sit back’ and be supported. This is reinforcing the learned dependency many refugees acquire in refugee camps and is not in their long-term best interests.

Once it is ingrained, it is hard to wean people from a life of dependency. Doing this requires saying “no” and ensuring others do the same. It is about helping entrants to understand that the withdrawal of support is not being done to punish them or because they are no longer welcome but rather to ensure that they become more actively involved in shaping their own future. Each of the agencies (including volunteer groups) working with the Karen need to develop strategies designed to promote the progression towards independence while not jeopardising the trust that has been established.

There are several divisions that exist in the Karen community. One solution to this would be to work with a neutral organisation which could play a positive role in bringing the community together. The organisation needs to be careful that it limits its role to facilitating discussion and assisting in
developing projects and initiatives rather than dictate the process or become involved in local implementation issues.

Finally, there is an urgent need for a Karen-specific community development position to coordinate initiatives and bring key players together to prioritise and respond to the needs of the Karen community. The position should be based within a neutral organisation so that the worker can remain relatively free from the ethnoscopic politics in the region. An appropriate agency to resource the worker with the ability to provide administration and other support services would need to be identified. A community development worker could link Karen residents into existing programs – such as sporting clubs and school holiday programs for children. In addition to being fun, these could extend the communities experiences and give them practice in English.

Continued dialogue with agencies in the region will assist in assessing specific trends and issues affecting the Karen community. The community development worker could assist in addressing some of these concerns by raising them with appropriate government departments.

The Karen are a courageous and resilient community. They have much to contribute to Bendigo and Australia. It has been a pleasure to undertake this research with them and the extraordinary volunteers who have assisted in making their resettlement such a success.
References


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