Listening to young people’s voices on Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy

Sydney Youth Roundtable with SSI, 2nd July 2014

“They are playing with our lives...every year I get older ...I want to start a family but I can’t”.

Background

Two youth roundtables recently held by Australia21 have given some insight into the ways that young Australians think about these issues, and their visions for the future. The youth roundtables were held as part of a broader project Australia21 has been undertaking in collaboration with other groups – Asylum Seeker Policy: A fair, just and effective approach. As part of this project, a collection of short essays and a discussion paper on the options have been compiled. Also, on the 11th of July, Australia21 co-hosted an expert roundtable on this topic at Parliament House, with the Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Law (UNSW) and the Centre for Policy Development.

The youth roundtables were designed to provide an opportunity for young people (18-30 years old) to freely voice their perspectives, ideas and visions relating to the future of Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy in Australia. We believe it is critical for young peoples’ voices to be heard, especially on controversial and complex topic areas that affect their future and that of their country. It is particularly important to hear the voices of young people from refugee and asylum seeker background who have lived experience of these issues. These events were an initiative of YoungA21 with support from Australia21.
The first youth roundtable was held in Canberra with support from the Crawford School at ANU, with 38 young people aged 18-30 from the public. The second youth roundtable was held with Settlement Services International (SSI) in Sydney with 35 young people of the same age group, specifically of refugee and asylum seeker background. In both workshops a rich picture diagramming approach was used—to understand participants preferred futures around refugee and asylum seeker policy through using visual images (diagrams and pictures). Discussions from both roundtables were remarkably wide-ranging and insightful and had much overlap in content and opinion, despite participants being from very different experiential and cultural backgrounds. Conversations reflected a strong desire for change in policy and practice in Australia, and a sense of disillusionment and disappointment about public perceptions and treatment of refugee and asylum seekers.

Some participants from Canberra emphasised that we are all boat people in Australia, so we should all treat each other equally—as we are all in the same situation and living together. “We are all in the same boat”

At the Canberra roundtable sadness and anger was expressed at the treatment of refugee and asylum seekers. There was much concern particularly around mental health of people in detention and in communities. It was emphasised that policy makers and public should be strongly encouraged to reframe their current ways of thinking about refugee and asylum seekers, and be more open, sincere and unprejudiced in their discourse on the topic. Calls were also made for ‘grown up’ and progressive leadership, and for Australia as a nation to be more cognizant of equality under the law, and our moral and international obligations.
A group from the Canberra youth roundtable emphasised that it is important we have improved moral leadership on Refugee and Asylum Seeker Policy.

It was argued that refugee and asylum seekers are often dehumanised in these debates; they are generally not seen by the general public and policy makers as ‘real people’, but as statistics, or criminals who should be behind bars. It was suggested that greater attention needs to be placed on more appropriate and creative solutions to domestic processing, especially in terms of the location and speed of processing. In an ideal future, Christmas Island and Nauru would be closed, and the money saved could be directed towards supporting communities to be involved in the processing and resettlement of refugee and asylum seekers. There were also strong calls for policy modification to ensure that people can have opportunities to contribute more fully to society (e.g. allowing people working rights while being processed).

**What was discussed at the Sydney roundtable?**

The overarching message from the Sydney youth roundtable was that the refugee journey is long and difficult. “I thought when I got to Australia the hard part was over, but now I have to start again from nothing. It is hard in a different way. I can’t seem to get a start anywhere and it is hard to have hope until I can.” After arriving in the settlement country most people need a range of personally targeted supports to settle successfully, particularly in communities where refugee status carries stigma. Some of the current policy settings seem designed to frustrate that journey rather than support it, and to waste human potential. People appeared to be resilient and energetic but sorely tried.

Participants commonly expressed strong frustration of the inhumane ways refugee and asylum seekers are treated through restrictive policies, as well as the way they are often stigmatized in the media and by the general public. “*We are not animals, we are human*”. “*We are not from Mars*” In particular the way boat people are marked as ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ is very upsetting. There was a strong yearning to be treated and to live like others. It was suggested there needs to be strong, empathetic leadership and programs to address stigma and encourage community engagement. One participant used a picture of birds being fed, to
communicate her hope that if Tony Abbott fed the birds he may develop empathy. One said he would say to the Government “Please make decisions like you are deciding about someone from your own family”

One group at the Sydney youth roundtable said they would like to live in an Australian future “Where the Prime minister is a detainee and knows what it’s like”

There was a lot of disappointment and pessimism about the new Government and policies that create more uncertainty, and make people fearful and lose hope for the future. “They are cruel, they don’t care; they hate us”. In particular the inability to work while being processed is excruciating for many of the participants. They talked of having much passion, experience and qualifications and wanting to contribute in Australia by working, but losing resilience and hope. “They are playing with our lives...every year I get older...I want to start a family but I can’t”. There was also frustration by those that were allowed to work, where time and energy put into gaining qualifications and experience were not recognized “I want to share my skills with Australia”

There was annoyance at the inability to be able to plan or make any goals and being in ‘limbo land’, especially around study and work. “I don’t have anything good to tell myself in in the mirror in the morning. I want to build my life in Australia, but I can’t...How can I ever ask anyone for their daughter’s hand in marriage?”. For those that are allowed to study it is very expensive and difficult with language difficulties. People are also scared to do anything and feel disadvantaged. If they were to get hurt they would not know what to do as they can’t afford healthcare and are afraid to go to hospital or police. Many are separated from their family and are experiencing deep loneliness and fear about the future. It was suggested there needs to be more resources and support into settlement services for employment, education, health care, and community engagement.
A participant from the Sydney youth roundtable explains a quote from her group’s picture
“No matter how broken you have been and no matter how much life has thrown you in the dark you will always persevere through and your visible scars convey just how strong you are to move on and keep walking in the face of life that once threw you in the darkness”

The dangers of detention and long processing times was also commonly raised. Participants said there should not be detention centers, but if there had to be, time in them should be limited and people should be treated like ‘humans’. It was explained that in detention people lose their skills and hopes, and also develop deep psychological issues that are difficult to recover from. Processing times should also have designated times, so that people do not have to suffer with uncertainty.

What next?
The outcome from the youth roundtables was mentioned at the expert roundtable by a youth representative and will also be incorporated into a full policy report that will be released by Australia21 later in 2014.
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For more information about Australia21’s project on refugee and asylum seekers and youth engagement, please see www.australia21.org.au