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|  | **Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions** |

# Briefing paper for LCA leadership

# COVID-19 Ethical Issues – Impact on Refugees and Asylum Seekers

## Context

COVID-19 has seen unprecedented changes across the globe in the last 4 months, including in Australia and New Zealand, as governments have sought to address a novel virus and the ensuing pandemic.

The pandemic further heightens many social issues for refugee communities, particularly in relation to individual rights, access to public health, medical services and financial resources. The issues play out at global (Kluge et al 2020), national (GO8, 2020) and local levels. Ultimately, the issues relate to ethical and political value judgements being made about people’s lives.

In Australia, these issues are particularly critical for refugees and asylum seekers who do not have the same rights as citizens and who are particularly vulnerable at this time. The GO8 Report (2020) points out attention must also be given to health care and social needs of those within our society who are not currently citizens, with appropriate recognition of their special circumstances (GO8 Report, April 2020 p 24). The Settlement Council of Australia (peak body for refugee and migrant service providers) surveyed members in April 2020 and reports vulnerability of refugees and migrants to job loss and inequality in accessing online services.

Vulnerable groups currently not protected from health and economic impacts of Covid-19 include

* 1,440 people in onshore detention in Australia (Department of Home Affairs, 2020);
* 30,000 people on bridging visas (Refugee Council of Australia, 2020); and
* Temporary visa holders including refugees, temporary migrant workers and international students.

COVID-19 restrictions mean that those in detention in suburbs in our capital cities can no longer receive visitors and the few on Manus and other centres who are now being sent to the USA will arrive in the middle of a pandemic and would probably be safer in Australia.

The recent surge in COVID-19 cases in Victoria and the lockdown of public housing towers in Melbourne has highlighted communication issues and other issues re COVID-19 for vulnerable multicultural communities. Migrant women have been disproportionately affected as they are hardest hit by job and income losses.

In New Zealand, the refugee quota program was put on hold in March 2020. 135 refugees in the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre were required to remain at the Centre for the lockdown, but started to leave the Centre from 12 June. At 1 July, 17 refugees remained in the Centre.

## Ethical position

The ethical position is to ensure that all people are considered in our response to COVID-19, especially the most vulnerable. How do we as a church speak into this situation?

The Australian Churches Refugee Taskforce and the Refugee Council of Australia are leaders in an ethical response to the impact of COVID-19 on refugees and asylum seekers. They have both written to the Australian Government seeking that:

1. all people have access to medical treatment and Medicare for people seeking asylum
2. all people have a financial safety net so they are not forced into further hardship (JobSeeker, JobKeeper, access to Special Benefits for Safe Haven Enterprise holders who are studying and for Temporary Protection Visa holders)

A recent report from the National Refugee-led Advisory and Advocacy Group ‘Leaving Nobody Behind’ (May 2020) further identifies specific policy gaps in the Australian context.

The response of the government has been that people have many options for support. However, this is not borne out by people on the ground as the Emergency Relief support is taking time to be available and many who have lost their jobs do not qualify for JobSeeker and have no income.

There are two relevant Senate Enquiries

* Select Committee on COVID-19 (submissions due 28 May 2020)
* Legal and Constitutional Affairs Legislation Committee – examining the Migration Amendment (Prohibiting Items in Immigration Detention Facilities) Bill 2020 which is seeking to prevent those in detention from having mobile phones and allowing strip searches without adequate checks and balances (submissions due 11 June 2020).

It is recommended that the LCA continue to support the ACRT and seek to promote the rights and safety of refugees in Australia especially as the impact of COVID-19 unfolds in our community.

## References

1. GO8 (2020) COVID-19 Roadmap to Recovery. A Report for the Nation.
2. <https://www.immigration.govt.nz/about-us/covid-19/migrant-information>
3. Kluge HHP Jakab Z Bartovic J D’Anna V, Severonei S (2020) Refugee and migrant health in the COVID-19 response. [www.thelancet5.com](http://www.thelancet5.com) Vol 395 April 18,2020
4. NRAAG (May 2020) Leaving Nobody Behind. Outcomes Report
5. SCoA (May 2020) The Impact of Coronavirus on Workforce Retention and Business Continuity for Settlement Services.