INTRODUCTION

Since 1945, Australia has played a major role in providing protection and opportunities for refugees – both by resettling people in need from overseas, and by enabling people seeking asylum to apply for protection in Australia. Providing a welcoming, secure and respectful environment for refugees results in greater social and economic benefits for everyone and a stronger, more cohesive Australia. Yet, many of Australia’s current refugee policies are out of step with community values of fairness and decency, fall short of Australia’s international obligations, and are not contributing to a sustainable, humane response to refugees globally.

The Kaldor Centre Principles for Australian Refugee Policy are designed to serve as a stable foundation for policymaking in this area. They are grounded in evidence-based research and are informed by good practices from other countries, as well as from Australia’s past. They provide concrete examples of how, and why, Australia can develop a more humane, sustainable and manageable approach to protection which simultaneously benefits refugees, people seeking asylum and the Australian community.

The Kaldor Centre Principles have been developed with the objectives of ensuring Australia’s compliance with its obligations under international law – including those set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention, its 1967 Protocol and international human rights treaties – and respect for the inherent human dignity of everyone who is displaced and in search of protection.

By committing to the following principles, Australia could create a more sustainable and effective refugee policy and advance its aspirations for a more fair and decent society.

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1 The intention of these good practice examples is to highlight alternative approaches that Australian policymakers could consider, acknowledging, of course, that each may have limitations or context-specific factors.
Australia should comply with its international legal obligations

What?

Australia should comply with its international legal obligations relating to the treatment of refugees and others at risk of serious harm (such as death, torture, or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment). These obligations apply wherever Australian officials or their representatives act, including outside Australian territory.

Australia’s international legal obligations include the fundamental duty not to send any person to a place where they are at risk of persecution or other serious harm (known as the principle of non-refoulement), as well as obligations not to discriminate against refugees or to penalise them for the manner in which they arrive. Australia is responsible for upholding these obligations wherever it asserts its jurisdiction or control. This includes outside Australian territory – for example, when Australia intercepts boats carrying asylum seekers at sea, or exercises control over refugees held offshore in Nauru and Papua New Guinea. Some aspects of Australia’s refugee policy have put Australia in breach of these obligations, including turning back boats at sea and detaining asylum seekers and refugees (including children) for extended periods of time.

Why?

Australia played a key role in drafting the international treaties that protect people fleeing persecution and other forms of serious harm, and it has voluntarily committed to abide by them. International law reinforces, rather than undermines, Australia’s sovereignty, and it provides an important framework within which governments can manage their borders yet still cooperate on matters of common concern.

A renewed commitment by Australia to comply with its international legal obligations would improve its reputation as a good international citizen and a leader in human rights. It would also provide a stronger basis for cooperation between Australia and other countries on refugee protection issues, both within the Asia-Pacific region and globally.
Australia has ratified a number of treaties relating to the treatment of refugees and others in need of international protection, including the Refugee Convention\(^6\) and its Protocol,\(^7\) the Convention against Torture,\(^8\) the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)\(^9\) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.\(^10\) By ratifying these treaties, Australia has committed to upholding the principles and obligations they set out in good faith.\(^11\) It is not permitted to invoke its domestic law as a justification for ignoring them.\(^12\)

**How?**

Australia should incorporate its international legal obligations into domestic law. The best way to do this is by including direct reference to key refugee and human rights treaties in relevant legislation – in particular, within the *Migration Act 1958* (Cth). At a minimum, Australia should ensure that the provisions of its domestic legislation are not inconsistent with its international legal obligations.

Australia should also create accountability mechanisms to ensure that these obligations are fulfilled. This would make important protections for refugees enforceable at the national level and reviewable in domestic courts, giving people seeking Australia's protection the opportunity to challenge government decisions relating to their status and treatment.

As a matter of priority, Australia should abolish laws and practices that could result in people being sent to places where they risk being persecuted, tortured, killed or otherwise subjected to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. In particular, Australia should stop turning back boats at sea without engaging in a full consideration of the international protection claims of those on board. Australia should ensure that all those who seek its protection are able to have their claims determined fairly and with due process.

Australia should repeal those sections of the *Migration Act* that are specifically intended to exclude its international obligations from being considered under domestic law. These include section 197C, which states that Australia's non-refoulement obligations are 'irrelevant' to the removal of unlawful non-citizens brought temporarily to Australia;\(^13\) sections 5H–5M, which set out Australia's own interpretation of its international protection obligations;\(^14\) and a number of legislative 'bars' in the *Migration Act* which prevent many asylum seekers from applying for a protection visa in Australia.\(^15\) In addition, Australia should reinstate those references to the Refugee Convention that were removed from the *Migration Act*,\(^16\) and ensure that the Act’s provisions on complementary protection fully reflect Australia’s non-refoulement obligations under international human rights law.\(^17\) Australia should also adopt a legal framework and procedure for the identification and protection of stateless persons.\(^18\)

\(^{6}\) Australia ratified the Refugee Convention on 22 January 1954.  
\(^{8}\) Australia ratified the CAT on 8 August 1989.  
\(^{9}\) Australia ratified the ICCPR on 13 August 1980.  
\(^{10}\) Australia ratified the CRC on 17 December 1990.  
\(^{11}\) See Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties, opened for signature 23 May 1969, 1155 UNTS 331 (entered into force 27 January 1980) (VCLT) art 26: ‘Every treaty in force is binding upon the parties to it and must be performed by them in good faith.’  
\(^{12}\) Ibid art 27: ‘A party may not invoke the provisions of its internal law as justification for its failure to perform a treaty…’.  
\(^{13}\) As introduced by the Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Act 2014 (Cth). See Migration Act 1958 (Cth) (Migration Act) ss 197C, 198.  
\(^{14}\) As introduced by Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Act 2014 (Cth).  
\(^{15}\) Migration Act ss 46A (unauthorised maritime arrivals), 46B (transitory persons), 48A (refused a protection visa), 91E (safe third countries), 91K (holder of a temporary safe haven visa), and 91P (nationality or right to reside in third country).  
\(^{16}\) See generally Migration and Maritime Powers Legislation Amendment (Resolving the Asylum Legacy Caseload) Act 2014 (Cth).  
\(^{17}\) Migration Act ss 5, 36(2A). Some of the provisions are more limited than the international law sources on which they are based: Jane McAdam, ‘Australian Complementary Protection: A Step-by-Step Approach’ (2011) 33 Sydney Law Review 687.  
Examples of good practice:

- Canada, New Zealand and the United States all include direct reference to international refugee and human rights treaties, such as the Refugee Convention and Protocol, CAT and/or ICCPR, in their domestic legislation. The New Zealand’s Immigration Act 2009 includes all four.  

- In New Zealand, the direct incorporation of the Refugee Convention in domestic law has enabled refugee status decision-makers to draw on a robust body of judicial decisions from other jurisdictions, as well as the views of academic experts, when making decisions regarding the scope and content of international protection.

- The EU includes extensive references to the Refugee Convention and Protocol and other human rights instruments in its own regional treaty law, as well as in regulations and directives dealing with border surveillance, border and coast guard activities, reception, procedures and qualification for protection, among other issues.

- In Europe, the European Convention on Human Rights guarantees all individuals, including refugees and asylum seekers, access to a fair determination of their legal rights and an effective remedy when such rights are violated. The European Court of Human Rights has held that this right is not just ‘theoretical or illusory’ but must be ‘practical and effective’, and that it may require governments to provide legal assistance where individuals cannot obtain it themselves.

- Many countries have enshrined the right to asylum in their national constitutions. In Europe alone, almost half the constitutions of EU Member States contain the right to asylum. While this does not guarantee implementation in practice, it provides a basis for challenging attempts by governments to restrict access to protection. For example, in Ecuador, attempts by the government to restrict the time allowed to lodge an application for asylum or appeal a negative decision were struck down by the courts as infringing the right to asylum.

- A number of countries have a formal procedure in place to determine whether an individual is stateless, including France, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Mexico, Moldova, the Philippines, Slovakia, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom.

- In New Zealand and Canada, refugee status decision-makers are empowered to grant visas to people who may not qualify for international protection but for whom there are humanitarian or compassionate grounds for allowing them to remain. Australian law contained a similar provision between 1980 and 1989.

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17 See Immigration Act 2009 (NZ) s 124; Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, SC 2001, c 27 (Canada) ss 2(1), 96, 97; Immigration and Nationality Act, 8 CFR §§ 208.16, 208.17 (United States).
18 Immigration Act 2009 (NZ) s 12.
25 Immigration Act 2009 (NZ) ss 194(5), 194(6), 195(6), 195(7); Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, SC 2001, c 27 (Canada) s 25.
2  Australia should provide humane, fair reception conditions

What?

Australia should ensure that people seeking asylum are afforded a humane and fair reception, regardless of their legal status or mode of arrival. Reception conditions should be sensitive to age, gender and diversity. People seeking asylum should not be detained, except where absolutely necessary for a brief initial period for registration, documentation, health and security checks. Where detention is exceptionally required, it should be non-arbitrary, justified by reference to individual circumstances, proportionate and periodically reviewable by a court. Children should never be detained on account of their immigration status.

Why?

Many of Australia’s international legal obligations relating to the treatment of refugees and others in need of international protection apply even before a person has been recognised by Australian authorities as requiring international protection. The basic standards of treatment required under international refugee and human rights law provide a ‘yardstick’ for defining appropriate reception conditions for people who come to Australia seeking protection.30

Under the Refugee Convention, the principles of non-refoulement and non-discrimination, as well as rights relating to personal status, access to the courts and public education, accrue to refugees from the moment they arrive in Australia or come under Australia’s control.31 Under international human rights law, Australia must ensure minimum standards of treatment for every person within its territory or jurisdiction, including ensuring basic standards of living,32 protecting against arbitrary detention and torture,33 and upholding the best interests of the child.34 Yet, many people seeking asylum in Australia live in destitution, without secure work, adequate health care, basic financial assistance, counselling or other support.35 According to a Senate Committee, policies that leave asylum seekers destitute are ‘morally indefensible and an abrogation of responsibility by the Commonwealth’.36

The prohibition on arbitrary detention is of particular importance to those seeking protection in Australia. As a general principle, detention of refugees and asylum seekers will be unlawful under international law unless, in each individual case, it is reasonable, necessary, proportionate and subject to periodic review.37 Blanket detention policies – such as Australia’s policy of mandatory detention for those arriving without a valid visa – do not satisfy these criteria and are therefore unlawful. Australia cannot ‘contract out’ of its obligation not to detain people by sending them to Papua New Guinea or Nauru for processing. As discussed under Principle 6, offshore processing undermines Australia’s potential role as a global and regional leader in refugee protection, hindering genuine and equitable cooperation between Australia and other countries in the Asia-Pacific region on this issue.

31 Ibid.
33 ICCPR arts 7, 9, 10; CAT art 2.
34 CRC art 3(1).
36 Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, Parliament of Australia, Inquiry into the Administration and Operation of the Migration Act 1958 (2006) para 8.62; see also McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 113
Australia's mandatory detention policies have been repeatedly criticised, both domestically\textsuperscript{38} and internationally.\textsuperscript{38} The average length of detention of asylum seekers in Australia is about 500 days, although some individuals have been detained for more than five years.\textsuperscript{39} This is vastly out of step with detention practices elsewhere – for example, in most of Europe the average length of detention is less than 90 days, and in some countries it is limited to an even shorter duration.\textsuperscript{40} Leaving refugees for prolonged and indefinite periods with little hope for a solution has devastating impacts on people’s mental and physical health and well-being.\textsuperscript{41} The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture found that Australia’s detention practices violated the right of asylum seekers, including children, to be free from ‘torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment’.\textsuperscript{42} The UN Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child have jointly proclaimed that: ‘Every child, at all times, has a fundamental right to liberty and freedom from immigration detention. ... Any kind of child immigration detention should be forbidden by law and such prohibition should be fully implemented in practice.’\textsuperscript{43}

Allowing people seeking asylum to live in the community while their claims are processed, and providing them with adequate care and assistance during this period, helps to promote their self-sufficiency and prospects for long-term integration.\textsuperscript{44} It is also a more humane approach that aligns with human rights law, and it is considerably less expensive than closed detention.\textsuperscript{45} Research in Uganda – which has adopted a ‘self-reliance’ model of refugee protection, allowing refugees the right to work and freedom of movement – shows that programs encouraging self-reliance and self-sufficiency among refugees can promote economic sustainability among refugees themselves, as well as benefitting host communities.\textsuperscript{46} For those whose claims for international protection are unsuccessful, humane and fair treatment during their stay in Australia will help to facilitate successful return and re-integration into their country of origin (or another country).\textsuperscript{47}

How?

Australia should provide humane and fair reception conditions for all people seeking asylum, irrespective of their legal status or whether they arrive by sea or air. People should be given access to medical care, gainful employment, education and such other assistance as will enable them to live in dignity in the community pending the determination of their claims.

In order to provide humane, fair conditions for all people seeking asylum, Australia should take the following actions as a matter of priority:

End mandatory, indefinite detention

By its very nature, mandatory detention is arbitrary and thus contrary to international law. Detention should only be used where absolutely necessary, and for the shortest possible time, while registration, documentation, health and security checks take place. It should be subject to time limits specified by law. Sufficient safeguards must exist to ensure that detention is not arbitrary or indefinite. Individuals who are detained must be given the opportunity


\textsuperscript{41}See Jacques Delors Institut, Asylum Detention in Europe: State of Play and Ways Forward (18 May 2017) 15. Detention in France is limited to 60 days, and in Spain to 45 days.

\textsuperscript{42}Medecins Sans Frontieres, Indefinite Despair: The Tragic Mental Health Consequences of Offshore Processing on Nauru (December 2018); Commonwealth Ombudsman, Suicide and Self-Harm in the Immigration Detention Network (May 2013).

\textsuperscript{43}Special Rapporteur Report, above n 39, paras 19, 31.

\textsuperscript{44}Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Joint General Comment No. 4 (2017) of the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families and No. 23 (2017) of the Committee on the Rights of the Child on State Obligations regarding the Human Rights of Children in the Context of International Migration in Countries of Origin, Transit, Destination and Return, UN doc CMW/C/GC/4-CRC/C/GC/23 (16 Nov 2017) para 5.


\textsuperscript{46}See McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 208.

\textsuperscript{47}See generally Alexander Betts et al, Refugee Economies in Uganda: What Difference Does the Self-Reliance Model Make? (Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford, 2019). This report also identifies a number of weaknesses in the Ugandan model, however.

\textsuperscript{48}Australian Human Rights Commission, above n 45, s 5.1: International Detention Coalition, above n 45, s 2.4.3.
and necessary assistance to challenge their detention in court. In all cases, including where security issues are raised, the use of detention should comply with international legal standards. Community-based alternatives to detention should be used whenever possible. Children should never be detained on account of their immigration status.

**Process asylum claims in Australia, not offshore**

Australia should also abolish its offshore processing regime and fulfil its international legal obligations to all people sent offshore. Those found to be refugees should be promptly settled in Australia or in another country able and willing to provide effective protection and a durable solution in accordance with international law. Those found not to require international protection should be given appropriate assistance to enable them to return to their country of origin and rebuild their lives. All those sent offshore should be treated with dignity and given access to necessary medical and other assistance.

**Enable dignified living conditions for all people seeking asylum**

Australia should allow all those seeking asylum the opportunity to work so that they can contribute to their own well-being and to the Australian community. Australia should provide adequate support and a social security safety net to those unable to find employment. At a minimum, Australia should ensure that people seeking asylum have access to basic health care, housing support, financial assistance, counselling, and other essential services.

**Examples of good practice:**

- The EU Reception Directive\(^49\) sets out minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers to ensure ‘a dignified standard of living and comparable living conditions in all Member States’.\(^50\) The Directive recommends specific measures to be taken by States in relation to freedom of movement, respect for family unity, education, employment and training, and provisions for people with special needs, in order to ensure that minimum reception standards are met.

- In most South American countries, national legislation either does not provide for, or explicitly prohibits, immigration detention.\(^51\) For example, legislation in Venezuela provides that measures taken towards deportation ‘[must] not imply a deprivation or restriction of the right to personal liberty’, while Ecuador’s Constitution recognises freedom of movement for all people and prohibits any type of criminalisation of irregular migration.\(^52\)

- Many European States have replaced the detention of asylum seekers with alternatives. For example, Belgium’s *Reception Act 2007* guarantees basic forms of assistance to all asylum seekers, including accommodation, food, clothing, medical care, social and psychological support, access to interpreters and legal representation, access to training, and a small monetary allowance.\(^53\) Malta ended its practice of automatic detention of unlawful arrivals in 2015\(^54\) and now houses most asylum seekers in open centres, where they are allowed freedom of movement, provided they confirm residence in person three times a week.\(^55\)

\(^50\) Ibid preambular para 11.
\(^54\) Global Detention Project, ‘Malta Immigration Detention’ (August 2017) https://www.globaldetentionproject.org/countries/europe/malta
Australia should provide a fair, efficient and transparent system for processing asylum claims

What?

Australia should provide a fair, efficient and transparent system for processing asylum claims, with decisions made by suitably qualified, independent decision-makers. All those seeking Australia’s protection should receive a fair hearing, including free access to legal advice and assistance, interpreting services, and the opportunity for independent review of negative decisions. Asylum claims should never be processed at sea.

Why?

In order to fulfil its obligations under the Refugee Convention and international human rights law, Australia must have in place procedures that ensure the timely and accurate identification of refugees and others in need of international protection. While there is no single uniform procedure that must be used when processing asylum claims, the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which is comprised of States, has set out certain basic requirements for ensuring fairness and essential guarantees for applicants. These include ensuring respect for the principle of non-refoulement, providing appropriate guidance for applicants, and allowing appeals against negative decisions.¹⁶

Failing to provide adequate asylum procedures for those seeking Australia’s protection hampers the ability of decision-makers to make well-informed and well-reasoned decisions. Where applicants are not given appropriate advice and assistance with asylum procedures, they may be unable to present their claims effectively.¹⁷ In turn, this increases the likelihood of appeals and undermines public confidence in the decision-making process.¹⁸

Expeditious and effective decision-making promotes certainty for applicants and helps those in need of international protection to rebuild their lives and become full participants in Australian society. It also contributes to the timely return to their home country of those who are not entitled to international protection. Fundamentally, processing all asylum claims fairly and efficiently will help to ensure that Australia does not inadvertently return someone to a place where their life or freedom is at risk.

¹⁷As the UN Human Rights Committee has noted, access to appropriate legal and other assistance “often determines whether or not a person can access the relevant proceedings or participate in them in a meaningful way”. UN Human Rights Committee, General Comment No. 32: Article 14: Right to Equality before Courts and Tribunals and to a Fair Trial, 90th sess, UN doc CCPR/C/GC/32 (23 August 2007) para 10.
¹⁸See McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 189–95.
How?

Australia should provide access to fair, efficient and transparent procedures for determining the claims of all those seeking asylum. The criteria for international protection should be set out in domestic law by reference to Australia’s international legal obligations. Decisions regarding applicants’ protection claims should be made by suitably qualified and independent decision-makers, in accordance with due process and the rule of law.

Access to fair and efficient asylum procedures should be provided to every person seeking asylum in Australia, irrespective of the time or mode of their arrival. In particular, Australia should abolish its use of ‘fast track’ procedures, which prevent some applicants from accessing legal assistance or applying for independent review of the decision on their claim. It should also cease relying on ‘enhanced screening’ as a replacement for a full status determination procedure for some asylum seekers arriving by boat. Asylum processing or screening conducted at sea does not meet the minimum requirements for fair procedures.

People seeking asylum should be given the advice and assistance necessary to fully present their claims. Australia should provide free age, gender and diversity sensitive counselling, legal advice and representation with the support of a qualified interpreter. Tailored assistance should be provided for those with special requirements, including children, victims of trauma and people with disabilities. At a minimum, the government should reinstate free legal assistance to all applicants for their initial protection visa application and merits review (as previously provided under the Immigration Advice and Application Assistance Scheme (IAAAS)).

Every person seeking asylum should have access to independent merits review and judicial review of government decisions affecting them. Cases that raise security issues should be dealt with in accordance with Australia’s international legal obligations. In particular, individuals subject to adverse ASIO security decisions affecting them. Cases that raise security issues should be dealt with in accordance with Australia’s international legal obligations and the rule of law. In particular, individuals subject to adverse ASIO security decisions affecting them should have the opportunity to meaningfully challenge the assessment and to have it independently reviewed.

Examples of good practice:

• Many countries provide free legal advice and representation to those seeking asylum – for example, via a dedicated legal service provider (eg Red Cross in Iceland) or a duty lawyer service (eg in Sweden and Netherlands). Interpreters are also provided for free in many countries. In the United States, the quality of interpretation in interviews is continuously monitored.

• Denmark provides an automated appeal process for all rejected claims, promoting better quality decision-making at the initial stages and obviating the need for rejected applicants to lodge their own appeal.

• Canada and France have facilitated independent evaluations of their country’s asylum procedures, with findings made public. In France, UNHCR was contracted to evaluate the quality of asylum interviews, research and decisions. In Canada, the government commissioned an independent review of its asylum management systems which identified shortcomings in the existing system and made recommendations for improvement.

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68 See Principle 1, above.
67 See McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 43ff.
66 UNHCR has expressed its concerns to Australia about the potential non-compliance of enhanced screening procedures with international law, and the fact that asylum procedures conducted at sea ‘would rarely afford an appropriate venue for a fair procedure’. See UNHCR, ‘Return to Sri Lanka of Individuals Intercepted at Sea’ (Press release, 7 July 2014) https://www.unhcr.org/en-au/news/press/2014/7/53baaf11f/returns-sri-lanka-individuals-intercepted-sea.html. While UNHCR has expressed support for the use of ‘fast track’ procedures elsewhere (notably, in Europe), this is only if they are accompanied by sufficient procedural safeguards and due process standards, including the rights of applicants to seek legal advice, prepare their application, receive properly reasoned decisions, apply for review, and remain in the country until the final determination of their claim. See UNHCR, “Fair and Fast: UNHCR Discussion Paper on Accelerated and Simplified Procedures in the European Union” (May 2018) 12–13.
65 See Government of Canada, above n 64.
62 Ibid.
61 See McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 187–8.
60 It should also cease relying on ‘enhanced screening’ as a replacement for a full status determination procedure for some asylum seekers arriving by boat. Asylum processing or screening conducted at sea does not meet the minimum requirements for fair procedures.
68 See Government of Canada, above n 64.
Australia should respect the principles of family unity and the best interests of the child

What?

Australia should respect the principles of family unity and the best interests of the child, in accordance with international human rights law. All those granted international protection in Australia should have the opportunity to be reunited with their families. Children should not be separated from their parents, and their health, welfare and education should be carefully safeguarded. Special provisions should be made for unaccompanied children, including the appointment of an independent guardian with the power to advocate for their best interests. Children should never be detained.

Why?

International human rights law recognises the family as ‘the natural and fundamental group unit of society’ and obliges states to ensure respect for family unity. Summary Conclusions from UNHCR’s Global Consultations on International Protection explain that the principle of family unity ‘requires not only that States refrain from action which would result in family separations, but also that they take measures to maintain the unity of the family and reunite family members who have been separated’. They also urge that deciding who constitutes a ‘family’ requires ‘a flexible approach which takes account of cultural variations, and economic and emotional dependency factors’.

The Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out basic standards of treatment for all children, regardless of their immigration status. Fundamental among these obligations is the requirement that, in all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration. More specifically, no child should be separated from his or her parents against his or her will, and States must assist in the reunification of children separated from family members. Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Australia is obliged to afford children seeking asylum the ‘appropriate protection and humanitarian assistance’ necessary to allow them to enjoy their rights. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which oversees the implementation of the Convention, has criticised Australia’s treatment of children seeking asylum and urged Australia ‘to bring its immigration and asylum laws into full conformity with the Convention and other relevant international standards’. Mutual support among family members is critical to people’s resilience, including their integration and success in new communities. Family separation creates significant psychological hardship and distress, and in certain circumstances could even amount to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment, in violation of the ICCPR.

69ICCPR art 23(1); also CRC, preambular para 5.
70ICCPR arts 17(1), 23(1); CRC arts 8(1), 9; See also Final Act of the United Nations Conference of Plenipotentiaries on the Status of Refugees and Stateless Persons, 25 July 1951, Recommendation B, which reaffirms the ‘essential right’ of family unity for refugees.
72Ibid para 8.
73CRC art 3(1).
74Unless the best interests of the child require such separation: ibid art 9.
75Ibid art 22(2).
76Ibid art 22(1).
78ICCPR art 7; see McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 26.
How?

All refugees should have the opportunity to be reunited with their families, irrespective of their legal status or their mode of arrival. Australia should increase the capacity of its current family reunification programs, and provide a dedicated quota for family reunification that is separate from Australia’s general humanitarian resettlement program. Australia should also remove existing discriminatory restrictions on family reunification for those who come by boat, and allow for family reunion beyond ‘immediate family members’.

All children seeking asylum in Australia should have access to appropriate care, assistance and education, irrespective of their legal status or the duration of their stay in Australia. Australia should incorporate the principle of the best interests of the child into domestic legislation and ensure that it is a primary consideration in all aspects of refugee policy affecting children. As a matter of priority, Australia should abolish those aspects of its refugee policy that are most harmful to children. These include offshore processing and temporary protection visas.

Offshore processing has particularly devastating effects on families and children, even after their release from detention. It should be abolished, and those currently held offshore should be provided with protection and durable solutions. While there are no children currently held offshore, Australian law should be amended to guarantee that no child or family will be transferred offshore in the future.

Temporary protection, which results in families being separated for prolonged, and potentially indefinite, periods of time, also has especially detrimental effects on the mental health of refugee and asylum seeker children. While there are no children currently held offshore, Australian law should be amended to guarantee that no child or family will be transferred offshore in the future.

In order to safeguard the rights and interests of unaccompanied asylum seeker and refugee children, Australia should appoint an independent guardian with the power to advocate for unaccompanied refugee and asylum seeker children in relation to all decisions that affect their lives. The current guardian, the Minister, has a clear conflict of interest in this role.

Examples of good practice:

• In the Netherlands, all unaccompanied children are placed under the guardianship of an independent agency which arranges housing and care, usually within foster families. Children under 16 are accompanied by guardians during all interviews with immigration authorities.

• The EU Qualification Directive provides that Member States may extend provisions on family unity beyond immediate family members ‘to other close relatives who lived together as part of the family at the time of leaving the country of origin, and who were wholly or mainly dependent on the beneficiary of international protection at that time.’ The Court of Justice of the European Union has held that dependency in this context must be understood in terms of legal, financial, emotional or material support between family members.

• Sweden has established a Children’s Ombudsman – a government agency formed to represent children’s rights and to monitor Sweden’s implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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80 It should be abolished, and those currently held offshore should be provided with protection and durable solutions. While there are no children currently held offshore, Australian law should be amended to guarantee that no child or family will be transferred offshore in the future.

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82 Sweden has established a Children’s Ombudsman – a government agency formed to represent children’s rights and to monitor Sweden’s implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Australia should create additional safe, lawful pathways to protection

What?

Australia should create additional safe, lawful pathways to protection, including by increasing the resettlement of refugees as an agreed percentage of Australia’s annual migration intake; creating special humanitarian intakes for people fleeing particular crises and programs for those particularly at risk or otherwise in danger of being left behind (including women and girls at risk); and supporting community and private sponsorship of refugees (in addition to government-allocated places).

Why?

People fleeing persecution, conflict and human rights abuses often face unimaginable dangers on their journeys to find safety and protection. Many refugees who make dangerous boat journeys or employ the assistance of smugglers understand the risks. But with no alternative pathway to safety, they may have no other option.

Safe, lawful pathways to protection provide opportunities for refugees to seek safety using regular means and routes of travel and without putting their lives at risk. They include refugee resettlement, as well as other complementary pathways to protection, such as community and private sponsorship, family reunification programs, special humanitarian intakes, targeted work and study programs, and in-country processing or other ‘protected entry’ schemes. For many refugees, such pathways may provide the only means of finding a durable solution and an opportunity to rebuild their lives.

Safe, lawful pathways to protection not only save lives, but are also a critical form of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing among States, because they can relieve the pressure on ‘front line’ States during large-scale humanitarian emergencies. Indeed, the ‘urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world’s refugees’ was the driving force behind the 2016 New York Declaration and the 2018 Global Compact on Refugees, both of which Australia supported. Under the Refugee Compact, Australia pledged to ‘ease pressures on host countries’ and ‘expand access to third country solutions’ for refugees. In 2019, as part of the implementation phase of the Refugee Compact, the first Global Refugee Forum will take place and Australia will be required to report on its progress towards these objectives.

Most people want to move safely and lawfully. Most governments want to know who has entered their territory and why. Creating safe and lawful pathways to protection is therefore in everyone’s interests. And Australia has done it before. Between 1948 and 1953, Australia resettled more than 160,000 refugees, predominantly from Eastern Europe. During this period, refugees represented around half of all newcomers who settled in Australia (compared to less than 10 per cent now). By working together, the Australian community and government could again reduce the risks faced by refugees and enhance access to protection and durable solutions.

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100 Refugee Compact. Objectives (i) and (ii).
101 McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 68.
How?

Australia should expand its existing humanitarian program to increase the overall number of people resettled to Australia each year, and to address the specific resettlement needs of particular individuals and groups. Australia’s general resettlement quota should be increased as a percentage of Australia’s annual migration intake. This number should be subject to annual review to ensure that it reflects the scale of global displacement and the needs identified by UNHCR. Australia’s resettlement program should prioritise those with the greatest protection needs and maintain sufficient flexibility to respond to changing priorities. Restrictions on resettlement based on someone’s date, mode or place of arrival should be removed, including for refugees registered with UNHCR in Indonesia.

In addition to its general resettlement program, Australia should maintain a dedicated quota for urgent or emergency resettlement cases. It should also have places set aside for special humanitarian intakes, which can be used as and when required to respond to large-scale humanitarian crises. This helps to promote international solidarity and responsibility-sharing, as well as protection and durable solutions for those with the greatest protection needs.

Australia should develop additional safe and lawful pathways for refugees and others in need of international protection, including through ‘protected entry procedures’ and community and private sponsorship. While Australia’s current Community Support Program is a first step in this regard, it requires significant revision to make it a genuinely complementary pathway to protection in Australia. In particular, the Community Support Program quota should be increased, and places should be additional to those in the Humanitarian Program (not taken from them). Eligibility should be based on individuals’ protection needs, not their potential for integration and/or economic participation. The cost of supporting refugees under the Community Support Program should be reduced to provide more equitable access and better align it with similar programs elsewhere.

Australia should also expand options for ‘in-country processing’ by giving people at risk the opportunity to apply for protection before they flee their home countries. This could include, for example, the expansion of Australia’s existing In-country Special Humanitarian visa (subclass 201), which is currently used only rarely. Finally, Australia should consider facilitating refugees’ access to visas for skilled migration, study, family reunion and so on by relaxing certain documentary requirements and waiving or reducing fees.

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98 The Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers suggested that the number should increase to at least 27,000 refugees per annum: Australian Government, Report of the Expert Panel on Asylum Seekers (2012) 14 (Recommendation 2).

99 See Wood and Higgins, above n 91.


Examples of good practice:

• Between 2015 and 2017, Australia implemented a special humanitarian intake of 12,000 refugees fleeing conflict in Syria and Iraq. This number was additional to the annual quota of refugees resettled under Australia’s general resettlement program. While there is room for improvement in relation to similar future intakes, the Syria–Iraq special intake provides a sound basis for planning for, and responding to, future humanitarian crises.

• Canada has a highly successful private sponsorship program for resettlement of refugees, which to date has provided durable solutions for more than 275,000 refugees. Canada’s program has not only significantly expanded refugee resettlement in Canada, but has also broken down cultural barriers and enhanced social inclusion more generally. Several other countries – including Argentina, Germany, Ireland, New Zealand, Spain and the United Kingdom – have launched or are piloting community sponsorship programs, many of which are based on the Canadian model. In Germany, an estimated 10 per cent of the population provided voluntary, financial or in-kind support to refugees in 2015 when refugee arrivals increased significantly.

• Following the end of the Second World War, several countries – including Australia, Belgium, Canada and the Netherlands – implemented post-war refugee placement programs, simultaneously providing work opportunities for refugees and addressing labour shortages within each country.

• Between 1979 and 1997, Australia ran a Community Refugee Resettlement Scheme (CRRS) which supported the settlement and integration of more than 30,000 refugees. Refugees were settled directly into communities and supported by voluntary agencies, community groups, businesses and individuals. Under the CRRS, the government provided funding for refugees’ airfares and other transportation, while the community supported refugees with housing support, English language tuition and assistance in getting employment.

• Italy has supported a coalition of faith-based organisations to implement ‘humanitarian corridors’ for people fleeing Syria and Eritrea, allowing safe passage from neighbouring countries for a small number of refugees. France has operated a similar scheme for Syrian and Iraqi refugees.

• In the 1980s, the Australian government used in-country processing to resettle several hundred refugees from Latin America.
Australia should provide global and regional leadership on refugee protection

How?

Australia should engage and cooperate with other countries at the international and regional levels to secure protection and find durable solutions for refugees and those seeking asylum, and to promote the better management of international migration in all its aspects. Australia should commit to ongoing participation in relevant dialogue and policy processes, as well as ad hoc arrangements to address specific refugee situations. Australia should also ensure coherence between its diplomatic, aid and refugee programs in order to promote human rights and the rule of law in countries of origin and asylum, address the root causes of displacement, and support durable solutions. Australia should ensure that its own refugee policies do not seek to deflect responsibility for protection on to neighbouring States or increase the risk of harm for people on the move.

Why?

The challenges of refugee protection are international in nature and require international cooperation in response. Securing protection and solutions for refugees requires engagement and cooperation with other countries, the UN and other international organisations to protect people seeking asylum in accordance with international law. Under the Refugee Convention, Australia is obliged to cooperate with UNHCR in the exercise of its functions, which include providing international protection and seeking permanent solutions for refugees.

Further, under international human rights law, Australia has committed to respect, protect and fulfil fundamental human rights. As a Member State of the United Nations, Australia has pledged to take ‘joint and separate’ action to promote ‘universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all’. These commitments require not only that Australia uphold its obligations within its own territory and jurisdiction, but also that it cooperate with and assist other States to promote and protect human rights more generally.

With 85 per cent of the world’s refugees hosted in developing regions and increasing numbers of people trapped in situations of protracted displacement, the international community has recognised the ‘urgent need for more equitable sharing of the burden and responsibility for hosting and supporting the world’s refugees’. Under the Global Compact on Refugees, Australia has committed to responding to these needs, including via contributions of financial, material and technical assistance, and by providing resettlement places and complementary pathways for admission for those in need of international protection.

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111 See Refugee Convention preambular para 4: considering that ‘a satisfactory solution of a problem of which the United Nations has recognized the international scope and nature cannot therefore be achieved without international co-operation’.
112 Ibid art 35.
114 Charter of the United Nations art 56.
115 Ibid art 55.
118 Refugee Compact, para 1.
119 Ibid para 18.
By adopting a coherent, human rights-centred approach across its diplomatic, aid and refugee policies, Australia can support the expansion of the protection space in countries of origin and asylum. Measures such as the provision of development and humanitarian assistance and the strategic use of resettlement can promote respect for refugees’ rights in countries of asylum and enhance opportunities for refugees and host communities, which may in turn reduce the need for people to take dangerous journeys to other countries in search of safety.

Australia should also contribute to international efforts to address the root causes of displacement, including persecution, conflict, statelessness, human rights violations, and the impacts of disasters and climate change. The multi-layered causes of displacement mean there is no simple way to address root causes and prevent displacement. While displacement may be the result of a specific trigger or cause – that is, a precipitating event (or events) that prompt a person to decide to flee – it is often the result of underlying and longer-term drivers – that is, the social, political and environmental conditions that produce the triggering event and decision to leave. Nevertheless, over the long term, promoting respect for human rights and the rule of law, contributing to aid and development, and working to reduce conflict and the negative effects of climate change, could help to ease the conditions that force people to leave their countries of origin in search of safety and to contribute to conditions for the safe, dignified and sustainable return of those not in need of international protection.

It is in Australia’s interests to promote refugee protection and regional cooperation, particularly in the Asia-Pacific. By working cooperatively with our neighbours in the region and demonstrating leadership through modelling good practices, Australia could more effectively address the root causes of displacement, enhance protection in countries of first asylum, encourage responsibility-sharing among States, and increase the availability of durable solutions for refugees in the region.

However, Australia’s authority to promote protection and cooperation both regionally and globally depends upon it being able to demonstrate respect for human rights within its own territory and abroad. Australia’s credibility and moral authority to promote constructive and protection-sensitive responses to displacement in the Asia-Pacific region has been fundamentally undermined by several of its current policies, particularly offshore processing and turning back boats, which may be perceived as an attempt by Australia to evade its international legal commitments and shift responsibility for refugee protection on to other States. Adopting a principled approach to Australia’s refugee policies, as outlined here, will foster cooperation and lay the foundations for a more effective and sustainable response to displacement in our region.

What?

Fundamentally, Australia must work with other States and the international community as a whole to ensure a global, cooperative approach to promoting peace, human rights and solutions to situations of displacement.

Australia should actively contribute to international frameworks and mechanisms for promoting and ensuring respect for human rights, including through diplomatic efforts, the provision of funding and by setting a positive example of cooperation and engagement on human rights issues. Australia should take action to address the numerous concerns and recommendations expressed by UN human rights bodies regarding its own human rights record.
Australia should also provide humanitarian assistance, development, and technical and financial support in countries of origin and first asylum, to help people access effective protection without the need to undertake lengthy and often dangerous journeys. Australia should reverse the significant (and repeated) cuts that have been made to its foreign aid budget in recent years. As a proportion of Australia’s Gross National Income, Australia’s aid program should be increased from its current level (of around 0.2 per cent) to 0.7 per cent, in line with commitments under the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Australia should actively support regional cooperation in the Asia-Pacific to provide protection to people who are displaced (or who are at risk of being displaced) and to promote international and regional agreements oriented to protection, solutions and standards of treatment consistent with international refugee law and international human rights law. This includes an on-going commitment by Australia to support UNHCR through funding, the provision of resettlement places and the promotion of protection. It also includes engagement by Australia with other countries in the region to promote the ratification of the Refugee Convention and Protocol and international human rights treaties; to encourage States in the region to provide opportunities for local integration or refugee resettlement; and to support capacity-building in countries of origin and first asylum aimed at improving protection for people who are displaced.

Australia should draw on its experience and expertise to support other countries to develop their own refugee laws and policies. Australia could encourage and support new resettlement states in the region through technical or financial assistance – for example, via the IOM–UNHCR Emerging Resettlement Countries Joint Support Mechanism. It could also provide financial assistance to countries developing their own asylum and refugee systems.

Any regional cooperation agreements that Australia enters into with other countries in the Asia-Pacific region should be founded on a genuine commitment to responsibility-sharing (rather than responsibility-shifting). They should aim to increase the overall available protection space in the region, be subject to effective oversight and quality assurance mechanisms, and in all cases be consistent with Australia’s international legal obligations.

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128 Ibid.

Examples of good practice:

- The Comprehensive Plan of Action for Indochinese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s entailed cooperation between States of first asylum, resettlement States (including Australia) and UNHCR to provide immediate protection and long-term solutions for refugees fleeing conflict in South-East Asia.  

- In Africa and Latin America, regional agreements relating to refugees, as well as broader migration-related agreements and policies, reinforce the importance of the Refugee Convention and Protocol and call on States that have not done so to ratify these instruments and to apply their provisions.

- In the Americas, the Regional Conference on Migration (RCM) promotes cooperation and coordination between Member States to protect both the human rights of those who move and the national interests of States. For example, in 2016, the RCM adopted a guide to effective practices on addressing the needs of people displaced across borders in the context of disasters.

- Sweden has concluded a multi-year funding agreement with UNHCR for 2018–21, 94 per cent of which is unearmarked funds, providing both predictability and consistency for UNHCR's work.

- 163 States have adopted both the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration, demonstrating their commitment to cooperate in the better management of all aspects of people movement across borders.

- Canada, together with UNHCR and the Open Society Foundations, launched an initiative aimed at increasing private sponsorship for refugees around the world.

- Denmark, Luxembourg, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom all meet or exceed the target of 0.7 per cent of Gross National Income for overseas aid, Luxembourg, Sweden and Norway spend around one per cent.

- The Nansen Initiative’s Agenda for the Protection of Cross-Border Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change, endorsed by 109 governments in 2015, provides an example of a holistic approach to displacement that includes recommended actions for how countries can both protect people displaced in the context of disasters, and prevent displacement from occurring in the first place – for example, through disaster risk reduction activities and by facilitating voluntary migration for those at risk of displacement.
Australia should invest in refugees for long-term success

What?

Australia should prepare for long-term success by investing in refugees as community members, leaders and ambassadors for Australia, and enabling them to strengthen their education, skills and resilience to contribute to their communities, whether in Australia, their country of origin (if return becomes possible), or any other country in which they may one day live. This includes a commitment to creating conditions that enable all people granted protection to enrich society through their human, economic and social capabilities.

Why?

Refugee protection is not only about providing short-term protection from imminent harm. Refugees are entitled to the respect and fulfilment of their rights and the opportunity to rebuild and advance their lives. Under the Refugee Convention, Australia has committed to facilitating the ‘assimilation and naturalization’ of refugees as far as possible – meaning that Australia should provide the foundations and conditions by which refugees ‘may be more readily integrated in the economic, social and cultural life of [their] country of refuge’.\(^{140}\) Research shows that, given the right opportunities, refugees are remarkably successful at integrating into Australia – joining communities, making friends, contributing to their communities and, for many, learning a new language.\(^{141}\)

Allowing refugees to find safety and rebuild their lives in Australia benefits Australian communities, too. Refugees make important social, economic and cultural contributions to the communities that receive them, including by fostering understanding and social inclusion.\(^{142}\) Access to work and study from the moment of arrival, and during the determination of protection claims, would promote long-term integration for those who are found to be refugees or otherwise in need of protection. For those whose claims are unsuccessful, it would help to facilitate their successful return and re-integration in their country of origin (or elsewhere).\(^{143}\)

How?

Australia should invest in the settlement, integration and inclusion of all refugees, providing them with the opportunity to lead dignified lives, realise their aspirations, and, if they wish, to become citizens of their new country. They should have access to medical care, English language tuition, and such other social support as will enable them to live with dignity in the community. They should also be enabled to contribute to the well-being of themselves, their families and the Australian community through gainful employment. This requires a commitment to education, training, skills transfer and recognition of qualifications for refugees, and the promotion of business partnerships to facilitate employment opportunities for refugees. Special consideration should be given to finding ways to match the economic and demographic needs of Australia’s states and territories with the skills and desires of refugees.

\(^{140}\)Atle Grahl-Madsen, Commentary on the Refugee Convention, 1951, Articles 2–11, 13–37 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Division of International Protection, 1997) Comment (3) on art 34.

\(^{141}\) See Jock Collins and Carol Reid, ‘Refugees are Integrating Just Fine in Regional Australia’ on The Conversation (13 August 2018) https://theconversation.com/refugees-are-integrating-just-fine-in-regional-australia-101188.


The long-term success of Australia’s refugee policies also depends, to a significant degree, on the fulfilment of these Principles for Australian Refugee Policy as a whole. People who come to Australia seeking protection bring with them their own skills, talents and capabilities. Many of the current shortcomings in Australian refugee policy – including detention, offshore processing, temporary protection visas and limited access to family reunification programs – undermine the ability of refugees to rebuild their lives, realise their potential and become valuable, contributing members of Australian society. A more principled approach to refugee policy, including the specific recommendations provided in this document, could address misconceptions about refugees and help to enhance social inclusion.144

Examples of good practice:

• Australia has a strong record of delivering effective and responsive settlement services to refugees arriving as part of Australia’s Refugee and Humanitarian Program.145 With an increase in funding and flexibility, such support could be extended to all those seeking Australia’s protection, including those who arrive by boat.

• Canada’s private sponsorship program for refugees has been ‘transformative’ for both refugees and Canadian communities, by breaking down barriers, promoting inclusion and fostering long-lasting relationships.146

• Bolivia’s new Immigration Law, adopted in 2013, provides extensive rights for all non-nationals, irrespective of their reason for movement, including rights to family reunion, education and health, and the possibility of obtaining permanent residency or citizenship after three years.147 In an address to the UN General Assembly, the Bolivian President called for ‘universal citizenship’ and stated that no one who crosses an international border is ‘illegal’.148

• The German government, with the support of private donors, has implemented the DAFI (Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative) programme, providing scholarships to refugees to study in their country of asylum. To date, the programme has supported the tertiary studies of more than 14,000 refugees.149

• In Canada, the World Education Service has trialled alternative methods of verifying education and professional qualifications for refugees lacking comprehensive personal documents. This involves matching refugees’ partial documentation with independent research and experience with international educational institutions.150 The initial trial received encouraging responses from educational institutions. For refugees themselves, the process ‘gave many of them hope, dignity, and a basis upon which to reclaim their identity and plan for their futures.’151

144 See McAdam and Chong, above n 2, 69–70.
151 Ibid 21.
The Andrew & Renata Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law at UNSW Sydney is the world’s leading research centre dedicated to the study of international refugee law. Founded in October 2013, the Centre undertakes rigorous research on the most pressing displacement issues in Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and around the world, and contributes to public policy by promoting legal, sustainable and humane solutions to forced migration. Through outstanding research and engagement, the Centre has become recognised as an intellectual powerhouse with global impact.

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