

Submission

I attended the round-table discussion for women held in Parramatta on 22nd August 2023. Key concepts that I took away from that meeting were the following:

- The fact that most of us who run organisations representing the various multicultural communities do this on a voluntary basis.
- The groups have different needs for a range of reasons; there are different migrations streams such as skilled migrants, refugees, international students and spouses, all of whom have different needs on participating in life in Australia.
- That representation of the different communities brings its own problems; who are the so-called community leaders and which communities do they lead/ represent? Are they gender-representative?

While most of the representatives in the room were from a single country or ethnic group, I was there representing African Women Community Support Group, which in turn represents African Australians and Africans in Australia. But Africa is a continent of 54 countries, each with its own multiplicity of ethnic groups and languages, so any group seeking to represent “Africa/ Africans” is bound to be limited in its reach.

The issue of racism was raised, although perhaps more accurately the word “xenophobia” – relating to fear of the ‘other’ or ‘dislike of foreigners’ - should have been used, as the example related to someone who by taking off her headscarf could immediately blend into the mainstream community, and therefore the issue was related more to religion than race. However, for the purposes of this multicultural framework review, I continue to use the word ‘racism’ but in an expanded form to include all forms of religious and ethnic based discrimination.

So that is the background to my submission. Now for the more challenging part, suggested solutions.

On Voluntariness of our Work

It was suggested in the meeting that there be some sort of training for the Management Committees of these Multicultural Organisations. I agree. I specifically think that such training be held on a regular basis for Management committee members, but organised by function. By this I mean, that there be separate trainings for Chairpersons, Treasurers, Secretaries, etc, so that the Chairpersons of a number of organisations come together to share experiences, learn from each other, and NETWORK. Similarly for the other executive positions. I feel that my organisation [African Women Community Support Group (AWCSG) Inc] is in a silo when we have trainings for ourselves, and I learned a lot from the consultation on 22nd August about how other organisations are going forwards.

On Representation

We hear a lot about consultation with “community leaders” but do not know who the leaders are. Does this phrase refer to religious leaders and/ or leaders of the community-based organisations? Who do they lead – eg country-based organisations, or regional based organisations? What is the gender breakdown of the leadership team? In my organisation we have many women leaders, but we do not seem to get those generic invitations to events for or consultations with ‘community leaders’.

On Incorporation and Auspicing

My organisation, AWCSG Inc, recently became incorporated after having existed for several years as an informal CBO called African Women's Group (AWG). As AWG we had no constitution and were not incorporated, so were unable to apply for or receive government funding. We were however able to be auspiced by a well-known organisation, and this allowed us to run events without ourselves handling the funding.

We soon realised that being incorporated did not itself mean we could gain government funding because we did not have a funding history, a history of accounting for funds. So we still need to be auspiced until we gather such a history. In the meantime, we are trying to access smaller funds from organisations which do not ask for these types of conditions.

How can this issue be addressed? In some ways it links to the first point on the fact that our organisations are voluntary.

On Racism

In the consultation of 22nd August, it was very clear that the representatives present had different experiences of 'racism' (the word used here in the wider form mentioned above). As a sub-Saharan African Australian, I do not have the option to take an article of clothing off to 'blend in'.

On meeting newcomers, especially groups of newcomers, I get bombarded by questions about where I come from, where I learned my English, how I feel about living in this wonderful country, when I'm going back (I guess they mean to where they presume I came from), how often I go back to my homeland, 'how is it back there?' etc.

Given that I've live in Australia since 1987, more than 35 years ago, more than half my lifetime ago, and am a citizen – an Australian - one would think that these questions should be clearly seen as inappropriate.

Some in the room suggested that the issue of racism should be addressed more directly. I'm not sure I agree, as when this happens those of us of a certain appearance 'cop a lot of flak' in a similar way as is happening to others in this referendum (voice) debate.

There was a recent visit to Australia by the UN Working Group on Experts on People of African Descent (UN WGEPAD), invited in by the Australian Government. They visited Australia in December last year, holding consultation in Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney, with the trip having been organised by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Department of Home Affairs. The working group met with several state and federal government departments in those cities.

They also met with civil society representatives of African descent from Canberra, Melbourne, Brisbane, Sydney, Perth and Adelaide.

A draft report has been produced and shared with some members of the government, and also with representatives of those community groups who participated in the consultations. The final report will be presented to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva later in September.

The draft report, which it has been said will not differ much from the final report, highlighted the issue of racial discrimination. In paragraph 7 it states "Despite the positive measures [taken by the government] the Working Group is concerned about the prevalence of racial discrimination and the human rights situation of Africans and people of African descent in Australia." Paragraph 125, the final one, states "The Working Group would like to reiterate its satisfaction at the Government's willingness to engage in dialogue, cooperation and action to combat racial discrimination. We hope

that our report will support the Government in this process and we express our willingness to assist in this important endeavour.”

I raise this here to indicate that there is this parallel process happening in Australia, alongside the Multicultural Framework Review, and that some of the findings of the WGEPAD may well be relevant to this Review.

Links to Discussions on Indigenous Voice to Parliament

The discussions on the forthcoming referendum on the Voice to Parliament has inadvertently put the focus on the multicultural communities of Australia. Noel Pearson, in his first Boyer Lecture on Recognition in October 2022, said

“Mutual recognition will enable us to acknowledge three stories: the Ancient Indigenous Heritage which is Australia’s foundation, the British Institutions built upon it, and the adorning Gift of Multicultural Migration. . . .

The . . . Gift of Multicultural Migration . . . recognises that peoples from the earth over brought their multitude of cultural gifts to Australia. That we celebrate diversity in unity makes us a beacon to the world. When we renounced the White Australia policy, we made a better Commonwealth. In Robert Hughes’ incomparable words we showed that people with different roots can live together, that we can learn to read the image-bank of others, that we can look across the frontiers of our differences without prejudice or illusion.

These three stories will make us one: Australians.”

The adorning Gift of Multicultural Migration. A great way for us to be described. But is this how we are really seen by the majority of the Australian population?

I think that the above statements show the real issue: how can we Multicultural Australians be seen as just that – Australians? Not a separate group of Australians, but people who have as much right as any other Australians to be here. While the first migrants, from Britain, brought the gifts of their institutions, we more recent arrivals have brought our own gifts – such as care for family, multiple approaches to religion & philosophy. The Multicultural Framework must somehow show these gifts in the positive light that is indicated above.

It is important to go beyond the “multiculturalism of shish kebab and belly dancing”. In other words, multiculturalism is not just about exotic food, clothing and dancing.

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