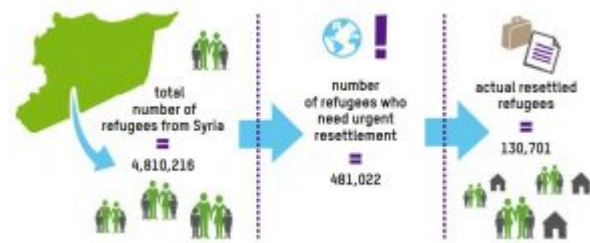


Syrian refugee resettlement: are Australia and New Zealand doing their fair share?

by Jo Spratt

28 February 2017



‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way’ is Oxfam’s latest report about rich countries’ contribution to helping Syrian people. Building on previous ‘fair share’ reports (earlier blogs [here](#) and [here](#)), this time Oxfam takes a closer look at assistance to registered Syrian refugees.

After the media frenzy about Aleppo, all seems quiet on the Western media front about the ongoing Syrian war. Meanwhile, the ceasefire is crumbling. Although fighting has halted in some parts of Syria, [siege](#) and conflict continues in others (for example, see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Regardless of the outcome of Astana and resumed United Nations [negotiations](#) peace remains elusive. People will continue to seek refuge from conflict and deprivation. Meanwhile, rich governments have still not done enough to help people fleeing conflict and persecution in Syria.

Oxfam’s analysis is based on their call for rich countries to resettle or admit under humanitarian categories the [most vulnerable ten per cent](#) of UNHCR registered Syrian refugees in countries neighbouring Syria – approximately 480,000 people. From this they calculate a ‘fair share’ for rich country signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention, based on each country’s economy. Between 2013 and end-2016 a mere 130,701 people have arrived in these countries – only 2.7 per cent of the entire Syrian refugee population.

Australia has done well – contributing 95 per cent of its fair share with 10,044 arrivals. Yet this pales against Canada’s 248 per cent and Norway’s 144 per cent.

New Zealand does poorly, welcoming just 472 people: 33 per cent of its fair share. To achieve its fair share, New Zealand would have to help a total 1,418 registered refugees: a small number New Zealand can well afford.

Yet, there are challenges associated with resettlement. Extra resources are required to screen people, and then settle them far from home, in different cultures,

sometimes with no existing Syrian community for support. Acknowledging this, Oxfam includes eight country case studies investigating resettlement processes. Each country is assessed against five criteria: political commitment to resettle refugees, resettlement criteria and family reunification, security checks, investment in capacity, staff and facilities, and reception conditions. Australia is one of these country case studies (pp. 16-17).

Australia's offer to resettle 12,000 Syrians and Iraqis was a show of political commitment, although if split half-half this only comprises 6,000 Syrians. While slow to take-off, Australia has done well in meeting its commitment, with just over half the 12,000 people arriving in Australia and three-quarters granted visas. Syrian refugees are also entering under the normal humanitarian intake, with 3,202 Syrians and Iraqis given entry under this category, approximately half of whom are Syrians. In total, for Syrian entrants, Australia has almost achieved its fair share of 10,552 with 10,044 people resettled in Australia.

Resettling from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, Australia gives priority to highly vulnerable refugees – persecuted minorities, women, children, and families with scant chance of ever returning home. The analysis does not comment on family reunification. In terms of capacity to process refugees, the Australian government made a reasonable investment, sending seven extra staff to the region and recruiting 22 local staff. The robust security, health and character checks undertaken require several months and vary per individual. Yet, once a visa is granted, it takes an average of only two months before people arrive in Australia.

Once in Australia, Syrians are resettled across the country and receive support from local services, including information and assistance packages, such as household items. Each individual or family are assigned a case worker. They can use health and education services, and receive language assistance, employment services, and income support. They receive the social security entitlements provided to all permanent residents, and are eligible for intensive resettlement support in their first year in Australia. After four years they can apply for Australian citizenship.

In stark contrast, Oxfam slams Australia for its treatment of asylum seekers attempting to reach Australia by boat, calling the approach “retrograde and inhumane” (p. 17). Alongside the restrictive policies in some European countries and the United States, Oxfam highlights how the Australian approach probably influences Syria's neighbouring states as they enact more restrictive measures that undermine people's lives and well-being.

The process of selecting, vetting, processing and resettling refugees is complex, and the Oxfam reports skates across this complexity. Yet processing and

resettlement systems are crucial components of assisting refugees, and Oxfam rightly focus on this in their case studies. What Oxfam doesn't note is that Australia's settlement support framework is well-regarded internationally, and was positively **reviewed** in 2015. However, there is more work to be done here, particularly in supporting newly settled people into **employment**.

Also in question is what Australia will commit to now that it has fulfilled its initial promise to Syrians looking for safety. Given its stance on asylum-seekers (at least those who use boats opposed to planes), the least Australia could do is continue to admit extra registered refugees.

Across the ditch, New Zealand can simply do more. The government's obstinacy in helping people fleeing Syria, and refugees in general, is in stark contrast to the reputation it likes to talk abroad. On this matter, far from being a constructive, collaborative small state, New Zealand can't even see its way to increasing its refugee intake as a token symbol of support for other countries who do far more, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey.

Both Australia and New Zealand can afford to offer sanctuary to more Syrians, and to fund quality resettlement support programmes for new arrivals. While admittedly difficult, both countries could also invest additionally in celebrating cultural diversity. When we welcome people who need security and help, and support them to be part of existing communities, we all advance and benefit as human beings.

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