

Submission on Australia's Humanitarian Program 2026-27

Centre for Policy Development

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About CPD

The [Centre for Policy Development](#) (CPD) is an independent, not-for-profit policy institute with staff in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra and Jakarta.

Our vision is a fair, sustainable society and wellbeing economy that serves current and future generations in Australia and Southeast Asia.

Our mission is to help create transformative systems change through practical solutions to complex policy challenges. We tackle the hard questions, working towards change that is systemic and long-term.

Through our work, we aim to contribute to governments that are coordinated, collaborative, and effective, with an eye to both the near and longer term. We strive to build a social services system that helps people and communities to thrive now and in the future, and drive shifts in policy making practice with a focus on wellbeing and sustainability rather than primarily economic growth.

CPD uses a distinctive Create-Connect-Convince method to influence government policy making. More information about CPD is available at cpd.org.au

We acknowledge and celebrate Australia's First Peoples.

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Introduction

The Centre for Policy Development (CPD) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Department of Home Affairs on Australia's 2026-27 Humanitarian Program.

CPD is an independent, values-driven, and evidence-based policy institute. We believe in a society that expands opportunity and social justice; an economy that is clean, innovative and productive; a government that is active and effective; and a country that is respected for its leadership and cooperation.

In providing this submission, CPD acknowledges the lands and people of the Wurundjeri of the Kulin nation and the people of the Gadigal of the Eora nation, who are the traditional owners of the land on which the CPD offices are located in Melbourne and Sydney respectively.

CPD recognises that themes of welcome, cultural understanding and national sovereignty are integral to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and also feature within the discourse about migration. For thousands of years, Australia has been a country of movement of people from place to place. Traditions that preserve cultural practices, recognise national sovereignty, acknowledge country and welcome people to country, have been cultivated and nurtured throughout Australia's history. After many years of neglect and suppression, these traditions are being reconciled in the present day through the acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture. This understanding and recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and culture is an essential first step towards settling in Australia and becoming Australian.

CPD has a well-developed body of work on migration and settlement through the domestically-focused Cities and Settlement initiative and the regionally-focused [Asia Dialogue on Forced Migration](#) (ADFM). In

2017, CPD's report [Settling Better](#), outlined the shifting environment of humanitarian migration and emphasised the importance of economic participation as a central element of the settlement process. Running since 2015, the ADFM pursues more effective, durable and dignified approaches to forced migration in the Asia Pacific through informal dialogues between officials from ten countries, civil society, academia and experts with lived experience of displacement.

CPD's work is informed by a human-centred approach to developing public policy that is in the long-term best interest of the country and region. CPD believes that all migration policy should be:

- ⇒ **Principled:** guided by values, with human rights, agency, welcoming and inclusion as some of the fundamental principles.
- ⇒ **Holistic:** inclusive of all migration programs and aware of the social, economic and cultural uncertainty that exists within the migrant experience. Focused on ensuring supports are provided throughout the migration process and across all areas that contribute to the wellbeing of individuals and families.
- ⇒ **Well-designed:** intentionally coordinated throughout all the stages of migration, data-informed and embedded in all parts of government that play a role in helping people to settle well and extending into the community service and private sectors.

This submission holds the position that a principled, holistic, well-designed Humanitarian Program is in the best interests of Australia and the region for two main reasons. First, because successful settlement services help to build thriving communities and economies across Australia, and second because Australia's migration policy settings contribute to regional responsibility-sharing and trust-building.

As a policy institute CPD is not a service provider or refugee-led organisation. We leave it to other submissions to share those perspectives, particularly in response to Discussion Questions 2, 3 and 4. This submission responds to Questions 1 and 5, and makes recommendations for Australia to:

- ⇒ Gradually increase the humanitarian program from 20,000 to 27,000, beginning in 2027-28.
- ⇒ Make all 'complementary' pathways additional to the Humanitarian Program and develop a strategic plan to grow complementary pathways sustainably to 10,000 per year.
- ⇒ Work with regional partners to improve conditions for displaced persons in transit, including through mental health support and improving exit processes.
- ⇒ Play a leadership role in resettling those in need from our immediate region, including Rohingya and other Myanmar refugees, and gradually lifting the ban of resettlement from Indonesia.

Refugee-led organisations and civil society partners, including the Complementary Pathways Coordination Group, would be valuable partners in developing these policies to ensure they are effective, sustainable and meet needs on the ground.

This consultation process is taking place at a time of great geopolitical unrest and increasing displacement in Iran, Lebanon and across the Middle East. We recognise the strain that the international protection system is currently under, and the competing asks being put to the Australian Government. The proposals made in this submission have kept this context in mind, and seek gradual, sustainable changes in line with existing commitments. This includes the 23 pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum in 2023, which Australia will need to report against in 2027.

Successful settlement services help to build thriving communities and economies across Australia

Australia's settlement services are world-leading and have helped regional and urban cities to thrive for decades. The 2019 Shergold Review recognised that "*refugees and humanitarian entrants have always played an important role in enriching the Australian community and building our stronger economy*".¹ Australia's diversity and strong network of diaspora organisations sets it apart globally and is a key strength in our international relations.

Prior CPD work has recognised the value of place-based and locally coordinated approaches to settlement and English language learning.² There are countless examples of successful settlement, such as the Karen population in Nhill, and communities in Western Melbourne.³ Refugees and humanitarian migrants not only enrich communities through new perspectives but also fill important skill gaps in key industries.

Well-designed complementary pathways programs support individuals and communities to thrive, and yield particular benefits such as wider community involvement in welcome and settlement. This not only brings additional resources but also contributes social capital and local knowledge from local communities. This in turn transforms into positive settlement outcomes and strengthened communities, which boosts social licence for the broader Humanitarian Program. As covered in CPD's report [Putting People First](#), Community Refugee Sponsorship Australia is one organisation putting this into practice and helping to improve collective responsibility and partnership at the local level to achieve strong settlement outcomes.

Australia's migration policy settings contribute to global and regional responsibility-sharing

Australia has a long and proud history of settling refugees well, and in 2026 welcomed the one millionth refugee since the Second World War. In a rapidly changing global environment bipartisan support is something of which Australians should be proud.

Australia is committed to welcoming refugees not only because of international legal commitments under the 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, but also for moral and ethical reasons. 2025 saw unprecedented strain placed on the global refugee system, with significant cuts to both funding and resettlement from Australia's like-minded partners. CPD welcomes Australia's continued commitment to supporting refugees through its humanitarian program and maintaining its funding levels.

Nevertheless, countries in our region hosting large populations of refugees have experienced significant cuts to their overall humanitarian budgets and are struggling to support displaced populations. At the same time large institutions like the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM) are experiencing their own resourcing challenges.

Participants in Track 1.5 dialogue conversations facilitated by CPD consistently raise the value and significance of responsibility sharing around the region, and identify Australia's role as a resettlement country as a key contribution to this shared responsibility. The Humanitarian Program should be designed with this in mind, recognising both its domestic and regional benefits. In addition to resettlement, there are also opportunities for Australia to continue to share lessons from its policies and programs with partners in the region,

such as the establishment of the Refugee Advisory Panel, and helping to grow resettlement and complementary pathways in other countries.

Recommendations:

Recommendation 1: Gradually increase the humanitarian program from 20,000 to 27,000, beginning in 2027-28.

The Department's Discussion Paper highlights that *"demand for places under the Humanitarian Program continues to be high, driven by record levels of forced displacement, ongoing instability and a reduction of resettlement places around the world."* While Australia can only assist a relatively small number in need of protection, its contribution via the Humanitarian Program represents a significant part of global resettlement. This has never been more true than for 2026-27.

The Department's Discussion Paper also confirmed that the Humanitarian Program will remain at 20,000 in 2026-27. This being the case, this submission recommends the Department plan for an increase to the program beginning in 2027-28, and scale up to 27,000 over a number of years. This is in line with commitments made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum to *"commit to gradually increase Australia's Humanitarian Program"*. Civil society groups and refugee-led organisations would be good partners for the Department to help co-design this staged increase.

This decision would signal reliability and solidarity to neighbouring countries, would make a tangible difference to the lives of those in need of protection, and would contribute to the growth in Australian communities and economies. It would also put Australia on stronger footing to achieve its other pledges at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum to *"support other States to establish and grow their own refugee resettlement programs"* and *"engage with refugee hosting*

states as partners in the exercise of growing resettlement and complementary pathways”.

Recommendation 2: Make all ‘complementary’ pathways additional to the Humanitarian Program and develop a strategic plan to grow these pathways sustainably to 10,000 per year.

We welcome the commitment of the government to make CRISP permanent, and to establish and grow the Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP). However complementary pathways are not truly complementary unless they are all additional to the Humanitarian Program intake.

Making all complementary pathways additional to the Humanitarian Program is in line with recommendations from the 2019 Shergold Review and commitments made at the 2023 Global Refugee Forum to “*gradually increase community sponsored and other complementary pathways to 10,000 per year over time, additional to the core humanitarian intake*”. This position would also align with Australia’s role as chair of the Global Task Force on Refugee Labour Mobility (GTF) for 2024–2026.

Existing pathways include skills, education and community sponsorship, all of which subsidise the financial cost to government across employers, universities and community groups. Pathways that bring refugees to Australia with pre-identified skills or to study in-demand courses can fast-track their settlement into communities in cities and country towns across the country. It will be crucial that these new and emerging pathways are equipped to conduct robust monitoring and evaluation to ensure they can be accurately costed and their benefits well-understood.

The current practice of counting most complementary pathways as part of the Humanitarian Program, and skilled refugee visa placement as part of the skilled program,

does not accurately reflect the costs or outcomes for people who arrive on these pathways, given the distinct populations they cover. Over time this should be explored more fully in order to support the scaling up and sustainability of these programs, as distinct from the core UNHCR-referred and broader Humanitarian Program, which should be maintained for reasons outlined above.

The Complementary Pathways Coordination Group has published a Vision and Roadmap to scaling up complementary pathways in a sustainable way, which remains a useful resource to support the Department in developing these programs.⁴

Recommendation 3: Work with regional partners to improve conditions for displaced persons in transit, including through mental health support and improving exit processes.

Resettlement begins prior to an individual’s arrival in Australia, as recognised by programs like the Australian Cultural Orientation Program. The Department of Home Affairs and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade each have important roles in working with host countries to improve conditions for displaced persons in transit, and to ensure exit processes do not further traumatise people. This may include internal support to in-country mental health services available to refugees and migrants, or advocacy to end pre-departure detention in some countries.

There is an important role for Australia in improving the conditions in which displaced persons live in the region. As above, while Australia can increase the number of people it resettles, it can only resettle a relatively small number of refugees in need of protection, and so should do its best to help our regional partners, and those unable to ever be resettled. This can take the form of funding mental health support services in the region, supporting national asylum capability, helping to develop regional guidelines or

standards on issues including alternatives to child immigration detention or civil registration and vital statistics, advocating for refugee access to education and livelihoods.

Further, there are untapped opportunities to link complementary pathway programs with in-country support for refugees, for example through train to hire initiatives, and encouraging access to university for refugees in host countries, in addition to resettling refugees on student pathways from those same countries.

Recommendation 4: Play a leadership role in resettling from our immediate region, including Rohingya and other Myanmar refugees, and gradually lifting the ban of resettlement from Indonesia

Australia makes a significant regional contribution as one of the largest global donors to the crises in Myanmar and Bangladesh, committing over \$1.26 billion in humanitarian assistance since 2017, including a new \$370 million program starting in 2026 for three years.⁵ Unfortunately since the illegal military coup in February 2021, displacement from Myanmar has only worsened, and conditions for safe, dignified, durable and voluntary repatriation of Rohingya from Cox's Bazar to their former homes in Rakhine State are far from reality.

Australia plays an important leadership role in addressing trafficking in persons as co-chair of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Human Trafficking and Related Transnational Crime. Given the vulnerability of many displaced people to trafficking in persons and related exploitation, we encourage Australia to also play a leadership role in resettling displaced people, particularly from Myanmar and including Rohingya ethnic groups.

Australia has a well-established and resourceful Myanmar diaspora who has and can continue to support these cohorts to

resettle well in Australia. In this way Australia can pursue a three-pronged strategy of supporting a return to civilian-rule in Myanmar as the long-term solution, while simultaneously working to improve conditions for those already displaced through improving protection in the region, and by resettling those in greatest need of protection. This would be in line with Australia's Global Refugee Forum pledge to *"enhancing support for durable solutions, including increasing Rohingya refugee resettlement."*

Another way Australia can improve its Humanitarian Program and strengthen relationships with the region is through lifting its ban on resettling refugees who registered with UNHCR in Indonesia after 2014. This would not require additional places, but would remove a restriction that has been in place for too long. This cohort of people have been living in Indonesia without legal rights to work or study for over a decade, and the majority come from Afghanistan and Myanmar; countries that are not safe to return to at present. In addition to working with the Indonesian Government on ways to improve the lives of refugees living in the country, Australia should amend its policies to enable resettlement to re-start for this cohort. This could be done in two stages, first by opening up eligibility to this cohort for complementary pathways and sponsored visas, before lifting the ban in full. By doing this in a phased manner, starting with those in country the longest, this could be done without creating so-called "pull factors". In tandem, Australia could continue to work with other countries on long-term settlement options. This decision would not only benefit individual refugees, but would be a significant show of goodwill and responsibility sharing to our northern neighbour.

Finally and more broadly, in the context of diminishing international resettlement places, Australia has an important opportunity to assist UNHCR in the strategic use of resettlement by helping with resettlement of small caseloads especially at risk in our region.

ENDNOTES

¹ Peter Shergold, Kerrin Benson and Margaret Piper. 2019. [Investing in refugees, investing in Australia](#), February.

² Clifford Eberly & Ryan Martin. 2024. [Putting People First](#), Centre for Policy Development, November; Henry Sherrell. 2020. [Putting Language In Place](#), Centre for Policy Development, August.

³ AMES & Deloitte Access Economics. 2015. [Small towns big returns: Economic and social impact of the Karen resettlement in Nhill](#), March.

⁴ Louise Olliff, 2025, '[A Complementary Pathways Program for Australia: A vision and roadmap to achieve 10,000 complementary pathway places for refugees by 2030](#)', May.

⁵ DFAT. 2026. '[Humanitarian support to Myanmar and Bangladesh](#)' *Australia's Humanitarian Assistance*.