

Summary: ‘Harnessing Possibilities and Synergies to Refugee Complementary Migration Pathways in Australia: A Multiple Streams Analysis’

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Harnessing Possibilities and Synergies to Refugee Complementary Migration Pathways in Australia: A Multiple Streams Analysis

Executive Summary

- Using a Multiple Streams Framework (MSF), this article provides a cross-sectoral analysis by academics, policymakers, advocates, and practitioners actively engaged in designing or managing Australia's three emerging complementary pathways: community sponsorship (CS), labour mobility (LM), and education pathways (EP).
- The three complementary pathways were enabled by strategic policy entrepreneurship and the alignment of political opportunity, clear problem framing, and ready-made solutions.
- The strategic relevance of these pathways lies in their ability to address national workforce shortages and demographic pressures, enhance Australia's international humanitarian leadership, and expand public-private partnerships that reduce demands on government infrastructure.

Introduction

- The authors emphasize the role of complementary pathways as 'intermediate solutions' between government-assisted refugee resettlement programmes and standard migration pathways. They are framed as solutions for displaced people who are not triaged into the former and who do not have the finances, professional skills, networks, or visa requirements to access the latter.
- MSF is used to analyze the success Australian policymakers have had in introducing new policies and pilot complementary pathways for refugees, despite growing public hostility towards issues of migration and resettlement.

Context

Complementary Pathways in the Global Context: Acting on the Imperative Set by the Global Refugee Forum

- This section explores the commitment of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR) to strengthen international cooperation and solidarity with refugees and affected host communities. The GCR established the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), first held in 2019.
- Many of the commitments made during the first GRF were critiqued for their lack of novelty, including Australia's pledges, which largely reflected what it was already doing.
- The second GRF was held in 2023, following COVID-19 and new global events that caused the number of displaced populations to increase from 80 million to 180 million worldwide.
- This GRF focused on creating more substantial multistakeholder 'mega' pledges within coordinated pledging frameworks.
- Member states and non-state supporters committed \$2.2 billion to improve the lives of refugees and host communities.

- There was further agreement to resettle 1 million refugees by 2030 and to establish a new global sponsorship fund to help 3 million more refugees access third countries through complementary pathways.

Australian Context: 'Making Hay While the Sun Shines' During the Opening of a Policy Window

- Refugee and asylum seeker topics are among the most politically contested in the country.
- The Australian government has put in place hardline policy measures to deter asylum seekers, including offshore detention.
- This has meant that **policy frameworks for complementary pathways in Australia are advanced in a hostile political environment.**
- However, **public and political support is more favourable toward resettlement**, partly due to the belief that “good” refugees wait to be admitted.

Multiple Streams Framework (MSF)

- The authors use the MSF to analyze how policymakers were able to introduce new policies and pilots that enabled complementary pathways to Australia in politically fraught environments.
- An MSF approach:
 - Acknowledges the ambiguous and non-linear nature of policymaking; and
 - Permits analysis to account for contextual information, recognizing how different streams need to converge to influence the likelihood of policy change.
- The authors use three streams of MSF:
 - **Problem framing:** emphasizes the subjectivity of policy “problems”, including problem framing through a compelling narrative to prompt a desired solution.
 - **Policy proposals:** use policy windows to articulate and ‘sell’ a policy problem and recognize policy entrepreneurs as agents for policy change.
 - **Politics streams:** necessitate an awareness that the political environment is fundamental to being able to leverage a solution to the identified problem.
- These MSF streams are applied to examine the conditions, actors, opportunity structures, and policy formations resulting in the emergence of three new complementary pathways in Australia: community sponsorship, labour mobility pathway, and complementary education pathway.

Case 1: Community Sponsorship

- In response to the liberalisation of Australia’s immigration policy following the displacement of Indochinese refugees, the Fraser Government introduced the Community Refugee Settlement Scheme (CRSS) in 1979, which operated in place of resettlement and not in addition to it.
- The CRSS faced criticisms for denying refugees access to the full range of services and isolating diaspora communities. The issues of removing or limiting named cases farmed subsequent debates.

- In 1997, the Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) was introduced to support the resettlement of refugees from previously underrepresented regions such as East Africa.
- In 2013, the Community Proposal Pilot (CPP) was introduced. Although successful, it was not without some drawbacks, such as high costs, its lack of additionality, and strict eligibility criteria.
- In 2015, a Discussion Paper was published by the Australian Government to consider a revised or new CS approach.

Framing the 'Policy Problem'

- In 2015, design and implementation issues with the CPP and bipartisan support fueled policy directions that led to the implementation of the Community Support Program (CSP).
- The CSP ignored many of the Discussion Paper recommendations, imposing requirements such as 'adequate' English proficiency, an age range between 18 and 50, and an offer of employment in Australia or demonstration of financial self-sufficiency.
- Despite its once high cost, CSP operates as an effective family reunification program for some refugee communities. Now **CSP has a fixed application cost of approx. \$8000.**

Framing the 'Policy Problem' for the Community Refugee Integration Pilot (CRISP)

- With renewed political interest in CS, refugee advocates created a consortium in 2018 to respond to the challenges of CSP.
- The consortium raised funding to create the Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (CRSI), which enabled the development of the Community Refugee Integration and Settlement Pilot (CRISP) 'to illustrate how CS could be different from, or co-exist with, the existing CSP.'

Creating and 'Selling' Policy Solutions

- **CRISP was launched in 2022 after policy negotiations and co-design efforts.** It differed from CSP in that it admitted UNHCR-referred refugees who are unknown to community support groups (CSGs).
- CRSIP eliminated restrictive criteria such as English language and employment eligibility requirements.

Case 2: Labour Mobility Pathway

- Labour mobility (LM) is a type of complementary pathway that enables displaced individuals to restart their lives and careers, while also filling skill shortages in destination countries.
- Australia began to experiment with LM in 2016 in partnership with Talent Beyond Boundaries (TBB).
- The Skilled Refugee Labour Agreement Pilot (SRLAP) was developed, which provides regulated migration pathways for refugees to enter Australia for skilled employment.

Framing the 'Policy Problem'

- LM schemes address underused skills of displaced talent, skill shortages in destination countries, and barriers between job seekers and employers.
- TBB's analysis shows that displaced people in countries of first asylum are often restricted from exercising employment at a level commensurate with their qualifications.
- Australia experiences profound skills shortages, and conventional migration pathways are not designed with displaced people in mind.
- Accordingly, displaced populations struggle to meet administrative and procedural requirements, including proof of income through bank statements, employment confirmation letters from employers, and other important documents for their application.

Creating and 'Selling' Policy Solutions

- SRLAP, launched in 2021 and led by TBB, created a pathway for refugees to enter Australia after securing employment from a partnering employer.
- Ensures refugees are not tied to a singular employer and thus reduces the risk of exploitation.
- The Australian government waived skills assessments and eased documentation requirements, reducing English language requirements to "functional English."
- The age limit for applicants was increased to 55 to account for career disruptions during displacement.

Case 3: Complementary Education Pathway

- Complementary education pathways (CEP) admit refugees to third countries for studies.
- **CEPs can either include a scholarship route to protection, or they may use a humanitarian visa to provide a resettlement pathway.**
- The Refugee Student Settlement Pathway (RSSP) enables refugees to pursue higher education in Australia with a structured transition into residence and integration.
- RSSP is being piloted with 20 students, who are expected to start studying at Australian universities in 2026.

Framing the 'Policy Problem'

- Limited global availability of educational pathways linked to durable protection.
- **Most CESPs rely on study visas and scholarships, while a few adopt a sponsorship model that leads to permanent resettlement solutions.**

Creating and 'Selling' Policy Solutions in Australia

- A window of opportunity opened when the Labor Government was elected in 2022.
- There was a desire to create an Australian version of Canada's World University Service of Canada (WUSC) Student Refugee Program (SRP).

- The solution was the RSSP, developed by the Australian Refugee Welcome University Sponsorship Consortium (ARWUSC).
- It involved 20 public universities, the Australian government, and UNHCR.

Political Conditions

- The authors reiterate the hostility of the political climate in Australia towards refugees and asylum seekers.
- CS pathways and the involvement of Australian communities have sparked discussions of refugee resettlement.
- LM fulfils both humanitarian and economic needs, thus avoiding the polarising politics of refugee issues.
- Despite a cost-of-living and a housing crisis perceived to have been fuelled by increased migration, the case for an Australian CEP was made easier by the two pilot complementary pathways already in existence.

Discussion

- **All three pathways, particularly LM and EP, emphasise the “skilled” refugee, risking the diversion of focus from protection-based resettlement, and reinforcing the “good vs. bad refugee” narratives.**
- Pathways may remain temporary without moving beyond the pilot phase.
- Complementary pathways must remain complementary and not replace core protection mechanisms and resettlement.
- Refugee leadership and consultation should be integrated in the design and implementation of pathways.
- The article demonstrates how **policies succeed when three MSF streams converge: framing the policy problem, recognizing the window of opportunity, and introducing policy solutions.**

Conclusion

- Policy entrepreneurs played a decisive role in making these pathways government-ready by leveraging policy windows.
- Complementary pathways contribute to the humanization of refugees and reframing them as people with aspirations and experiences.
- Despite political conditions being hostile, policy frameworks for all three complementary pathways succeeded in avoiding political tension.
- Finally, the authors emphasize that complementary pathways provide an opportunity for Australia to expand its migration programme and involve Australian communities in welcoming refugees.