

Exploring the Safety Net for people seeking asylum

in conversation with Lativ (made-up name)

The idea of a universal safety net

Since the middle of the twentieth century, Australia has committed to a universal safety net, that is, providing government support for all who live here and need it. (Examples are age pensions, disability or unemployment support.) Australians realised that human rights for all are important to guarantee peace and social cohesion. They also knew that there should be a fair go for all, and that no one in our prosperous country should be without the basic essentials for life. Finally, they knew that anyone of us could fall on hard times and need the safety net.

In the intervening decades there has been a tendency to move away from this thinking. It was based on awareness of the responsibilities as well as rights of belonging to a society. We are now in a world where the market and economic growth are often given a higher priority and more air time than the wellbeing of human beings and the planet. This has led to serious shortcomings in the support offered to many on the margins of society, often when it makes no economic sense. This can be seen for example in the popularity of political moves to restrict access to concession payments such as Newstart and to keep such payments low.

Government policy on the safety net, and what it means for people seeking asylum

The current program for people seeking asylum (Status Resolution Support Service - SRSS) has included a basic living allowance (for a single person it is 89% of Newstart - \$465 a fortnight or \$35 a day), as well as access to torture and trauma counselling, as well as case management services according to need. These services are provided to people while their claim for protection is being assessed. Even though it is such a small payment it can provide some of the essentials and along with that a sense that the future might be better.

Lativ

After being in Australia for 2 months actively trying to look for a job, I found it difficult to survive. I was living in a share house offered to me by Lentara Uniting Church. My employment search was unsuccessful although I could speak English and had even been lucky to have an Australian degree.

The first time I received the SRSS payment, (\$465) fortnightly, I felt that I was getting a sense of a security. My caseworker from the Red Cross explained that I would have access to a basic living allowance and trauma counselling. It lifted me up from a state of depression because I didn't know how I could survive in Australia.

It brightened my days because I could worry about finding a job, getting an interview instead of worrying about a roof over my head and food. The payment meant that I was not alone and I could be safe while awaiting the outcome of my visa. During this difficult journey, I felt supported.

My life changed at that time. I started contributing a percentage of my SRSS towards my rent. I started thinking about saving for the future in case I never found a job. This isn't enough to survive as a human being who has no other support, no family and rarely friends. As a single person you can barely survive but as a single mother or a young family life gets even harder.

During 2018 it was decided by government that the number of people receiving this support should be cut drastically. There is lack of transparency around the exact numbers and reasons for coming off the list, but it is known that already 5 000 of the more than 13 000 people who were receiving it are receiving it no longer.

There is also little transparency about the exact criteria for allocating the payments, but to qualify now, people need to demonstrate they meet a high threshold of vulnerability, including:

- Physical health barriers that are ongoing, permanent disability, or cognitive impairment
- Mental health barriers, with a current diagnosis and treatment plan in place
- Single parents with pre-school aged children, pregnant women with complications, a primary carer for someone with a significant vulnerability, people aged 70 and over
- A major crisis for the client (family violence, house fire, flood, etc)

Irs and Aknal (made up names)

and their four children are seeking asylum: they are Tamils who originally came from Sri Lanka. They escaped the civil war in that country by travelling to India, where they were told that they must return to Sri Lanka. Knowing that was unsafe because of ongoing persecution of Tamil people, they came to Australia by boat to seek asylum.

They spent time in detention before being released into the community. Their application for a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa has been refused, despite clear evidence that people of Tamil background continue to be persecuted in Sri Lanka, especially those who have sought asylum elsewhere.

The payments to the family of six were cut the moment the initial decision to refuse their application was made. They are appealing the decision, and despite the fact that could take a very long time, they currently have no income whatsoever.

Lativ

For a person seeking asylum, the SRSS is everything. Taking that contribution away from people who are waiting to hear from the Department of Home Affairs is unfair and cruel. Like myself, every human being deserves to have a minimum basic allowance that provides a shelter, food and health support.

In a very unfamiliar environment, SRSS can give hope and support people while they are getting back on track with their lives. I was lucky I ended up finding employment after being on SRSS for 5 months. It's different now.

What does this mean for the charities which support the people seeking asylum?

When people have no income from the government, nor from work, (some visas do not permit employment and even when they do it is difficult for many to find work) they have to depend on other people or organisations.

This has meant that since the cutbacks in access to benefits in 2018, those charities who support people seeking asylum are stretched beyond their normal resources. Instead of providing support in critical situations from time to time, services are needing to provide much more ongoing support.

This includes, as well as the larger charities, Catholics among them, there are parishes, small community organisations who are simply unable to stretch their resources further. Clearly such a situation is unsustainable.

What does this mean for state governments?

Even with the current federal government support, people seeking asylum very often cannot access adequate housing. While situations vary across the nation, some support is already being provided by state governments, especially NSW and Victoria where most of the people seeking asylum live.

Refugee Council of Australia have estimated that extra costs to the states and territories from the federal cuts will be in the range of \$80 to \$120 million.

What happens if we let money do the talking?

Research shows that when any people are homeless, there is a significant increase in their contact with health system, (hospital stays, emergency visits, mental health services), the justice system (police, courts, prison) and homeless services.

It has also been clearly established that this involves a greater cost than when people are supported into housing. Logic dictates that the more complex the needs the greater the cost.

Lativ

Some friends are facing destitution: they are being punished for needing help while waiting to find employment.

It shouldn't be like this.

We need to express solidarity and compassion.

Remember every time you hear about a person seeking asylum, check what kind of help you can offer, because they face so many challenges.

Sources and for further information

Refugee Council of Australia

<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/srss-cuts-factsheet/>

St Vincent de Paul Society

https://www.vinnies.org.au/page/Publications/National/Factsheets_and_policy_briefings/Status_Resolution_Support_Service_Payments/What_are_the_implications_of_abandoning_the_notion_of_a_universal_safety_net/