

## Fourth preliminary report on the Community response to the Covid-19 Emergency – 31 August 2020

### THE NUMBERS

#### The requests received

The project Community Response to the Covid-19 Emergency, which officially began on the 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2020, has been operating over the past 5 months along with the advancement of the crisis, initially all around Australia and lately for Victoria in particular. This is a crisis that has been particularly harsh on temporary migrants. Requests for support have continued to rise throughout this period: as at the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, 235 people have registered their requests via an online form and have been contacted via phone.

The second lockdown for Melbourne was announced on 7<sup>th</sup> July and the sense of dread felt by temporary migrants about their situations deteriorating has sadly proven to be justified, due to the joint effects of the second lockdown, followed by the stage 4 restrictions, that were put in place from the 5<sup>th</sup> of August and that are due to last until mid September. After a partial re-opening of the economy between the two lockdowns, the announcement of a new wave of restrictions meant an even greater financial and psychological burden on temporary migrants. Moreover, the stage 4 restrictions have pushed people out of work that had held on to their employment during the previous months, for example those working in constructions and retail. At the same time, over the 5 months that this emergency has dragged on, many temporary migrants decided to leave Australia, and many more have been considering it not just for the financial struggle, but also for the many concerns about the treatment they have received from the Governments.

In August, Nomit has surveyed the project's recipients residing in Victoria to see whether or not they had left the country and to understand how their circumstances were during the second lockdown. At least 15% of the recipients residing in Victoria have left the country since April 2020. Of the 45 people that answered the survey, only 4 have seen an improvement in their circumstances during the second lockdown. All the others have experienced either no improvement or a worsening of the situations they have been facing since April 2020. As a practical confirmation, most of the requests Nomit has received during the month of August have come from individuals and families that have been withstanding the crisis for months, digging into their savings, and that have somehow manage to wait until very recently to ask for support.

Of the **235** people who have registered with the project and have been contacted by the volunteers of Nomit, **167** reside in Victoria, **27** in NSW, **15** in WA, **21** in QLD, **3** in SA and **2** in TAS. From July 2020 on, all the new requests for assistance have come from people residing in Victoria: this provides evidence of how their circumstances have been affected for the worse by the second lockdown. This was a predictable outcome of the new restrictions, and nonetheless the Governments decided to keep ignoring the suffering of so many people living in and contributing to Australia and helping its economy thrive.

Regarding the statistical breakdown in term of visas, **111** of the people requesting support are Working Holiday Makers, **88** hold a student visa, **30** a partner or skilled visa, **4** of them were here on a tourist visa. Towards the end of August both a Permanent Resident and an Australian citizen (born and raised in Italy) contacted us for support. Permanent residents and Australian citizens are not eligible to get financial support from Nomit, whose focus is on temporary migrants. Nonetheless, this is further evidence of how inadequate the Governments response has been in the wake of a protracted social emergency. The main increase of requests in terms of types of visas is among the Students, growing from 77 to 88, and the Sponsor Visas, from 25 to 30. The growing needs of students and sponsor visa holders, people who have

been living in Australia for many years now, could be read as evidence of how the crisis is impacting not only the lives of the newcomers, whose working and holidays plans have been shattered by the Covid emergency, but to a greater extent, also the structured life plans of people that have been making enormous efforts and sacrifices to build a future in Australia.

### **The funds redistributed to the community so far**

In the period between 14<sup>th</sup> of April, when the first donation was paid and 31<sup>st</sup> of August, a total of **207** Italians with temporary visas have received economic support, up from 183 on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July. **208** Lampo (\$100 donations) have been distributed so far, an increase from **180** on the 6<sup>th</sup> of July. In total, **205** people have received the \$100 payment (three of them have received two).

Mano, a free loan scheme, started on the 1<sup>st</sup> of May. As at the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, **68** people have benefitted from it. It may be worth considering that during the same period **72** Manos were approved, but that **4** of the recipients turned down the aid a few days after the approval since they had just found a job and they asked for the loan to be allocated to someone facing an even more challenging situation than theirs. This proves the honesty and, above all, the community spirit shown by the people we have been in contact with and this is a great feature of the RceCovid-19 project.

In summary, **\$54,800** has been distributed to the community up until the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, **\$20,800** in the form of \$100 Lampo donations and **\$34,000** through the Free Loan Scheme called Mano.

### **CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **The effect of the second lockdown on temporary visa holders**

On the one hand, the Covid social crisis has forced temporary migrants who have suffered for months into even worse circumstances; on the other, temporary migrant workers who had worked during the first lockdown were pushed out of work following the stage 4 restrictions. Besides, the crisis has delivered major consequences because of work casualisation and visa restrictions. The majority of the recipients have been employed for years in casual work, the only exception being the ones with a sponsor visa, who nevertheless are prevented from looking for another job by their visa's restrictions.

The student are subject to even stricter visa limitations, that limit their working hours and opportunities to secure a permanent job, besides the great amount of money they have to pay to maintain their visa entitlements.

An adequate discussion on the social and economic crisis we are all going through needs to focus on the actual situation of temporary migrants and on the factors that lead to them being discriminated against. In fact, students, working holiday makers, skilled workers with temporary visas, talented young people, couples and families have been relegated to material deprivation and social exclusion not simply by the restrictions adopted to face the pandemic, but by the combined effect of the present emergency with years of work discrimination and humiliation allowed under Australian migration policies. The restrictions dictated by the public health necessity have exacerbated the social and financial situation of temporary migrants. These consequences could have been easily foreseen, but have been deliberately ignored.

Job insecurity, in fact, means vulnerability to harassment in the workplace and no protection in case of sickness. At the same time, it leads to long lasting uncertainty affecting the everyday life, future prospects and above all the mental health of temporary migrants, with unknown long term consequences. In a

nutshell, the legislation temporary migrants lives are framed by creates social and economic inequalities. During this Covid crisis, every level of Governments in Australia has done a lot, but has done little to tackle these discriminatory conditions.

As a matter of fact, many temporary migrants have taken the final step and have left the country during recent months, while those who have decided to are either already or are soon likely to be in poverty. There is no other word to describe the situation of many of them: in a rich country like Australia, this is more than an odd paradox, it is blatantly inhumane, and casts a shadow on the reputation of the country. The people Nomit has supported through this crisis were struggling to pay rent, bills, school payments. Facing an unexpected expense, like a medical emergency, they were not able to pay for it; to keep up with their pre crisis living standard was impossible for many who had to leave their accommodation to move somewhere cheaper; others cannot afford to travel to a regional area to get a job. This is a far cry from the high standards of living Australia is renowned for.

### **An assumption of responsibility**

The Australian Governments is responsible for and should be held to account for the social crisis following the pandemic emergency. The Australian Governments is responsible for the discriminatory and short-sighted migration policies enforced in recent years and for excluding temporary migrants from any form of support based on their visa. It should indeed be acknowledged that while they are highly relevant for Australian society, temporary migrants are extremely vulnerable: they cannot rely on a family and social network, and most of them cannot benefit from the public health system.

The Australian Governments should not only be considered accountable for not taking adequate actions to alleviate the risk of social and financial disruptions for temporary migrants, but also guilty for deliberately deciding not to address such a significant issue. For a rich and socially developed country like Australia, to let an epidemic of poverty spread is planned injustice. The research conducted by Bassina Farbenblum of UNSW and Laurie Berg of the University of Technology of Sydney perfectly explains and documents the current difficulties and the structural inequalities that affect temporary migrants in Australia, in particular international students: (<https://theconversation.com/i-will-never-come-to-australia-again-new-research-reveals-the-suffering-of-temporary-migrants-during-the-covid-19-crisis-143351>)

Since the crisis will continue to be felt well after the lockdown is lifted, there is no time to waste in facing the fundamental issues related to migration in Australia and to deliver both short term relief for temporary migrants and a long-term migration policy.

Nomit, whose volunteers have been addressing the difficulties and suffering of many over the past months, would like to formally report their needs and aspirations by drafting an *Agenda* of basic requirements. We have called it a *Survival Agenda* because it is essential not only to give migrants an actual chance to make the best of their life experience in Australia but deliver advantage for the future improvement of Australia's economy and society.

The Board of Nomit would like to present this *Agenda* to the Australian Governments as well as to Italian institutions representing the Italian community in Australia. Nomit calls for immediate and substantial actions in supporting temporary migrants in Australia.

### **A survival Agenda**

- Extension of Medicare for every temporary migrant until the end of 2020.
- Review of school fees owing until the end of the year, including a suspension of fees owing to time missed
- Extension of the length of every temporary visa at no cost for a period of time at least equivalent to the lockdown period.
- Governments contribution in favor of Working Holiday Visa makers to sustain them during the quarantine required before starting a job in Regional Australia
- Provision of a Governments contribution for international students up to \$3000 according to their income over the lockdown period
- Extension of free childcare until the end of 2020.