



Refugees and regional settlement: balancing priorities

Summary

The issue

A simple equation is sometimes presented, that regional areas need population and workers and that refugees need jobs and therefore the refugees should go to regional areas. Our research suggests the equation is not necessarily simple.

Both the Federal Government and the Victorian State Government have been developing policies to encourage migrants and refugees to settle in regional areas, in order to assist the newcomers to gain employment and to help build regional economies. This involves both relocation from metropolitan areas and direct settlement from overseas. However, the settlement needs of refugees cannot be assumed to be the same as those of other migrants.

The research

The Brotherhood of St Laurence has studied the settlement experiences of two recent refugee groups (Iraqi and Sudanese) in regional Victoria (Shepparton, Colac and Warrnambool) and examined factors that promote successful settlement. Interviews and consultations were undertaken in mid 2004 with 55 Iraqi and Sudanese refugees and 22 community leaders and service providers.

Iraqi settlement in the Shepparton area commenced in the 1990s and by 2004 the Iraqi community was estimated at 3000 people, including some on Temporary Protection Visas. Sudanese settlement commenced in Colac in 2002 and in Warrnambool in 2003, and by mid 2004 there were some 60 to 70 Sudanese refugees in each town, with the local meatworks their major employers.

The findings

At the moment I might not be able to live in my homeland, just because of lack of security and there is no stability so that is why I really prefer to stay here.

It is very difficult to settle in a place where you don't know anyone. This is why I came here ... two [relatives] came here and then they settled here.

Actually we are feeling at home here, the most important thing is to meet with people and help to socialise with them and go along with them, because this is part of happiness.

Sometimes the men are happy because they have the opportunity to work [at the meatworks]; sometimes they are not because that is not what they want to do for the rest of their life.

Most of the refugees in the study had relocated from capital cities to the regional areas; however a few had arrived direct from overseas or (some Iraqis) from Australian detention centres. Their primary reasons for choosing to go to the three regional locations were to seek employment and/or to join relatives and friends. Other considerations included wanting a quiet place, the desire to bring up children in a small town, and a healthier climate.

It was important for the refugees that, the advantages of the regional location outweighed the disadvantages at that point in time. What they liked best about their regional homes included employment, the quiet and convenience of a smaller place, a welcoming host community, being part of their own ethnic community and some cheaper costs of living including housing (in some locations) and transport. On the other hand some individuals reported difficulties including lack of

employment, lack of educational opportunities, some high costs of living, including housing, food and medical care, and some experiences of discrimination.

While the refugees in the three locations shared some common experiences, there were differences relating to the local context and to the refugee group. For example, for the Iraqis in Shepparton an important benefit was the number of services which had engaged bilingual workers, something the newer and smaller Sudanese groups did not have. On the other hand, unemployment was a greater problem for the Iraqis in Shepparton than for the Sudanese in Colac and Warrnambool.

What is needed for inclusive regional settlement

This study suggests that some of the supports needed by refugees settling in regional areas are:

- *specific to refugees* – including recognition of their experience of trauma and loss, their disrupted education and employment, their special health needs, their anxiety about family still in danger overseas, and recognition of the uncertainty and limitations for those granted only Temporary Protection Visas
- *specific to refugees and other immigrants as newcomers* – including the provision of language services, understanding of their cultural background, as well as assistance in understanding the Australian system at local, state and national levels
- *specific to refugees and other residents of regional areas* – including access to educational and career opportunities (an issue that causes many young people to leave regional areas for the city), low-cost housing and affordable medical care.

Specific policies that may need to be reviewed in the light of the present study's findings include:

- the delivery of DIMIA refugee settlement services in regional areas across large distances and to areas with small numbers of refugees. This may require specialist targeted programs joined to existing services.
- the provision of English classes and the funding model that underpins them. There is a need to provide for people with different levels of education. Funding per class rather than per head may be more appropriate for regional areas (if not for all areas).
- education and employment services, to allow refugees to develop career pathways. This approach could draw on learnings from the Brotherhood of St Laurence's successful pilot, Given the Chance, a careers, education and employment program for refugees.

If long-term successful regional settlement is the aim, policies are needed that:

- provide generous settlement services for refugees in regional areas, meeting their special needs as refugees as well as their wider needs as immigrants
- promote vigorous and sustainable regional economies – which can provide education and employment pathways for both the host communities and refugees
- enhance the host communities' capacity to welcome and include newcomers.

The findings suggest that policies of refugee settlement should aim to promote informed choice for the refugees. Further, they should provide for advance planning and capacity building in settlement destinations, whether urban or regional, in consultation with the refugee communities.

The full report, *Refugees and regional settlement: balancing priorities*, by Janet Taylor & Dayane Stanovic was published by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and its specialist refugee arm, the Ecumenical Migration Centre, in June 2005.

The report is available as a PDF file from <www.bsl.org.au>

or a printed copy by mail for \$12 plus \$3.50 (p&p) from

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