

Refugees and regional settlement: balancing priorities

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Introduction

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. While this sounds like a win-win scenario, the reality is more complex.

Both the Australian Government and the Victorian State Government have been developing policies to encourage migrants and refugees to settle in regional areas, to assist the newcomers to gain employment and to help build regional economies. However, the settlement needs of refugees cannot be assumed to be the same as those of other migrants.

In 2004 the Brotherhood of St Laurence undertook a study to explore the experiences of two recent refugee groups (Iraqi and Sudanese) and their settlement in selected areas of regional Victoria (Shepparton, Colac and Warrnambool) and to examine factors that promote settlement in such areas.

This paper outlines some of the findings and recommendations from the report *Refugees and regional settlement: balancing priorities* (Taylor & Stanovic 2005) and asks how these relate to the Goulburn Valley's more recent experience.

The policy context

The debate about the regional settlement of refugees takes place within a number of important, and at times, conflicting policy arenas: humanitarian goals and obligations to refugees, population strategy and economic development of regional areas.

It should be noted refugees make up only a small proportion of new arrivals. In 2004–05, some 13,000 Refugee and Special Humanitarian entrants were to be accepted, while some 110,000 people were to be accepted as migrants (including skilled migrants and family migrants).

At present in Australia there are two processes of regional settlement for refugees: one by which refugees go straight to regional areas on arrival, either because they are directed there by DIAC or because their sponsors are there; the other 'secondary migration' or relocation when refugees who have first settled in a city decide themselves to move to a regional area.

The regional context

Australia has a longstanding, and rather mixed, tradition of bringing in migrant labour to work in rural areas, from the days of early 19th century European settlement, to the migrant camps such as Bonegilla after the second world war (although the migrants often moved on to the cities).

Regional Australia is of course very diverse. While some parts have a sustainable economic base, many parts are in some trouble, economically, ecologically and socially. Almost all non-metropolitan areas, including those experiencing overall growth, record net losses of young adults (Stilwell 2003).

Regional inequality is seen as increasing. Country towns and rural locations have only 25 per cent of the Australian population but 39 per cent of all areas in poverty (Withers & Powall 2003, p.10).

An important earlier study of immigrant settlement in country areas (Gray et al. 1991) found that refugees (a quarter of their sample) encountered considerably more problems than other migrants in rural areas. The study pointed to high unemployment and also to lack of 'critical mass' for provision of services. Such findings continue to warrant attention.

The study

The study aimed to explore the settlement experience of recent refugees in regional Victoria and to look at factors promoting inclusive settlement.

The refugees

We interviewed some 54 Iraqi and Sudanese refugees and 22 community leaders and service providers. Most of the refugees in the study had moved from capital cities to the regional areas, however some had arrived direct from overseas or from Australian detention centres. The study considered their reasons for choosing a regional location and the factors that helped them feel 'at home' and also the difficulties they faced.

The locations

The settlement issues for these groups were explored in three regional locations: for the Iraqis, the Shepparton area in central Victoria; for the Sudanese, Warrnambool and Colac in western Victoria.

Shepparton has a strong and long history of settlement by migrants, including Italian, Greek, Albanian and Turkish communities, in contrast to the more 'Anglo' communities of Warrnambool and Colac. All three areas are keen to attract workers, although their unemployment rates are higher than the state average (DEWR 2004).

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.

Each area had a different history of initial settlement:

- in Shepparton the arrival of Iraqis was unplanned and spontaneous
- in Warrnambool the initial Sudanese settlement was planned as part of a privately funded humanitarian project, the Warrnambool Relocation Project
- in Colac the Sudanese settlement was initiated by an employer.

The findings

Inclusive settlement for refugees in regional areas

The full report of the study (Taylor & Stanovic 2005) includes a chapter on each of the three locations. Here some of the findings are summarised.

The focus of the study is the refugees' experiences based on focus groups or interviews. These produced some vivid glimpses of the participants' lives but findings were necessarily limited by time and language. We did not attempt a wider study of the host communities' attitudes to the refugees, an important aspect of settlement and inclusion.

Drawing together the experiences of the refugees from the three locations there were some patterns and commonalities in their responses, but there was also considerable diversity. In some cases the women gave different responses from the men, the younger people from their parents, and there were marked individual differences, for example, one Sudanese woman was happy to be living in Colac, another, in seemingly very similar circumstances, unhappy.

Choice of location

We asked the refugees if they had a free choice where would they want to live and received very diverse answers. Some would choose to return to their homeland if it were safe and peaceful. Others, especially the young people, would choose a major Australian city for its educational and employment and leisure opportunities. Some were very pleased to live where they were, because they had work or felt safe and settled.

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. (Iraqi man)

Why had the refugees chosen come to the regional centres in which they were living? Most were relocating from a city. Their primary reasons were to seek employment and/or to join relatives and friends. For example, the Sudanese men in Colac came to work in the meat works and the women and children followed. Other refugees spoke of multiple reasons for their choice. Some placed a positive value on living in a small town as a quiet place, especially to bring up children. A number of parents, both Iraqi and Sudanese, spoke of being better able to control their children in a small town than in a city. The Iraqis also mentioned clean air as a reason for choosing Shepparton (a number had children with asthma), as well as its reputation for tolerance and being multicultural.

Some of the refugees had come directly from overseas to join friends or relatives who sponsored them and so had not made an active choice of a country town.

Regional settlement: the best things and the difficulties

The following illustrate some of the refugees' responses when asked what they liked best about where they were living.

For me because my husband has found a job here ... We are happy very happy, because we are here [in Australia] 18 years and it's just not easy for my husband to find a job. We have been in Queensland, no job for him, or in Melbourne. (Iraqi woman)

The only reason we are here is because of employment. But the rest of the community, there is nothing wrong, we are getting along with the community and they are very supportive. But the town is so small you cannot get what you want. (Sudanese woman Colac)

Here the social life is very easy and like they are friendly and, for example, if you go to the church here you get the whole family there in the church, starting from the younger ones, but in Melbourne you get the aged people ... The rural areas they still keep their values, they keep their respect and because we come from [a rural area] we want to find the same environment. (Sudanese man Warrnambool)

What the refugees identified as the best things about living in their regional location often, but not always, reflected their reasons for coming to the place. For those who had employment, this was a key factor. Some were very positive about the quiet and also the convenience of a smaller place in terms of ease of getting around and not needing transport. Some mentioned a cheaper cost of living. Some valued the assistance from the local community, having friends of their own group around them and, especially in Warrnambool, the friendly local people. Some spoke of being in a place of safety, in contrast to their homeland. The Iraqis emphasised the value of the availability of bilingual workers, a benefit not shared by the Sudanese groups.

What were the difficulties of their location? For some, the lack of employment was the major difficulty, especially for the Iraqis in Shepparton. For people in all three locations the limited

tertiary educational opportunities were seen as a problem, in spite of the university campuses in Shepparton and Warrnambool. Cost of living was seen as higher than in cities by some people, in particular cost of food and of health services (because of lack of bulkbilling GPs). Housing was a difficulty for some as were limited settlement services and access to English classes. Discrimination was a problem raised particularly by some of the Iraqis.

All three locations provided positive examples of refugee settlement, but all three also had some difficulties.

The decisive thing for refugees was the *balance* between the advantages and the disadvantages of a particular location. Some, overall, were quite happy to be living where they were, in spite of some difficulties. For others, the problems outweighed the benefits and they were likely to move on because of lack of work or the high cost of living or to undertake higher education.

Implications for the future

One must ask *why* regional areas need workers and population. If the answer is because of population decline due to lack of 'employment of choice' and educational opportunities and loss of services, these are all factors that could weigh very heavily on refugee settlers. Problems with these—employment, education pathways and services—were all prominent for the refugees in this study.

In this paper we argue that because of the special humanitarian considerations for accepting refugees into Australia, we as a society have a strong obligation to assist their settlement as much as possible. They must not be seen as merely a source of cheap labour.

If long-term inclusive regional settlement is the aim, what is needed are policies 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.

To conclude I wish to ask how the issues raised above relate to the Goulburn Valley's subsequent experience, especially with the more recent direct settlement of refugees from the Congo. Two particular challenges suggested in the report are: the high unemployment in the Iraqi community and Shepparton's resources to support existing refugee groups as well as the most recent arrivals.

Notes

I wish to acknowledge and thank the many people, including those in Shepparton who helped us with the study.

The full report *Refugees and regional settlement: balancing priorities* (Taylor & Stanovic 2005) is available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence website:

http://www.bsl.org.au/pdfs/refugees_and_regional_settlement.pdf

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