

UNDERSTANDING REGIONAL SETTLEMENT IN AUSTRALIA

KEY LEARNINGS FROM PAST EXPERIENCES

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**REGIONAL
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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This paper contains the learnings from some regional communities in different parts of Australia that have successfully welcomed migrants. Experiences in these communities have helped inform the toolkit *Steps to Settlement Success*.

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INTRODUCTION

Many people settled in Australia's capital cities say they would have preferred to resettle in regional towns had they known what opportunities were available to them outside of metropolitan centres. As the lifestyle and employment opportunities become more widely known, many migrants living in big cities are raising their hands to move to regional communities.

Policies to support regional settlement need to be of the view that such a settlement is voluntary. Only then will the issue of long-term retention of populations in regional areas, well documented by the Australian Government (2014) be able to be addressed. This voluntary requirement goes both ways – the migrants moving need to want to go to the communities and the communities need to want the migrants to come (Sharp, 2005; McDonald, 2008).

Because of the range of opportunities that migrants bring, it is necessary for regional communities to think broadly about why they want to instigate their settlement program. This understanding will provide the foundation for establishing the necessary mechanisms to compel migrants to come and be part of these communities. Such mechanisms may include:

- Establishing links with a group that is interested in living in a regional area;
- Thinking about the number of migrants the regional community can afford;
- Thinking about attractive opportunities (jobs, lifestyle, environment) the regional community presents;
- Profiling the regional community and presenting that profile to the interested migrants;
- Having the support of migrant community leaders; and
- Assisting migrants to maintain relationships with their community and matching the needs of migrating families with those of the host community.

In looking at a range of different settlement projects in Australia, Piper (2017) highlights that there are many advantages on both sides of the regional settlement process; benefits for the migrants that relocate and benefits for the host communities receiving them. For migrants, regional resettlement can offer inexpensive accommodation, job opportunities, a welcoming community that is supportive, access to services and other indirect benefits. Meanwhile, host communities can benefit from increased economic transactions locally, bridged labour gaps, enhancements to local culture, and increased diversity. All of these strengthen regional communities in different ways.

For regional resettlement to be successful, there are two important elements that every host community must possess to attract migrants: employment and reasonable accommodation (Piper, 2017). For rural communities, another key element of successful and sustainable regional resettlement is 'farming practice'.

Some migrants move to regional areas in search of jobs and cheaper housing (Fozdar and Hartley, 2012). Many migrants' moving to rural Australia in particular also have great ambitions of farming. It is

a large part of why big cities are not their ultimate settlement location; farming is a permanent activity they will continue to practice as long as they have the opportunity.

Notwithstanding the importance of employment, affordable housing and availability of land for farming, for many migrants, the decision to stay on and live in a regional community ultimately depends on whether the community is a *welcoming community* that is ready to embrace the new migrants. A welcoming community is a source of safety for new migrants and can help greatly with migrant attraction and retention (National Working Group on Small Centre Strategies, 2007). Thus, encouraging more small towns to become welcoming communities is also integral to sustainable regional settlement.

GREAT SOUTH COAST ECONOMIC MIGRATION PROJECT

At the time that Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development (GLAPDI) were coordinating the project in Mingoola NSW, Leadership Great South Coast (LGSC) and iGen Foundation began discussing the opportunity for a project to assist metropolitan families from diverse cultural backgrounds into the Great South Coast region of Victoria.

Together, the three organisations Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development International (GLAPDI), Leadership Great South Coast (LGSC) and iGen Foundation formed the Great South Coast Economic Migration Project (GSEMP) and held community consultations across five Great South Coast local government areas. Southern Grampians Shire Council, through the leadership of the Mayor, were motivated to implement the project and families began moving to Hamilton in January 2018. Eleven families (60 people) have moved to date with a target of 20 families by December 2019. To date, a minimum of two people per family has been supported to gain employment.

The GSEMP is currently also being implemented in the Glenelg Shire with the aim to move another ten families by the end of 2019. The project team are creating a website to assist with the matching process of families with employers and the community.

The project is being evaluated by university researchers to create a model that can be replicated in other regions. The project has received funding through the Victorian State Government.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Intercultural Approach:** An intercultural expert advises the project team to ensure that local communities are engaged and supportive of the project and that families are embraced into the community, building local relationships and support networks.
- **Working Group:** Chaired by the Mayor, a working group involves a cross-sector of the community that advises the project team. Representatives include employment agencies, key community groups, health professionals, real estate agents and educators.
- **Project Manager:** A Project Manager overseeing the project is crucial to achieving project goals and momentum. The Project Manager builds up relationships in the community, specifically

with employers and community groups, and assists the families with job applications, housing and community supports.

- **Family Liaison:** A Family Liaison Officer is located in Hamilton. With his experience of relocating from Melbourne, he provides ongoing communication with the migrants. This is important for managing the expectation of families, resolving issues, and bridging language barriers.
- **Welcome Weekends:** The migrant families visit the region to get an understanding of the area, and meet the community, employers, and real estate agents. The visits also include homestays with local families, helping establish the first connections between migrants and the local community.
- **Buddy Program:** A Buddy program was established to match new families with a local family – the local family assists with the move, invites the new family to events, helps them build relationships in the community, and regularly catch-up. This program takes a long-term approach to support for families relocating.
- **Employment:** Employment is based on skills and qualifications. Taking an individualised approach, each family member discusses their long-term work preferences with the project team. The aim is for one person in each family to have a job before relocation.
- **Housing:** The project team meet with local real estate agents to provide background information on families. Buddies attend meetings with the families and real estate agents.
- **Land:** Community members have offered land for the families to grow crops on to support their farming pursuits. This has been important for the families to create a sense of belonging and reconnection to the land.
- **Vocational Education Pathway Support:** Local vocational training providers have been engaged to give one-on-one skills assessments, training, and pathway advice to ensure each person is supported to gain meaningful and long-term employment.
- **Language and Tutoring Cafe:** The Project has established a Language Cafe that is open to anyone in the community wishing to practice English conversation in a relaxed and informal setting. It is held once a month and rotated across businesses. A Tutoring Cafe has also been introduced. It assists primary school students of new families with homework through a structured and fun environment after school. The students are tutored by secondary students with a trained facilitator coordinating.
- **English Language Classes:** Trained English as a Second Language Volunteers assist the new families twice a week with English Language Classes. These classes are helpful to women who are often at home caring for children and unable to practice their English skills.
- **Community Connections:** Numerous structures have been put in place to support families to connect meaningfully with the community, for example, support from local churches and mentors for business start-ups.

GAPS

- **Agricultural workers:** The biggest gaps in the Great South Coast region are in the agricultural sector, and the families often do not have the mechanical knowledge and physical ability to take on the manual labour required to fill gaps in the workforce.

- **Timeframes:** The process to find employment and housing at a time that suits the families has been challenging, as many have children in school they need to consider. The project team needs to balance family and community expectations continually.
- **Housing:** Limited rental housing presents challenges and the project team uses their networks to reach out to the private market. There was particular difficulty in finding 4-5 bedroom houses suitable for families.

SHEPPARTON, VICTORIA

Shepparton was one of two regional locations the Australian Government chose to pilot the direct resettlement of 'unlinked' refugees; refugees with no pre-existing family or social ties in Australia. In the course of the regional resettlement pilot, ten families from the Democratic Republic of Congo settled in Shepparton in 2005. Like any government settlement area, Shepparton had services to support the newly arrived migrants. Even if there were Government services available, local community support was active from day one of the arrivals of migrants, including local church volunteers, community volunteers, and others.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Management:** The steering committee did all the planning in advance of the arrival of refugees. The committee was composed of staff from all three levels of government, with three more subcommittees established to look after education, employment and health.
- **Housing:** Finding affordable accommodation was difficult because the families were not yet in Australia, and real estate agents were reluctant to give houses to new arrivals as they had no rental history.
- **Employment:** The local government was advised to engage with employers and explore job opportunities. Employment outcomes were fair, with only three out of the ten families arriving in Shepparton not having anyone engaged in work. Though employment outcomes were considered largely positive for the Shepparton pilot, some local employers were hesitant about employing new arrivals because of the training that would be needed to get the refugees to the employers' desired skill level.
- **Health:** Local GPs worked together to overcome issues around the lack of information on the health needs of refugees (such as the lack of medical records). Communication issues also had to be overcome as refugees were not familiar with the local medical system. Interpreters helped greatly in this regard, as did the training of refugees in first aid and basic public health education (such as nutrition, hygiene, dental health).
- **Transport:** Refugees were not familiar with the local transport options. The solution was for caseworkers to introduce them to the public transport system, volunteers to drive refugees between locations, and to connect refugees with local driving schools.
- **Volunteers:** Local volunteers were instrumental in assisting the refugees on daily activities, often without limit. However, learning from the Shepparton experience – there a need for coordination of volunteers to avoid conflicting instructions.

- **Risk assessment:** Thought went into what may go wrong in the resettlement process and how to mitigate against things going wrong in the first place.

GAPS

- **Employment:** Job providers did not adjust their procedures of employment to consider the arriving cohort of refugees from overseas. Even with local skill shortages, some employers were unwilling to offer jobs to the refugees, in part because of the perceived training or assistance that would be required.
- **Housing:** Securing housing for new arrivals was an issue, as real estate agents were reluctant to offer houses to people with no rental history.
- **Communication:** There was a lack of constant communication to manage expectations. For example, new refugees were told to pay three weeks rent upon arrival, and not before they arrived in Shepparton
- **Transport:** The local transport system was regarded as “not user-friendly to new refugees”.

ROCKHAMPTON, QUEENSLAND

Rockhampton has grown in recent years thanks to migration – both direct migration from overseas and secondary migration from Brisbane (Piper, 2017). A large driver for the migrant attraction was the Teys Australia meatworks, one of the largest local employers. The meatworks recognised migration as a solution to address worker shortage and started to attract migrants from the Middle East and South Asia since 2010 (MDA, 2012). Most of the migrants had travelled to Rockhampton as solo workers, leaving their families behind and travelling back and forth to visit and spread the word about the opportunities for employment back in Rockhampton. Once the message of opportunity spread to Brisbane, both migrants and refugees were keen to relocate with their families to Rockhampton.

Rockhampton has a history as a welcoming community, with local volunteers assisting, and they have embraced migrants, refugees, and their families for years. Those coming for work since 2010 were no different; their presence is highly valued. Teys Australia shares this view, citing former refugee and migrant workers as having not only bridged the labour gap in the meatworks but also having brought huge economic gains to the region. Without this source of additional labour, the meatworks would have likely downsized or closed and subsequently impacted on farming production in the region (MDA, 2012).

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Employment:** Migrant settlement in the Rockhampton region was primarily driven by employment opportunities presented by a lack of local skilled labour.
- **Welcoming community:** Local community members, businesses, neighbours and individuals have welcomed, supported and embraced newcomers into their community.
- **Skills:** local meatworks has always provided training to upskill and equip the migrants who join their companies.

- **Liability and sustainability:** After getting jobs, and being trained, the migrants and refugees are stable, reliable for work and they have stayed for long.
- **Local Government:** Rockhampton regional council organised an official welcome of the cohort of skilled migrants and refugees into their communities.
- **Settlement services:** The regional city has settlement services that support new arrivals to access all the services they may need, including education, health, accommodation and other areas of life.
- **English learning:** The local TAFE delivers an English learning course, which is flexible according to work shifts
- **Partnership:** AWX (local labour hire company), Teys Australia (meatworks company) and MDA partnered to assist the resettlement process. For workers retention and sustainability, the partners did the following:
 - Employing bicultural workers to assist in on-work training, translations,
 - Flexibility in repayment of relocation expenses,
 - Translation of materials in the local worker's languages,
 - Make sure that workers have time to join English classes
- **The attractiveness of Rockhampton:** Rockhampton has offered a peaceful environment for the new migrants compared to the city lifestyle

GAPS

- **Perception:** Some misconceptions in the local community that some of the refugees, like Hazaras from Afghanistan, were Al-Qaeda or Taliban (ABC, 2012).
- **Funding:** there was no funding specifically allocated to this resettlement initiative
- **Culture:** Some cultural difference between the local community and the new refugees.
- **Low level of English proficiency:** The migrants and refugees were from countries speaking languages other than English,
- **Workplace:** Employers recruited translators during induction training to translate material into the migrant's language, and made time for employees to attend English classes
- **Retention of workers:** in 2012, 36% of 480 migrants that were employed left the meatworks because of the nature of work that involved hard labour, and some of them left to visit their families overseas and never returned to the company.

LIMESTONE COAST, SOUTH AUSTRALIA (MT GAMBIER, NARACORTE AND BORDERTOWN)

Alongside Shepparton, Mount Gambier was chosen for the Australian Government's regional settlement pilot, with the first refugee families (primarily Burmese) arriving in June 2007 (Feist *et al.*, 2015). Securing employment for the refugees was an initial challenge. Consequently, local councils from around the Limestone Coast region, in collaboration with the Migrant Resource Centre, established the *Limestone Coast Sustainable Regional Project*. The project was responsible for enhancing the employability of resettled migrants and refugees in the region.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Local government:** Councils were instrumental in creating an environment of welcome and acceptance between the local community and the refugee families.
- **Collaboration:** Settlement services, employment agencies and employers all collaborated.
- **Language:** Flexible English learning sessions were provided to new migrants.
- **Community:** Critical to the settlement process has been the support from the community for the refugees to get training and job opportunities.
- **Training:** Opportunities were created to upskill the refugees while on the job and receive support from mentors.
- **Driving lessons:** It was very important for the new arrivals to learn to drive as the area was not considered “public transport friendly”. This training also opened job opportunities in the driving industry.
- **Networking:** There have been active efforts to create occasions for the locals to mingle with the refugee families.
- **Services:** Migration agents and case managers have provided ongoing support to new families in the region and have assisted in proposals for additional family members to come directly to the region.
- **Employment:** Employers developed a strategy that, when launched, invited new migrants and the rest of the community to get involved.

NHILL, VICTORIA

The resettlement project was motivated by employment because a local poultry company Luv-a-Duck was facing labour shortages. The company turned to the Karen refugee community in Melbourne to instigate a settlement program in collaboration with AMES, a settlement services organisation working in Melbourne. The management of Luv-a-Duck started with three Karen employees and, through word of mouth, kept on employing whenever there was a job opportunity. The management also approached the local council for settlement support services as the members of the Karen community kept increasing as new workers brought their families to Nhill with them. The council was supportive and started funding some services, like caseworker services (AMES and Deloitte, 2015).

KEY LEARNINGS:

- **Employment:** 61 employment opportunities for Karen community members were created in Nhill. In turn, local employers had a chance to fill labour shortages.
- **Collaboration:** AMES, Luv-a-Duck and the Karen community worked together to make the Nhill settlement project a success.
- **Education:** Luv-a-Duck provided on-the-job training of Karen workers and encouraged the Karen youth to study at the local college.
- **Transport:** The public transport in Nhill links to different regional towns and Melbourne, thereby helping to facilitate connections across different communities.
- **Volunteers:** Nhill volunteers were supportive in helping new arrivals to attend their appointments, know where to get necessary services or even connect to other local employers.
- **Funding:** Migrants to Nhill received financial support for their relocation, and support services in Nhill received external government funding.

MINGOOLA, NEW SOUTH WALES/QUEENSLAND BORDER

Two divergent factors motivated this resettlement project. Firstly, the Mingoola community was aging, with a primary school in recession, and needed new young families to come to live locally to boost school numbers and close local labour gap. Secondly, the desire of African families living in big Australian cities to relocate to regional areas, some lieu of peaceful reconnection with farming activities. The community of Mingoola and members of the African community were instrumental in supporting the families in the preliminary stages of organising houses for accommodation and working on houses to make them ready.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Community:** Both migrant families and the local Mingoola community had their dreams met. The African families wanted to move to the country, and the Mingoola community wanted families with Agriculture experience to move into their community.

- **Planning:** The Mingoola community decided to settle families in their community and developed a strategic plan to do it.
- **Volunteers:** Community members volunteered to renovate houses, assist migrant families with knowledge of local amenities, teach migrant families what crops to grow in winter and summer periods.
- **Housing:** Accommodation for the migrant families were made available thanks to Mingoola community members, who offered the use of their disused farmhouses. Habitat for Humanity NSW, GLAPDInt community members, and Mingoola community members helped renovate these houses. The price of rent of these houses is minimal, which is also an attractive factor for the migrants.
- **Land:** Farmers have provided and prepared land for the migrant families who desperately wanted to have gardens. Farming is the major reason why migrant families want to live in Mingoola in the long term.
- **Employment:** Local farmers provided agricultural work for families when they arrived. This work is mostly casual, but the Mingoola locals continued to offer jobs to the migrants whenever further work was required.
- **Familiarity:** The migrant families visited Mingoola to get an understanding and appreciation for the area. This initial visit helped establish the first connections between migrants and the local community. GLAPDInt also organised a presentation to the local community members on the profiles of migrants and their cultural expectations.
- **Engagement:** GLAPDInt and Mingoola Progress Association organised a welcome event for the migrant families to create relationships and “family facilitators” among the community networks.
- **Language:** Through Mingoola Public School, adults attend online English classes to improve their proficiency.
- **Communication:** Ongoing communication between the migrants, the Mingoola community and GLAPDInt was necessary to manage the expectation of families, resolve issues, and bridge language barriers as required.
- **Future-focus:** The migrant families have applied for relatives to join them directly from overseas. The relatives have the same background in Agriculture, so Mingoola presents a more attractive lifestyle for them than metropolitan centres.

GAPS

- **Language:** Some of the migrants have a low level of English proficiency, which can be a barrier to certain employment and social connections.
- **Skills and resources:** Lack of land ownership, mechanised agriculture skills and equipment limit the opportunities for migrant families to pursue large-scale farming endeavours.
- **Housing:** Limited housing stock presents an accommodation problem for future migrants or relatives who may be interested in joining those already in Mingoola.
- **Land:** lack of land ownership or long-term leasing

DALWALLINU, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Resettlement in Dalwallinu was engineered by an individual farmer who observed the depopulation trend in his shire and decided to initiate the Regional Repopulation Project with the support of the local council. The council decided to establish a Regional Repopulation Committee to oversee the implementation of the project. The project started with the resettlement of migrants from the city, however, this plan was not successful. Because local businesses were losing the business as a result of labour shortage, they decided to outsource skilled migrants from The Philippines. With such a repopulation team in place resettlement and support of the skilled migrants was well done. Today Dalwallinu counts more than 200 migrants in the community employed by different local companies in different capacities. Also, around 80 of the skilled migrants have acquired their permanent residence status and citizenship.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Local government:** Dalwallinu Shire council was very active in the planning and implementation of the project.
- **Management:** The Regional Repopulation Committee was established to champion the project.
- **Consultation:** There were frequent consultations with the community and migrants at every phase of settlement.
- **Culture:** Those involved in the project sought to avoid cultural assumptions more tailored to the Australian way of life and instead tried to respect other cultures' preferences, such as cluster housing as opposed to solitary housing.
- **Terminology:** The use of "New Residents" rather than the term migrants was seen to make a big difference for community integration.
- **Community:** The community strategy was to engage the new residents in all local community events, festivals and functions, to develop social network connections and exemplify cultural diversity.
- **Engagement:** New residents embraced the expectations of the host community by joining volunteering and support groups, like the fire brigade unit.
- **Funding:** Access to funding was able to support the project model.
- **Recommendations:** Those involved in the project consider jobs, schools, housing and a welcoming community the key elements for successful settlement.
- **Future-focus:** The outlook for sustainable resettlement in Dalwallinu is to engage new residents in agri-business and housing projects.

WARRNAMBOOL, VICTORIA

The local meat factory in partnership with the local council championed migration to Warrnambool. The purpose of the migration initiative was to fill labour gaps while at the same time promote diversity in the community. There was a great connection between the local Council and the local community in Melbourne as a base support for the new migrants.

KEY LEARNINGS

- **Planning:** A planning team was created, comprising local council and local partners.
- **Criteria:** The partners and council established criteria of resettlement, emphasising the importance of preparing a welcoming community, available employment and services, and ability to link with their communities located elsewhere in Australia (e.g. back in Melbourne).
- **Management:** The project was driven by a liaison officer, whose services were considered especially helpful.
- **Funding:** There was funding from grants to support the project.
- **Planning:** Target numbers for a specified period (i.e. ten families to be resettled in one year) were decided in advance.
- **Familiarity:** The relocated migrants were familiar to each other before they moved.
- **Housing:** The resettlement team organised houses for the new migrants; and
- **Community:** Families felt integrated into the community, and that the local community was welcoming.

GAPS

- **Housing:** Costs associated with housing were higher than in Melbourne and other cities.
- **Employment:** There were limited employment opportunities locally.
- **The diversity of needs:** Single migrants were not well supported compared to families.
- **Funding:** The liaison officer's position was defunded, and there was also a lack of funding for long-term projects.

SUMMARY

From the Australian experience of regional migration outlined here, it is evident that there are at least three major players involved in ensuring settlement success. One is government – be it a federally-facilitated settlement of migrants to regional areas directly from overseas or local council settlement facilitation (of either direct or secondary migrants). Another is business – often a key driver for migrant attraction and retention through employment. Then there are the volunteers and organisations that support new arrivals to become settled and participate in local events and activities.

Underlying these elements of successful regional settlement is a sense of community; of people – existing and new residents – coming together to support one another to address a particular challenge (employment, livelihood, wellbeing) in a particular place to benefit all those who work to make it a success.

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