

2 October, 2019

Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Migration  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Committee Members,

**Re: Inquiry into Migration in Regional Australia**

I am grateful for the opportunity to provide this submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Migration inquiry. I am making this submission in a personal capacity, drawing on my experiences as a migrant and as an independent researcher.

From my experiences and research, it is apparent that *sustainable employment opportunities* are one of the key pathways to successful settlement in the regional context. As such, in order to improve regional migration in Australia, it is important to *close the settlement loop*.

**Context**

Migration policy which urges migrants to move to regional areas is only a small part of the broader solution to promoting successful settlement. It is necessary to also address the important roles welcoming communities, evolving infrastructure, support initiatives and, most importantly, sustainable employment opportunities play in improving settlement experiences and outcomes. Additionally, settling migrants in regional areas which may be able to provide sustainable employment at the current time could be counterproductive. Migrants will try to move back to bigger cities to seek employment and/or better lifestyle opportunities. On this note, it is important that strategies and initiatives are sustainable and forward-thinking, and are not based solely on employment prospects at a fixed point in time. This is important to ensuring that migrants are able to settle in the area for the long term without fear that they will need to move back to bigger cities to seek employment and better lifestyle opportunities.

In May 2019, Bernard Baffour, a demographer at the Australian National University (ANU), noted that, apart from Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Hobart, most other Australian cities and regional centres have lost people to internal migration. This is a matter of great concern as it means that regional towns are unable to retain people and sustain economic growth while cities are increasingly congested.

Furthermore, the growth trajectory of migrants, refugees and other humanitarian entrants cannot be contingent on the opportunities afforded by the area in which they are asked to resettle. The lack of opportunities in smaller towns and regional communities alludes to an economic disadvantage to persons who are resettled in those regions. Put simply, individuals who are asked to resettle in small towns are going to be at a greater disadvantage than those who settle in regional hubs. This, in turn, will have other consequences in the long term,

especially in relation to social or economic inequality. It is important to address these issues as the settlement process itself will take considerably longer if sustainable employment opportunities are fleeting or scarce in regional areas.

Australia is a welcoming nation, as are its regional areas and local communities. The Welcoming Cities Standard allows small and mid-sized councils and towns to own their community's needs and respond accordingly. This is reflected in the Welcoming Regions summary which underscores that '[e]conomic security is at the heart of the 'win-win' argument advanced in favour of regional settlement.' Therefore, the next logical step entails shifting beyond being welcoming and ensuring that regional migration is effective and sustainable with respect to employment opportunities. As such, successful settlement in regional Australia needs to be part of a much larger, collaborative effort between multiple private sector industries, community organisations and the Australian Government.

This submission makes a few general comments concerning migrants and migration in regional Australia (both internal and external).

### **Inquiry into Migration in Regional Australia**

In addressing a select number of the terms of reference set forth by the inquiry, I put forward the following recommendations:

- National and international best practice strategies to encourage people to settle and stay in regional areas

I would like to draw notice to the regularly identified examples of the successful settlement of Karen refugees in Nhill and Bendigo. *The key factor in these examples is the availability of sustained employment for Karen persons.*

Resettlement in Nhill, Victoria was largely successful due to the involvement of local poultry company, Luv-a-Duck, coordinated by Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) in Melbourne. In the case of Bendigo, a similar large-scale employer was involved, Hazeldenes Chicken Farm Pty Ltd. Both employers facilitated workplace integration strategies and on-the-job training for Karen workers. While other employers were involved in both cases, large-scale demand for workers from employers can act as a catalyst for successful resettlement. It is important to note that Karen workers in Bendigo have also transitioned to variety of industries over time. Other similar cases have been mentioned in Understanding Regional Settlement in Australia: Key Learnings from Past Experiences, a joint report, commissioned by Regional Australia Institute, Scanlon Foundation and Welcoming Cities.

In most of these cases, the migrants were refugees and other humanitarian entrants. As such, in the following sections, it is necessary to draw attention to skilled migrants and their engagement and experiences with regional settlement.

- Strategies to develop regional skilled migration

There are multiple programs underway to ensure regional locations which are identified as resettlement sites are inclusive and the communities themselves are involved in welcoming

new members. As local councils are increasingly involved in work revolving around social cohesion, regional areas will appeal to new migrants. However, the lack of diverse professional opportunities in regional areas may be a roadblock to attracting skilled migrants to regional areas. Therefore, the case of skilled migrants must be analysed separately from refugees and humanitarian entrants.

Most skilled migrants attend university in Australia and expect to settle with jobs (also known as ‘knowledge jobs’) related to their area of study, skill or expertise. Regional areas lack such opportunities and therefore may not always appeal to young skilled migrants and their families. Migration policies alone are insufficient to ensure sustainable regional population growth, especially in the case of skilled migrants.

- *One of the key strategies proposed here is the involvement of the private sector in providing job opportunities in regional areas.* Currently, settlement activities are coordinated between government agencies, local community representatives/councils and settlement organisations. The private sector is largely missing from this transaction. Regional migration must be looked at in conjunction with upcoming industries and their projected job growth. Depending on the availability of employment, the department can highlight regional areas which would be conducive to internal migration (of Australian born and overseas migrants).
- *A complementary strategy would require skilled migrants to be provided support incentives to move to regional areas.* Support incentives could include entrepreneurship and/or incubator programs for migrants to start small feasible businesses in mid-sized towns. While there are similar incubation and entrepreneurship programs currently operating (Catalysr, Generation Launch by Unbound and Ignite), they are mostly geared towards urban areas. Access to seed funding would provide a strong incentive for skilled migrants to move to regional towns. This is a more sustainable strategy as ownership of businesses would incentivise migrants to stay in regional areas for the long term and contribute to the creation of new jobs and growing industries. Please note that these strategies would be different from the Business Visas offered by the Australian Government. However, a program similar to the Entrepreneurs' Programme administered by the Department of Industry, Innovation and Science but tailored to the regional context would be suitable.

- Strategies to develop regional humanitarian migration

Along with the strategies mentioned in the previous section for skilled migrants, *regional educational institutions must focus on reskilling or upskilling humanitarian entrants, to participate in industries which will see a certain growth in the next five years.*

- Data suggests that within the next five years, the four industries where the most job growth will be possible are healthcare and social assistance, construction, education and training, and professional, technical and scientific services. Therefore, settlement sector and government programs aimed at new humanitarian entrants should be formulated in

response to industry growth in certain terms. Similar recommendations must have been made in the Senate Committee Inquiry on 'Jobs for the Future in Regional Areas' (September, 2019).

- A complementary strategy would require local councils and communities to nominate occupational and labour shortages they have experienced or are a point of concern. *Resettlement numbers and strategies must be formulated in response to labour shortages as opposed to populating regional areas.* In the *White paper on Developing Northern Australia* (2015), the unique labour needs of the Northern Territory are outlined. As such, these unique needs require a skilled workforce which are trained to work in these regions. Humanitarian migrants can be settled in these regions if they are trained to work in sustainable jobs. This strategy would require both employers and government programs to invest in needs based skill development.
- Regional areas which have formal settlement service providers, procedures and structures are preferable for humanitarian migration, in particular. Service providers in regional hubs must provide case management to nearby small- settled towns until formal service providers are established in smaller, regional areas.
  - Local volunteers, employers and community organisations and their role in facilitating regional settlement

Research has suggested that regional and rural towns are cosmopolitan and welcome to new immigrants migrating to these regions. However, ensuring community members retain a sense of autonomy and control over and confidence within their communities would help promote social cohesion within these regions.

- It is important foster agreements such as the Designated Area Migration Agreements (DAMA), where local communities and territories can have more autonomy in terms of migration as well as respond to genuine labour shortages.
- New migrants and humanitarian entrants may be unaware of the resources and opportunities regional Australia may be able to offer. Additionally, they may perceive rural and/or regional Australia as being unwelcoming. Therefore, local community organisations and regional universities must be encouraged to change the narrative of regional and rural Australia. This can be done through exhibitions, conferences, tradeshows and tourism.
  - Related infrastructure matters

In conclusion, I would like to underscore the critical need for improvements in regional infrastructure, specifically transport and healthcare services. Additionally, there is also a severe lack of coordinated settlement services in many areas in regional Australia. Compelling migrants to move to regional cities that may not be able to deliver efficient public transport and health care services will disadvantage these populations. In many other

cities and larger towns, settlement services bridge the gap and complement the lack of transport, health care or free legal services.

In the Canberra region, some service providers offer subsidised driving lessons for new migrants from lower socio-economic backgrounds, conduct regular information sessions on healthcare, migration and legal issues, host free beginners, intermediate and advanced English language classes, coordinate housing and provide advice regarding job applications and other matters essential for successful migrant settlement. The lack of such a service in regional towns unfairly pressures the local community to pick up the slack. If the community possesses the necessary resources and has planned to welcome new migrants, the settlement process might be easier. However, even in that case, volunteering can only achieve so much. Coordinated settlement services are far more effective in ensuring successful settlement and advocacy regarding regional migration.

If you would like to further discuss this submission, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours Sincerely

Ms Sahana Sehgal

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