

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS ON REGIONAL REFUGEE SETTLEMENT

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Background

The report *Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas: Evidence based good practice*¹ has contributed to the discussion about opening up opportunities for refugees to move into regional areas. The scope of the report did not, however, allow all relevant issues to be considered. This paper is intended to complement the report by examining one such issue in more depth, namely the options for refugees in regional areas in terms of employment and income generating activities.

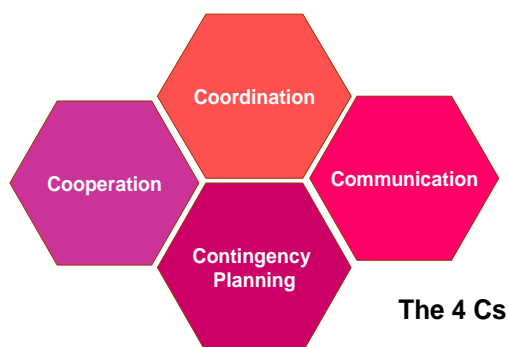
The paper is written primarily for those in regional areas who are either thinking about sustainable regional development or about welcoming refugees and is intended to convey a message to both groups that their objectives are not mutually exclusive. Supporting refugees is not necessarily just an act of benevolence; it is also something that can make a significant contribution to the local community and the economy.

Another key message of the paper is that thinking should begin with what the area needs/wants in terms of economic and social development and then consider what contribution refugees could make to this. The very best regional settlement outcomes occur when refugees are 'value adding'. Locals are far more likely to welcome them when they see how they are contributing and the refugees will integrate far more successfully when they feel that they are valued and respected.

The paper presents four broad areas in which opportunities for regional settlement can be considered:

- Agriculture
- Industry
- The Welfare Sector
- Commerce

Before exploring these, however, it is important to reiterate the most important lesson from all of the regional studies undertaken thus far. As explained in *Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas*, successful regional settlement of refugees does not necessarily happen of its own accord. For it to meet the needs of the refugees and the host community, four things (the Four Guiding Principles),² as shown below, must come into play.



What this means in relation to the suggested opportunities is also considered (albeit in brief) in this paper.

¹ *Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas: Evidence based good practice*. DPC. 2017.

² See full explanation in *Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas: Evidence based good practice*. DPC. 2017.

1. **Agriculture**

When the topic of regional settlement for refugees is raised, most people's minds go straight to farming, in most instances thinking in terms of smallholdings or farm work. As will be explored below, both offer opportunities for people from refugee backgrounds but it is important not to limit thinking to these areas. Doing this will close minds to the reality that there are more options worth exploring.

i. Smallholdings

Notwithstanding the comment above, creating opportunities for refugees to work on smallholdings should not be dismissed and will begin the exploration of agricultural opportunities.

Many refugees come from rural backgrounds and find living in cities challenging. They want nothing more than to have land on which they can grow staple food crops and tend animals, thereby replicating their largely self-sufficient lifestyle prior to their displacement.

Purchasing land, even small holdings, is beyond the grasp of most newly arrived refugees but this should not preclude these refugees achieving their ambition.

Throughout regional Australia are many properties on which there is more than one house and a few surplus hectares. Realising the opportunity this affords requires a number of things to align. These include but are not limited to the following:

- Having at least three or four landowners in the district being open to the opportunity of offering land and support. Regional settlement is unlikely to be sustainable if there is only one family as isolation from their community will undermine any benefits they derive from being on the land.
- Having land suitable for growing the type of crops that the refugees are interested in growing.
- Having local farmers who are willing to lend a hand, especially in the early days. In return, they would forge bonds with skilled farmers who can help them out on occasions, or be available for seasonal paid employment, thereby saving them from having to rely on backpackers or itinerant farmhands.
- Having suitable housing on the properties and/or links to a group such as Habitat for Humanity that can renovate older, unused dwellings.
- Having a local council that allows dual occupancy on rural land and/or a council prepared to amend their regulations to permit this.
- Having the support of the local community, not least opinion leaders, local media and faith leaders. Having 'a champion' who can take on issues as they arise can also be a great assistance.
- Ensuring that the key service agencies, schools and TAFEs understand and support the intuitive and that their staff members are trained to support the new arrivals.
- Last but by no means least, having a 'broker' who can liaise between the farm owners, the community and the refugees. The 'broker' might be a settlement service agency, a leader from the refugees' community or both.

There are many benefits for the local community that can be derived from supporting such an initiative, not least:

- giving the community something they can work on collectively;
- having consumers who will support local businesses;

- having children who will attend (and maybe even save) the local school;
- providing an opportunity for locals to get to know people from another culture;
- increasing the supply of local workers, especially for seasonal work; etc.

And like all of the initiatives outlined in this paper, the likelihood of this being successful is greatly enhanced with the application of the Four Guiding Principles outlined above.

ii. Farm Work

Refugees also have skills relevant for farmers who need additional labourers on their properties, either full time or seasonally. The latter could complement – or in some areas replace – the need to engage backpackers and could result in building a more reliable and better trained workforce.

Farm work is more likely to suit refugees who don't have families with them in Australia and are more focused, in the short term at least, on earning an income rather than on 'building a home'.

Refugees are already working on farms around the country but to fully realise the potential of this workforce, greater coordination is required. Ideally this would be provided by one or more agencies that perform the following essential functions:

- Identifying employment opportunities in farming or horticulture.
- Vetting potential employers to ensure compliance with Fair Work and Work Health and Safety laws.
- Briefing potential employers about the background of refugees and the challenges they face adapting to life in Australia.
- Providing training for the refugees about the Australian workplace (both its culture and laws).
- Linking refugees (ideally in small groups not as individuals) to employment opportunities.
- Liaising between the refugees and their employers when required.

Such an agency does not exist at present but is a natural amalgamation of the agencies involved in supplying seasonal workers and the employment programs currently supporting refugees.

iii. Agribusiness

Both of the previous suggested areas are limited in scope – both in terms of the number of people that can be accommodated in any one location and the impact they will have on the local economy. Without wishing to dismiss the merits of both, it is important not to limit thinking about rural opportunities to such small-scale initiatives.

Before exploring what could be done, it is worth reflecting on the following:

- 28.5% of Australia's population (6.9 million people) were born overseas³ and about 1 in 2 Australians have at least one overseas-born parent.
- Australians come from over 220 birthplaces and even more cultural groups.

³ From the 2016 Census.

- Each community in Australia has certain foods that are important to them. These are 'comfort foods' that they miss deeply when they can't get and make them feel 'at home' when they can. This is akin to how many Australian-born people feel about Vegemite or Tim Tams.

To date, little has been done to explore the opportunities that present from tapping into the new markets that have opened up as our population has diversified and sizeable new communities have formed. Further, Australians have demonstrated a great interest in food from other countries and are quick to embrace new products so the size of any potential market should not be limited to the number within target communities.

Identifying and developing agribusinesses based on new products requires the alignment of:

- farmers who are interested in diversification;
- identification of a suitable crop;
- land suitable for growing the selected crop;
- investors who can see the benefits from tapping into new markets;
- scope for putting in place the infrastructure required to process, ship and market the end product;
- refugees with the skills necessary to guide and participate in each step of the supply chain.

More than all of these, it requires visionaries who can see the potential and are prepared to put the effort in to pull all of the above elements together.

We have already seen examples around the country where refugees have made their mark. By way of an example, Vietnamese farmers on the outskirts of Darwin⁴ have contributed \$30 million to the Territory's economy through the production of Asian fruit and vegetables for local consumption.

Something that stands out as being ripe for exploring is the various products made from white corn. White corn is not widely grown in Australia but is used to produce the staple food of people from many parts of Africa.⁵ The ground corn is made into a paste or porridge which is then eaten with some form of stew or with tea. For the many Africans living in Australia, not having ready access to this is a major impediment to feeling at home. Capitalising on this market would require growing white corn, setting up a factory for processing the corn into flour/meal, distribution and marketing. People from refugee backgrounds could be involved in each stage of the supply chain and the regional community that hosted such an enterprise would reap the benefits.

And this is not the only opportunity that could yield significant benefits for regional communities and for refugees.

Regional Development Australia, farmers associations and relevant government agencies are encouraged to engage with refugee communities to identify products that could form the basis of lucrative collaboration between investors, local communities and refugees keen to use their knowledge and skills. There could even be scope for tapping into the newly released Regional Development Fund.

2. Industry

Regional Australia is not just about farming. In some areas there is an existing industrial base and increasingly new industries are being drawn into regional Australia for practical and financial reasons.

Industry needs workers at all skill levels and where the local workforce is insufficient, they have to attract workers from outside the area. To date, there has been considerable reliance on attracting workers from

⁴ ABC Radio National, Country Breakfast, Edwina Farley, 13 January 2018.

⁵ The names used vary throughout Africa and include mealie meal (or mielie meel) in Southern Africa, ugali (or ubugali) in Central Africa and Fufu in West Africa.

overseas under the 457 Visa Scheme. While this has helped many industries stay in business, it also has some down-sides, not least in terms of being able to build a stable, committed workforce. This approach also ignores another potential source of workers: people from refugee backgrounds living (and unable to find suitable employment) in major cities.

A few industries, not least meat producers, have recognised this valuable source of labour and are actively targeting refugee communities in their recruitment drives. In Nhill in regional Victoria, a major duck processing factory was seeking to expand but could not find suitable labour. By reaching out to a settlement service provider, it was able to attract families from Myanmar to the town. Luv-a-Duck employed 54 of the refugees directly and a further 7 were employed by allied businesses. In all 70.5 full-time-equivalent positions were added to the local economy.

As with all of the areas covered in this paper, success does not come of its own accord. It is dependent on vision, commitment, cooperation, consultation and planning and involves, but is by no means limited to, the following:

- Recognising that within the communities of former refugees living in Australia are people with skills and experience at all levels within the workforce (from unskilled workers to highly experienced technicians, engineers, managers, accountants etc) that they have a strong desire to work because meaningful work is the best way they can restore their dignity and feel that they are rebuilding their lives.
- Developing links to agencies working within refugee communities so that suitable workers can be identified.
- Supporting the relocation of workers to regional areas.
- Being willing to support the refugees when they first enter the workplace. This might involve the provision of targeted English language instruction, Work Health and Safety training, buddying or mentoring, or some other form of workplace support.
- Maintaining links to refugee community leaders or settlement service providers to ensure there is a cultural broker to ease the way through any challenges encountered.
- Preparing and educating the other workers so that they understand and are not threatened by new workmates from different cultural backgrounds.
- Working closely with key people within the local community to gain their support and ensure that essential complementary services, such as schools and medical centres, are well prepared to work with a new cohort.

While at first this might seem a long list, in reality and as the owners of the Luv-a-Duck factory in Nhill can attest, the initial investment of time and money is more than compensated by securing a stable and committed workforce.

3. Welfare Sector

A search of job vacancies in most regional centres makes clear that the welfare sector is struggling to find workers. This is particularly the case in child care and aged care but extends across the sector.

Whether it is because they come from cultures where caring for others is strongly ingrained or because they want to contribute to their new community or for any other reason, many people from refugee backgrounds are seeking out TAFE courses in welfare-related skills.

The challenge that remains is to tap into this pool of newly trained workers to encourage them to use their skills in a regional area. Conversely, service providers in regional areas could (through settlement agencies) link to people who are interested in undertaking qualifications and offer something akin to an apprenticeship which involves combining on-the-job experience with training delivered by a regionally-based TAFE college (or university).

As in other areas covered in this report:

- focusing on a single individual is not likely to be sustainable. It is far better to think about how a group can be accommodated (in one or more facilities) so that they support each other to transition to the unfamiliar environment;
- the likelihood of success is greatly enhanced if work is done to prepare the workplace and the community and support is provided to the new workers.

4. Commerce

Experience has shown that many people from refugee backgrounds are highly entrepreneurial. A number of Australia's largest companies were founded by people who arrived as refugees: TNT (Sir Peter Abeles), Westfield (Frank Lowey) and Meriton (Harry Triguboff). On a smaller scale, local communities across the country are supported by shops and businesses established by refugees. And there are many new arrivals with the skills and passion to set up a business of their own.

The CGU Small Business Report⁶ issued in January 2018 suggests that 1/3 of small businesses in Australia (620,000 businesses) are owned by "migrants". Included in this, and profiled in the report, are many refugee business owners who have made a significant contribution to their community.

The entrepreneurial tendencies of refugees have been well recognised by a number of agencies that have set up training and support programs for those wanting to open a small-business. To date, most of these have been restricted to major urban centres and the vision of those going through these programs has been similarly confined. Doing this, however, limits the potential of exploring regional opportunities.

It would be safe to surmise that there are many regional communities that have gaps in their local services. They might lack a café, or a hairdresser, or a baker or a handyman. The list is extensive.

If there is a collective community desire for a particular service – and a willingness on behalf of the community to support anyone coming to fill the gap – why not look at encouraging a refugee family (or a small number of families) to move to the area? This not only meets an identified community need, it also stimulates the local economy and possibly has flow on benefits (particularly in a small town) such as building the number of students in the local school and patients for the doctor and dentist etc, thereby enhancing sustainability of these vital services.

5. Professions

Amongst many who have not worked with or encountered refugees, there is a tendency to think of new arrivals as people with few skills and whose only contribution to the Australian workplace is at the low skilled level. This does not, however, reflect the current reality. Many entrants, in particular those from the Middle East, are university trained professionals with many years of work experience.

Take for example Munjed al Muderis. A surgeon in his native Iraq, Munjed was forced to flee when his surgical team was ordered by soldiers to perform punitive amputations. Since being granted refugee status in Australia, he has had his qualifications recognised, is practicing as an orthopaedic surgeon and has

⁶ www.cgu.com.au/migrantsmallbusiness/download-report

become a world-leader in robotic prostheses. Thanks to Munjed, many Australian amputees, including members of the defence forces, are fully mobile again.

If we limit our thinking about refugees as employees to low skilled work, we run the risk of missing out on the valuable contribution that highly skilled refugees can make to this country, and we greatly impair the refugees' healing process. Refugees who are able to use their skills and who feel that they are contributing, are far better equipped to put the horrors of their past behind them.

If, on the other hand, regional employers are prepared to be open in their thinking, they can tap into a valuable and under-utilised resource.

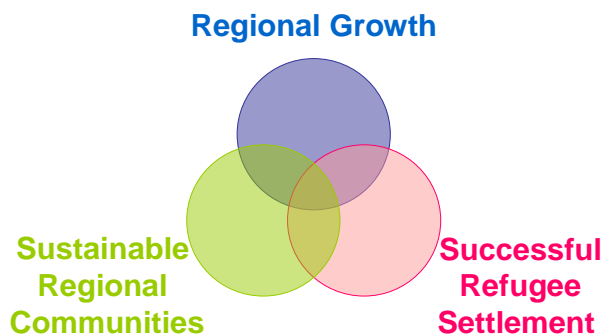
Doing this requires employers to do a number of things, not least:

- linking to agencies working with refugees to identify suitable workers;
- looking beyond the lack of local experience and an unfamiliar name when assessing applications;
- recognising potential opportunities for those who have yet to have their qualifications recognised, for example an accountant could work in a payroll office, a pharmacist in a laboratory, an engineer or architect in a drafting team etc;
- supporting refugees to get their qualifications recognised by providing study leave and on-the-job mentoring;
- recognising the importance of creating 'a community' for the refugee and his/her family and supporting their integration into the town.

Concluding Remarks

This paper does not profess to cover all areas or be a comprehensive overview of regional employment opportunities. Rather it seeks to capture some of the discussions that have been swirling around since the issue of regional refugee settlement ignited interest.

Significantly, however, this paper is a plea to all involved not to limit their thinking. The interest of the NSW Government in regional settlement provides a rare opportunity to really focus on this issue and find ways tap into a greatly underutilised resource. When done well, regional settlement of refugees has the potential to be a win-win for all concerned, not least in the following areas:



Realising this potential means dispensing with 'business as usual' and thinking 'outside the square'. Those who are prepared to do this will reap the rewards.