Refugees and regional settlement: win–win?

Paper presented at the
Australian Social Policy Conference
Looking Back, Looking Forward

20–22 July 2005, University of New South Wales

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Introduction
The federal government has been developing policies to encourage refugees to settle in regional areas to assist the newcomers gain employment and to help build regional economies. While this sounds like a win-win scenario, the reality is more complex.

This paper outlines changes in policy over recent years, presents some of the findings of a recent study by the Brotherhood of St Laurence and considers implications for future policy.

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.

Matters of concern include the nature of the refugee experience, the special needs of refugees as distinct from migrants, the availability of employment and support services, and the capacity of regional communities to build ties with newcomers of different backgrounds.

Overall Australia has a very metropolitan population and the large majority of migrant and refugee arrivals have settled in the cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne, to be with their compatriots, to find employment and to be able to make use of services. However regional communities are often keen to attract residents and workers.

In recent years Australian Government (and Opposition) policies have started to encourage both skilled migrants and refugees to settle in regional areas (DIMIA 2003; Birrell 2003). It has been suggested that up to 45 per cent of new arrivals should be located in regional areas (Withers & Powall 2003).

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, in contrast to some 110,000 people to be accepted as migrants (including skilled migrants and family migrants).

Following the Review of Settlement Services (DIMIA 2003), the Australian Government aimed to double the number of refugees successfully settling in regional Australia (Hardgrave 2004). This includes directing some ‘unattached’ humanitarian entrants (those without friends or relatives here) to regional locations (see DIMIA website).

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 DIMIA 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, other parts are in deep trouble, economically, ecologically and socially (Stilwell 2003). Almost all non-metropolitan areas, including those experiencing overall growth, record net losses of young adults.
Challenges facing regional communities include the shortage of labour, often for seasonal work, such as fruit picking or in abattoirs, and of professionals such as doctors and dentists. Rural towns have often suffered the loss of services such as banks and loss of steady employment, for example with public utilities. There is also the need to maintain or increase population, for example to stop local schools closing.

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) concluded that non-English speaking background immigrants faced disadvantage in these areas (due to the volatility of the rural economy, isolation and lack of services). They 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 Brotherhood of St Laurence has undertaken a study to explore the settlement experiences of two recent refugee groups in selected areas of regional Victoria and to examine factors that promote inclusive settlement in such areas.

Social exclusion and inclusion in refugee re-settlement have been discussed in a number of recent papers in Australia (Taylor 2004; Ramburuth & Stanovic 2004; White, M 2004) and Canada (Omidvar & Richmond 2003).

The refugees
Two recent and diverse refugee groups were selected: refugees from Iraq and from Sudan, the two largest groups of refugees arriving in Australia in 2003–04 (DIMIA 2004).

Interviews, focus groups and consultations were undertaken in mid 2004 with some 55 refugees (29 Iraqi and 26 Sudanese) and 22 community leaders and service providers.

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 focus of the study is the refugees’ experiences based on focus groups or interviews. These produced some vivid glimpses of the participants’ lives, but the findings were necessarily limited by time and language. We did not, for example, specifically explore the refugees’ pre-migration trauma. While additional information was gathered in consultations with community workers and leaders, 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 responses of the refugees from the three locations, there were some patterns and commonalities, 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, was 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. As one young Iraqi commented: ‘Like Shepparton is too small, so it’s boring you know’. However some were 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 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, 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 grown up people but you don’t see youth or kids going to the church. 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.

There had been changes over time. In Shepparton, there was some discussion of early difficulties overcome, as services developed and the community became more familiar with the newcomers. But there were also difficulties that arose unexpectedly, for example increased public abuse arising from the public linking of Muslims and terrorism after the Bali bombing in 2002.

Unfortunately it’s the influence of the media and unfortunately as well it’s the government policy, the government policy would like to stress the point connecting between Muslim and terror. If that is something [you get] from the higher ranking people, what can you expect from the ordinary citizens? (Iraqi man)

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. Refugees cannot be the single answer for regional problems, although they can make a contribution if appropriate resources are in place.

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 the uncertainty and limitations for those granted only Temporary Protection Visas
Refugees and regional settlement: win–win?

• specific to refugees and other immigrants as newcomers – including the provision of housing, 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) and access to affordable medical care.

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.

Note
This paper is based on the full report of the project, Refugees and regional settlement: balancing priorities (Taylor & Stanovic 2005) which is available on the Brotherhood of St Laurence’s website <www.bsl.org.au>. Readers who are interested in more detailed accounts of the background literature, the methodology or the settlement experiences in each of the three locations are referred to full report.

References


Gray, I, Dunn, P, Kelly, B & Williams, C 1991, Immigrant settlement in country areas, Bureau of Immigration Research, AGPS, Canberra.


