

Committee Secretary

29 August 2017

Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

RE: The Settlement of Refugees in Rural/Regional Areas

The Northern Victoria Refugee Support Network seeks to develop and implement strategies to raise the profile of people seeking asylum/refugees and to ensure that a humane, compassionate approach is taken to meeting their needs. The Network currently has 11 member community groups/organisations and is submitting this proposal for locating migrants and refugees in regional cities and rural areas.

The submission proposes resettling refugees into rural /regional communities. It refers to data from the previous successful experiences of the townships of Mingoola (NSW) and Nhill (Victoria).

The discussion will address the following Terms of Reference of the *Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation*

1 a) Best practice approaches to regional development, considering Australian and international examples, that support:

- i. growing and sustaining the rural and regional population base;
- ii. the benefits of economic growth and opportunity being shared right across Australia;
- iii. developing the capabilities of regional Australians;
- iv. growing and diversifying of the regional economic and employment base;
- v. an improved quality of life for regional Australians;
- vi. vibrant, more cohesive and engaged regional communities;
- vii. leveraging long-term private investment; and;
- viii. a place-based approach that considers local circumstances, competitive advantages and involves collective governance;

1. c) Actions of the Commonwealth that would encourage greater corporate decentralisation and what can be learned from corporate decentralisation approaches, including:

- i. considering the role of the private sector in sustainably driving employment and growth opportunities in regional areas in both existing and new industries;
- vi. examining the extent to which employment and growth can be supported by growing existing and new industries in regional areas, leveraging strong transport and communications connectivity.

The Proposal

➤ Background:

A well-developed system of support for the resettlement of refugees is in place throughout Australia. In Victoria, AMES is the key provider of English Language and Settlement services

and a major supplier of specialist employment and training services in Melbourne and Sydney. Information provided on their website (<https://www.ames.net.au/find-sites>) clearly demonstrates that overwhelmingly these services are located in urban areas. This reflects the fact that the majority of refugees are resettled in the cities, placing a significant burden on the local urban areas and in the case of Sydney and Melbourne adding to the challenges caused by overcrowding, rapidly increasing population, expanding size etc.

Social trends in Australia, as recorded by the Australian Bureau of Statistics <https://www2.deloitte.com/au/en/pages/consumer-business/articles/farming-verge-workforce-crisis.html> demonstrate that overall population numbers and age distribution in rural and regional areas is progressively changing. An example of this is in the agricultural sector where the average age of those on the land is increasing and their numbers are decreasing. We frequently hear and, in fact, observe small towns in rural areas “dying”. Exploring opportunities for the resettlement of refugee communities in these rural communities would go some way in addressing the problems experienced in both the suburban areas of our biggest cities and those being faced by small/medium rural communities. An overview of several examples of this being done successfully is given below.

Mingoola is located on the border of New South Wales and Queensland and was facing problems common to small rural communities. The population was in decline, enrolments at the local primary school were down and farmers could not find labourers to help with manual work. Three years ago the local progress association, inspired by a local resident, decided to look for refugees who were willing to move to the area. Initially the local people were discouraged by the lack of support services available, the view that there is inadequate support for refugees in rural areas and the frequently expressed opinion that “these people need to stay in the city”.

At the same time a refugee advocate in Sydney was struggling with the issues faced by refugees from Central Africa who were living in urban Sydney. They had rural backgrounds and had little hope of finding suitable employment in Sydney. The Mingoola resident mentioned above had been in touch with her local member, Mr Barnaby Joyce and through this contact connection was made with the African Refugee Community in Sydney. The result has been a win-win situation with the rural community now in a position to grow and develop and the refugee community finding a place to settle and contribute in a meaningful way to their future.

A full summary of this story, including discussion reading the challenges face, can be viewed at <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-07/how-african-refugees-are-reinvigorating-mingoola/7970876>

There are several examples of communities in rural and regional Australia who have been involved in the resettlement of refugees and this experience has contributed to an improved quality of life.

- **Murray Valley Sanctuary Refugee Group, Albury Wodonga** has sponsored and supported more than 80 humanitarian entrant refugees to settle in Albury-Wodonga. The impact of the settlement experience for the many volunteers, organisations and businesses involved, has been life changing, improving the quality of life of both regional Australians and refugees.

- **Sanctuary Foundation Australia, Coffs Harbour.** For over 25 years, Sanctuary has sponsored, provided interest-free travel loans, and resettled Government approved humanitarian entrant refugees, helping them to rebuild their lives in Australia from war zones around the world.
- About 40,000 Syrian refugees arrived in **Canada in 2016**, with roughly a third sponsored by Canadian citizens motivated to bring people to safety. The Canadian government struggled to find and screen sufficient numbers of eligible refugees to meet the demand of willing, welcoming sponsors.

➤ **Evidence**

The report **Small Towns - Big Returns** compiled by *AMES and Deloitte Access Economics* has recently been released. This case study outlines both the process and the economic and social impacts of the resettlement of a Karen refugee community in the township of **Nhill** in North West Victoria. While it acknowledges that the “increased resettlement of migrants and refugees in regional Australia has been an on-going focus of the policies of successive governments”, the report provides very clear statistical evidence and guidelines on what contributed to the success of this major resettlement, not just for Nhill but for the area more broadly.

<https://www.ames.net.au/files/file/Research/19933%20AMES%20Nhill%20Report%20LR.pdf>

Nhill is a relatively isolated agricultural town in the wheat-belt Wimmera region of Victoria. In 2010, Luv-a-Duck, the largest commercial business in the town, was seeking to expand in response to increased market demand but was unable to do so because of a lack of potential employees. This was the result of a declining working-age population, in a context of relatively low unemployment. Luv-a-Duck management undertook a process which was very similar to the process described in the Mingoola example referred to above. A Karen community was relocated to Nhill to address the labour shortage and has contributed to the successful expansion of the business. With the inclusion of the Karen community into the local community significant growth was experienced in a range of areas, including but not limited to, health and education.

In relation to economic benefit

- A total of **70.5 FTE have been added to the local economy**. This includes 54 Karen who are directly employed by Luv-a-Duck and seven that are employed by businesses supplying them, representing approximately **3% of the total employment** across the local government area.
- The increased population has led to the creation and filling of **additional jobs** across the broader community.
- The economic impact of the increased labour supply in terms of Gross Regional Product as estimated by Deloitte Access Economics is **\$41.5 million**

In terms of social impacts the report states that Karen resettlement has helped to

- Redress population decline for the township
- Revitalise local services so that they are in the position to attract increased funding
- Increase social capital across both communities

It is recognised that the success of the Karen resettlement was dependent on a number of contributing factors. These include

- Employment opportunities
- Strong leadership in the host community
- Effective preparation of the host community for the new settlers
- The availability of initial accommodation for new arrivals
- Support for new families
- Management of the “cultural adjustment” required on both sides
- Strong leadership in the refugee/settling community
- Preparation of the settlers for their new environment.

The report clearly outlines a strategy that could be used to address situations where rural communities are experiencing similar issues.

➤ **The Way Forward**

If this proposal is to be considered, it will require financial and political support however the benefits are far reaching. Potential sources of support include

- Rural communities themselves where community members are keen to support refugees/new arrivals
- Sponsorship programs involving private enterprise and/or community groups and not for profit agencies.
- Partnerships with state governments. The **Regional Partnerships initiative in Victoria** seeks to encourage innovation and development in rural and regional areas. Industry sector development in tourism, agriculture, manufacturing and freight and local amenity and infrastructure were identified as priority areas at the Ovens Murray Regional Partnership Assembly in 2016. These initiatives will require access to an appropriate workforce. <https://engage.vic.gov.au/ovens-murray>
- Possible support for partnerships with micro-financing agencies that are prepared to be involved with refugee communities who wish to start business enterprises in rural areas. **Thrive Refugee Enterprise** is one such agency which is well supported by Corporate Partners and provides ongoing business support and mentorship. <http://thriverefugeeenterprise.org.au/>
- These initiatives would also work in parallel with the current **Safe Haven Enterprise Visa** process which encourages refugees to move to rural/regional areas.

➤ **Conclusion**

This submission has sought to briefly outline the social and economic factors that currently exist in rural and regional areas and make a significant contribution to the difficulties experienced by these communities. This is true for many of the communities in the area covered by the **Northern Victoria Refugee Support Network** and indeed, more broadly across Australia. The examples included in this submission support a win-win approach, one that benefits Australians living in rural/regional communities and those that are seeking to establish a future for their families in our country.

The successful resettlement of refugee communities in rural/regional areas will require coordination at both a local level and more broadly across rural and regional areas. The readiness of communities to embark on such a project and the ongoing coordination and support that would be required if these initiatives are to be successful, would be crucial in obtaining a positive outcome for the communities involved.

An agency located in a rural/regional area would be in the best position to provide this administrative support and would be consistent with the goal of decentralizing Commonwealth entities and functions.

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