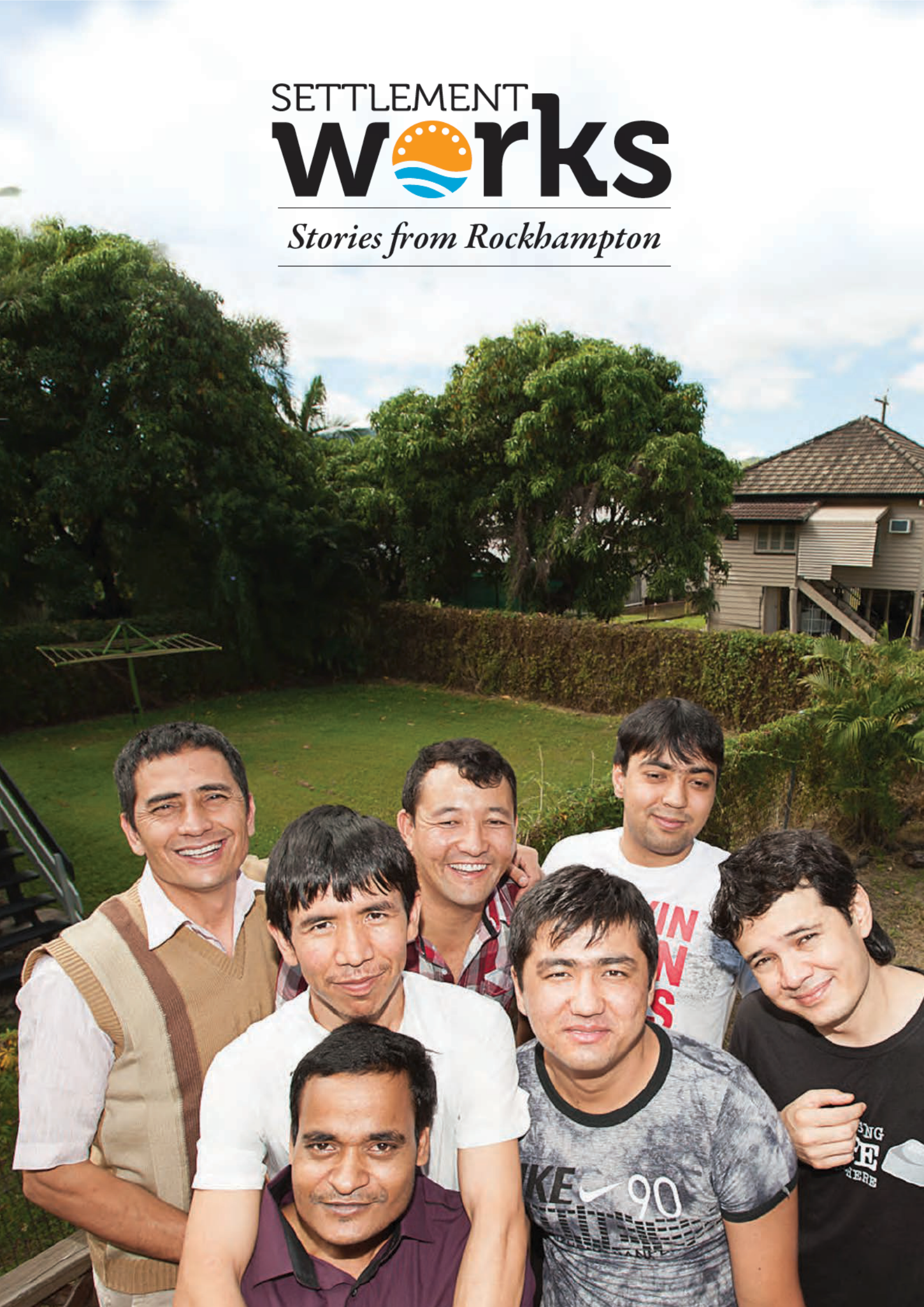
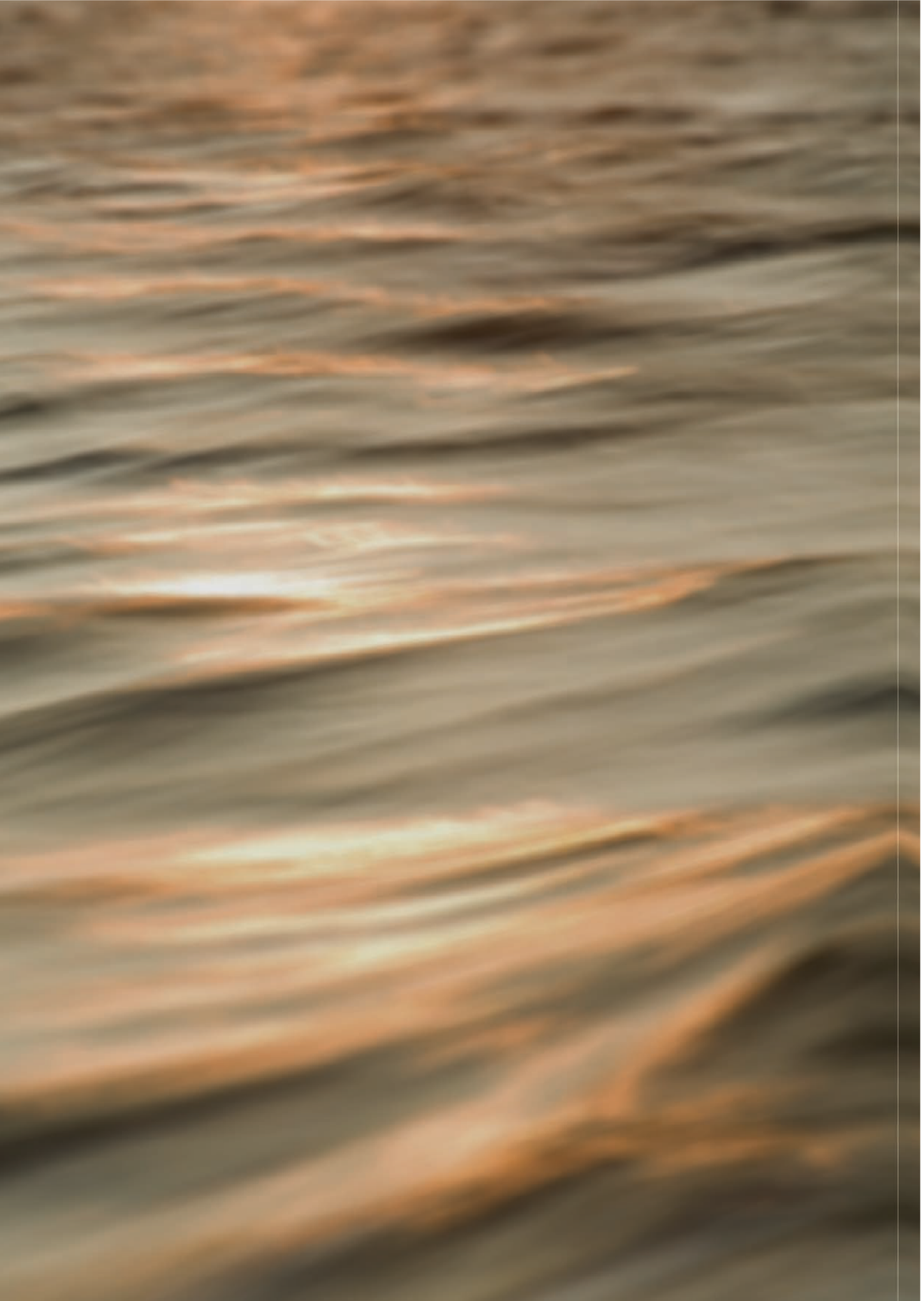
SETTLEMENT works

Stories from Rockhampton





SETTLEMENT works

Stories from Rockhampton

This report tells the settlement stories of eight new settlers from refugee backgrounds in Rockhampton—their search for employment and a place to call home.

mda

Multicultural Development Association

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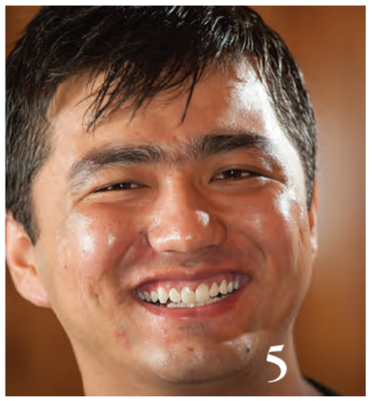

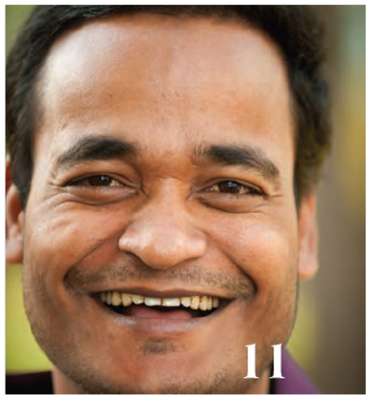

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INTRODUCTION

The Multicultural Development Association (MDA) is a major settlement agency in Queensland providing settlement support for around 2500 clients each year. MDA assists refugees to settle across Brisbane, Central Coast and South West Queensland including Rockhampton.

Our services are delivered through various strategies including case management, community engagement and advocacy. The work of MDA focuses on building the confidence and capacity of new arrivals to participate in Australian society both socially and economically. A key part of settlement success has been the creation of new pathways to employment.

Recent years have seen significant demographic changes in the newly arrived refugees that MDA assists. Since 2010 there have been increasing numbers of unaccompanied men between the ages of 21 and 40 arriving in Australia as asylum seekers and refugees. This cohort has a number of strong reasons to find employment as soon as possible.

Firstly, many have been forced to flee without any preparation and therefore have no access to resources and need to find employment to establish themselves.

Many have left their families behind and are keen to bring them to safety in Australia. Added to this desire, there is a powerful cultural expectation for them to support immediate and extended family members who have been left behind.

In addition, many of the newly arrived refugees have spent some months in Australian detention centres and are in search of strategies to fast forward their connection with the community and to find ways to overcome the challenges imposed by detention.

This strong desire for employment extends to a willingness to re-locate to regional areas where critical labour shortages exist. Many of the new arrivals are highly mobile and willing to work in jobs that many Australian workers would reject. A recent MDA survey found that 64% of recently arrived men were willing to do labouring jobs in Australia regardless of what their pre-arrival employment experiences were.

These men are motivated to sustain their employment which has led to higher labour retention for employers and a high level of social participation in local communities. This has been the experience in Rockhampton, a regional city of about 116 700 people.

Keys to success in Rockhampton

Since 2010 many hundreds of refugee men have travelled to Rockhampton to find work. Two years later, it is a success story of regional settlement.

In addition to the strong drivers for work, there are other key ingredients that have contributed to the successful settlement outcomes in Rockhampton.

History of welcoming new settlers

Rockhampton has a long history of welcoming migrant workers to the region and this has continued with the Rockhampton community's welcome to men from the Middle East and South East Asia. Local services, local communities, neighbours, businesses and most individuals have positively embraced this new group of hopeful settlers.

One new arrival related that: "You know transport is not that good in Rockhampton and I was really struggling to get around after work. One day my neighbour told me I can use his car, I almost cried"

Networks of support

There are strong bonds between groups who have shared similar refugee and asylum seeking experiences. Information about work opportunities is readily shared across national networks of newly arrived refugees. It was through these networks, that word spread of the positive work experiences and the acceptance of the Rockhampton community.

"Word of mouth is everything and as soon as someone has a good work story to tell, word gets around" (Mohammad Azad page 13)

Strong local partnerships

The Rockhampton Regional Council through its Access and Equity agenda, provided a formal welcome to the new refugees in 2010 that is still remembered positively. This welcome initiated the strong collaborative approach to community building that continues today.

New arrivals have benefited from the strong volunteer networks in the Rockhampton area including organisations such as Sanctuary and the Central Queensland Multicultural Association.

The local AMEP program at TAFE has partnered with MDA to deliver English language classes at a time that suits shift workers.

On 23 June, Rockhampton hosted *Walk Together* which was part of an Australia-wide move to welcome newcomers to Australia. There was great support from the local community including media. Despite the rain, people were walking in solidarity with newly arrived refugees and demonstrating the strength of the Rockhampton community's support for them.

"These people have come here through a difficult journey, this is only a few drops of rain, and I am happy to be able to welcome people" said one local.

Industry partnerships

A partnership focussed on employment with AWX, the local Teys Australia meatworks and MDA has been integral to the successful settlement of almost 500 newly arrived refugees to the region. There was a critical shortage of workers at the meatworks and without these men, Teys would have found it very hard to continue production at sustainable levels.

A Teys Australia employer said … "once refugee workers are trained, and familiar with Australian work environments and culture, they have a high degree of loyalty. They now belong to the local community".

The partnership approach enabled AWX to put in place strategies to secure and retain the workforce needed.

These strategies included:

- Employing bicultural workers to assist with workplace induction and support
- Flexible repayment options for travel and establishment expenses
- Translating materials into community languages;
- Reconfiguring the induction process to meet the learning needs of men
- Ensuring that workers have access to English classes

Attractive lifestyle and surrounds

From the sub tropical surrounds and the beach, to the friendly, uncrowded atmosphere, Rockhampton has captured many of the men's hearts. In contrast to their past experiences and their time in Australian capital cities, Rockhampton is a peaceful and desirable place to live.

Local settlement support

MDA's commitment to regional settlement in Rockhampton, despite uncertainty about funding viability, has enabled the provision of settlement support to newly arrived refugees and sustainable retention of new arrivals. When MDA started work in Rockhampton in mid 2011, there was no certainty about how long people would work or stay in the town. Creating a settlement support framework has helped arrivals to establish themselves in work and to build a community. Gradually, things have turned around with less transience and more people choosing to remain in Rockhampton. Since August 2011, approximately 80% of arrivals are now staying in Rockhampton. They are working in increasingly diverse local industries, making friends and establishing local community connections. In the last few months, MDA has supported local Afghan Hazara and Rohingyan communities with their first steps towards creating formal community groups.

MDA's experience in Rockhampton demonstrates that a coordinated approach to settlement involving industry, community, government and settlement services works.

"People in Rocky are honest. I feel like they are friendly and warm to me; much better than big cities where people have no time for you. When my family comes to Australia, I want them to settle here in Rocky, my new home."

ALI ABBAS REZAI

I was born in Logar, Qarbagh, Ghazni, Afghanistan in a time of war. I was the middle child between my sister and brother. During that time, the Soviets were occupying Afghanistan and my father had to serve in the army for two years. When he returned, he owned a shop in the city. After the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Taliban took over. They believe that Hazara people are infidels, and things became very dangerous for us.

My father was executed by the Taliban when I was 14. He was killed because he was Hazara and a shop owner. My mother went to a friend of my father for help to flee. At this time, many Hazara people were leaving Afghanistan for Pakistan and Iran. We went to Quetta in Pakistan. There was already an established Hazara population in Quetta from 200 years before. They had fled there because of persecution by Amir Abdul Rahman an Afghani King who committed genocide against the Hazara people. So you can see how Hazara people have never known peace.

For five or six years the situation in Quetta was good. People were so friendly and helped us a lot. I worked to take care of my family selling clothes and then, when I was 16, loading and unloading trucks. There was always a threat from outside, and we were only able to mix with our own people, but at least we were safe. That was until 2004 when the first bomb blast went off in Quetta. After the Americans invaded Afghanistan, many of the Taliban people came to Pakistan to hide and started to carry out target attacks in Quetta. Things began to become bad for us again.

In 2008 I met my wife. After I finished my work each day I would go to English classes from 6 pm to 7pm. I was so embarrassed when I was young and too shy to talk to women. So it was four or five months before I actually spoke to her. I had made a plan to get her phone number and call her on the phone to speak—that way I would not be too ashamed to talk.

In my culture you do not ask for approval to be married, so when my mother approached me and asked me what my plans for the future were I was delighted. She met with my future wife and not long after we got married. We now have a beautiful son named Farhan Ali Rezai.

Apart from this happiness, life in Quetta was becoming more and more dangerous. All over the walls in the street graffitti was written, saying that Shia people should be removed—that Hazara people were not welcome in Pakistan anymore. So I returned to Afghanistan to see what the situation was like there. I thought perhaps my family could return home. But things were worse there. So I returned to Quetta and spoke with my family about what we should do. My wife did not want me to leave, but my mother was sure that it was the best option for us. She said she could not bear to see her son killed in front of her. There was a big risk that this may happen as the attacks targeted men. I needed to stay alive to take care of my family, so I took the long journey to seek asylum.

In Quetta I played football with a guy called Lucky. Lucky and I kept in touch through Facebook while I was in detention. He told me that he had found good work for refugees in a town called Rockhampton. When I was granted my permanent visa I moved to Rockhampton as quickly as I could and have been here ever since. I love living here, because whenever I get sad or miss my family I have my friends here to cheer me up. They understand what I am feeling and help me. On Saturdays we go to the beach together, to Yeppoon or Emu Park and have a BBQ. When I was in Brisbane I heard people talking about the Gold Coast. I have never been there, but I think that Yeppoon would be a much better place. On Sundays we all go shopping to get our food for the week, but then try to rest as much as we can because we know we have work on Monday.

> *"The Burmese guys who live with us are so friendly. They are refugees too and they understand what our lives have been like, so it is easy for us to get along. We sit together and eat and drink tea together. They are really funny guys."*

IDRES MOHAMMADI

I was lucky. I was sponsored by my brother in law who came to Australia in 2000. So I didn't have to spend time in detention. For that I am thankful. I received sponsorship in August 2011. At the time I was living in Quetta. I had left Afghanistan when I was very small.

At first I went to Mildura to join my brother in law and sister. I worked for 3 months on a small farm, but this was only casual, seasonal work. So when a friend told me that I could get good, regular work in Rockhampton I left Mildura right away.

I like living in this house because they are my fellows.

I enjoy talking with my friends and going together to BBQs and having fun. I don't like alcohol, and we don't really drink but we can still have fun. The Burmese guys who live here and the Korean guys who work with me, we are all great friends. Even though I had never met anyone from Korea before I came to Rockhampton, now we are joking and laughing all day at work.

My favourite place to go is Yeppoon, but I am not a good swimmer so I just make sure I stay between the flags where it is safe to swim. The lifeguards there are really nice guys too.

"I love living with these guys so much. If they move house, I will move with them. Now all I need is an Australian girlfriend."

ABBAS ALI REZAI

I was born in Dasht, Nili, Daikundi, Afghanistan. I come from a small family, and have only one brother and one sister. I left Afghanistan when I was 15 years old, as a refugee. Like most Afghanis you will meet in Rockhampton, we all left during that time because it was too dangerous for us to stay. Hazara people were being targeted every day.

We went to Quetta, where it was safe and happy for a while. But after 2003 things began to worsen. Day after day more attacks happened. We were very anxious and all we could talk about was: "should we stay or should we go?" One good thing though that happened during that time was I met and married my wife, Masooma. We now have two beautiful children.

My family decided I had to leave Pakistan. I had to stay alive for my family, and with more and more attacks it was too dangerous to stay in Quetta.

I hadn't had my visa very long when an old friend, Mohammad Azad , called me to tell me that the meat works he was working at was looking for more workers. I quickly joined him in Rockhampton.

Rockhampton is a beautiful small town; easy to get around, safe and not too crowded. It is very multicultural and I enjoy mixing with people from all over the world. In Quetta, all Hazara people had to keep to themselves as it was too dangerous to talk with strangers, but in Rockhampton, people are always so friendly and talk to me, asking where I am from and what my life has been like.

We are actually a peaceful culture, and wish to live with other people without fighting, without tension and without conflict. I think finally we have found that place in Rockhampton.

This week I do the cleaning and Ali does the cooking. We share to make it easier for us. We all miss our wives I think.

What I have found in Rockhampton is freedom. I can be myself, talk to who I want to, and go where I want. There is a feeling I have here like anything is possible.

Although I am so happy here, I still do worry about my family at home. I lodged my humanitarian sponsorship application for my family 2 years ago, but nothing has happened. Recently I lodged a spouse visa also, so I hope that is approved soon. I miss them so much.

"Today is my day to clean the house. We all take turns doing the different jobs to help out."

HAIDER ALI AHMADI

My name is Haider Ali Ahmadi and I was born in Kisaw, Afghanistan. I am Hazara and I am proud to call myself Hazara. In the year 2000 my father was killed by the Taliban, so from the age of 12 I had to work to support my family.

I worked selling rice and vegetables in Pakistan. I would buy them from the Pashtoon areas and take them and sell them in the Hazara areas. This was very dangerous, but I was small and young and fast and no one could catch me....until one day when some members of the Taliban caught me. That is why I am missing a front tooth and have a scar on my arm. They cut me with a knife there; that was my warning. They told me because I was just a boy they would not kill me, but if they saw me there again they would hurt me worse. So I never went back.

I worked in many jobs after that, but it was becoming harder and harder to earn enough money for my family and stay safe. So at the age of 18 I made the long journey to Australia.

I spent 2 years in detention, more time than any of my friends.

Then I went to Sydney for 2 months, but it was too big and I didn't feel like it had a soul. So when I heard about Mohammad Azad in Rockhampton, I rang him to ask about it. It sounded like a good place to live. It is such a nice place with such nice people. We are never harassed or bothered here. We can live in peace.

The situation in Quetta is so bad, that people are too scared to leave their houses. Sometimes I cannot believe the freedom I get to enjoy here in Rockhampton.

"The houses are big and so different from the Afghani houses. The back yards are green and full of plants and trees."

ABDUL HAMID

I am a Rohingyan man from Burma. I have five brothers. I only studied for five years in school. I had to leave early to work as a fisherman to support my family. When I was fifteen I opened a shop selling clothes. This was better money than working as a fisherman, but was much harder as men from the government would come in and take clothes from my shop and not pay for them. Soon they sent me bankrupt. So I started working in my brother's shop helping him. But he was having the same problems as I was with government people stealing.

One day my Aunty came to me to tell me about problems she was having with some government officials who were forcing her to sign documents that would mean she would not own her home any longer. She refused and they beat her. I went with her to her house to help her and they beat me also. I was beaten unconscious. When I woke up I didn't know what had happened. My Aunty had disappeared and I didn't know where she had gone. No one knew. When I went home my family asked me what had happened to me, but I didn't want to tell them and scare them more.

I spent a long time searching for my Aunty, but I could not find her anywhere. I went to the immigration office to ask them, but they said they knew nothing about it. Later I was told she had fled the country because she was scared for her life. Not long after I also left Burma, to seek asylum. I stayed in Malaysia for 3 years and worked in construction. I wanted to come to Australia so I could live freely and independently. In Australia, Rohingyan people are not persecuted and we are able to have human rights. That is something I have never experienced before.

Rockhampton is a beautiful town; it is easy to go everywhere. I am very thankful to the people of Rockhampton.

Living with the Hazara people is good. They are so friendly.

"We don't look at each other as being from different cultures; we look at each other as friends."

MOHAMMAD AZAD

I fled Afghanistan after several narrow escapes and attempts on my life by the Taliban. I was working in Afghanistan for the Canadian and French armies as well as the American special forces. I can speak 6 languages including 3 local Afghani languages. There was no choice but to flee Afghanistan during the conflict and I took my family to Pakistan where they remain today. I am always thinking of them and hoping they are safe. In 2009 I decided to leave Pakistan when it became unsafe and sought refugee status in Australia. After I arrived I spent four and a half months time in detention on Christmas Island. These were difficult times but now that I'm in Rockhampton with many, many men who have shared similar experiences we are able to support one another. I think this helps many new people to Rockhampton. They get some comfort from what they have experienced while they are separated from their families.

I arrived in Rockhampton with a couple of friends and for the first two days we walked each and every street of this new city. This is when I fell in love with Rockhampton. But the first few months were hard. We lived at the local backpackers and I remember feeling very nervous. I had only been out of detention for a few months and was unsure about how anything worked in Australia or who to contact for anything.

We had no rental history so getting a house was a real struggle. I had heard from others that living in a new place is very difficult. They had told me that sometimes the local people aren't welcoming or act aggressively or even violently towards us because we're different. This isn't what is happening in Rockhampton. I know that Rockhampton has a long history of welcoming refugees and other migrants from Vietnam, Brazil and the Philippines. The locals of Rockhampton have always welcomed us into their community and it's because they have done so for a long time and know about migrants.

My job with AWX at the meatworks was to support many new refugees—Afghans, Kurds, Tamils and men from Burma into the local community. Almost 100 men moved to Rockhampton within the first few weeks of my arrival and each week tens more men arrived, one group after another. Word of mouth is everything and as soon as someone has a good work story to tell, word gets around.

Many men find it difficult to get work because they don't speak English fluently and their skills are not recognised. Also, many men don't understand about how you get a job. In Australia it's a competitive process and you need a resume and have an interview. In Afghanistan it depends much more on who you know.

Now everyone wants to come to Rockhampton. I have helped more than 700 people settle in Rockhampton. Some have not stayed, but we now have a community group of more than 500 refugees who plan to make Rockhampton home.

In 2010 the local city council held a welcome ceremony that was great because it really brought everyone together. Since that time other local community groups including the Philippino and Indian communities have invited us to their events. Local Aboriginal and Muslim communities have also offered us practical assistance and invited us to their celebrations. This has not been possible for many other Hazaras living in Brisbane and Logan.

Since MDA set up its office here it has made such a difference to people staying and settling. Recently I secured a job at MDA which I love because I can help more people to settle well in Rockhampton. I really like working with my colleagues.

"I hope to buy a house here for my family and I have visited the school where I want my children to learn. I can see my wife and children having a wonderful life here in Rockhampton."

HOSSEIN DADRAS

I arrived in Rockhampton in October 2011. Like everyone, I came to work in the meat factory. But I didn't stay very long, only around a month, because I hated seeing all the blood. After I quit, I moved to Sydney, but I found it hard to settle because it is so big and noisy. I missed Rockhampton. So after two months, I returned to Rockhampton and began searching for a job.

I was staying with a friend initially and his girlfriend introduced me to Lynda, who has a real estate and cleaning business. I volunteered with Lynda to gain some experience and build my resume. After doing this for a little time, Lynda suggested I apply for a job at the Mazda car dealer in town. Ever since I was a child I have loved working with cars and being around cars, so when my application was accepted I was overwhelmed with happiness. My job is to apply the accessories that the customer orders to the vehicles. I get to work with my hands and tools, and I love it. My boss tells me I do good work and he is very happy with me. His praise means a lot.

My case manager at MDA has helped me to get a lease agreement and I am now living in a house that I love. My favourite thing about Rockhampton is the quiet. Oh, and I love a beer.

"After a hard day's work, I kick off my boots, sit out on the veranda and enjoy a cold beer. There is no better feeling in the world."

MOHSEN FADAEE

I came to Rockhampton one week after Hossein. After some time in the meat works, I moved to Melbourne to find some different work. I started working as a painter for a company in Melbourne, but they were offering to pay me cash-in-hand illegally and I felt uncomfortable breaking the law like that.

So when Hossein called me and told me that Mazda were looking to hire new people, I quickly returned to Rockhampton. I now work with Hossein and I love it. We are meeting new people and working with some great guys. We laugh a lot at work.

I am very happy I came back to Rockhampton. To meet true Aussie people, you need to move to the small cities like Rockhampton. To learn about the true soul of Australia, to learn the Australian accent and way of life, Rockhampton is the place to be. It is beautiful and small and the people are really good.

From the beginning MDA took my hand and showed me the way. Without them I would have been lost. They gave me a lot of knowledge and strength to begin my new life, and I am forever thankful to them for that.

"For me, Rockhampton is definitely the place to be."

EMPLOYMENT CASE STUDY—ROCKHAMPTON

In less than two years, 480 unaccompanied male humanitarian refugees were employed to work at the Teys Australia meatworks in Rockhampton. Some of these men were surveyed as part of MDA's 'Snapshot—employment in early settlement 2012'.

The Teys Australia Rockhampton plant has a slaughtering capacity of 1,731 head per day and is Australia's largest single shift slaughterer. It is Rockhampton's largest single employer.

It is a company: "…committed to valuing differences, respecting all individuals and maintaining an environment in which everyone is treated with dignity. Leveraging diversity enables innovation and creativity which enhances sustainable business opportunities. This commitment is supported by our long-standing policy of providing equal opportunity in employment to all qualified applicants."

Teys needed workers as it was unable to fill vacancies. The company had positive experiences with humanitarian refugee and migrant families in its Biloela plant and was therefore interested in a partnership for Rockhampton.

Teys acknowledges there can be challenges in employing people with minimal English and has taken a number of steps to support the transition into the workplace including:

- Translating materials into community languages;
- Reconfiguring the induction process to meet the learning needs of the men; and
- Ensuring that workers have access to English classes.

The partnership between Teys Australia, AWX and MDA developed from a recognition by these companies that people who have come to Australia as refugees have a strength and determination to succeed that translates into reliability, loyalty and commitment in the workplace. Following the successful employment of a small number of men from Sri Lanka by AWX through MDA's settlement program, the program grew and a number of initiatives were put in place to ensure appropriate job matching and supports were in place.

Many of the early applicants had experience working for themselves, as shepherds, selling fruit or trinkets, or on building sites as tilers, concreters, plumbers or electricians. None had formal qualifications for their trades. AWX worked to secure these men specific jobs at the meatworks. This strategy required a focus on a thorough pre-induction covering safety, personal hygiene, product hygiene, food safety, good manufacturing practice and workplace readiness.

AWX also provided essential practical support on the ground to facilitate access to these jobs. Many of these workers received support to locate temporary accommodation, transport from the workplace; and connection to community services and events. The company met the upfront costs of travel, medical expenses and accommodation.

AWX and MDA attribute the engagement of staff from similar ethnic backgrounds as a success factor for the ongoing employment of humanitarian refugees at the Teys meatworks in Rockhampton. One of the people formerly employed as a recruitment

Table Rockhampton Meatworks number of commencements and resignations

Rockhampton Meatworks — Employment of Humanitarian Refugees				
April 2010 to February 2012				
	Number	Proportion		Total
Commencements	480	100%		480
Ongoing AWX employees	185	38.54%	63.75%	306
Transferred to Teys employees	121	25.21%		
Resignations	174	36.25%		174

Source: AWX Agribusines, Brisbane, 1 February 2012

officer, speaks six languages and was an effective advocate for the men, also providing orientation support to new workers.

In February 2012, of the 480 men employed with Teys 306 (64%) were actively employed, while 174 (36%) had moved on and/or resigned.

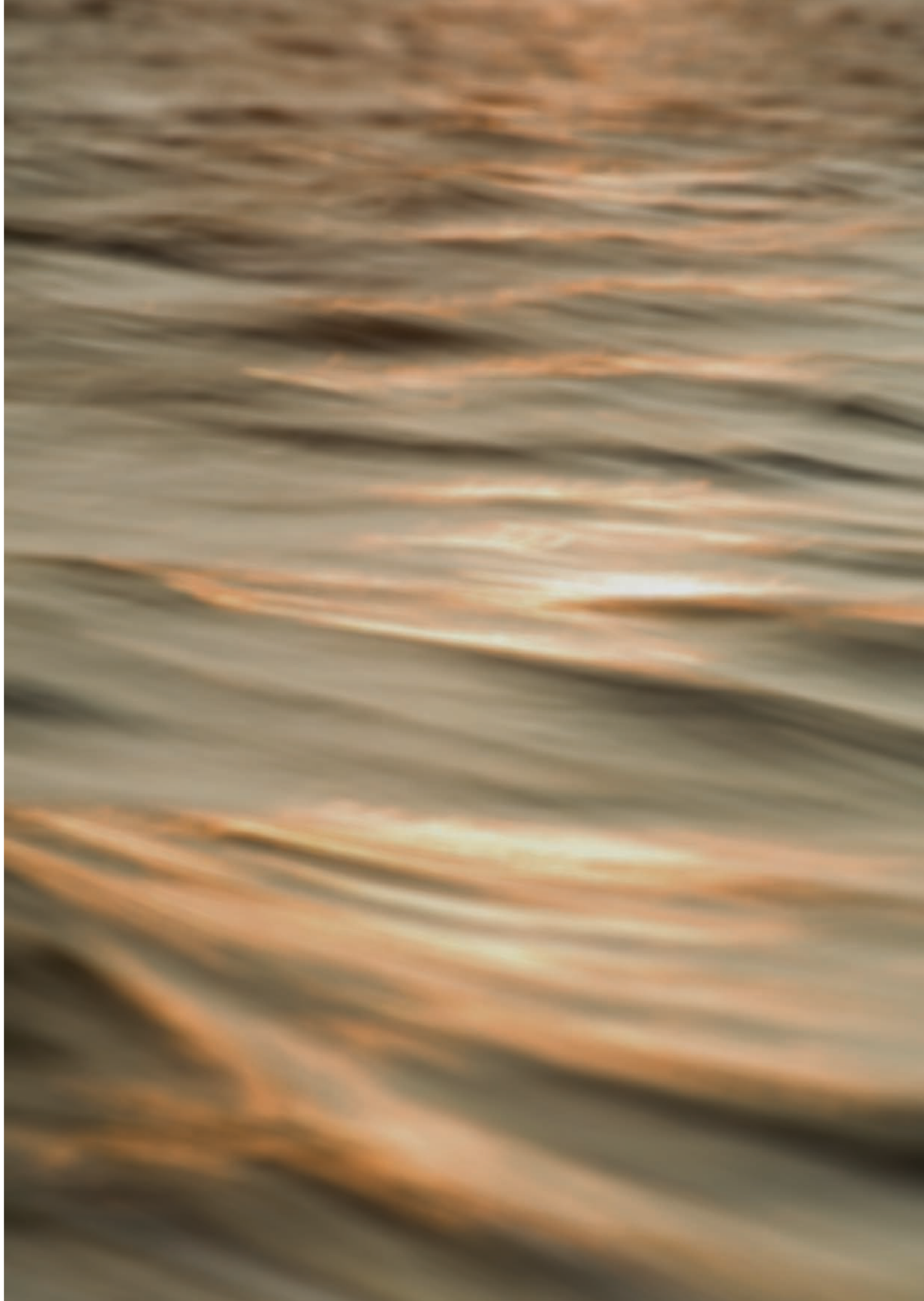
For the initial nine months, the workers were employees of AWX Agribusiness and transferred to Teys' employ at the end of this time. One hundred and twenty one (25.2%) of those employed in the last two years became ongoing Teys employees.

Of the humanitarian refugees who resigned or moved on from the meatworks, the main motivation for leaving was that the work was not as expected, although some who left for this reason stayed for up to six months. Others who stayed between three to six months left to meet up with family overseas and stayed overseas longer than the company allowed. This resulted in these men being designated as resigned or having left their employment.

From Teys Australia's perspective, once refugee workers are trained and you get to know them, they have a high degree of loyalty to the plant. Humanitarian refugees arrive at Teys Australia mostly as workers unskilled in the meat industry and Teys Australia develops their skills to meet the necessary industry requirements. Some workers then move onto other industries based on the skills they acquire working with Teys Australia.

According to Teys Australia, humanitarian refugees working in the Rockhampton meatworks has addressed a critical shortage of workers and they have brought significant benefits to the region. Without humanitarian refugees and skilled migrants, Teys would find it very hard to continue production at sustainable levels at some sites, particularly in Rockhampton and Biloela:

" If production was reduced or plants were unable to open locally, then there would be massive flow on effects in the region—to farmers, stockyards, stock agents and other businesses and the Australia economy. This would run to millions of dollars."



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