

FECCA Submission to the Inquiry into regional skills relocation

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About FECCA

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing the interests of Culturally and Linguistically (CALD) diverse Australians. We provide advocacy, develop policy and promote issues on behalf of our constituency to government and the broader community.

FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism. FECCA's membership comprises state, territory and regional multicultural and ethnic community councils.

FECCA has an elected executive committee and a professional national secretariat implementing policies and work programs on behalf of its membership and stakeholders.

Introduction

FECCA is pleased to contribute to the inquiry into regional skills relocation.

FECCA has a Regional Chair on its Executive Committee responsible for a regional development policy advisory committee which has produced a regional migration policy. This submission draws substantially on this policy. As the national peak body advocating on behalf of Australia's diverse communities, FECCA is well placed to submit to this report.

Terms of reference

The terms of reference are to inquire into and report on the applicability of government employment policies to address the skills shortages in regional Australia focusing on opportunities to support the relocation of unemployed workers from areas of high unemployment to areas experiencing skills shortages.

FECCA regional migration policy

Apart from earlier historic programs such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the Australian Government since the 1990s has been encouraging new immigrants to settle in regional and rural Australia through a number of initiatives. This regionalisation of immigration policy has been implemented through a range of visa pathways which aim to attract immigrants with a range of skills to regional and rural Australia. It seeks to help ameliorate and address population and labour shortages outside of the capital cities. Retaining as well as attracting new immigrants to small rural townships and rural communities has been identified as the key challenge (Colins & Krivokapic-Skoko 2007).

Family connections, job opportunities and life style are three major reasons given by immigrants for settling in regional and rural areas.

The single most important factor regional and rural immigrants identify as a disincentive is inadequate amenities (Colins & Krivokapic-Skoko 2007).

Encouraging regional settlement with supporting infrastructure is a sound ideal. However, it is critical that it is underpinned by adequate planning and funding for rural development. Some immigrants who initially settle in regional and rural areas are not obtaining adequate support and settlement services. After a brief period in a rural location these immigrants move to metropolitan areas where they find that better services (specialist and mainstream) are available and where it is more likely that they'll find people from similar cultural backgrounds who can provide social support, information and direct and indirect support with the challenges of settlement.

Some of the issues faced by individuals and families from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds settling in rural Australia are:

- limited knowledge about services available
- limited information on how to access services
- poorly planned settlement services for new and old migrants
- limited education opportunities for diverse communities
- inadequate funding of some initiatives in regional areas
- unemployment, particularly of young adults
- problems with accessing housing and inability to compete in the

private rental market

- and a lack of cross-cultural awareness in rural locations.

Settlement of asylum seekers, refugees and humanitarian entrants in regional areas

Many people now seeking asylum in Australia come from dry, rural, inland communities. As a consequence, they may be more comfortable living in, and helping to maintain populations and economies in rural Australia. The injection of immigrants into rural society and economies also has the potential to pay great dividends. In many communities agriculture is in decline and economic drivers are the manufacturing, mining and service industries. Immigrants with new ideas and ways of doing this may both help to revitalise agriculture while also contributing to other industries.

Regional settlement of refugees is an extremely complex matter. The government directs settlement in regional areas of about 1200 humanitarian entrants annually. In areas such as Warnambool and Swan Hill local councils and communities have supported relocation settlement to fill local labour shortages and grow communities. In some other areas spontaneous secondary settlement has occurred in regional areas like Gatton Queensland and Orange NSW.

A good example of successful secondary settlement is the Karen community in WA who moved en masse (30 families) from Perth to Katanning because they had come from rural areas in Burma and found the city difficult. Crucial to this success was a great deal of hard work by the community, as well as different levels of government, local community and local businesses to ensure sufficient support services were available to them. The majority were families from remote areas who felt they 'didn't belong in the city'. Major issues after securing employment were finding accommodation, driving and appropriate education for their children.

The lessons learnt from these types of experiences are that key drivers of regional settlement seem to be employment opportunities, cost of living and suitable housing affordability, regional lifestyle, presence of family and friends of same ethnic/religious backgrounds, and financial assistance for relocation.

Factors attributed to the success of regional settlement are: thorough and extensive planning processes; consulting and communicating widely, including engaging new arrivals about their experiences, needs and

expectation, recognise and understand resettlement involves a number of transitions and phases of readjustment with different needs being addressed, working with local community and ensuring all necessary services are adequate and readily available, and preparing and training service providers and stakeholders including the local indigenous community and existing migrant and refugee groups; and continually evaluating stakeholders satisfaction and community relations (Peter Templeton, First Assistant Secretary, Settlement, DIAC conference paper at FECCA Conference Shepparton 2009).

Regional universities

FECCA advocates continued funding, development and growth of regional universities and support for international students who attend these universities. International students provide economic stimulus to regional areas and add to the cultural diversity and dynamism of regional Australia. Greater support needs to be given to international students in regional Australia including in cultural orientation and in community harmony and safety initiatives in regional universities as well as in metropolitan areas.

Transport issues

Despite improvement of metropolitan transport services, transport issues in regional and rural areas still need attention in order to attract and retain people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Some parts of regional areas do not have tarred roads and therefore during wet season these routes are very unsafe to drive. Some of these roads are not regularly repaired from pot holes and eroded edges and as such has caused road fatalities.

The air services between regional towns and metropolitan areas are limited and costly. Air transport may be the only means of transport because of the distances between towns. Trains and buses are equally limited and have to be booked in some cases well in advance, which does not support any unexpected travel to metropolitan areas for treatment by medical specialists and other professional services.

Mobile telephones are not accessible in all of regional Australia. This limitation imposes a severe restriction on people's ability to call for services. The unavailability of broadband in some rural areas prevents access to a wide range of internet and television programs. FECCA

supports current Australian Government plans to extend broadband coverage in the regions through a National Broadband Network.

Regional adjustment

There is a significant rate of adjustment underway across Australia. A case in point is the Murray Darling Basin. The Murray Darling Basin Authority is developing strategies to engage with 2.2 million stakeholders in order to undertake its work to manage the Basin's water resources in the national interest. The Murray Darling Basin Authority has the responsibility under the *Water Act 2007* which includes the development of an integrated water resource plan for the Murray Darling Basin that will restore to health this major river system so that it can sustain its environment, enhance and maintain the services it provides and support the communities and industries that depend on it. This is a significant challenge, which is being addressed in a new and unique way.

Water availability, tax incentives, a receptive environment, improved infrastructure and a systematic whole of government approach is necessary to sustain and grow regional communities in areas like the Murray-Darling Basin undergoing significant re-adjustment. This includes policies aimed at retaining and attracting migrants and workers from the cities to areas of skills shortages

In 2006, almost a quarter of Australia's population was born overseas, including people from over 200 countries. However, this diversity tends to be concentrated in the capital cities. There were more than 201 000 people residing in the Murray-Darling Basin who were born overseas, representing 10.7 per cent of the Basin population. Over half of the overseas born were either in Canberra (76 200) or in inner regional areas of the Basin. The proportion of overseas born residents in all regions of the Basin is consistently lower than the rest of Australia.

Between 2001 and 2006, there was a 7.3 per cent increase in overseas born population of the Basin, which compares to an 8.3 per cent increase for the rest of Australia. However, the overseas born population for inner regional areas of the basin grew slightly more in this period, with an 11.4 per cent increase (about 8 800 new migrants). While the numbers are not large, migrant populations from some countries may be concentrated in particular areas. For example, the inner regional town of Toowoomba attracted over 400 arrivals from the Sudan as part of the humanitarian migration program in the 2001 to 2006 period (Socio-Economic Context

for the Murray-Darling Basin Descriptive Report).

It is crucial that stakeholders from a multicultural background have the opportunity to be involved in the process which will impact not only on their lives but on subsequent generations.

Similarly, significant efforts must be made on behalf of diverse multicultural communities in other areas of the country undergoing significant rural adjustment.

Conclusion

To address skills shortages in regional areas some employment policies focus on relocation of unemployed workers from areas of high unemployment. Such policies need to cover specific employment support requirements of migrant workers and secondary settlement requirements of workers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds if they are to be successful. Migrants and refugees are disproportionately affected by unemployment as they tend to be disproportionately represented in industries highly affected by economic downturn (such as construction and manufacturing). Humanitarian entrants had an unemployment rate of 32 per cent in 2007. For new and emerging communities from the Horn of Africa the unemployment rate ranged from 25 to 50 per cent in 2007. For them to relocate successfully it would be necessary to provide employment support services and access to other services such as English as a Second Language (ESL) classes and culturally appropriate support for their families.

FECCA recommends that the government works to develop better practice models in rural and regional areas to better support Australians from diverse multicultural backgrounds. Successful regional migration and settlement policy requires considered attention by policy makers. There is no one size fits all policy prescription.

Migrants are attracted to regional and rural areas by factors such as employment opportunities, cost of living and housing affordability, country lifestyle and the presence of family or friends of the same ethnic or religious background. Attracting and retaining migrants and refugees in regional areas requires suitable employment options, educational opportunities, health, housing availability, local community support, training of service providers, information on access to services, planned settlement services and program funding. It requires close collaboration of

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all those involved and the sharing of best practice models between different regional areas, government and agencies.

Thank you for the opportunity to lodge this submission and please include FECCA in future consultations on this issue.