

## **Migration: An Opportunity for Rural and Regional Australia**

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The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the national peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations. FECCA provides advocacy, develops policy and promotes issues on behalf of its constituency to Government and the broader community. FECCA supports multiculturalism, community harmony, social justice and the rejection of all forms of discrimination and racism so as to build a productive and culturally rich Australian society. FECCA's policies are developed around the concepts of empowerment and inclusion and are formulated with the common good of all Australians in mind.

FECCA believes that the development of a policy platform for promoting growth in rural and regional Australia should recognise and tap into the cultural diversity of the regions, and explore the opportunities generated by the talents and the skills offered by people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Encouraging more international students, skilled migrants and humanitarian entrants to move to rural and regional Australia is dependent on the ability of the regions to cater for their specific needs, and facilitate their settlement in an environment free of discrimination or racism. Adequate settlement services, access to culturally appropriate support mechanisms, and improved infrastructure are just a few of the key issues to be factored into the policy design and planning process.

### **Opportunities**

Migration can address issues such as sparse population and skill shortages by encouraging and assisting settlement in the region of immigrants and refugees who can contribute with the much needed experience and skills. The Australian Government has a history of regionalising immigration policy through various initiatives and visa pathways, as well as by focusing on the relocation of unemployed workers from areas of high unemployment to areas experiencing skills shortages. This can prove to be beneficial to rural and regional communities where settlement services and the appropriate infrastructure and support systems are in place.

Refugees and humanitarian entrants often live most of their lives in rural or inland communities that are similar to the environment in rural Australia. Encouraging their settlement in rural areas may therefore not only provide suitable settlement options to them, but would also benefit the rural society and economy in which they settle, help to maintain populations and economies, and foster innovation.

The international experience that migrant workers bring is valuable to regions that seek to develop ties with markets beyond Australian borders. To develop the agriculture sector in regional Australia, migrants and refugees can contribute new ideas and methods of operation to revitalise agriculture while also contributing to other industries. Migrant groups in the agriculture industry have been identified as a significant part of the seasonal agricultural workforce. Temporary skilled migrants could also contribute to the further development of the agriculture industry, contributing expertise and diverse skills. Most often, temporary skilled migrants will go on to become permanent residents and citizens. The skills that they bring subsequently remind in Australia and can further contribute to the industries that they are working in.

## Challenges

FECCA notes that taking advantage of the opportunities presented through the settlement of culturally and linguistically diverse Australians in rural and regional Australia can only be effectively facilitated if policy frameworks and support systems are implemented to enable this. Attracting and retaining migrants and humanitarian entrants in rural and regional areas can pose various challenges and require coordinated and adequate planning and funding. Local communities, governments and businesses must work together to ensure that appropriate and integrated support services are available to people settling in such areas.

FECCA is aware that migrants and humanitarian entrants who initially settle in rural and regional areas often do not obtain adequate support and settlement services. As a result, after a brief period in a rural location, many migrants move to metropolitan areas where they find services (both specialist and mainstream) are available, and where it is more likely that they will be able to interact with members of their own community to receive the necessary social support, information and other assistance required for effective settlement.

Some of the key challenges for culturally and linguistically diverse communities are similar to those faced by all mainstream communities living in rural and regional Australia. These include remoteness and social isolation, poor infrastructure, limited transport options, limited provisions of health, employment and education services, difficulties in finding adequate housing and limited employment opportunities. Many of these issues are exacerbated for migrants and people from refugee backgrounds due to their specific circumstances such as low English proficiency, limited access to cultural and religious institutions, experience of torture and/or trauma, racism, labelling and stereotyping.

The prevalence of discrimination and racism generated by negative attitudes towards certain ethnic or cultural groups can create an additional layer of complexity and barriers that may impede effective settlement and community engagement. Adverse reactions towards migrants settling in a certain area can create tensions amongst community members and destabilise community harmony. This can subsequently have negative effects not only on social cohesion levels in the area, but can also adversely impact productivity and economic development.

### Case study: Nhill, Victoria

AMES Australia and Deloitte Access Economics have published a case study on the resettlement of Karen community members in Nhill, Victoria (*Small towns, Big returns*, March 2015). The report provides insights into the economic and social value that can flow from the resettlement of migrants and refugees in regional Australia, and identifies the factors that contribute to the success of such resettlement.

The case study identifies the following factors as contributors to regional resettlement success:

- Employment – jobs available for the new settlers
- Initial (short term) accommodation for new settlers
- Settling and providing support for families
- Host community prepared for new settlers
- Strong leadership in the host community
- Potential settlers well prepared
- Strong leadership within the settling community
- Degree and complexity of 'cultural adjustment' on both sides considered and managed

## **Case Study: Shepparton, Victoria**

FECCA published 'Community perspectives on settlement issues affecting new and emerging communities in rural and regional Australia: A case study of the Iraqi, Afghan, Congolese and Sudanese communities in Shepparton, Victoria' in June 2015. The settlement of new and emerging communities in Shepparton is regarded as a success story and the benefits it generated for both the local communities and those settled in the area are widely recognised. FECCA's report highlights the need to create adequate support infrastructure, developing targeted policies and strengthening social cohesion in the region.

The report can be accessed online: <http://fecca.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/FECCA-Rural-and-Regional-report-June-2015-00000002.pdf>

## **Safe Haven Enterprise Visas (SHEV, Subclass 790)**

The SHEV is a new class of visa introduced by the Australian Government that are not yet available. The SHEV provides temporary protection to those the Government deems to have arrived in Australia 'illegally', while encouraging earning and learning in regional Australia. Visa holders will be able to remain in Australia for 5 years, after which time they can apply for a further SHEV. SHEV holders will have access to the right to work, Medicare, Centrelink, job matching and short-term counselling for torture or trauma where required, the Adult Migrant English Programme and school (for children). Visa holders will not have access to funded settlement services.

SHEV holders who, for at least 42 months of the 5 years of the visa, were employed in regional Australia and did not receive any social security benefits, were enrolled in full time study in regional Australia, or a combination of both can apply for a prescribed permanent or temporary onshore substantive visa (except a permanent Protection visa).

State and Territory governments must opt into the SHEV programme. The New South Wales government has opted into the programme from 1 July 2015 and prescribed a number of postcodes which are considered 'Regional Australia' for the purposes of the SHEV. No other State or Territory has signed on to the programme at this stage.

FECCA believes that the SHEV provides an opportunity for the utilisation of the skills of humanitarian entrants in regional Australia; however we hold a number of concerns about the implementation of this visa class. The settlement of SHEV holders to regional areas for employment and education must be accompanied by appropriate resourcing and access to settlement services, access to culturally appropriate support mechanisms, and improved infrastructure. Additionally, there should be a better pathway for SHEV holders to apply for permanent Protection Visas, strengthening the ties of humanitarian entrants to regional Australia.

## Potential action

- Key policy directions proposed for the development of rural and regional Australia should also feature strategies to foster positive attitudes towards multiculturalism, social cohesion and community harmony.
- Ensure that Local Government areas are support to 'manage' cultural diversity in their jurisdictions. For example, the Australian Human Rights Commission has developed a resource for local governments to foster social cohesion.
- Strategies such a developing an adequate support infrastructure are necessary to encourage settlement of migrant and refugee communities in rural and regional Australia.
- Improve settlement outcomes for humanitarian entrants living in regional Australia on SHEVS but implementing coordinated support frameworks for visa holders, including access to funded settlement services.
- Strengthen ties of humanitarian entrants to regional Australia by creating better pathways to permanent residency for individuals on SHEVs by allowing applications to permanent Protection Visas after a five year period.