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Inquiry into regional development and decentralisation

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) is the peak body representing Australia's culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities and their organisations, and promoting issues on behalf of its constituency to government and the broader community. FECCA strives to ensure that the needs and aspirations of various cohorts of Australia's CALD population are heard by policy and decision makers, as well as the broader public.

FECCA has a dedicated Rural and Regional Advisory Committee to provide advice and grassroots feedback on the distinct circumstances and needs of migrant and refugee communities living in rural and regional locations. Through this committee, FECCA aims to promote a greater understanding of these issues to government, business and the general community, increase representation of multicultural regional communities at a national level and provide a national forum for information exchange, discussion and consultation on regional settlement.

FECCA members from regional and rural Australia include:

- Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council
- Diversitat (Geelong Ethnic Communities' Council)
- Multicultural Communities' Council of the Gold Coast
- Albury-Wodonga Ethnic Communities' Council
- Young & District Multicultural Association
- Multicultural Council of Griffith
- Multicultural Council of Wagga Wagga
- Ethnic Council of Shepparton & District
- North East Multicultural Association
- Gippsland Ethnic Communities' Council
- Multicultural Communities' Council of Illawarra

FECCA commends the Select Committee on Regional Development and Decentralisation the opportunity to provide comment on this inquiry.

Recommendations:

- **FECCA recommends** that adequate and appropriate resources are devoted to settlement services in regional areas so as to attract and retain new migrants, particularly skilled migrants, and their families
- **FECCA recommends** that adequate and appropriate resources are devoted to assisting migrants, particularly skilled migrants, and their families to build sustainable, prosperous and successful lives in regional areas beyond the initial settlement period (5 years)
- **FECCA recommends** that any focus on decentralisation or regional development pay close attention to the positive role and contribution migrants and refugees could play in this process.

Key message:

FECCA believes that the refinement 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.

Targeted migration programs 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 is 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 remain in Australia and can further

contribute to the industries that they are working in. Ensuring that all visas have a pathway to permanency is crucial in attracting migrants to rural and regional Australia.

Dating back to major programs such as the Snowy Mountains Scheme, the Australian Government has encouraged 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 of particular value to regional and rural Australia. It seeks to help ameliorate and address population and labour shortages outside of the capital cities. However, retaining as well as attracting new immigrants to regional centres and rural communities has been identified as a key challenge.

Many regional areas rely on the influx of new people to maintain job supply and to rejuvenate or maintain certain industries. Well planned and thoughtful regional development relies on the ability to meet the needs of employers seeking to fill positions with qualified overseas skilled migrants. ABS data shows that 75% of all recent skilled migrants were employed as at November 2016 and of the recent skilled migrants who were the main visa applicant, 82% were employed¹.

One area where skilled migration programs particularly affect Australians of CALD background is in the area of ageing. The ageing population of Australia is increasingly diverse and many elderly people, as a result of dementia and other illnesses, lose their acquired languages (of concern is the loss of English language skills). There is a high, and increasing, need for aged care workers who are able to care for CALD elderly in cultural sensitive ways and in their preferred language. Overseas migrants are the only way that Australia will be able to meet the needs of our growing elderly populations from CALD backgrounds. This is a particular concern in regional communities where the ageing post World War II migrant populations require increasing culturally appropriate and in-language care but where there is difficulty recruiting and retaining trained staff.

Rural and regional areas can derive enormous benefit from well-managed migrant and humanitarian settlement. However, some of the specific challenges faced by people from CALD backgrounds, that will need to be addressed to encourage settlement in rural and regional Australia include:

- Limited knowledge about services available
- Limited information on how to access services
- Settlement and other services poorly structured to cater to the diversity of migrants
- Limited education opportunities
- Unemployment (particularly of young people) and underemployment
- Difficulty accessing housing especially in the private rental market
- Racism and discrimination.

Family connections, job opportunities and life style are three major reasons given by immigrants for settling in regional and rural areas. However, it is critical that regional settlement for migrants 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. As a result, after a brief period in a rural location, these immigrants move to metropolitan areas where they can access a greater range of services and support including larger communities of people with whom they share a language or cultural heritage.

¹ <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/6250.0>

Case study: Nhill, Victoria

In 2015 AMES Australia and Deloitte Access Economics 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](#).

The correlation between skilled migrants, employment and associated benefits such as economic development and community prosperity is clear and has been reflected historically.

FECCA would be glad to contribute in more detail on matters relating to culturally and linguistically diverse communities as part of a discussion of regional development. For further information please contact FECCA Director Dr Emma Campbell emma@fecca.org.au or 02 6282 5755.