
The Centre

REGIONAL REFUGEE SETTLEMENT SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS: MEASURES FOR THE MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT OF SERVICE NEED.

INTRODUCTION

Any discussion and/or debate regarding regional settlement options for refugee communities is timely given a recent Australian Government initiative to further target rural and regional areas for migrant and humanitarian entrant re

populations and decreasing services, we have to analyse seriously any government initiative that is using the ‘encouragement’ of migrant and refugee resettlement as a potential panacea for rural ills. For refugee communities in particular, an existing complexity of needs may place them at a starting point of marginalisation. Without adequate service structures, this will only be compounded in regional areas experiencing their own issues around disadvantage. Further, we have to question what ‘encouragement’ means. It is the right of the individual to choose where they want to live, and opportunities for informed decision making in this regard must be 37386 625g

The more specific issues raised in broader research (including the critical need for specialised services to be in place prior to regional settlement) m

their community's attempts to effectively resettle. The barriers are exacerbated in regional areas, and service needs are amplified as a result (White, 2004).

More recently, Taylor and Stanovic (2005) used the framework of 'social exclusion' as a research guide in assessing resettlement successes, gaps and levels of satisfaction for two refugee communities in regional Victoria. A comprehensive study of the Iraqi community in Shepparton and the smaller Sudanese community that has settled in Warrnambool since 2003, this is an important exploration of regional settlement needs, with an emphasis on the social and community aspects that are necessary for a more holistic look at what is required for real and sustainable success. Whilst acknowledging the benefits and positive aspects of regional life, as articulated by their respondents, the authors found that… "A simple equation is sometimes presented, that regional areas need population and workers and refugees need jobs and refugees should go to regional areas. Our research suggests the equation is not necessarily simple" (Taylor & Stanovic, p. v. 2005).

By utilising such measures to look at primary and enhanced service provision (and levels of community acceptance) in regional areas, the research that has taken place to date has identified both positive and negative aspects (Taylor & Stanovic, 2005; White, 2004, Carr, 2004; Stillwell, 2003). Stillwell's look at the experiences of a group of Afghan men who resettled in Young for employment purposes is important for a number of reasons. It documents the many issues faced by persons on TPV's in regional areas, but also demonstrates the positive impact a new and emerging community can have on the broader community. While Colic-Peisker suggests this may have much to do with economics, she also notes the emergence of rural refugee support groups and the pressure applied (often from conservative quarters) to have permanent visas granted to such workers (2003). Stillwell also reports the positive and affirming aspects of the resettlement including enlightening, intercultural interactions (2003). Regarding service needs, however, there is a strong correlation between levels of 'exclusion' experienced by the individual and their capacity to stay on in regional settlement areas. Isolation is more likely, and service requirements may grow accordingly (White, 2004).

AREAS FOR ENHANCED RESEARCH

In light of the outcome of the research to date, including the increased likelihood of refugee communities experiencing 'exclusion' in regional areas, resettlement needs should be further examined and evaluated in regards to the 'intersectionality' and 'compounding' of various factors. Dependant on the situation that led to migration, critical variables can be assessed in a framework of 4 tiers of potential service requirements. These can be classed as (1) common needs shared with all community members such as education, health, and employment (2) those shared with other migrant groups such as specific cultural links and community acceptance (3) more

SUMMARY

It appears there is a strong need for further research in the regional settlement area, although it may need to happen concurrently with the extension of services. Recent government policy has left little room for a more specific initial assessment of service gaps and priorities as it moves ahead with new targeted areas. By focusing on primary settlement needs, DIMIA is failing to provide a comprehensive needs-assessment for the individuals and communities it hopes to resettle in regional areas. While some injection of funds is promised in regards to specialised services, it seems a minimum level of support structures will be in place initially, in the hope that additional funding can 'further develop local capacity' to provide more specialised services at some point (DIMIA, 2005). This is not ideal, nor best practice in regards to the establishment of regional settlement schemes. The experiences of individuals become a 'trial' of adequate service provision, a situation that is not acceptable for communities already potentially marginalised by circumstance and history.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Utilising the emerging, independent body of research regarding service requirements for sustainable, regional refugee settlement is critical in both the identification of existing barriers, and to advocate and plan for a better way of providing services. Government agencies (including policy areas) and service providers must be attentive in considering outcomes of such research, and 'best practice' must be aimed for in regards to addressing all levels of support service requirements, not just the primary ones (as critical as they are). If DIMIA is going to continue to promote regional resettlement schemes, it is imperative that all identified aspects of necessary service provision are acknowledged and planned for.

It is recommended that service providers and refugee communities continue to gather data and qualitative information, regarding service successes and gaps, as a means to lobby for both enhanced support structures and further studies of regional settlement needs. There is a place for consistent, inter-service benchmarks regarding appropriate standards of support in regional areas, and this needs to develop as a result of thorough, inclusive research. Existing frameworks using 'social exclusion' measures have been applied successfully in these initial stages of assessment (Taylor, 2004; Taylor 2005; White 2004; Ramburuth & Stanovic, 2004), with clear results as measured by community involvement and culturally specific outcomes. This can be developed further, utilising the four tiers of potential settlement requirements to assess the unique aspects of any identified community group, and the locale to which they are being encouraged to settle. Information is a powerful tool in advocacy, and the critical element in effective planning for social services.

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