Welcoming Regions

SUMMARY

John van Kooy and Rebecca Wickes
Monash Migration and Inclusion Centre

Aleem Ali
Welcoming Cities

Overview

Encouraging migrants to move to regional Australia is often portrayed as a 'win-win' for receiving communities, local economies, and migrants themselves. Migration has the potential to revitalise regional towns and bring new life to local economies, adding cultural richness and diversity to regional communities, while easing pressure on urban infrastructure and services.

However, the social and economic characteristics of Australia's regions differ greatly. Many of the potential benefits of regional settlement may be offset by existing inequalities and gaps in social and physical infrastructure. Moreover, few communities in remote areas have experience dealing with cultural and linguistic diversity. Migrants themselves may be wary of limited employment pathways and the effects of cultural distance with regional communities; they may choose to relocate only temporarily or simply to meet visa requirements. These risk factors can compromise the sustainability of resettlement efforts before they have even begun.

Realising the benefits of regional settlement requires careful planning, knowledge of 'what works,' and close collaboration between key stakeholders.

Key success factors of regional migrant settlement
Essential
- Locally-driven coordination, consultation, planning and budgeting
- Meaningful consultation and a culture of welcome in receiving communities
- Employment that matches demand with the characteristics of new migrants
- Accessible housing, transport and culturally-appropriate services

Desirable
- Established ethnic communities and multicultural organisations

Settlement Scenarios

We propose four scenarios to inform the design of migrant resettlement initiatives:

- Destinations for new and emerging migrant communities
- Regions of welcome for refugees
- Demand-driven economic gain
- Optimal migrant settlement

Key Success Factors of Regional Migrant Settlement

Outlined below are the services, opportunities and resources needed to welcome new arrivals while maintaining and enhancing the vibrancy of local communities.

Essential: Locally-driven coordination, consultation, planning and budgeting

Careful planning is required in each regional location to determine local workforce needs, service gaps and appropriate strategies to respond. Local planning should commence well in advance of new arrivals and take account of economic trends, community concerns, service provider capacities, and funding constraints. Given the annual budgeting and policy cycles of government departments, local planning approaches and resourcing may need to be responsive and adaptive to the non-linear dynamics of settlement. Councils and Shires need to have a formal role in settlement planning networks and program delivery. Planning should be inclusive of community groups (businesses, schools, volunteers, etc.), and importantly, migrants themselves.

Essential: Meaningful consultation and a culture of welcome in receiving communities

Meaningful consultations with migrant groups (through, for example, ethno-specific community organisations) can provide insights to real experiences, concerns and aspirations, and mitigate risks of early flight from regional destinations. Receiving communities and local organisations should also be well-informed and prepared to welcome new arrivals. An understanding of local attitudes towards migrants, as well as the perceptions that locals have about different cultures and ethnicities, need to be addressed in planning for regional settlement.

Community consultations and information-sharing are critical approaches to build trust, respect and understanding. Engaging local Indigenous communities in welcoming work is a core component of resettlement preparation and planning. Policies and programs that include First Nations Peoples while also emphasising shared values and building positive social relationships can go a long way to fostering openness and acceptance in local communities.

Essential: Employment that matches demand with the characteristics of new migrants

Economic security is at the heart of the 'win-win' argument advanced in favour of regional settlement. Sustained employment that enables migrants to meet their costs of living and pursue career advancement is central to settlement success. Given the diversity of regional economies

and labour market opportunities, however, careful consideration must be given to the potential 'fit' between available jobs and migrants' skills, qualifications and career aspirations.

While government-initiated skilled migration schemes have attempted to direct migrant workers to regional destinations for decades, there remains no coordinated system or strategy for linking migrant workers with regional employers. Despite this, Australian employers are proactively playing a variety of roles in regional areas to attract and retain migrant workers, including acting as proxies for settlement service providers in remote areas, and as hosts and 'cultural ambassadors' for new arrivals. In other cases, employers or employer associations have acted on ethical motivations to participate in 'welcome' projects for newly-arrived refugees. Smaller employers, however, are likely to have limited capacity to absorb extra responsibility for supporting new arrivals and may need assistance to support adaptation to Australian work settings, to understand visa conditions and options, and facilitate employee settlement.

Channelling temporary workers and migrants on short-term visas to regional areas addresses a narrower policy objective. Temporary migrants may provide an immediate boost to regional economies, but the durability of these benefits is likely to be limited. Moreover, the nature of these benefits will change according to macroeconomic and industry trends. In regional contexts experiencing high levels of disadvantage, unemployment, depopulation or even environmental calamities, the arrival of temporary migrants who have no intention or feasible option to remain could exacerbate existing social and economic inequalities.

Essential: Accessible housing, transport and culturally-appropriate services

Social and physical service infrastructure needs to be affordable, culturally-appropriate and accessible to newly-arrived migrants. Specialised services such as skilled interpreters, medical staff trained in refugee health, and English second-language tuition in schools may be required to help migrant populations establish themselves. To meet employment requirements, migrants also need access to vocational education and training options. While federal policies afford humanitarian migrants access to mainstream settlement services, other temporary and skilled migrants do not have the same eligibility for government services. This leaves some groups at risk of isolation, especially where established groups from similar cultural backgrounds are not present. Affordable housing options are also critical to attract and retain migrants who presently reside in metropolitan areas. Without this optimal mix of services and infrastructure in regional locations, the promise of the 'win-win' will be difficult to realise.

Desirable: Established ethnic communities and multicultural organisations

Integration can also be assisted by the active role of established ethnic communities and multicultural institutions. Where these communities do not yet exist in regional areas, there may be opportunities to foster intercultural contact through existing institutions such as schools and workplaces.

Settlement Scenarios

We propose four scenarios to inform the design of migrant resettlement initiatives. We briefly summarise them here:

:
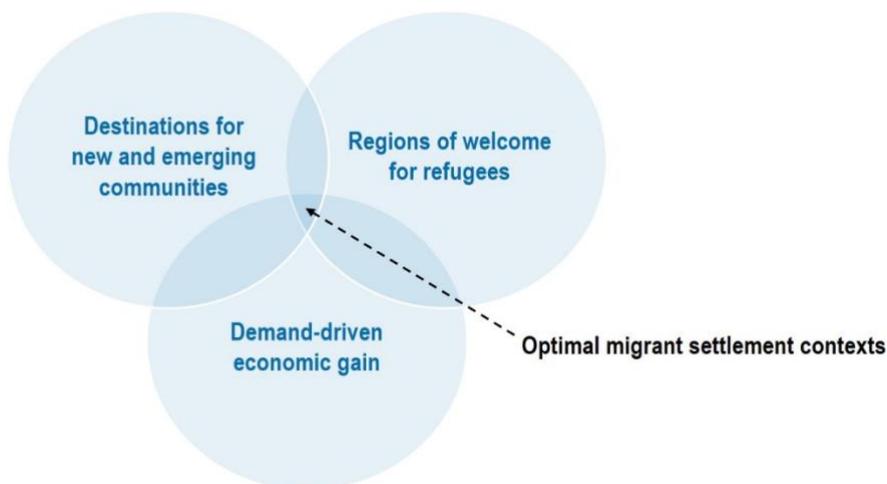
Figure 1. Operational contexts for migrant settlement in regional areas

Destinations for new and emerging migrant communities

This scenario refers to regional towns that do not have a history or experience with supporting migrant settlement or multiculturalism. However, a detailed needs analysis may identify population decline, low demand for services and/or worker shortages that could be addressed by a targeted long-term settlement program. Community consultations, especially with First Nations people, should indicate a sentiment and willingness to facilitate settlement of a small number of migrants from emerging migrant communities on a long-term and/or permanent basis. This process would not be suited to areas with high levels of youth unemployment, or significant socioeconomic inequalities between existing cultural groups.

Regions of welcome for refugees

Based on extensive community consultation, local governments in regional areas may initiate small-scale refugee resettlement programs based a commitment to humanitarianism and the concept of 'welcome'. Core principles would include appreciating the benefits of cultural diversity and social inclusion. First Nations communities should be engaged in 'welcoming work' that reflects the cultural heritage and traditional owners of the land. Receiving communities may consider community sponsorship approaches for individual refugee families. The possibilities of long-term employment and refugee career pathways should be carefully considered, primarily for their potential to facilitate integration and household economic security—rather than merely addressing immediate labour shortages. Resettlement requires the support of service providers and ethno-specific or multicultural organisations.

Demand-driven economic gain

In these contexts, employer demand in regional industries drives the identification and recruitment of skilled migrants and temporary workers for secondary migration to regional locations. Employer-worker linkages are facilitated by partnerships between state and federal agencies, local governments and service providers. Migrants are placed into local labour markets and matched with jobs that meet their income and visa requirements. The policy objective is not necessarily settlement but could include pathways to long-term residence for some visa holders. It would not be suited to areas with high levels of youth unemployment, or significant socioeconomic inequalities between existing cultural groups.

Optimal migrant settlement

Optimal regional settlement contexts are destinations that exhibit most of the social, cultural and institutional features necessary for successful long-term primary or secondary settlement (i.e. a combination of the elements of all other scenarios). With the commitment of local authorities supporting new arrivals, receiving communities and First Nations people engage in collaborative planning and preparation. Employment pathways are identified that reflect career opportunities rather than short-term job placements. Local service providers have demonstrated intercultural competencies. The settlement opportunities in this context would suit a range of different migrant cohorts, including short-term/temporary migrants, humanitarian entrants and permanent family or skilled migrants.

Next Steps

The initial research, funded by the Queensland Government through Multicultural Affairs Queensland, focussed on leading practice in supporting local governments to create opportunities to grow welcome, belonging, intercultural connections and inform uptake of regional opportunities.

The next steps in this work will include:

Advising and supporting regional councils to strengthen welcome and inclusion
Informed by and building on the key learnings, Welcoming Cities will support interested regional councils to consult, partner, plan and commence initiatives to strengthen welcome and inclusion in local areas. This may include engagement with the Welcoming Cities network and the Welcoming Cities Standard.