Hopes Fulfilled or Dreams Shattered?
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Background Paper

Regional Refugee Settlement Support Requirements: Measure for the meaningful assessment of service need

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This background paper has been prepared to inform discussion at this conference and does not necessarily represent the views of the Centre for Refugee Research.

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 resettlement, with the potential expansion of such schemes in the near future (DIMIA, 2004).

Partly as a result of recommendations from the 'The Report on the Review of Settlement Services for Migrants and Humanitarian Entrants (2002-2003)', but also in response to wider community concerns regarding declining populations and services in rural areas, the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs (DIMIA) also hopes to 'encourage' some refugees already settled in major cities to relocate to regional areas. The department's stated intention is to 'influence' only those without strong social and familial ties within cities to make any such move (DIMIA, 2005).

Whilst settling in non-urban areas may appeal to some individuals and, further, suit the needs of diminishing communities, it is an element of the resettlement process requiring careful consideration (Taylor, 2005). It is generally accepted that refugees (including those classified 'asylum seekers') have particular needs in regards to settlement, often requiring specialised services. This can be a result of pre-migration experiences that may include trauma associated with war, famine, torture, and the violent loss of family and community (Ramburuth & Stanovic, 2004; Pittaway 1991). These are exceptional circumstances that clearly differentiate such communities and individuals from the more mainstream needs of other migrants.

Given that settlement service provision in urban areas is not fully developed, with gaps in most areas including employment, housing, education, health and social support (Carr, 2004; Taylor & Stanovic, 2005), it is likely that such needs will be even greater in regional areas where primary service gaps already exist. While studies have occurred in regards to broader settlement requirements for refugees arriving in Australia, there is much scope for more extensive research in both the general resettlement domain, and in specific areas such as regional options.

Although settling in regional areas may have its advantages, most people continue to settle in urban areas as a result of benefits and options in the domains of employment, health, housing and familial, social and cultural links. While smaller communities in regional areas are suffering ongoing issues in regards to diminishing

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 considered non-negotiable.

BACKGROUND

In recent years DIMIA has encouraged refugee resettlement in a number of regional areas, including Logan, Toowoomba, Townsville, Cairns, Gold Coast, Launceston, Alice Springs, Wollongong, Geelong, Mandurah, Goulburn, Shepparton, Wagga Wagga (DIMIA fact sheet, 2004). In 2003-2004 this involved 919 people out of a total 10,401 of persons assisted under the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) (DIMIA 2005).

While regional settlement for refugee communities has been occurring for some time (by both government directive and as a result of local area initiatives), it is important that lessons learnt by the sector be used to refine and enhance current and future service provision. It is a critical time in the development of policy and practice in the area, and stakeholders need to ensure refugee individuals, and communities, are supported in a manner appropriate to their rights and needs. This requires acknowledgement of existing research, and the support and encouragement of further studies that look specifically at 'best practice' service structures for optimum regional settlement success.

In Australia, relevant policy development in resettlement has been based primarily on research stemming from DIMIA, or DIMIA affiliated sources (Phillips, 2005). In regards to independent research, this is problematic. The recent government initiative to target four areas for increased regional resettlement (to date two in Victoria) has been accompanied by commitments to a) source areas with adequate resources (i.e. employment, housing), b) increase financial input (to $12.4 million) and c) provide 'specialised' services (DIMIA, 2005). The parameters of these structural supports, however, remain somewhat undefined. While DIMIA acknowledges the need for enhanced service provision, and has reportedly developed criteria for the assessment of appropriate regional locations regarding employment opportunities, affordable housing and health services, it has only identified 'capacity to build expertise' as a measure of the locations ability to meet more specialised needs (DIMIA, 2004).

The more specific issues raised in broader research (including the critical need for specialised services to be in place prior to regional settlement) must be considered in any planning, and the processes of assessment and evaluation need to become far more inclusive regarding stakeholder participation. This applies particularly to the lack of participatory practices regarding refugee individuals and communities (Phillips, 2005; Ramburuth & Greenacre, 2004). Phillips noted the barriers in place regarding participation in decision-making, including the element of 'fear' if service users perceive the evaluator as having some influence in their plans for further settlement assistance, including the sponsoring of family members (Phillips, 2005). This needs to be addressed if research is to be meaningful. Community input is critical in the defining of what constitutes appropriate 'service provision'. While the 'Settlement Services Review' was welcomed by the sector as significant in regards to potential for enhanced service provision, there is still scope for 'community' involvement in both the implementation of current recommendations and the research and planning for further development (Ramburuth & Greenacre, 2004; Phillips, 2004).

CURRENT RESEARCH

Certainly, some significant research has been conducted recently that is clearly inclusive and appropriately comprehensive. Much of this has focused on utilising a framework of 'social exclusion' as a means to identify areas of need regarding policy development, service provision and community education (Taylor, 2004; White, 2004).This research is a critical enhancement of the information provided by DIMIA (and related sources) as it identifies the more unique and defining features of refugee settlement requirements, allowing scope for more effective planning processes to be developed. New and emerging refugee communities, at times with more complex needs, may require precision and depth in evaluation and service type, and blanket measures will not suffice. By utilising 'exclusion' models, researchers are able to more fully explore the breadth of factors that may impact on the individual or community as they move through the resettlement process (Ramburuth & Stanovic, 2004).

Studies of the levels of 'social exclusion' experienced by refugees settling in Australia, and elsewhere, indicate a clear correlation between government policy and the degree to which refugees are able to be included in the community generally, and have access to services specifically (Carr, 2004; White, 2004; Taylor, 2004; Ramburuth & Stanovic, 2004). White argues that despite existing and planned resettlement services, Australian government policy is essentially 'exclusionary' in regard to refugees (including asylum seekers). This has been facilitated by the political climate in recent years in regards to notions of 'asylum', (White, 2004; Colic-Peisker, 2004) and impacts on all aspects of the individual and

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

specialised services appropriate to those of refugee background such as language services, counselling (Taylor, 2004) and finally, as created by current government policy, (4) the potential exacerbation of all areas for those on temporary protection visa's (TPV's). This includes further barriers to employment and housing generally (and the exclusion from IHSS settlement service), and more specific ramifications such as the psychosocial effects of living in an ongoing state of uncertainty (Mitchell & Kirsner, 2003; Colic-Peisker, 2004; Ramburuth & Stanovic, 2004).

The likelihood of the individual and/or community requiring more complex service provision increases with the intersecting/impacting of each factor. Essentially, if the primary requirements shared with all members of the community are not met (employment, housing, health, education), access to, and benefits from, the other levels of service is necessarily affected. The reverse is also true, where the capacity for sustainable outcomes in areas such as employment and housing are negatively impacted on if needs in other areas are not addressed. Research to date verifies this, with lack or absence of more specialised services creating barriers to meaningful settlement outcomes. Whilst employment is critical to positive resettlement experiences (Colic-Peisker, 2003) barriers to it are established if language, schooling and specialist services are not in place. Financial, medical and psychological problems may follow (Ramburuth & Stanovic, 2004).

It is also important for researchers and service providers to consider the notion of 'over servicing' or 'wrongly servicing'. Resettlement style is dependant on features unique to each individual and/or community and, as found by Colic-Peisker & Tilbury (2003), services should be driven by cultural priorities, as defined by the recipients. Further variables such as age, gender, education level and the degree to which the individual has experienced trauma (Pittaway, 1991) will all effect support service requirements.

While the regional settlement research to date has included crosscutting issues regarding gender and youth, this requires further attention in future studies. Taylor and Stanovic (2005) were able to use gender and age specific focus groups to identify particular needs (such as youth claiming a preference for urban areas and women citing isolation as a critical issue until female-specific services were implemented). These areas should be explored further as a means of building gender and age specific service models into the various layers of service provision. What a female-headed, Sudanese household may require for a meaningful and sustainable regional existence is likely to differ greatly from that of a young Iraqi man, remaining in Australia on a temporary protection visa. Only more extensive, and inclusive, community oriented research will provide these necessary details.

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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