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# The missing workers

Locally-led migration strategies to  
better meet rural labour needs

Policy paper



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KNOWLEDGE POLICY PRACTICE

# The missing workers

## Locally-led migration strategies to better meet rural labour needs<sup>i</sup>

### Key points

- In 151 regional LGAs across the country, the numbers of overseas-born residents are increasing, while the number of Australian-born residents is decreasing. The vast majority (113) of these 151 LGAs are rural.
- Population loss means there are still labour shortages in many rural areas. More needs to be done to enable rural communities to attract labour that cannot be sourced locally.
- Australia's current immigration, employment and settlement services systems are relatively siloed, imposing many barriers to rural settlement even though there are mutual benefits to be had for migrants and rural communities alike (including lower rates of unemployment).
- There is currently no systematic way for migrant workers to link up with rural employers, nor is there a systematic policy or integrated support mechanism to facilitate secondary migration away from metropolitan cities.
- Information and perception problems about the contribution that migrants make to economic and social life mask the opportunities and mutual benefits offered by rural settlement.
- Locally-led migration strategies have demonstrated their capacity to effectively overcome the barriers which are currently constraining the movement of migrants to meet permanent workforce shortages in rural areas. Support for more locally-led efforts across rural Australia is key to future population and economic growth in small towns.

#### POLICY ISSUE

Workforce shortages across rural Australia require new strategies to enable migration to better meet local labour needs.

#### ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Supported by literature and analysis from the Regional Australia Institute (RAI), this policy paper is based on discussions between regional settlement representatives at *Migration Nation*, a RAI roundtable event held at Old Parliament House on 1 November 2017 as well as consultations with governments and community groups.

### Policy implications

The scaling up of locally-led migration strategies that are flexible, fit for place, and better equipped to meet local labour needs should be a priority in future immigration, settlement and regional development policies. The aim of this policy should be to better support and enable the development of locally-led migration initiatives in every rural community experiencing workforce shortages.

<sup>i</sup> For simplicity's sake, the term 'migrant' is used here to collectively refer to all international migrants, whether they enter Australia as skilled workers, asylum seekers or people from refugee backgrounds. This briefing also takes a 'migrant agnostic' view in the sense that no particular overseas-born worker is prioritised in terms of their capacity or suitability to meet the local labour needs of rural Australian communities.

A new national policy facilitating the establishment of a network of priority rural migration areas could enable many rural communities to meet local labour market needs and provide support for local growth and community renewal. The policy approach is outlined below.

## **1. Support the establishment of more locally-led migration and settlement initiatives**

This involves:

- a) Providing resources for locally-led needs assessments to confirm workforce requirements and broader community support for rural migration and settlement programs.
- b) Providing resources for communities to build local capacity to provide initial and ongoing support to new arrivals.
- c) Establishing a 'matchmaking' system that fosters direct links between rural employers and migrant workers.
- d) Creating and distributing information resources with accurate information on the economic contribution of migrant workers, as well as tips on how rural communities can navigate their own settlement journey.

The main goal of Part 1 of this policy approach is that a group of motivated rural communities achieve status as priority settlement areas (demonstrating workforce need, housing availability, social integration capacity, and local service capability).

## **2. Facilitate migration to, and settlement in, priority rural areas**

This involves:

- a) Capturing the shortage of labour in rural areas across the country, including the distribution of temporary workers, to enable Australia's immigration policy to better meet rural labour needs (both skilled and unskilled).
- b) Establishing a systematic and integrated approach for facilitating rural settlement, offering incentives for migrants to move to rural locations and incentives to rural communities to gain status as priority areas for settlement.
- c) Ensuring greater flexibility in settlement and employment services so that rural areas are not adversely impacted by assistance eligibility criteria.

The main goals from Part 2 of this policy approach are that:

- 'First mover' settlement occurs shortly after priority area status is achieved.
- Over three to five years, an additional 2,000-3,000 migrants per year are moving to priority rural areas to take up employment and long-term residence.
- Migrants stay in rural communities and employment for at least five years.

These policy changes can be achieved at low additional cost to governments. Part 1 should leverage local and philanthropic investment as the foundation for locally-led migration strategies. Part 2 involves making strategic policy changes to existing policies to facilitate the movement of migrants to priority rural areas.

## Migration is the key for future rural growth

Regional settlement has been actively endorsed by the Australian Government since 2004 as a way to support regional workforce and population growth in smaller communities and ease strain on infrastructure in metropolitan areas.<sup>1</sup> This has seen various planned regional settlement strategies piloted over the years, with varying degrees of success.<sup>2</sup>

Many of Australia's regional areas are still experiencing labour shortages and population decline, especially more remote rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Often, it is not that there are not enough jobs for people in rural areas, but that there are not enough local workers to fill them. Consequently, migrant labour is required to sustain rural communities throughout the year and across the country.

Between the 2011 and 2016 Census, for 151 regional LGAs, the arrival of overseas-born residents helped alleviate the loss of Australian-born residents. The vast majority (113) of these 151 LGAs are rural, what the Regional Australia Institute (RAI) terms 'heartland regions'.<sup>ii</sup>

Since the arrival of overseas-born residents can help offset population decline, migration should be considered the first priority for rural communities looking to grow their population base and fill labour gaps.

To understand the labour market in rural communities in more detail, the RAI analysed ABS Census community profile data for 2011 and 2016 to identify relationships between population characteristics and outcomes such as workforce participation rates, age mix and unemployment in a particular place.

For Australia as a whole, labour force participation is shown to be positively correlated with an LGA's proportion of overseas-born residents ( $r = 0.29, n = 538, p = 0.00$ ) and negatively correlated with its proportion of Australian-born residents ( $r = -0.37, n = 538, p = 0.00$ ). Essentially, as the proportion of overseas-born residents increases in an LGA, labour force participation also likely increases. Conversely, as the proportion of Australian-born residents increases, labour force participation likely decreases. In effect, more migrants tends to mean more labour force engagement.

A look specifically at the 166 heartland regions across Australia where the Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (AFF) industry is the most dominant industry of employment – and employs 15 percent or more of workers (see Figure 1) – reveals another association. There is a small positive correlation with labour force participation and growth in the number of overseas-born residents ( $r = 0.19, n = 166, p = 0.05$ ). Essentially, chances are that 2016 labour force participation was higher in AFF-dominant heartlands where the overseas-born population grew between 2011 and 2016 than in places where it remained stable or decreased.

Growth in the number of overseas-born residents is important for rural areas with ageing populations that are looking for the next generation of workers. Analysis shows that, in AFF-dominant heartland regions, there is a negative correlation between labour participation and

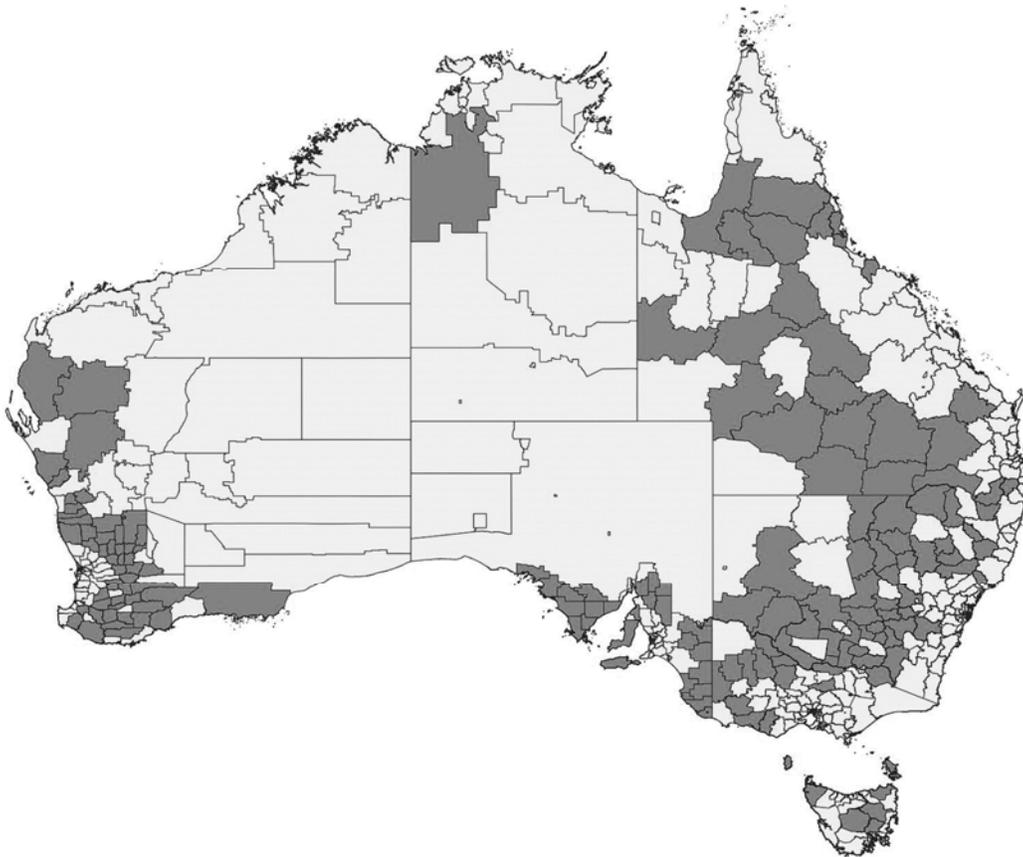
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<sup>ii</sup> The Regional Australia Institute defines 'heartland regions' as smaller regional areas that are isolated from major metropolitan and regional cities (and thus more remote) and which are shaped by local ingenuity.

median age ( $r = -0.45, n = 166, p = 0.00$ ). This means that the older an AFF-dominant heartland region is, the fewer people it is likely to have working or available to work.

The rest of Australia also has the same relationship between median age and labour force participation, albeit not as strong as AFF dominant heartland regions ( $r = -0.26, n = 372, p = 0.00$ ). What makes AFF-dominant heartlands further stand out from the rest of Australia is the negative correlation between unemployment and proportion of AFF workers ( $r = -0.22, n = 166, p = 0.05$ ).

Essentially, as the proportion of AFF workers increases in AFF-dominant heartlands, unemployment likely decreases. This indicates that older places in rural Australia may not have spare workers to draw on, and so should look to secondary migration to help meet their labour demands. Moreover, since overseas-born AFF workers tend to be younger than Australian-born AFF workers, increasing the pool of migrant labour can help boost the AFF workforce in both the short and long term (see Table 1).



**Figure 1. Location of the 166 AFF dominant heartland regions across Australia**

Source: 2016 Census of population and housing, customised data

**Table 1. Distribution of Australia’s workers by age, industry and place of birth**

<b>ALL INDUSTRIES</b>	<b>Aged under 30 years</b>	<b>Aged 50 years or over</b>
Australian-born workers	27%	41%
Overseas-born workers	20%	44%
<b>AFF INDUSTRY</b>	<b>Aged under 30 years</b>	<b>Aged 50 years or over</b>
Australian-born workers	16%	50%
Overseas-born workers	24%	38%

**Source:** ABS (2016). *Census of Population and Housing*, customised data

While 91 out of the 166 AFF-dominant heartlands experienced overall population growth between the 2011 and 2016 Censuses, more needs to be done to ensure the populations of the remaining 75 AFF-dominant heartlands do not decline.

Relative to the national intake of migrants to Australia every year, the number of additional residents required to avoid population decline in these 75 AFF-dominant heartlands is quite small. The ABS estimates that net overseas migration in just one year (2015-16) resulted in a gain of 182,165 people to Australia’s population base.<sup>4</sup> To avoid population decline over the intercensal period, the 75 AFF-dominant heartland regions needed a total gain of 10,031 people across five years (2011-16).

One issue facing these regions is that migrants settling outside of metropolitan areas have traditionally concentrated in only a few ‘hotspot’ locations – often in the larger regional hubs.<sup>5</sup> Locally-led migration strategies have been crucial in shifting this trend for smaller communities.

There are some inspiring examples of successful rural settlement initiatives, such as in Nhill, Dalwallinu, Pyramid Hill and Mingoola. In these communities, residents and business-owners have come together to identify labour needs and build local capacity to attract and retain overseas-born residents.

In AFF-dominant areas such as these, migrant workers can contribute much-needed skills for local businesses for whom it is difficult to source domestic labour (like abattoirs and poultry producers). Without migrant labour, such businesses – which are important to the livelihood of many rural communities – would find it hard to operate, given that many local residents do not consider such work to be ‘acceptable employment’.<sup>6</sup>

For rural businesses yet to have the opportunity to tap into Australia’s rich source of migrant labour, there is a real struggle to find workers. Many make do with temporary migration or get by without the permanent workforce they need. These businesses would benefit greatly from the chance to employ migrants on a more long-term basis.

Rural communities can be a great option for migrants, too. Immigrant unemployment decreases with remoteness as the employment opportunities outside of metropolitan areas can be strong and suited to migrant ambitions and skills.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, employment opportunities are varied and encompass more than the seasonal agricultural work done by temporary migrants visiting Australia on working holiday visas. An enhanced approach to matching migrant skills and aspirations with local industry needs will result in better outcomes for migrants and rural communities alike.

The Productivity Commission recommends that the objective of Australia's immigration policy should be to maximise the overall wellbeing (economic, social and environmental) of the existing Australian community and its future generations.<sup>8</sup> The RAI has identified ways in which Australia's current immigration, settlement and regional development policies can be enhanced to better support the capacity of rural businesses and the wellbeing of communities, especially those with surpluses in infrastructure and shortages in labour. Prioritising migration to such areas can, in turn, ease the burden of infrastructure development and unemployment service provision in Australia's major cities.

More needs to be done to make widespread rural settlement a sustainable reality. Some key points of action relate directly to attraction – the mechanisms by which international migrants and people from refugee backgrounds are drawn to rural communities. Others relate to the issue of retention – the factors that encourage arrivals to stay. The lessons from real-world experiences of rural settlement are central to understanding these issues in depth and the types of actions that are required to overcome them.

## Learning from experience: The RAI migration roundtable

Building on the RAI's 2016 publication *The Missing Migrants*,<sup>9</sup> which documented the impact of migration to rural areas through several locally-led initiatives, the RAI hosted a migration roundtable at Old Parliament House on 1 November 2017 to gain first-hand insight into what can be done to enhance migrant attraction and retention outside of major cities. With participants coming from across the country and a range of backgrounds (including farmers, settlement services, business owners, academics and council members), the roundtable uncovered a rich array of local knowledge and experience about migrant attraction and retention. Viewed alongside complementary research, these roundtable experiences highlight the key ingredients for effective rural settlement and the types of interventions necessary to overcome barriers that inhibit its success.

Five themes emerged:

- 1) The misalignment of rural migration ambitions and the current settlement and employment service systems.
- 2) The capacity to better support rural communities and their labour needs through migration.
- 3) The persistent information and perception problems about rural migration.
- 4) The importance of linking migrants with rural communities and businesses, and fostering social connections.
- 5) The engagement of communities and securing of majority support.

## Managing misalignment with settlement and employment services

Australia's settlement service system is rigid, with funding for settlement services tied to client numbers within particular catchment zones. Because of system inflexibility, policy has the effect

of keeping some migrants ‘in place’ (and in metropolitan areas in particular) rather than supporting them to move into or between rural areas. Any encouragement of migrants to relocate out of one catchment area to a secondary location can therefore create a conflict of interest for some settlement service providers as it may impact on their future funding and capacity to provide support to others.

For people in rural communities that have built up the capacity to be able to provide settlement services locally, the limited support by way of government resource distribution undermines locally-led solutions to the rural settlement ‘problem’.

Participants at the RAI’s roundtable agreed that there is general metro-centric scepticism towards rural settlement and a view that it is not possible because rural areas do not have the social assistance infrastructure to support people once they arrive. However, places like Nhill,<sup>10</sup> Dalwallinu,<sup>11</sup> Mingoola<sup>12</sup> and Pyramid Hill<sup>13</sup> have shown that when there is community drive to get new residents in to meet a particular need, existing residents and businesses can acquire the human capital and resources necessary to ensure settlement is a success. This is often achieved without formal support services, suggesting that much more could be possible with formal support.

Roundtable participants were also adamant that reliance on national assistance programs outside of settlement-specific services does not suffice, especially when trying to link arrivals with employers. There are many people who want jobs in rural areas, and rural employers who want workers. And yet, there is often a big mismatch in terms of the desire to connect and the ability or willingness for national assistance programs to ensure that the right connections actually get made.<sup>14</sup>

On the face of it, Australia’s current employment services system, jobactive, supports rural jobs, and the relocation of prospective employees to rural areas to secure these jobs. However, the requirements for jobseekers looking to receive relocation assistance under jobactive may be quite prohibitive.<sup>15</sup>

The first impediment to jobseekers obtaining relocation assistance is the need for the new location to be a minimum of 90 minutes away from the jobseeker’s existing location. Greater flexibility is needed to ensure that jobseekers looking to move shorter distances may not be unfairly disadvantaged because they miss a time requirement by a number of minutes.

The second impediment to rural relocation under jobactive is the need for the job in the new location to be ongoing employment. In some rural areas, contract or seasonal work may be only what is available at a particular point in time. Even so, many rural employers still need workers, and many workers still want to move to these rural areas. Better mechanisms are required to ensure that assistance for the relocation of workers is based on local need for labour rather than on standardised requirements for what employment is considered ‘suitable’ for assistance.

The third constraining factor is that jobseekers must have been receiving income support payments for 12 months prior to applying for relocation assistance. As with the over 90 minute travel time requirement, this income support requirement is somewhat arbitrary. It may mean

that what determines a prospective employee's suitability for relocation to a regional area is not so much their skills, experience and desire, but their status as a long-term welfare recipient. Such a requirement delays the time some people may take to get off employment assistance in metropolitan areas and into employment in regional areas.

With the jobactive deed expiring in 2020, now is the time to reflect on its stated role of 'connecting job seekers with employers', and the inadvertent ways in which standardised approaches to employment assistance may be undermining the capacity for connections to be made between jobseekers and rural employers.<sup>16</sup> By actively incorporating flexible measures around relocation assistance, the next iteration of employment services will be better placed to meet rural-specific workforce challenges.

### **Ensuring Australia's immigration system supports rural communities and labour needs**

The alignment of Australia's skilled migration program and rural labour needs was another key issue discussed at the RAI migration roundtable. As well as being fuelled by a local desire to attract new residents, roundtable participants agreed that the success of rural settlement would be greatly increased if Australia's visa system were to better reflect local labour needs.

For those working in the rural settlement space, the continued reliance on restrictive skilled occupation lists and remuneration requirements under the new system demonstrates the degree of 'disconnect' between migration policy and the rural experience. According to those at the RAI roundtable who have attempted to facilitate rural settlement outside of the formal policy space: 'There is a big gap between government and us' in terms of the types of workers prioritised for entry into Australia and those that are desperately needed in rural areas.

The reason why some rural communities have sought to develop their own settlement strategy and service delivery mechanisms is precisely because of this gap. Informal mechanisms for attracting skilled and unskilled workers to rural areas, and to settle them once they get there, can and do work. However, without support, local volunteers engaged in these efforts can easily get worn out. More resources for local governments to facilitate rural employment placement and settlement can alleviate some of the burden.

More consistent national policy support for rural settlement is needed, especially for secondary migration away from metropolitan areas.<sup>17</sup> Not only should there be a better reflection of the depth and breadth of workforce needs in rural areas, there should also be more resources from settlement and job services and other initiatives directed to rural areas to actually attract, support and retain the workers that they need. The fulfilment of both of these criteria will better safeguard the welfare of rural Australian communities and businesses.

Though the primary settlement of migrants from overseas may be regarded by some rural communities as the ideal settlement scenario, since effort and resources for 'luring' people away from major cities can be directed elsewhere, opportunities for secondary settlement were central to discussions at the RAI roundtable. Secondary settlement may prove to be more successful than primary settlement in many cases, as arrivals will likely have fewer high-level needs to account for in the immediate term where humanitarian migrants are involved.<sup>18</sup> Secondary migrants may also be more likely to be retained in rural areas in the long term, particularly if there were

incentives for migrants to relocate to rural areas (such as short-term benefits, like set up costs, or more long-term benefits, like increased opportunities for family reunion).

Secondary settlement is a ‘win-win’ for rural communities looking to grow their population and labour force, and for migrants looking to establish a life for themselves outside of metropolitan centres. Currently, there is no clear or consistent policy for secondary settlement in Australia to recognise and meet local labour needs in rural areas.

### Overcoming information and perception problems

There are two main metro-centric assumptions that have historically prevented wide endorsement of rural settlement, secondary or otherwise. One assumption is that there are no jobs in rural areas, so if migrants move to rural Australia they may end up unemployed. The other assumption is that there is an abundance of jobs in metropolitan areas, so migrants are unlikely to be unemployed.

The experiences of RAI’s roundtable participants challenge both of these assumptions. Roundtable participants were emphatic that many rural employers are desperate for migrant workers.<sup>19</sup> They also readily recounted many personal interactions with migrants living in metropolitan cities who are unemployed and, in some instances, have been without a job for several years. This anecdotal evidence is supported by the Productivity Commission, which estimates that unemployment rates of immigrants decrease with remoteness (see Table 2).<sup>20</sup>

**Table 2 Participation and unemployment rates across regions, 2011**  
Immigrants and Australian-born populations

	Major city		Inner regional		Outer regional		Remote	
	Australian born	Foreign born						
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Labour force participation rate	63.6	61.3	63.6	53.6	58.8	57.0	60.5	78.0
Unemployment rate	5.2	6.5	5.6	5.9	5.5	5.9	5.4	2.5

**Source:** Productivity Commission (2016). *Migrant Intake into Australia*. Inquiry Report No. 77, Canberra, Table C.9.

Concerns about migrant unemployment relate to another point of contention that creates perception problems about rural settlement: the welfare needs of migrants. As the Productivity Commission notes, welfare eligibility and uptake are two very different things. While eligibility varies according to a migrant’s visa class upon entry to Australia, uptake of government services by permanent immigrants is, on the whole, similar to the general population.<sup>21</sup>

Even in circumstances where benefits are immediately available on arrival to the country, such as for refugees arriving on humanitarian visas, not all of the working refugee population takes up income support (65 percent) or unemployment benefits (24 percent).<sup>22</sup> The same Productivity Commission analysis shows that skilled visa entrants are even less likely than the

general population to be on any form of income support (see Table 3). This suggests that the risks of additional government ‘burden’ to provide support services to migrants in rural areas appears less extreme than is assumed and may actually be lower than for metropolitan migrants in some cases.

To enhance the perception of rural settlement and the probability of its long-term success, like migration in general, there needs to be ‘an accurate understanding of the fiscal and economic impacts of migration’ in the public domain.<sup>23</sup>

There likewise needs to be greater awareness of the opportunities on offer in different regional locations if migrants are to have the freedom of choice about the kinds of jobs they want and where they want to eventually settle.

**Table 3 Income support by immigrant category, 2011<sup>a,b</sup>**

Share of population on income support and average daily payment rate

Category	Proportion receiving any form of income support	Proportion receiving unemployment benefits	Average daily income support payment <sup>c</sup>
	%	%	\$
Permanent immigrants	13	4	29
Skill	3	1	25
Family	13	4	30
Humanitarian	65	24	30
General population	17	4	33

<sup>a</sup> Immigrants who arrived between 1 January 2000 and 2011 Census night. <sup>b</sup> Proportion aged 15–64 years receiving income support payments on Census date, 9 August 2011. <sup>c</sup> Average daily income support payment is only for those who are receiving income support.

**Source:** Productivity Commission (2016). *Migrant Intake into Australia*. Inquiry Report No. 77, Canberra, Table 9.1.

While it is necessary to recognise that every location is different, as are the motivations and challenges associated with rural settlement, there must be a consistent ‘chorus’ about the economic and employment aspects of rural settlement to make it easier to achieve beyond just a few ‘hot spots’ around the country. The creation and sustainment of a consistent and positive narrative at the state and national level, rather than simply repeatedly drawing on a series of isolated stories, will better equip rural communities to advocate for the benefits of migration at the local level. Facilitation of regular get-togethers of leaders in the rural settlement space will aid in the sharing of knowledge and the construction of a consistent narrative.

Forming a positive image of rural communities in the eyes of migrants and policymakers will also help ‘plant the seed’ that settlement outside of metropolitan cities is a desirable outcome; that there are lifestyle and employment gains to be made from living in less densely populated places and that rural communities are ready and willing to receive new residents from cultures different to their own.

There are many instances of migrants taking up the opportunity to move to rural towns and setting down roots once they get there, such as buying homes, establishing businesses and

raising children. These stories need to be showcased. They demonstrate to critics and sceptics of migration that newcomers can make a life for themselves in a rural community and be invested in its future. Unfortunately, the contribution of migrants is a story that is not always recognised, or at least widely broadcast. As the RAI roundtable participants noted, better public awareness of this ‘unknown’ side of arrivals – as hardworking, ambitious, and keen to get involved – is what can combat elements of suspicion or unease in some places. Greater promotion of migrants’ positive potential can also help overcome any negative preconceptions of ‘outsiders’ held by existing residents of some rural communities. This then takes the onus off newcomers to ‘prove’ themselves as valuable to existing residents of a community before they have even arrived.

Most importantly, endorsements of the contribution that migrants make to rural life posit rural migration as a means to achieve mutual benefit for arrivals and existing communities alike, rather than simply a way to increase cultural diversity for diversity’s sake, or to fulfil some altruistic ambition. This shift in thinking of diversity as a benefit, instead of just a ‘good thing’, is necessary for the messaging around migration generally, as emphasised by participants at the RAI roundtable.

Instead of being regarded as charity cases, migrants need to be recognised as assets that contribute new knowledge and make regions better places to live. To this end, both governments and communities must be careful not to fund migration programs out of empathy. Instead, migration programs should be funded in accordance with regional economic development goals. Positioning migrants as contributors to economic and social life will help counter information and perception problems that inhibit broader support for migrants to settle outside of major cities.

### **Establishing community-migrant links and maintaining social bonds**

The wider economic development potential of rural migration should not be underestimated. As well as having more jobs than workers, some rural areas have surplus infrastructure. These areas need people to fill jobs and use existing facilities, like schools which have spare capacity. However, to get people in, and to stay, the right connections need to be made. Effective networking gets rural settlement done.

To aid the linking process, a more systematic way of understanding the specific labour requirements of rural businesses, and matching these with the capabilities and aspirations of migrants, is required. This is to ensure that businesses can get the right workers for their needs, and migrants can make informed decisions about whether and where to move, based on the types of employment opportunities available in given locations. Some existing examples of attempts to connect employers with relevantly-skilled migrants include [www.migranttalent.com](http://www.migranttalent.com) and its parent site, [www.refugeetalent.com](http://www.refugeetalent.com)

The challenge of developing an employer-migrant linkage system is to ensure workers are not exploited in the process, by third-party labour hire companies or by employers directly.<sup>24</sup>

To help prevent worker exploitation, and to increase the employment prospects of both migrants and rural communities, there needs to be a transparent and accountable

‘matchmaking’ system developed to link migrants with rural employers via genuine offers of meaningful and suitable employment. This may be through an existing professional networking website, or through a dedicated platform (facilitated by government or a philanthropic organisation) that incorporates region-specific migrant employment programs through which regions identify their own labour gaps and advertise for job/visa applicants accordingly. One region-specific approach that could inform such a model is Canada’s Manitoba Provincial Nominee Program.<sup>25</sup>

As well as helping migrants be informed about employment opportunities, regional communities must also become informed about what taking on migrants will be like, and how they can build social connections by accepting and valuing difference.<sup>26</sup>

There also needs to be an understanding that, even with a positive narrative about the mutual benefits of regional settlement, depending on a migrant’s background, it can take time for language and cultural barriers to be overcome and for a sense of belonging to be achieved. It is one thing for a newcomer to learn English and be able to effectively communicate with others in the community (be they employers, medical professionals, shop keepers or others); it is another for that newcomer to feel like they are part of the community.

Past settlement experiences illustrate the importance of instilling migrants with a sense of belonging and identity, and the need for social factors to be viewed on par with the economic aspects of regional settlement. This includes making sure that dependents of migrant jobseekers are also supported and engaged, and that the work obtained by migrant jobseekers is meaningful. Community ‘safety nets’ – services and processes to assist migrants through any difficulties they encounter post-arrival – should also be incorporated into community-driven settlement initiatives.

If these sorts of social factors of settlement are ignored, and migrants are not encouraged to feel like they belong to a community, they are more likely to leave it.<sup>27</sup> However, if migrants are integrated into the very fabric of regional communities – and welcomed as home owners and rent payers, employers and employees, parents and children, friends and co-workers – the likelihood of their retention is greatly increased.<sup>28</sup>

As noted by participants at the RAI migration roundtable, achieving success in making strong connections with even just a few migrants to start with is often central to broader rural settlement success, as migrants tend to be the best advertisement for encouraging more migrants to come. Once a group establishes themselves as a critical mass in a rural area and shows what is possible, and how good life can be outside of big cities, more may follow.

For long-term success, migrants need a voice in rural communities, to feel as though their values and concerns are being heard and appreciated. Encouraging migrants to build capacity and take on community leadership positions (e.g. representation in local chamber of commerce) will help greatly with this.<sup>29</sup> According to roundtable participants, empowering migrants in this way is critical if arrivals and existing communities are to truly grow together.

In addition to recognising migrants’ decision-making power, there needs to be greater empowerment of rural communities to develop their own migration strategy. Some broad tips

for getting communities started on their settlement journey, as offered by roundtable participants, include:

- Getting people to visit before making a move. This enables potential arrivals to get a feel for the place and for the local community to get a feel for who and what may come.
- Hosting community events (such as picnics and barbeques) to introduce everyone early on. This way, the unknown aspects of the move are more readily overcome.
- Encouraging arrivals to join clubs. This is so arrivals can network with locals to tap into social and employment opportunities, and so the community can foster an environment of safety and belonging.
- Building a relationship with the local media and encouraging it to share migrant stories. This will help cultivate a positive narrative around regional migration, and enhance the understanding of migrants and their local contribution within the broader community.

The job of policy is to ensure rural communities wishing to entice migrants in this way have the necessary information and resources on hand to do so. This includes providing local governments with the means to establish and sustain the necessary connections within their community to promote the best chance of long-term settlement success. By creating and promoting information resources, rural communities and businesses will be better positioned to connect with migrants and navigate the settlement journey together.

### **Activating community engagement and support**

Locally-led solutions are essential for place-based problems. Those present at the RAI migration roundtable agreed with this sentiment, urging that the most pragmatic and passionate leadership for rural settlement endeavours often comes from within. According to the roundtable participants, only with a locally-led, ground-up approach – that values both migrant and community perspectives – can settlement outside of major cities be truly successful.

Roundtable participants also impressed the need for communities to undertake an ongoing audit of their local issues – what works, what does not, and what can be improved – and to continuously revise what short-term strategies are needed to achieve long-term goals. Part of this means encouraging communities to develop clarity about what they want and need, and including new arrivals in this discussion. Speaking from experience, roundtable participants suggested that having access to trained facilitators at any planned community events can help greatly with this process.

Another way to activate community support for rural migration, also promoted by roundtable participants, is to position first-generation migrants to act as social and cultural bridge-makers between existing and prospective residents. This makes everyone more aware of the positive impacts that migration can have, is already having, on small communities.

Education around the tangible benefits of migration is important, as rural communities are rarely entirely homogenous (ideologically or ethnically), and not everyone will be involved or even necessarily in favour of regional migration, particularly in its early stages. As roundtable participants acknowledged, there are always going to be some labelled as ‘do-gooders’ and

others at the complete opposite end of the spectrum who are very much opposed to any kind of migrant influx. The majority, however, are thought to be somewhere in between, able to be swayed to either side, especially through messages propagated by the media.

Those pushing for positive media coverage, like those participating in the RAI's roundtable, are invariably the local champions behind the settlement process. Local champions are the ones who take up the cause for rural settlement and inspire others to join them. Local champions are the ones who establish the links between local government, not-for-profits and businesses to drive a whole of community approach for smoothing the transition of new arrivals into rural life.

However, even local champions, like those present at the roundtable, know that success relies on more than just a few people. The wider community still needs to be in support of rural settlement and willing to help, or at the very least tolerate the changes new residents bring. Community-readiness cannot be underestimated.

Across the country, communities are already showing themselves prepared to do what is necessary to build the local workforce and population base through migration. Any underestimation of the drive and capacity of more communities to rise to the challenge of making regional settlement a success is an opportunity lost. Still, more needs to be done to support local change-makers in their efforts to attract and retain migrants to their area.

### **Considering the bigger picture**

The five roundtable findings outlined above affirm two areas as being in need of policy action: (1) the flexibility of Australia's immigration, settlement and job services system, and (2) the support for locally-led migration strategies.

The inflexibility and siloed nature of Australia's immigration policy and settlement system is essentially an 'old' problem that has plagued settlement discussions for years and inhibited the prospect of largescale rural migration. The scaling up of locally-led migration strategies is what has the biggest potential to transform small rural communities, and so needs to be a key area of focus in future migration efforts.

To facilitate locally-led migration, particularly through secondary migration, there needs to be a rethink in the way the support services are funded and delivered. The challenge will be in ensuring that the location of support is based on where migrants want to go, not the other way around. Should a lot of migrants want to live and work in rural areas, opting for a change in lifestyle more in line with the way they want to live, then more support (whether financial or service-based) needs to be able to be directed to these regions.

Settlement services must be more mobile to be able to account for inevitable migrant mobility. This may mean facilitating central settlement services hubs to reach out and support more remote areas traditionally considered 'beyond scope' due to service catchment boundaries.

Just as migrants require different types and degrees of support, there is no 'one size fits all' solution to rural settlement. Nor is there a single driver behind what makes a community push to increase its migrant intake. Each place is different, and programs do not always translate from place to place. As a recent study into migrant and refugee settlement in regional and

rural Australia shows, to be sustainable, settlement solutions must be context-specific, with policy and programs flexible enough to account for local issues.<sup>30</sup>

Recognising local context also means understanding that different communities face different challenges in terms of attracting and retaining migrants. While many communities may wish to pursue migration as a means to broaden the local skills base or stem population and economic decline, there is still a matter of linking up with interested migrants, and making sure communities are ready to make it happen.

More needs to be done to make sure that communities of all sizes can connect and ‘share the learnings’ about what makes for a successful, long-term migration strategy so that more can bring it to fruition.

## Policy approach

### 1. Support the establishment of more locally-led migration and settlement initiatives

- a) **Facilitate the identification of local labour need and community support:** Provide resources for locally-led needs assessments to confirm specific workforce requirements and broader community support for rural migration and settlement programs. These resources will help ease the burden on individual community ‘champions’ to initiate such programs. These resources will also better enable rural employers to attract migrant workers that are ‘fit for place’, regardless of when and where they entered the country and on what terms. Access to resources should be on the basis that a community’s decision to initiate a migration program is encouraged, not required.
- b) **Provide resources for local capacity-building:** Provide resources for communities to build local capacity to carry out local programs. This may include trialling the delivery of outreach training from centralised settlement service providers. Outreach services should aim to upskill rural community members in how to navigate the settlement journey to achieve long-term results; that is, utilise ‘on-the-ground’ and other existing resources (e.g. interpreters in nearby locations) to provide initial and ongoing support to new arrivals.
- c) **Connect migrants and rural employers:** Establish a ‘matchmaking’ system that fosters direct links between rural employers and migrant workers. The system needs to be transparent and provide migrants with connections to genuine and suitable employment.
- d) **Create and promote information resources:** Help rural communities initiate and maintain social connections with arrivals by distributing ‘info packs’ to local governments. With accurate information on the economic contribution of migrant workers, as well as suggestions for how to manage the social aspects of migration to a small town, such info packs will ensure communities are well placed to navigate their own settlement journey.

The RAI is currently working with the Scanlon Foundation and the Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development International to develop a rural settlement toolkit that will be promoted to communities across the country once available. More support and resources for the creation and distribution of these kinds of initiatives is essential.

#### GOAL

A group of motivated rural communities achieve status as priority settlement areas (demonstrating workforce need, housing availability, social integration capacity, and local service capability).

## 2. Facilitate migration to, and settlement in, priority rural areas

- a) **Recognise local labour needs in immigration policy:** Develop a new mechanism for articulating labour shortages, including quantifying the reliance on temporary workers in particular occupations and regions. This will enable Australia's immigration policy to better meet local labour needs rather than operate according to limited 'in-demand' occupation lists. Such an understanding will also help facilitate rural employers' capacity to secure both skilled and unskilled workers, which will be especially helpful in LGAs where the overseas born are the only source of additional labour.
- b) **Incentivise rural settlement:** Establish a systematic and integrated approach for facilitating rural settlement, including specific support for secondary migration, so that all communities have the opportunity to benefit from in-migration of the overseas-born. Offer incentives for migrants to move to rural locations (such as set up costs and increased opportunities for family reunion). Offer incentives to rural communities to gain status as settlement priority areas.
- c) **Promote flexibility in service delivery and funding:** Review settlement and employment services to better facilitate the movement of migrants into and between rural areas. A review of settlement services should specifically address the issue of catchment-dependent funding mechanisms that effectively discourage moves across catchment boundaries. Similarly, a review of employment services should look at the inadvertent ways in which standardised eligibility criteria for relocation assistance may undermine the capacity for connections to be made between jobseekers and rural employers.

#### GOALS

1. 'First mover' settlement occurs shortly after priority area status is achieved.
2. Over three to five years, an additional 2,000-3,000 migrants per year are moving to priority rural areas to take up employment and long-term residence.
3. Migrants stay in rural communities and employment for at least five years.

## An enormous opportunity for change

This issue presents an enormous opportunity for positive change and development in rural communities.

By embedding rural settlement within broader discussions about regional development, rural communities and employers will have greater impetus to attract and retain migrants and ensure there is long-term success.

A stronger emphasis on locally-led secondary migration in federal policy may be especially fruitful in this regard as it can offer migrants a new way of life more akin to their heritage or aspirations. Secondary migration can also ease the burden on rural communities to provide high-need settlement services and on rural employers to fill jobs.

This is a mutually-beneficial scenario that Australia should aspire to achieve, not just in isolated pockets but across the country.

Just as the Landcare Movement enabled rural communities to confront local environmental degradation and develop sustainable approaches to land management in the 1980s and 1990s, a network of locally-led migration initiatives in rural communities can change the population and economic growth trajectory for many of Australia's small towns.

## Contacts and further information

To discuss this policy paper or find out more about the RAI's research agenda, please contact the RAI via [info@regionalaustralia.org.au](mailto:info@regionalaustralia.org.au) or visit [www.regionalaustralia.org.au](http://www.regionalaustralia.org.au).

## Disclaimer

This paper translates and analyses findings of research and discussions with community members involved in regional settlement. It is designed to enable an informed public discussion of migration to and between regional parts of Australia.

No responsibility is accepted by the Regional Australia Institute Limited, its Board or its funders for the accuracy of the advice provided or for the quality of advice or decisions made by others based on the information presented in this publication.

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