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Sustaining the regions: Issues of international migration, settlement and ethnic diversity

Mitra Khakbaz, Narayan Gopalkrishnan and Hurriyet Babacan

University of the Sunshine Coast

Abstract

The Commonwealth Government has adopted a strategy to increase international migration to the regions through a number of ways including regional skilled migration, increased business migration and approval of international students living in Australia for permanent residence.

Although there is no population policy framework which governs this strategy, it is, nevertheless, an attempt to address some of the decline which regional areas are experiencing in terms of population, service and resource sustainability and above all economic downturn.

However, injecting migrants into rural and regional areas (notwithstanding definition of what constitutes rural and regional) raises fundamental questions such as quality of services and infrastructure, nature of community outlook and potential to innovate and change. While regional re-invigoration involves broad consideration such as terms of trade, economic growth and spatial inequality it also involves the actions of communities and individuals in those locations.

This paper focuses on the issues of settlement of migrants in rural and regional areas and explores some the impact of key issues such as lack of infrastructure and services, openness to cultural diversity and difference, processes of settlement of immigrants and the impacts that isolation in rural areas can have and finally the elements of successful settlement to sustain the regions. Given that Australia is attempting to attract the educated, skilled and well-resourced members of the global community issues of settlement, economic opportunity and quality of life are fundamental to well being of not only those immigrating but the broader communities they integrate with.

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Introduction

The Commonwealth Government has adopted a strategy to increase international migration to the regions through a number of ways including regional skilled migration, increased business migration and approval of international students living in Australia for permanent residence.

What constitutes rural and regional is a matter of contention. Gray and Lawrence (2001) define *regional* as an area which has a distinctive relationship or dependency with a metropolitan area while *rural* is defined as connection to dependence of agriculture (p.2). While this definition may be controversial, for the purposes of this paper it is sufficient. In fact given that migrants are sent to areas in which agriculture is the main form of livelihood in many areas, the terms rural and regional will be used synonymously.

Notwithstanding definitional issues about regions, a new regional migration visa was announced on 20 May by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural Affairs and Indigenous Affairs. The Skilled Independent Regional (SIR) visa aims to attract skilled immigrants to regional areas for a minimum of three years. This complements a suite of initiatives to attract migrants under a range of business and skill categories to regional areas. In addition the State Governments have established strategies to promote migration to rural and regional areas in a number of skill areas including doctors, nurses and radiographers.

The Commonwealth Government does not have a population strategy. Opinion about population targets is a highly contested field amongst academics, demographers and policy makers (Hugo 2002). The scope of this paper does not permit a consideration of these issues at any length. Since the end of World War 2 over six million new settlers have arrived in Australia. Over the same years (1947-2001) the proportion of population overseas born increased from 10 per cent to 23 per cent (ABS 2004). In 2001 81% of the overseas born showed a preference to live in the city. The data from ABS (2004) indicates that the overseas born are more urbanised than the Australian born population. The 2001 Census indicated that 16 per cent of people born overseas were recent arrivals having arrived between 1996 and 2001. Recent arrivals were more urbanised with nine out of ten living in major urban areas. Approximately 5 per cent of overseas born population live in other rural areas as compared to 12 per cent of the Australian born population.

Despite high rates of net overseas migration there is debate amongst scholars about the possible impact of migration on population on elements of Australian life such as ageing, economic growth, and the environment (Hugo 2002, McDonald and Kippen 1999).

Although there is no population policy framework which governs the initiatives by the Commonwealth Government there is an underlying assumption that migration to the regions will address some of the decline which regional areas are experiencing in terms of population, service and resource sustainability, skill and labour shortages and above all economic downturn. In fact, the only jurisdiction to have adopted a policy position is the South Australian Government. In March 2004, the South Australian Government adopted *Prosperity Through Its People: A Population Policy for South Australia*. Identifying the problems in declining fertility rates, an ageing population, growth in demand for labour and skills, movement away from provincial towns to coastal towns and larger cities, the Policy sets a number of population targets in which attracting migrants plays a key role.

Since the introduction of regional visa schemes in 1996, over 27,000 visas have been granted. In 2002-2003 approximately 8,000 visas were granted under regional migration programs, an increase of over 90 per cent in the previous year and equates to 12 per cent of total number of skilled migrants to Australia. The 2004 Year Book concludes that these programs are too recent to have had any impact on the overall distribution of the overseas born population.

While the debates on population have focused on population size and role of immigration in impacting on that it is important to bear in mind that there are issues of spatial distribution and composition which need to be considered. Spatial growth patterns are changing with income disparities between urban and non-urban centres, with growth spurts in coastal areas

Rural and Regional Panorama

Rural and regional Australia faces significant challenges. According to Gray and Lawrence (2001) there are three key challenges: to be economically productive; to ensure social viability; and ecological sustainability. The fourth that emerges from all three is the reform of institutional structures which will enable responsiveness to the community needs. Pritchard and McManus (2000 a) point out that what we know about rural and regional Australia is there is growing income gap between rural and city dwellers, that there are a range of social problems including male suicide and that the number of farmers have dropped.

Given this panorama, injecting migrants into rural and regional areas raises fundamental questions such as quality of services and infrastructure, nature of community outlook and potential to innovate and change. While regional re-invigoration involves broad consideration such as terms of trade, economic growth and spatial inequality it also involves the actions of communities and individuals in those locations.

At a macro level the process of globalisation, defined as greater interconnectivity of people and events across the globe which incorporates all elements of social life although most often the economic is emphasised (Waters 1995, Bauman 1998). One main insight of globalisation is that it shrinks time and space, i.e. it is fast and cover vast amount of space quickly. The second key element is that space or territory becomes less relevant (Waters 1995) although this set up interplay of contradictory and complex set of relationships. The new flows of global capital has two significant impacts on rural and regional communities and economies; one is the loss of comparative advantage of countries such as Australia in the face of liberal trade policies and rural and regional communities becoming vulnerable within the nation state due to lack of investment by global or national corporations and the state. This limits the opportunities for rural and regional areas where regions compete with others to the lower order investment and resources or as Brecher and Costello (1994) have called the “race to the bottom”. It is the processes of globalisation, coupled with shortage of investment to change from agriculture based economies to new viable alternatives.

Issues of service viability are linked with population and demographic change. It is well known that the population of small towns are declining steadily (McKenzie 1994, Hugo 2002). This trend is not new and is exacerbated by restructuring in the agricultural sector (Productivity Commission 1999). Key factors which contribute to population change include farm mechanisation, farm enlargement, improvements in technology, globalisation and competition policies of government, falling incomes and shrinking of farm labour force . Although rural and regional areas are capable of growth this is spatially selective and has been contained to coastal

and commuter belts (Haberhorn et al. 1999). Broad population shifts have also been accompanied by important demographic changes: majority of people leaving declining areas are aged between 15 and 15 (Hugo 1994) due to lack of employment and educational opportunities but also for lifestyle choice; increase in the proportion of older adults over the age of 65 in rural and regional Australia (Pritchard and McManus 2000 b).

Social Reality of Rural and Regional Australia

In examining regional population and migration it is important to bear in mind that rural and regional Australia is diverse and is accompanied by a regional or localised identity. Regional diversity and identity are shaped by a number of factors including geography, a colonial past resulting in dispossession of and continued disadvantage of indigenous people; systems of law and government, particularly local government; history of economic development (agriculture, mining, forestry) and the associated patterns of population settlement and a heritage that emerges from the culmination of these factors.

The global new world order of increased competition, free trade agreements, and downturn in traditional sources of living has confronted rural and regional Australia in a fundamental way. Reflexivity is about people's reflection on events and situations and consequent action. There is an increasing trend for rural and regional communities towards being impoverished (Cheers 1998, Hugo 2002), disaffected and disenfranchised.

The reaction of communities in rural and regional areas is characterised by what rural ideology and culture in what is coined as 'countrymindedness' (Godden 1997) and the 'rural idyll' (Williams 1975). These determine a set of values placed on way things happen, sense of community and decision making process. Godden (1997:94) notes the role of countrymindedness in conservatism and "more or less considered view about how society should be organised". Rural ideology may be used to explain why the rates of innovation are slower and there is a reluctance to change ways of behaving, acting and doing in rural and regional areas relative to larger cosmopolitan centres.

Migration: As Spatial and Temporal Event

Migration is a fundamental yet complex feature of the modern world. Movements of people for numerous reasons across the globe as refugees, workers, tourists, businesspeople present themselves as everyday images in our daily lives. Migration is defined spatially as movement across the boundary of an areal unit (Boyle et al. 1998). However, it is usually more than this. Migration happens over time and involves temporal elements. McHugh et al. (1995) point out that it is more useful to talk about migration over a life course model and argue that recurrent mobility between multiple residences is becoming increasingly prevalent across the span of an individual's life span.

In addition to the spatial element of migration, it is fundamental to consider other elements of migration including cultural, psychological, economic and political factors.

Migrants Entering Rural and Regional Areas

The debates on immigration intakes have focused attention on distribution of migrants across Australia and the need to ease the economic and environmental pressures on cities. The Commonwealth Government response is largely supported by some states such as the statements made by the NSW Premier over many years about infrastructure issues and the need to discourage migrants from settling in Sydney. While infrastructure issues are critical the population distribution is one factor amongst many to consider in the settlement of migrants.

The rural landscape has had injection of culturally diverse populations over the last 200 years with the indentured Melanesian labour known as Kanaka, the Italian, the Chinese, the Greek, and the German and in more recent years other communities. Some communities came to be associated with key rural industries such as Italians with sugar, the German with the wine industry, the Turkish with grapes and tomatoes and so on.

The distribution of culturally diverse people across rural and regional areas varies considerably between states and territories. For example some areas such as Morwell, Shepparton, Griffith and Mareeba exhibit approximately 11 per cent of their population of non-English speaking background (NESB) while others are very low. The Mining town of Coober Pedy in South Australia has a population of over 25 per cent (Conner and Heilpern 1991, ABS 2004). Gray et al (1991) identified that settlement patterns are changing. Some rural and regional areas were home to older settlers including Italian, Greek, Polish, Dutch, German, Maltese, Chinese, Turkish, Sikh, Serbian and Croatian while new groups emerging included Filipino, Laotian, Vietnamese, Persian, Spanish speaking and Hmong.

There has been insufficient study of why cultural diversity in rural and regional areas. For example we do not know the process by which certain ethnic communities settle in particular areas. For example why did the Turkish community settle in the grape growing areas of Mildura in Victoria (just to name one community). Why are there emerging communities in some regions and not others? Why do some refugees placed in particular rural areas move out of those areas? What are the processes at work that sustain communities in rural and regional areas?

There are numerous theories of migration which can be used to explain the pull-push factors associated with investment of finance, shortages of labour and economic growth. A number of examples can be provided in the history of Australia of settlement of immigrants into particular areas do fill labour shortages such as the Snowy Mountain Scheme. The world is a growingly complex place with global shifts of capital and with rapid movements of finance in and out of countries. Thus it is not an easy scenario to explore issues around settlement of migrants in rural and regional areas.

The adaptation and settlement processes for immigrants are highly complex phenomena. When people arrive in Australia there is a stage in which they adjust or settle. How an immigrant arrives in any place is important, that is category of immigration (are they refugees, business migrants, skilled migrants or family migration). There is no current data on this for rural and regional Australia. The work undertaken by Gray et.al. (1991) indicate that 54 per cent arrived under family migration, 25 per cent under refugee program, 6 per cent as fiancées and 5 per cent under employer nomination scheme. This scenario is likely to change and internal migration upon arrival also takes place. However, the category of arrival often determines the type of services and support that an immigrant needs to adapt and settle in Australia.

The term settlement refers to the period following an immigrant's arrival in a new country.

The National Population Council (1988) defined *settlement* as

The process by which an immigrant establishes economic viability and social networks following immigration in order to contribute to, and make full use of, opportunities generally available in the receiving society. (DIMA 1996:1)

Cox (1996) points out that “it is the period during which immigrants need, depending on each person’s situation, to find housing and a source of income, to develop or find an adequate means of communicating with existing residents, and to begin building a satisfactory personal and social life in their new environment” (Cox, 1996:1)

Adelman et. al (1994) see settlement as promoting long-term equality of outcomes in relation to resources and power in society. They also believe that successful settlement relates to a stage of self-reliance within a culturally relevant support community. Wooden et.al.(1994) sees settlement as a process to engender a sense of security and optimism in immigrants.

However, the process of adjustment to a new society is dependent on making factors and it is an ongoing process. It is a dynamic process and involves the interface of the social, psychological and political dimensions of the person/group entering Australia and the society which receives them. Success or otherwise of settlement cannot be uni-dimensional and solely dependent upon the person/group immigrating. Due to the complex nature of the settlement process, the time of settlement varies for different people and groups.

At an individual level a number of studies have been conducted to identify the location of decisions of immigrants for settlement although there is paucity of recent research in this area. Maher and Stimson (1994) distinguish between natural attractors (climate and physiographic factors such as the beach) and constructed attractors. The constructed attractors are both economic and socio-cultural and include opportunities for good employment, social networks, housing, availability of social infrastructure (particularly schools) and elements which make for social cohesion (welcoming environment). The social networks and social cohesion elements were found to be key importance for newly arrived immigrants in rural areas in terms of information and cultural support. Murphy (1997) also found that in terms of initial location of immigrants a number of factors were found to be relevant (in order of importance): location of spouse, location of family, location of friends, job opportunities, housing information flows, links and distance from country of origin and previous visits to Australia. In addition to the above factors, Hazebroek et.al. (1994) pointed out other important considerations such as proximity to workplace, transferability of occupational skills, and access to places of worship, extent of cross cultural marriages, number of dependent aged, location of arrival base and length of time in Australia.

Service availability becomes critical and there is a significant responsibility for government. As Gray et. al. (1991) point out

the needs of immigrants settling in rural areas are basically similar to those of people who settle in cities, but social structures and relations entered during settlement are different, as are conditions affecting service delivery. In particular, immigrants who choose to settle in rural areas are likely to be isolated from large urban concentrations of ethnic groups and to be offered few or no services aimed at meeting their specific needs (p. xiii)

Stilwell's (1992) notion of *disarticulation* is a useful approach to draw upon. Stillwell notes that articulation relates to linkage and coherence. He points to a lack of articulation between productive sectors (industry, finance and investment) to social sectors. The result is inequality in the distribution of social resources, political disarticulation and structural fragmentation. This fragmentation is evident in rural areas and the inability of the three tiers of government to bridge the gaps. Many immigrants settling in rural and regional areas fall between the cracks. Babacan (1998) demonstrated a range of issues for culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the rural and regional areas including barriers to access, lack of resources and infrastructure, lack of critical mass (of an ethnic or multicultural groups) to warrant particular types of service (e.g. interpreters), lack information, problems with mainstreaming, ageing, isolation, language barriers, cultural issues, employment, inter-generational issues (impacting on women, youth, caring responsibilities) and racism. These are important issues to address if attracting and keeping migrants in the regions is to be a reality.

A final point to note is the importance of a sense of community. As outlined above a number of studies demonstrated the importance of social cohesion. Despite the diversity of rural and regional Queensland a homogenised representation is dominant. In reality it has been a field of cultural diversity although the percentages vary. This sets up a tension of social exclusion and inclusion. Elder (2001:192), in making reference to the sugar industry in Queensland argues that this has "created tensions between the culturally variable attitudes, divisions of labour, gender relations and patterns of interaction between farming households on the one hand, and the need for cooperation within the sugar industry as a whole on the other". Anscombe and Doyle (1998) point to the issues of what they call 'differentness' and point to both attitudes of individuals and institutional racism in rural Australia. They state that

both Aboriginal and ethnic communities in rural Australia are confronted with a dominant frame of reference and an ethnocentricity which tends to disempower, stereotype and maintain vested interests (p. xiii).

Drawing in from earlier discussion about conservatism and country-mindedness it is inevitable to question the level of social cohesion and social inclusion in rural areas for newly arriving migrants. McManus and Pritchard (2000 a) remind us of the overwhelming electoral success of Pauline Hanson and the One Nation Party in rural and regional seats and the exaggerated perceptions on a range of issues including immigration.

Conclusion

The way problems and issues are constructed in social, economic and political contexts have fundamental consequences for how they are understood and addressed. Discourses on population policy have not sufficiently addressed issues of migration and spatial distribution. Rural and regional discourses barely mention cultural diversity as an issue. This paper has focused on the issues of settlement of migrants in rural and regional areas and explored some of the impact of key issues such as lack of infrastructure and services, openness to cultural diversity and difference, processes of settlement of immigrants and the impacts that isolation in rural areas can have.

Given that Australia is attempting to attract the educated, skilled and well-resourced members of the global community issues of settlement, economic opportunity and quality of life are fundamental to well being of not only those immigrating but the broader communities they integrate with. It is critical that future efforts take a multi-disciplinary and holistic view of both

regions and population policy. Progress for a better future regional policy rests with not only reinvigorating the regions economically but also in building social capital. More effort needs to be put into understanding the complex threads which connect the lives of people around employment, identity, belonging, and inclusion...

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