



Case Study 4: Resettlement of 160 Karen refugees in Nhill Victoria

'Small towns Big returns' AMES (Australian Multicultural Education Services) Research and Policy/Deloitte Access Economics 2015

http://www.karen.org.au/karen_people.htm

Introduction

This case study looks to identify and assess some of the key factors that underpinned the successful placement of 106 Karen refugees from (Myanmar) in the small, isolated agricultural town of Nhill in the Wimmera region of north-western Victoria. Nhill, like many small, regional towns throughout Australia was experiencing some of the negative impacts of an aging population. These impacts included very low unemployment and a significant decline in the available number of younger people of a working age. This situation was resulting in an ongoing decline in the town's economy and social health and wellbeing.

The catalyst for the refugee settlement initiative came from one of the towns largest commercial businesses. Luv-a-Duck is a family owned, vertically integrated, agribusiness that produces and processes duck products for both domestic and export markets.

Luv-a-Duck needed additional labour to support an expansion program. With both "economic and humanitarian motivations" Luv-a-Duck contacted AMES (Australian Migrant Education Service). AMES is a 'not for profit' organisation that works closely with migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. AMES provide Job Services Australia (Job Active) specialist employment services to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) groups, Humanitarian Settlement Services and Adult Migrant Education Programs across Victoria. Through these services AMES established communication link between Luv-a-Duck and the large Karen community living in Werribee in Melbourne's west.

About the Karen people

The Karen people are an ethnic group living in South-East Asia. The Karen people are culturally and linguistically diverse. There are about seven million Karen people living in Burma (Myanmar), about half a million Thai-Karen whose ancestral villages are in Thailand, and smaller groups of Karen living in India and other South-East Asian countries. There are about 140,000 Karen refugees living in camps in Thailand, and about 50,000 Karen refugees have been resettled in America, Canada, Australia, and some European countries. Australia resettled the second highest number (approx. 11%; over 7000).

Most Karen people are subsistence farmers, living in small mountain villages, and growing rice and vegetables and raising animals and many have not had the opportunity to obtain higher levels of education. There are Buddhist monasteries in most Karen villages, and the

monastery is the centre of community life. Karen monks are religious leaders but they are often also community leaders, school teachers, human rights activists, counsellors, herbal doctors, and care for orphans and homeless children. About one hundred and fifty years ago Christian missionaries started working with the Karen and now about 15% of Karen people are Christians. In the 19th century Britain colonised Burma and destroyed the Burmese monarchy. Burma regained its independence in 1948. Civil war soon broke out between the government, the Karen and other ethnic minority groups.

In 1962 the Burmese Army took power. While the military regime has changed names several times since, Burma continues to be a military dictatorship. The Burmese Army held elections in 1990 but refused to hand over power to the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi.

The military held new elections in 2011 for “discipline-flourishing democracy”. A quarter of the seats in the new parliament have been reserved for military officers, international observers and media were barred, and the outcome was widely regarded as ‘rigged’.

The transition from military regime to military-controlled "discipline-flourishing democracy" has made little difference in the life of villagers in Karen State or elsewhere in Burma.

Since 2013 there has been little fighting in Karen State, and there have been on and off ceasefire negotiations between the Burmese government and several Karen armed groups. There is still occasional fighting, extortion and forced labour by the Burmese Army. Karen State also now has a landmine problem matched only by Afghanistan.¹

Relevance of this Case Study

Whilst the focus of this case study was essentially employment related, additional detail provided in the report concerning other, more intangible critical success factors adds greatly to the understanding of the challenge overall. The *Small Towns, Big Returns* report shows an economic benefit estimated to be \$41.5 million in net present terms based on modelling by Deloitte Access Economics. This is attributed, in the main, to the creation of 70.5 Full Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs over a 5 year period. The report however sheds much light on why the refugee resettlement initiative was successful and sustainable.

Of particular note in the report is the statement that while employment outcomes were critical, they were not in themselves sufficient to bring about the desired resettlement outcomes. Other contributing factors that benefited the employer and both the host and settlement communities included strong leadership, high quality preparation, good accommodation options, effective family support networks and high quality management of ‘cultural adjustment’ issues on both sides. When these community based factors were added to Luv-a-Duck’s strategic intent and combined economic and humanitarian motivations, success was inevitable.

Some of the key messages/learnings from this Case Study

Overall the *Small Towns, Big Returns* report captures much more than an initiative by an employer with labour supply needs. There is a ‘bigger picture’ here that relates much more to building sustainable, regional communities than to meeting the labour supply needs of a

¹ http://www.karen.org.au/karen_people.htm

food processor. The Nhill/Luv-a-Duck story could apply to almost any regional town in Australia that host's medium to large businesses with ongoing labour supply needs.

Australia's ageing population is a reality as is the ever-declining numbers of young people of a working-age, being available to regional industries. The report clearly shows that reversing the impacts of our ageing population is possible when all business, host community and settlement community stakeholders work together as 'one' to achieve refugee resettlement outcomes. Clearly the achievement of 70.5 FTE positions over 5 years is impressive as is the economic impact of the increased labour supply, estimated to be \$41.5 million in net present value terms. There is, as the report states, a "story behind the numbers".

The foundation stone of the Nhill/Luv-a-Duck "story" is leadership. Often opportunity arises from crisis. In the case of Luv-a-Duck the 'crisis' was insufficient labour supply to meet the needs of a business expansion program driven by a spike in domestic demand for product.

Strong leadership was displayed by Luv-a-Duck, the Nhill community, AMES (Adult Multicultural Education Services) and ultimately the Karen resettlement group. The key learning here was all leadership groups working together, respectfully.

Other critical success factors that contributed to the eventual success of the resettlement program include:

- a host community well prepared to accommodate refugees in a resettlement program.
- provision of access to accommodation
- organised support for new families
- effective management of 'cultural adjustment' on both sides
- preparing potential new settlers well for their new environment.

Resettlement of a single group of people from one ethnic origin assisted in decreasing the linguistic and cultural complexity of the exercise. The report indicates that the selection of the Karen group of people was attractive due to the fact that "As a people the Karen are strongly community oriented and place high importance on family and respect for elders and community leaders"². More importantly for Luv-a-Duck and Nhill, the Karen people group "were attracted to the prospect of moving to a small rural town".

The decision by Luv-a-Duck to initiate a resettlement program started as a little idea in a small conservative community. Sustainable success was achieved when business, community, government resettlement support agencies and the targeted resettlement group, in this case the Karen people, worked together as 'one'.

If this working together as 'one' can be achieved in resettlement programs, the rewards will come. In the case of Nhill, population decline for the township was redressed, local services were revitalised, government funding for the town increased and social capital and prosperity across both communities were greatly improved.

***'Small towns Big returns'* AMES Research and Policy/Deloitte Access Economics 2015**

² SE Region Migrant Resource Centre, May 2011, People of Burma in Melbourne; Perspectives of a Refugee Community