

Regional Engagement of Migrant Communities: Challenges and Innovations

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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 residency. There are already significant pockets of people of culturally diverse backgrounds in regional Australia. Regional Australia faces significant economic and social adjustments in times of global change and major restructuring. We see changes in population compositions and industry. Some areas are in decline while others, mainly along the coast, are experiencing large population growth.

The impact of these changes is that communities are feeling isolated and overwhelmed by the rapid pace of change and lack of control in decision-making processes, which impact on their lives. It is now more than ever that governments need to engage with communities in rural and regional areas. The issues relating to ethnicity and culture introduce an added dimension to the issues of engagement. This paper explores challenges faced by culturally diverse communities in engaging with Government in regional areas. The paper explores the problems and barriers faced in the process of engagement and the challenges of social inclusion when faced with the intersection of culture, economic disadvantage and spatial distribution.

Drawing from practice experiences, this paper argues that effective engagement can only occur with culturally diverse communities under two conditions:

1. Building capacity of communities to engage
2. Flexibility in government system that abandon mono-cultural practices and processes.

The paper concludes with innovations that will assist in overcoming some of the challenges.

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 residency.

Since the introduction of regional visa schemes in 1996, over 27,000 visas have been granted. In 2002–2003 approximately 8000 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. Even though 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 it is important to bear in mind that the current intake, in addition to the existing diversity, imposes significant challenges to inclusive practice and effective engagement of communities.

These changes have great impact on communities in regions and create a feeling of isolation by rapid pace of change and lack of access or control in decision-making processes. In examining regional engagement it is important to note 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. It is now more than ever that governments need to engage with communities.

This paper explores the problems and barriers faced in the process of engagement and the challenges of social inclusion when faced with the intersection of culture, economic disadvantage and spatial distribution. Drawing from practice the paper will argue that effective engagement will occur under two conditions: building capacity of communities to engage; and flexibility in government systems that abandon mono-cultural practices and processes.

Defining rural and regions

What constitutes rural and regional is a matter of contention. Gray and Lawrence (2001) define *regional* as an area that 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 settle in areas in which agriculture is the main form of livelihood, the terms rural and regional will be used synonymously.

Despite definitional issues about regions, a new regional migration visa was announced on 20 May 2004 by the Minister for Immigration and Multicultural 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. These initiatives, in addition to the historical factors, add and enrich the diversity of the regions.

Regional diversity

Regional Australia has had numerous injections of culturally diverse populations over the past 200 years with the indentured Melanesian labourers known as Kanakas, the Italian, the Chinese, the Greek, the German and, in more recent years, other communities. Over time, some communities came to be associated with key rural industries such as the Italian community with the sugar industry, the German community with the wine industry, and the Turkish community with the grape and tomato industries.

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.

To be able to effectively engage the migrant communities in rural and regional areas, it is critical to understand governments' responsibilities and the accessibility of services available in the regions. 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) and social sectors. The result is inequality in the distribution of social resources, political disarticulation and structural fragmentation. This fragmentation is evident in regional areas as is the inability of the three tiers of government to bridge the gaps. As a result, many immigrants settling in rural and regional areas fall between the cracks. Babacan (1998) demonstrates a range of issues for culturally and linguistically diverse communities in the rural and regional areas. These include including barriers to access, lack of resources and infrastructure, lack of critical mass (of an

ethnic or multicultural group) to warrant particular types of service (e.g. interpreters), lack of 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.

Social cohesion is one of the important factors in achieving effective engagement with diverse communities. In reality, regional Australia has always been a field of cultural diversity (although the percentages vary). However, it is well identified that, despite the diversity existing in rural and regional Queensland, the representation is very mono-cultural. This sets up a tension of social exclusion and inclusion.

Elder (2001, p. 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).

Social exclusion, as one of the main barriers faced by many disadvantaged groups in Queensland society, can be defined as:

“a multi-dimensional disadvantage which severs individuals and groups from the major social processes and opportunities in society such as housing, citizenship, employment, adequate living standards and may be manifested in various forms, at various times and within various sections of the population” (Barry & Hallet 1998).

Exclusion is multi-dimensional and can take many forms such as exclusion from the labour market, economic exclusion, social isolation, institutional exclusion, cultural exclusion and racism.

In order to develop more inclusive communities, there is a need to consider allowing for practices that aim at: empowering communities through access to resources; creating trust with institutions (e.g. government departments, local representatives); building and creating understanding; bridging the gaps; and enabling ethnic communities to participate in community and social life. It is important to be able to understand the psychology of inclusion such as enabling community members to become confident and hopeful individuals and the sociology of inclusion such as allowing the celebration of diversity. There is a need to support

ethnic communities to achieve the infrastructure of inclusion through access to information and resources. The inclusion and engagement of ethnic communities can happen through building the capacity of the communities to take part in decision-making processes.

Community capacity building is about improving the ability of a community to recognise, evaluate and address key issues that affect their lives. This has a number of dimensions and can be achieved through a range of initiatives including:

- networking — creating partnerships and relationships between groups and government agencies
- knowledge — to allow for the transferring and sharing of information to the communities and to the decision makers
- problem-solving skills and methods — to allow for communities to practice and to build their strengths in responding to issues and to create solutions that works for the communities
- Infrastructure (including technology).

Ethnic communities have and can make a positive contribution to our physical and social environment. This contribution is facilitated or hindered by social and economic factors. Facilitating factors include:

- community capacity and community capital
- overcoming social exclusion
- sense of belonging (translocation coinciding with sense of identity and transform of places to where people can find themselves)
- empowered communities who can exercise their citizenship rights.

Practice example

The Centre for Multicultural and Community Development is located within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of the Sunshine Coast and was established in 2003 in response to the need for research, training and development in community, social and multicultural affairs and increased public debate regarding immigration, refugees and racism.

The function of the centre is to stimulate debate and research in multicultural and community issues regionally, nationally and internationally. It conducts research on issues such as the impact of immigration, the building of community organisations, human rights, international aid, impacts of racism and specific issues such as women, youth, welfare and employment. The centre aims to assist in the development of a society in which individuals and communities have the skills and abilities to fully participate in social, economic, cultural and political life. It also aims to become a national think-tank for cultural diversity and community development.

It is against the backdrop of these objectives, and issues resulting from previous work by the centre, that the Community Capacity Building Project was born. The aim of the project was to enhance and strengthen communities' relationships and to increase the capacity for positive community building within targeted ethnic communities. Within this context I like to explore a capacity building project implemented in Mackay and region. This example is taken as a part of a broader project.

The project methodology was based on a participatory model and was very much about being 'hands on' and 'doing with' communities. Multiple approaches were adopted due to the complexity of the project and communities were encouraged to guide the process of the work to ensure that strategies were kept in line with the specific needs and strengths of each particular community. The project philosophy started from the basis of respect, acceptance, sharing and empowerment. The methodological approach was community based action research which Sarantakos (1998, p. 460) describes as "Research oriented towards bringing about change, often involving respondents in the process of investigation, with the researchers being aware of their influence on the research process by being a part of the environment they study" or as Stringer (1996, p. 15) describes as "a collaborative approach to inquiry or investigation that provides people with the means to take systematic action to resolve specific problems".

In Queensland, ethnic groups contribute greatly to their communities and to society. Definitions of community are many but refer to shared characteristics of a group of people, both social and geographic (Kenny 2001). Many groups share a sense of community on the basis of ethnicity and build community infrastructure and organisations around culture, language, ethnicity and common sense of history and belonging. However, inclusion and sustainability are key issues in building the capacity of ethnic communities. *Community capacity* is the characteristic of communities to affect their ability to identify, mobilise and address social problems (Goodman et al. 1998).

Bearing this in mind, the work started on June 2003 with identifying the characteristics of the region, identifying key stakeholders and community leaders and project staff that can work at a local level with the project and the communities. Project plan was designed and developed in consultation with the communities engaged. Representative of the local and state governments in a local level were engaged to ensure the dialogue amongst communities and governments. The barriers to participation were identified and strategies were developed to overcome access issues.

To ensure participation an initial consultation with other agencies working with diverse communities was organised and the objectives and aims of this project was outlined. The consultation process with main agencies ensured support for the project by local agencies

and groups. To ensure the sustainability of the project the activities was held at the main local neighbourhood centre. A multicultural network meeting was established to allow dialogue amongst service providers. The network consisted of Mackay community and welfare services, government and non-government agencies and community members. The network aimed to allow for information sharing avoiding duplication of existing services and procedures. The purpose of the meeting was to present, inform, update and work together to provide culturally appropriate and responsive services to the ethnic communities. In respond to the issues identified a Multicultural Families Support Group was established (the group still meets regularly). The communities participating guide the function of the group and identify the areas that need to be addressed. The links that has been created between ethnic communities and the neighbourhood centre was nurtured and supported by all parties engaged and has resulted in new projects and initiatives. In summary the key areas that the project focussed on were:

- Leadership — supporting community leaders, providing mentoring opportunities, creating trust, encouraging community unity, overcoming competition and creating partnership and collaboration
- Advocacy — increasing knowledge and awareness of laws, systems, processes, by accessing and supporting skilled leaders, overcoming the fear of authorities
- Resources — identifying the existing marginal funding from the mainstream, working in overcoming lack of resources within small ethnic communities, supporting communities to access broader resources available
- Government — increase understanding of government processes, developing strategies for adequate consultation by government, and overcoming the fear of authorities especially in refugee communities
- Organisational structures — forming groups, incorporation of associations, management committees, networking, membership development, financial accountability, insurance and volunteer management.

The outcomes of the project can be described as follows:

- Improved level of skills within the ethnic communities, particularly in relation to leadership, advocacy, organising and empowerment
- Emergence of new leaders in the community, particularly from non-traditional areas such as young people and women
- Stronger organisational frameworks within ethnic groups
- Partnerships with mainstream agencies including community, private sector and government agencies
- Increased level of networking and community collaboration particularly in the face of events such as racism and social crisis
- Improved ability to document and plan for emerging community needs

- Improved ability to articulate community issues and voice concerns through access to mechanisms including accessing members of parliament, community cabinet and public meetings
- Increased participation in policy development at all tiers of government through increased understanding of the processes of government and policy
- Enhanced community capacity through better access to resources
- Better understanding of cultural issues by broader society — contribution to a more socially inclusive society.

Concluding comments

In conclusion, it is important to note that effective engagement is possible when communities are enabled to participate. Participation can be defined as the ability to take part in decision-making, planning and action at different levels. Effective engagement is about having access to mechanisms that provide a sense of belonging. In order to communicate and engage with diverse community groups, it is important to identify the strengths, capacities and abilities of communities and to enable communities to guide engaging processes.

The presence of strong communities that can participate require:

- access to knowledge and information
- access to networks
- communication skills
- appropriate skills to negotiate systems
- presence of key leaders with advocacy skills
- access to resources
- sense of acceptance and belonging
- ability to work alongside mainstream services
- appropriate community structures and agencies
- high level of writing skills to government departments and to funding bodies
- ability to voice the concern of the clients or communities.

For governments to be able to effectively engage communities in regions it is necessary to consider the barriers faced by ethnic communities in regional areas. Barriers such as lack of resources and infrastructure, competitive nature of community resources, lack of appropriate mechanisms to transfer knowledge and information and most importantly the impact of racism and discrimination in communities participation. Governments will be required to allow for allocation of sufficient resources and more flexible and responsive methods of communicating with communities.

Successful engagement happens and can be sustained through a range of initiatives including:

- Establish relevant support networks and mentoring processes
- Work with communities to develop sustainable organisational structures
- Encouraging establishing links with mainstream agencies and connections with ethnic community organisations
- Work to strengthen existing community infrastructure
- Develop access to resources by community agencies
- Develop sustainability mechanisms of community agencies beyond the life of any given project
- Allow communities to connect with relevant local, state and commonwealth government departments
- Supporting communities in advocacy for their issues
- Introducing more flexible funding resources
- Allowing time for relationship building and developing trust.

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