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Towards Developing Personal Attributes in “New” Migrants: a Case Study of Capacity Building for Rural Australia

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Recently many ‘new’ migrants are settling in rural Australia by their own choice and by government initiatives. Many of these migrants face ‘settling in’ challenges in their new environment. Developing appropriate personal attributes can enhance coping with the settlement challenges.

This paper aims at highlighting strategies on how ‘new’ migrants can be mentored to develop and improve their personal attributes to cope with settlement challenges and develop independence.

Key Words: New migrants, personal attributes, capacity building

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Introduction

Australia has been one of the supportive countries in the world to settle refugees, humanitarian entrants and migrants of other forms. Since 1945 Australia has welcomed more than 650,000 refugees and migrants from all over the world (Ferguson, 2008). The Commonwealth Government encourages migrants and refugees to settle in regional, rural and remote areas (or collectively referred as rural Australia in this paper). There are a host of reasons settlement in rural areas including, repopulating shrinking settlements, reduction on heating settlements in bigger/metropolitan, tapping into regional resources, labour supply, development of rural communities, providing and distribution of services (The Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). In this paper rural Australia refers to towns and places that exist outside major metropolitan areas, usually with reduced services (Wilkinson and Blue, 2002).

Despite the Government's initiative to improve rural support, limited infrastructure in rural settings poses a challenge to the new comers with many settlement challenges (Nsubuga-Kyobe and Sivamalai, 2008). The said work reiterates the studies on settlement challenges that are generic to many new settlers in rural Australia (Sohl, 2004). Some of the issues identified include 'fitting in' well with the earlier settled communities, relative levels of support for the individual respective developments, employment opportunities, communication or language competencies, facilities and facilitations, as well as in securing an appropriate employment (Nsubuga-Kyobe, 2005; and Le Vine, Sivamalai and Harris, 2008, p 178).

Opportunities, and employment prospects; are generally ranked among the key pull factors in settling in a region (Arnott, 2007). Regarding employment the 'new comers' often have difficulties in securing positions that can match their knowledge, skills, and abilities, to the

available job opportunities. After several failed attempts, they usually resort to accepting a position that might be only available at a very much lower level that they not have anticipated at all, while others remain un-employed for a period (Guerin and Guerin, 2007).

In addition, the ethos of Australian workplace sometimes is not very supportive to the new comers who are unfamiliar of the workings of it. Therefore it takes time to know the workplace settings. Unless the employees at the rural workplace know the history and the circumstances of the migrants, it may take time to resonate sympathies that underplays the importance of Australian work experience. In some small rural communities there might be one dominant ethno-specific culture and as a result some staff members in certain work places may lack appropriate cultural understanding and tolerance, which can impede the new comer settlement into the work setting. Circumstances of this nature may not only delay progression with assisting communities but, makes the arrivals feel less worthwhile (African Think Tank Inc Conference Report, 2007; Townsend, 2007).

Migrants who have studied English prior to coming to Australia may still encounter communication challenges because of their accents, body language, and other impediments to it. Those new migrants who want to learn English need to be guided on information about the courses, venues and suitable lesson modes, assuming English classes are available for them in their rural Australian locality (Udo-Ekpo, 1999).

Transport has been one of the on-going challenges for rural Australians. Many Australians living in rural Australia use their own methods of transport. Costs and the limited frequency of the public transport systems in rural areas impose a huge burden for migrants who do not have their own means of transport (Taylor and Stanovic, 2004).

In regard to facilities and facilitations this includes accommodation. Many new migrants with five or more children (unlike a standard Australian family with two children) in rural Australia creates tension within families for a reasonable space for the family members, as it limits school going kids to do their home work. Circumstances of such basic household space can cause family conflicts and subsequently lead to social and psychological family unrests. Unless the issues facing the new comers are supported in a culturally appropriate manner, settlement in rural Australia will be an on-going challenge and might even cause further internal migrations as the foregoing is further precipitated by national and global economic crises (Eastern and Central Africa Communities of Victoria Inc., 2005; Stalker, 2001).

Key personal attributes in 'new migrants' for rural settlement

The study by Nsubuga-Kyobe and Sivamalai (2008) conducted in the Goulburn Valley region amongst recent arrivals in the region identified certain personal attributes that were deemed needed in order to survive in the region. Personal attributes in this regard could be referred to knowledge, skills and experience of an individual (Sivamalai, 2008). For clarity reasons the term 'new migrant' is used synonymously for 'new comer', 'recent arrival' and 'new arrival' to those who have arrived in Australia up to last five years, according to the Australian Department of Immigration and Citizenship.

Under the broad category of settlement issues, this study found several urgent needs, which include personal attributes like: reasonable communication abilities (verbal, written, and non-verbal), having employment, accommodation and living in harmony with family members and others. Within the category of personal attributes, the top most important item that was identified was the 'ability to communicate well in English'. This attribute was deemed essential by the migrants in order to survive in 'English speaking Australia'. The second most important attribute was maintaining 'self-esteem' and 'the drive to do things' (feeling

individually empowered). The third most important attribute that the new migrants felt vital is the development of the 'appropriate knowledge, skills and education' as the next for most other critical attributes enhancements. Further three other personal attributes within the top ranks included 'engaging with the settled communities' (i.e. living away from a metropolitan area or in a rural environment). The remaining top two attributes were, 'contexts' and how to "seek and gain help". The last three personal attributes were considered as being equally critical for rural settlement, because they relate more to the connections between the newly arrived and the local rural community, which relates to the "concept of capacity building" in this regard.

Capacity building is a process that enhances the ability of an individual or the community to perform effectively in the functions for which they exist in a sustainable manner within its contexts (Lusthaus, Adrien and Perstinger (1999). Capacity Building here, it infers about increasing the abilities, potentials and resources of the individuals, and providing an environment and initiatives to enhance fitting into a change. Thus, it implies externally or internally initiated processes designed to help individuals and groups associated with the drive to appreciate and manage their changing circumstances for the purpose of improving the stock of their capital in the process (Sivamalai, 2007; CVCB, 2006)

Studies by others confirm that ability to communicate in English is amongst the urgent settlement issues in new migrants mainly in rural settings where people live in a 'closed shop' environment. For example, the project in Australia by the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee identified the 'drivers and success factors in regional refugee settlement' (VSPC, 2008). One of the main success factors in the study that have assisted the settlement of new overseas-born settlers in regional areas was addressing language service needs. The importance of English language is further stressed by the present Australian Parliamentary

Secretary for Immigration and Citizenship Hon Laurie Ferguson (2008). He had expressed that successful settlement of migrants requires them to have English communication skills. He clearly articulated that “successful negotiating settlement continuum is contingent on learning English”. Furthermore, the Government’s 2008-09 research paper on “Australia’ settlement services for migrants and refugees” pointed out that English program should be designed “to teach migrants functional English in order to enable them to settle successfully into Australia, providing the basic language skills necessary to deal with everyday social situations and some work situations” (Spinks, 2009). Therefore it can be seen that the new migrant’s ability to communicate in English is paramount importance for successful settlement in Australia, in addition to establish the link and /or pathways for other essential settlement needs, such as employment, accommodation and family issues, as was identified in the Goulburn Valley survey.

Tailoring English learning with other settlement needs

Having established the need for ‘the ability to communicate in the English language’ as one of the core personal attribute, the next challenge is to tailor up the process of teaching and learning of the English Language along with other immediate settlement need. Tailoring the learning in a meaningful way, which is the perspective of the learner, would bring the best outcome for both the learner and settlement services providers. For example if a new migrant wants to purchase a car, they are required to possess a valid driving licence. Many new migrants often see getting the valid licence as a major hurdle to jump over because they have to learn the English language first and then understand the driving rules and regulation. By tailoring sessions coupled with other migrant’s wants in a way, this was assumed to improve the learner’s ability to communicate in English while at the same time preparing him/her for the driving test. It was assumed that it will have a better outcome for long term

rural settlement. This paper proposes a targeted approach to learning English, i.e. learning the language in a structured manner with a defined purpose (for example for obtaining the licence to drive). From the migrant's point of view, the outcome could be helping the migrant to be mobile if he/she gets a valid licence to drive, as well he/she would have worked on learning English along the way. Achievement of this nature not only improves the new comer's 'self-esteem' and gives them a 'feeling of empowerment' but, subsequently fulfils even other settlement needs. Inadvertently, some other migrant's important personal attributes identified as well get achieved in the process (e.g. 'self-esteem' and the 'drive to do things').

When the new comer experiences a sense of achievement, he/she is motivated to go beyond the initial goal. He/she is bound to maintain his/her motivation with every achievement. The individual who has experienced a sense of achievement may go on to acquire further 'knowledge, skills and education', (i.e. the third most important personal attribute. Achievements of personal goals will not be possible without the understanding of 'rurality', the 'contexts' and 'how to seek and gain help' (as another set of the most important attributes identified in the study). Therefore, the point that is emphasised in this paper is about the targeted approach that is tailored from migrant's personal urgent settlement need so that it engages and motivates them in a more meaningful way, while developing further personal attributes simultaneously, that is essential for building their capacity.

Developing personal attributes in migrants to enhance capacity building in rural settlement.

The meaning of capacity building in this context as well relates to the creation of an enabling environment with appropriate support, initiatives and other frameworks to be used to bring improvement in knowledge, training and skills into a setting or in an individual or groups. From the above strategy, it then follows that the new migrant who experiences the immediate

value in applying the 'learned English' in a practical way soon experiences a boost in his/her self-esteem and creates a further interest to learn more (i.e. improving his/her other personal attributes). The continuation of such achievement not only empowers the learner, but also can motivate others. This kind of experiences tends to have positive ripple effect on individuals, families, friends, neighbours and others who are associated with the learner.

Such ongoing development of the new comers personal attributes from strength to strength not only improves the individual, but can encourage the participation of other migrants in many of their own local community. Therefore the targeted approach not only improves the communication ability in the English language, while developing other personal attributes of the new comers, but also contributes to the improvement of others and engaging them with their local community. In summary the overall strategy of the targeted approach can be seen as progressive evolution of knowledge and skills in the new migrants, while at the same time enhancing others to their capacities and also establishing the connections with the local communities, i.e. capacity building.

Conclusion

The primary aim of supporting new rural migrants is to transform them from a dependent to independent status and subsequently they become part of community development of rural Australia.

Migrants who arrive in Australia with limited ability to communicate in English often realise that ability to communicate can create a pathway to acquire knowledge and skills in other areas and further enhancement of their personal attributes. If English is taught in a targeted manner (personal goal orientated direction) not only will they sustain the migrant motivation, but will also enable them to settle successfully. Achievement of personal goals can *not* only improve their settlement process but can further enhance their personal development. The

connections and engagement with others (new migrants and the local communities) during the settlement process will equally empower others to improve the capacity building in the local area.

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