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Corresponding author mail id:- m.boese@latrobe.edu.au

The role of Local Government in Migrant and Refugee Settlement in regional and rural Australia

Martina Boese

La Trobe University (*corresponding author*)

Melissa Phillips

University of Melbourne

Martina Boese is a Lecturer in Sociology at La Trobe University. Her current research is on migrant and refugee mobilities and employment in regional Australia. Her publications include articles in the *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, the *Employment and Labour Relations Review*, the co-authored book *Becoming Australian. Migration Settlement, Citizenship* (MUP, 2014) and the co-edited collection *Critical Reflections on Migration, 'Race' and Multiculturalism. Australia in a Global Context* (Routledge, 2017).

Melissa Phillips is an Honorary Fellow at the University of Melbourne (School of Social and Political Sciences) and a non-resident Fellow at the Center on International Cooperation (New York University). Her research interests include transit migration, multiculturalism and settlement. She has worked for international organisations in the Middle East, North and Horn of Africa and South Sudan. Melissa is also an Advisor to the Immigration Detention Coalition and Urban Refugees NGO, and Assistant Editor for the *Journal of Intercultural Studies*.

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ABSTRACT

Government responsibility for the settlement of newly arrived refugees and migrants in Australia is shared between the federal, state and local levels. While Australia's settlement policies are predominantly top-down and Commonwealth driven with some state involvement, local government has the potential to play a greater role in facilitating the settlement of newly arrived migrants and refugees. A growing body of literature in Australia and overseas highlights the role of local-level policies in supporting integration and social cohesion which is arguably even more crucial in the context of migrant and refugee settlement in regional and rural areas. This paper draws on focus groups with 90 local stakeholders in eight Local Government Areas in Victoria to propose a typology of local government involvement that shows the variable but potentially significant role of local government in the regional and rural settlement of recent arrivals. We argue that Australia's over 540 local governments provide crucial but underutilised governance resources for improving the settlement process. This finding has implications for settlement policies and funding, inter-governmental coordination, and the retention of migrants and refugees in regional and rural communities in Australia.

Introduction

In 2015, the mayor of an Australian town in rural Queensland offered to settle 1,500 Syrian refugees who were coming to Australia as part of a larger federal government resettlement program (Brisbane Times 2015). His pledge reflects a long tradition of local governments seeking to assist newly arrived migrants and refugees as the interface between the State, individuals and communities (Permezel & Duffy 2007). Regional settlement of newly arrived migrants and refugees is central to Australian population strategy and migration reforms. It is promoted as a way of countering population decline and labour and skills shortages in regional and rural areas while reducing pressure on metropolitan gateway cities (DSEWP 2010; Hugo 2008a, 2010; Hugo & Harris 2011). The significance of migration to regional

areas was also evident in the recent announcements related to temporary migration, where concessions for regional Australia were maintained in response to regional skills needs (DIBP 2017). Boosting economic development has been the central plank of federal government driven skilled migration policies, while social cohesion and retention of migrants and refugees are often considered equally or more important at the local government level (Moran & Mallman 2016; Radford 2016). A better understanding of the local responses to migration and institutional contexts of settlement, is key to identifying and acting upon gaps in coordination and other potential problems (Hinger et al 2016).

Coordinating settlement generally and regional settlement specifically involves a diverse array of actors, including government and community sector organisations. Overarching regional settlement is a complex framework of intergovernmental coordination at local, state and Commonwealth levels. Adding another layer to this picture, there are various regional structures that serve particular policy purposes for Commonwealth and state programs. While predominantly driven by top-down policies and funding with strong Commonwealth direction and oversight, settlement is increasingly mediated by 'non-traditional' settlement actors, such as local government (councils), employers and community groups, who bring a strong knowledge of the community at the grassroots level and play a central role in facilitating regional settlement (Galligan et al 2014). Based on a larger research project on regional settlement in Australiaⁱ, this article analyses the contribution of local government and its relationship with the community sector in settling newly arrived migrants and refugees in regional and rural towns at the level of service provision. It also assesses the nature of intergovernmental coordination in relation to settlement, which provides the institutional context for local government and community sector contributions. It shows that while local government contribution is variable, it is significant and has great potential for further enhancing settlement outcomes. Encouragement of such approaches has implications for the renewal of local communities and long term settlement of migrants and refugees in Australia.

This article firstly describes the role of local government in settlement in the context of wider Australian government settlement policies and programs. Then it reviews research on local government responses to settlement in other sites. Following a description of the research project and methods, we discuss our findings on responses from local governments alongside other local stakeholders such as business and the community sector in six research sites. From these findings we identify three types of roles that local governments play: lead agency

and facilitator; pro-active service provider; and passive actor with a watching brief. These roles in facilitating and assisting regional settlement are fulfilled alongside and often complementary to the community sector. The research findings highlight that the overall integration of settlement services is uneven, and complicated by the contracted nature of service provision in combination with migrants' and refugees' mobilities, generally described as 'secondary migration'. The settlement of migrants and refugees is a significant new domain for local governments in Australia, that translates to enhanced social policy responsibilities. Our research identified a patchwork of variability, and much good will despite shortcomings and lack of coordination and funding. The article concludes by highlighting the significant yet underutilized role of Australia's 546 local governing bodies as governance resource in the regional settlement of migrant and refugee entrants.

The role of local government in Australia

In Australia, local government lacks a constitutional mandate and has a mixed role overall, with responsibilities varying from state to state. Over time its role has shifted from being primarily a provider of 'services to property' to being increasingly a provider of 'services to people' (Dollery, Wallan and Allis 2006). Created out of state legislation, it relies on state funding with few powers of its own. However, it is at the coalface of social relations between established populations and newcomers, 'locals' and 'strangers', and has been identified as the level of government which is vital for establishing a sense of community most especially for residents of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Dunn et al 2001; Mansouri & Pietsch 2011; Pagonis 2013). Local councils have to ensure accessible and equitable service provision for all residents both to fulfil their mandate but also to meet federal strategies for access and equity (ALGA). Research in other sites also shows the importance of local neighbourhoods for socialisation and adaptation of migrants and refugees irrespective of whether these sites are in urban or regional locations (Dekker et al 2015; Myrberg 2015; Permezel and Duffy 2007; Scholten & Penninx 2016; Sichling & Roth 2016). Practical initiatives such as 'Refugee Week', 'Refugee Welcome Zones' and 'Welcoming Cities' are evidence of the value placed by local governments and neighbourhoods in their role as facilitators of local settlement (Morris & O'Shea, 2015; Myriad Consultants, 2014).

Australia's immigration policies are set federally by the Minister for Immigration and Border Protection, with multiculturalism describing the policies and services that respond to the consequences of immigration. Between immigration and multiculturalism is the task of settlement, which has been a predominantly top-down process where the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP, formerly DIAC) sets the overall numbers and mix of the migrant and refugee intake in consultation with various community and representative bodies and businesses. State governments concerned with regional development and renewal have played an active role in the revision of national settlement policy frameworks and have an increasingly important say in the settlement of migrants and refugees through State Migration Plans and the State Specific Regional Migration Visa scheme (SSRM) (CVWPM, 2004; MAV, 2011). At the time of this research the former DIAC exercised fiscal control and oversight of major settlement programs (DIAC 2007) including the Integrated Humanitarian Settlement Strategy (IHSS) (DIAC 2011a), the Settlement Grants Program (SGP) (DIAC 2011b) and the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) (DIAC 2010a), with settlement services outsourced through competitive tendering under a 'new public management' model of provision. Very few community sector groups providing services to migrants and refugees operated without some form of DIBP funding. Local government is one of a number of non-traditional settlement actors that has a stake in regional settlement, along with local businesses and host communities (DIAC 2006). The detailed structure of the complex web of intergovernmental coordination at the time of our research is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 here

Nominally, local government does not hold any specific responsibilities in the immigration or settlement area. Representation on immigration and settlement issues affecting local governments is channelled through the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) which sits on the Select Council on Immigration and Settlement (Personal communication, MAV). The primary responsibility of local councils is ensuring access and equity in accessing local government services, which means ensuring that newly arrived groups know about local government, understand it and can access the services it provides (DIMA 1998). In practice however, local governments have become increasingly involved in the area of

settlement and multicultural affairs, especially in the area of community relations, supporting the implementation of multicultural policies and fostering social cohesion (Moran & Mallman 2015; Pagonis 2013). A second area in which some actors at local government level are increasingly taking on responsibilities is the promotion and coordination of skilled migration, usually as part of a local or regional economic development agenda. A third area of involvement is that of refugee settlement planning and coordination through the Local Settlement Planning Committees (LSPC).

Some of the ways in which local government have been involved in supporting the implementation of multicultural policies and fostering social cohesion include hosting inter-faith dialogues and networks, cultural festivals and other creative programs to celebrate the diversity of local communities (Dunn et al. 2001; Interfaith Network of City of Dandenong; Mansouri & Pietsch, 2011; Permezel & Duffy 2007). This is an example of the leadership role that local government can play in promoting cultural diversity. Notably there have also been criticisms of local government for what at times might appear to be tokenistic or *ad hoc* efforts resulting in failing to share information and strategies, which inhibits institutional change and lack of a strategic focus (Dunn et al. 2001). Similarly there have been uneven responses by local government to racism and related issues. One positive example in this area has been the Municipal Association of Victoria's (MAV) promotion of local government's role in standing up to race-based discrimination through a partnership with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth) for a program called Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) (MAV, 2013).

There has been no development of a typology of local policies toward migrant and refugee settlement in Australia. In Europe, local government has been the focus of some comparative research attention regarding its role in shaping relationships between resident populations and newcomers (see Alexander 2003). This includes the establishment of migrant advisory bodies, local regulations and resource allocation. The emphasis in European research has however been at the urban level focusing on cities with little attention given to differences between urban and rural sites (Asselin et al 2006; Baldwin-Edwards 2005). This is also true for Alexander's (2003) typology of local government policies which focused on labour migrants in cities who are either seen as transient, guest workers, permanent new arrivals who are expected to assimilate and those who will retain ethnic differences, described as 'pluralist' (Alexander 2003: 417). According to this typology specific policies for political,

socio-economic, cultural-religious and spatial domains are dependent upon the type of labour migrant being considered from which non-policy, guest-worker, assimilationist and pluralist policies emerge respectively (Alexander 2003: 425). Three key differences set the research discussed here apart from Alexander's. Our research focuses on non-metropolitan sites (regional and rural), it includes a wide range of arrivals from skilled migrants to refugees, and it considers the role of community sector actors as part of the institutional context of local government responses (see also Hinger et al 2016). Furthermore, Australian migration policies have included targeted efforts by local governments to encourage migrant and refugee settlement and to respond with policies aimed at promoting multiculturalism and social cohesion. Against this, the context described by Alexander is one where a "local authority comes to grips with the presence of these Strangers" (2003: 425). Cognisant of these significant differences we are taking up Alexander's project to develop a typology of local government roles in settlement for the Australian context, based on a case study in Victoria.

Multicultural affairs and skilled migration in Victoria

Victoria has been active in promoting local government engagement in migrant and refugee settlement. In 2004, Victoria adopted a Skilled Migration Strategy and set up an associated Regional Migration Incentive Fund (RMIF) to assist regional communities in attracting and retaining skilled migrants for sustainable regional development and industry growth (DVC 2004). A number of local governments installed cultural diversity planners or similarly labelled staff, whose responsibilities range from the development and implementation of cultural diversity strategies to providing a port-of-call to new settlers in the municipality. While there is no legislative requirement for local councils to have a strategic document that addresses cultural diversity, a number of Victorian councils have developed multicultural strategic plans and cultural diversity strategies over the last few years, sometimes informed by community consultations (for example, City of Ballarat 2009-2014; City of Greater Geelong 2011-2014; City of Wangaratta 2014-2017).

At the level of programs, it is notable that while only one council in Victoria was funded under the SGP at the time of the research, the take up of federal initiatives such as Harmony Day and social cohesion grants among local governments is wide-spread.¹ In NSW, the

Community Relations Commission, which corresponds to the Victorian Multicultural Commission, has funded the development of a good practice guide for local government on cultural diversity and the West Australian Office for Multicultural Interests has developed a similar resource for local governments. In Victoria, the MAV has demonstrated its support of local government responsibility in the area of settlement and cultural diversity in several ways, including their involvement in a LEAD-project which included the development of two demonstration pilots within local government areas (LGAs).² It assists the development of locally-based responses, aimed at increasing acceptance of diversity and reducing discrimination in areas such as community development, and supporting organisations with training and other resources.

As part of the Global Skills for Provincial Victoria (GSPV) Initiative under the Skilled Migration Strategy which ran from 2007 until 2011, Regional Coordinators (RC) were placed in eleven regional councils. The roles of these RCs varied considerably in their terms of reference, portfolio and support by local government. For example, in one research site the coordination of GSPV was one of several portfolio areas for the local cultural diversity officer who was based in the community development area, while other RCs were based in economic development and focused solely on employer contacts and the attraction and retention of skilled migrants. The prime beneficiaries of RCs within local government were local businesses that otherwise relied heavily on migration agents for recruiting workers from overseas. When RCs provided comprehensive support to new arrivals and their dependants – for example, assisting with advice on job opportunities for the applicant's spouse or information on schooling for the children, this was due to the particular RC's personal engagement rather than the design of the program.

At the level of planning and coordination, LSPCs have been a longstanding vehicle in the area of settlement, first established in 1991 by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration as part of a three-tiered National Integrated Settlement Strategy (NISS) comprising the National Settlement Strategy, State Settlement Planning Committees and the LSPCs (DIMA, 2003). Under this nationally consistent settlement planning framework, LSPCs were active in all states with funding provided for LSPC-related administrative tasks. While the national and state-level coordination and planning instruments have faded away in recent years, the LSPCs continued to exist in a 'free-form' manner. Their membership extends from federal and state department representatives, for example, from DIBP,

Centrelink and state education and health departments, to local government representatives, refugee health nurses, multicultural liaison officers based at local schools or the police and local employers. The MAV also sits on the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee and could play a greater role in facilitating local and state coordination between local government and community sector organisations. At the time of research there were 23 LSPCs active in Victoria. The role of local government in these LSPCs varied, depending on the existence and political weight of other players in the settlement arena, such as a strong community sector organisation, a leading employer or a volunteering network. Based on our research in six regional sites, local government leadership on LSPCs was a rare case. There was also little evidence of coordination between the LSPCs and the earlier discussed RCs of the Skilled Migration Program.

Local government and migrant/refugee settlement

The research presented here was part of a larger project which examined the interrelated social, economic and political factors that shape the resettlement experiences of recently arrived visible migrants and refugees who live primarily in rural and regional areas.ⁱⁱ Conducted over a three-year period, the project examined the experiences of visible migrants and refugees by exploring their sense of identity and belonging; patterns of employment; the ways in which host communities responded and adapted to them; and the effectiveness of government policies. The Project adopted a multi-faceted methodological approach to enable the identification of practices, policies and life experiences that shaped the rural and regional settlement of recent arrivals. Specifically, a range of quantitative and qualitative methods were employed, including a national online survey of 106 professionals working in settlement; focus groups with 90 stakeholders working in settlement across eight research sites; nine community information sessions; expert interviews with 37 local employers and senior representatives of government and community sector organisations involved in settlement; and structured in-depth interviews with 85 newly arrived migrants and refugees from over 20 countries. All data elicited from in-depth interviews and other methods described above were coded and analysed facilitated by the analytical software NVivo. The following discussion draws upon responses to focus group and expert interview questions about the role of local government and settlement planning.

The eight research sites included six regional and two metropolitan sites. The sites were selected on the basis of published and informally available information on migration and settlement to cover a range of locations including sites with long-standing migration and those with more recent experiences of international migrants. The sites also varied in size and economic profiles, from small locations with a private college and a prevalence of farm jobs to regional cities with a university campus and a wide range of jobs. Two sites had skilled migration initiatives at Local Government level in place, which were aimed at attracting skilled migrants to the location. The variance across regional sites also allowed for insight into a range of local, institutional contexts. We have refrained from naming the sites to protect the anonymity of the interviewed stakeholders.

From our empirical research we distinguish three types of local government role in settlement. The first is a passive one where the local council has a watching brief, leaving community sector actors and business to take the initiative in attracting and looking after newly arrived migrants and refugees. The second is where local government pro-actively takes on a major service role and becomes the front desk service provider. The third is that of lead agency and facilitator. These are broad categorisations for facilitating analysis that are drawn from our findings on the practices of local councils and the testimony of a range of local stakeholders.

(i) Passive local government role – “Watching Brief”

In sites where settlement has occurred primarily as a consequence of onward movement by migrants and refugees after initial settlement (so-called ‘secondary migration’), the local governments in our research sample have generally been rather uninvolved in the LSPC and settlement related issues. This includes locations where employment provided the key attractor for both refugees and migrants. The driver of secondary migration in one location was a community sector organisation which facilitated the move and employment in the local meatworks. In another case, a labour hire organisation instigated the relocation from Melbourne to the region and took care of different settlement related needs such as accommodation. Local government had a watching brief and let things evolve and be taken care of by those who seemed to ‘do it best’; above all the community sector and volunteers who assisted new arrivals. In the case of employer-initiated settlement, a service provider

came on board to supplement the support that was initially provided by the employer. Both parties were key stakeholders on the LSPC while the Council remained in the background.

Council's back-seat role was justified by various arguments: lack of resources; that its personnel were fully engaged in servicing established operations; that others were doing it anyway; and that it would wait-and-see how things developed. Another reason why particular Councils were not engaged with settling new arrivals was their unpreparedness, especially in dealing with new arrivals who had moved into their area independently of any Council or community sector facilitation. One Council representative observed:

I suppose it would be fair to say that local government really didn't see it on the radar screen, because it came in through an employment situation. It wasn't [...] a planned settlement development. It was a development that you woke up to one day.
(*Council representative*)

Some Councils took a 'wait-and-see' approach, as one teacher in the migrant English program described :

It was called the 'Sudanese Experiment' and they thought—I think people still think—that it's just something that will go away soon, and that it was just a flash in the pan type thing; that it will all go away, and why should we do anything about it because it's not like it's going to be here for long. Well it has been, and it will be, and it's a fact of life that this is it. (*AMEP provider*)

Another stakeholder recounted the delay by Council in reacting to the arrival of refugees:

And what was occurring out there as the volunteers were actually supporting this huge influx of lots of nationalities hitting (the town), our local council I believe were caught with their pants down. (*Education and training provider*)

Councils also appeared to vary their involvement in light of what was being provided by others as one informant regretted:

In the early days [the CEO of the Shire] stood up and said ‘we've got to do something’, and became part of that driving force in getting things set up. And then when the outside players came in they had the funding so they started driving it and again, you know, inadvertently pushed the CEO into the background when we really needed the Shire. (*Education provider*)

To summarise, in some sites Councils adopted a more passive role when other actors took the lead or were not fully prepared for the long-term settlement of migrants and refugees. This resulted in both a ‘wait and see’ approach or, at the other end of the spectrum, ill-preparedness when more people started to arrive.

(ii) Pro-active role: local government as front desk service provider

Unlike the above category, some Councils take a pro-active service provider role, as happened in two of our research sites. In one case the local Council won the IHSS tender to provide the main Commonwealth funded settlement program. In the other case the Council hosted a community development project that focused on the local Sudanese community that had recently relocated from Melbourne. In both sites the local community sector strongly advocated for greater Council engagement. In the first case it was initially the community, in particular a group of volunteers, who took on the role of settlement workers for refugees on temporary protection visas in the early 1990s. Years of advocating for the needs of these new settlers in the community saw the Council eventually taking the lead and even securing IHSS and SGP funding to become the prime service provider for newly arrived refugees. In the course of our research this role changed again, since the IHSS and SGP funding was transferred to a local community sector organisation. There was some staff continuity, however, in that a former council staff member started working for the local community organisation in a settlement work capacity. In this case, individual volunteers and committed Council staff were often the catalyst for Council involvement.

We sat here with him [the CEO] for 2 hours. We went solid for 2 hours just filling his ear on just what happens here with our refugees: the range of work that's involved, the complexity of it, the lack of resources. He couldn't believe how we're surviving and doing what we're doing on the smell of an oily rag. He couldn't. (*Council staff*)

In the second case the local government came on board as a consequence of relocation which was initiated by a metropolitan- based community sector organisation and supported by a local church minister. There were limited employment outcomes that the funded community sector organisation could achieve on its own so the Council assisted by establishing a community development project with the help of state government funding.

The role of local government as direct service provider is rare in practice, and does not fit with the Commonwealth's policy of tendering out its main settlement programs to large service providers. These two cases are important, however, for showing local government can take a pro-active and major delivery role in settlement services. A notable finding was that refugee participants in our research testified to their positive relationships with Council staff beyond the service programs.

(iii) Local government as lead agency and facilitator

In one LGA the council has embraced immigration and cultural diversity support in their agenda. It had a Cultural Diversity Strategy and a Cultural Diversity Officer who looked after a large portfolio including the coordination of a Multicultural Ambassadors Program – a support network for recently arrived migrant and refugee settlers, and the Global Skills for Provincial Victoria Skilled migration initiative. The Council also ran a New Residents Program to connect new residents with each other, with businesses and existing resources.. The location of the Cultural Diversity Officer within the Council ensured effective communication between the Community Development and the Economic Development area, which had flow-on benefits for migrants as the addressees of the different services. This Council's approach was distinguished from other Councils' approaches which view migration primarily as an economic issue.

it was good because we at the same time as a council were able to work across different units within our organization for us to be able to run the program in a way that's holistic and integrated. While we are looking at settlement as a major component of the program and a very important component of the program, economic development - some of their programs as well and how this contributes to this program. So whatever strategies whatever they do with community development is

actually passed onto us as something that we can be aware of. So it's not only within council that this thing works because it creates an awareness of both our units in terms of the work that we do and how we can help each other but also with our clients and participants. ...

Our research among different local stakeholders including new arrivals in the regional locations suggests however that even in LGAs where the Council fulfils a more active role, newly arriving migrants and refugees are not necessarily aware of all the programs on offer for them. Furthermore, the expectations of different settlement stakeholders are not easily satisfied with a cultural diversity strategy 'on paper', which speaks of leadership and advocacy. This mismatch between expectations and efforts highlights the problem of an ill-defined role of local government in broader settlement and diversity planning domains.

Over the course of the research project, the roles adopted by local governments slightly transformed in some research sites. In one location where the council used to take the back seat in 2009 and leave the settlement work to the local MRC, it has since taken over the chair of the Local Settlement Planning Committee and secured SGP funding. The question of increased resourcing of local government engagement is critical. Another factor shaping local government engagement in the settlement and multiculturalism area is the extent to which it is intertwined with ethnic community issues. The overlap of, for example, a councillor role with a role in the local Ethnic Communities Council undoubtedly helps the positioning of multicultural issues on the local Council agenda. Another example is the chairing of the LSPC by a former mayor, as was the case in another research site.

Community sector organisations working with local government in settlement

Complementing, and in some cases substituting for, local government in providing settlement services at the local community level are community sector groups and volunteers. The community sector makes a considerable contribution to settlement, often taking the initiative in attracting new arrivals and filling gaps in coordination and service planning (McDonald, Gifford, Webster and Wiseman, 2008). New arrivals are often highly mobile, moving of their own accord to different local areas because of prospective employment, housing or social benefits (Piper and Associates, 2009). At the time of the research, government programs and

contracted service providers were not able to respond flexibly to such mobilities. Hence, local service providers, community sector agencies and volunteers were often in the forefront in providing assistance. The variance between a passive Council and proactive settlement service provision was felt the most by those local community organisations responding on the run, with government departments very often playing catch-up. Lack of timely available data about the secondary migration of new entrants made it extremely difficult for local service providers to make a case for additional funding needed to service the changing profile of their local area. One employee of an affected Council explained:

I think from my point of view, ... for a long time we weren't ... on anybody's radar in relation to new arrivals, because ... they were the next wave of new arrivals we were getting. They weren't direct arrivals into the community ... because it doesn't appear on anybody's database or anything like that. (*Council employee*)

Centrelink was identified by participants as the agency with accurate data on new arrival patterns and in some cases, local relationships with Centrelink staff facilitated the informal provision of data. Formal data sharing arrangements were in place between Commonwealth government agencies such as Medicare and DIBP. But even state governments can be out of the data loop when it comes to secondary migration. Picking up the slack, often at short notice, limits the potential for partnerships and engagement with other settlement stakeholders. In one location, the primary former DIAC-funded service provider for new entrants felt that they were the only referral point for all settlement issues, whereas this should have been a cooperative effort involving the local council and community sector groups. Conversely taking on this role could bring power. Funding inflexibility underpinned the inflexibility in service provision. Without proper coordination, blame shifting was common. One local settlement services manager noted the lack of leadership in this sphere:

But (they) keep saying oh, you know, it'd be good if you could capacity build locally and make things happen. If I hear that word one more time I'm going to scream! Because I don't know who's meant to be doing it, it's always someone else's responsibility. But these are fundamentally policy issues that go to the heart of how the whole system operates, and if you don't have those fundamental

building blocks there then you're going to have these things falling over. (*HSS provider*)

The inflexibility of funding arrangements and lag in preparedness was also highlighted by an employer who participated in the focus group:

Government doesn't seem able to be responsible in a reactive way early enough. So it's relying on the goodwill of people within under-funded organisations to say, “this is our responsibility, we will take it on”. (*Local employer*).

Gaps in planning and coordination become starker as new entrants are resettled in, or spontaneously move to regional and rural locations. If such movement catches one local community unprepared, it can leave another with unused services, as one stakeholder pointed out:

‘a lot of the local services (are left) high and dry right from the start’. (*Health service provider*)

As will be described next, the inter-relationship between local government and the community sector, which is critical to facilitating local settlement, comes in different shapes.

Outreach versus direct service-provision: the context of local action in the settlement arena

As has been highlighted above, the role and place of local government can be directly or indirectly affected by the conditions faced by other service providers in regional and rural areas. The lack of a critical mass of clients poses a significant problem for service providers in regional locations. Small client numbers may not justify investing in bricks and mortar buildings or local staff, due to the priority for an agency to be economically viable in the contracted environment mapped out earlier. It can also be very hard to determine numbers of migrants and refugees moving to an area, which is further compounded by disempowered LSPCs not having the scope to plan ahead and limitations on data sharing. Outreach service provision to regional and rural locations appeared to be a common response to this dilemma which was however met with significant criticism by local stakeholders.

(F)unding should have been given straight down here, at the coal face, where it was needed and where we had the expertise to deliver it within the stakeholders who were all sitting around the table ... we had representation from outside organisations ... that would come down, tell us their experiences, what we should be doing, and then we would see them again one week or two weeks or three weeks' time and the people you see sitting around the table were the ones doing it, the ones here until 8 o'clock at night...and the people helping people, pat them on the shoulder and supporting them through the thing ... people at the coal face.
(*Local employer*)

In a context where many agencies had lost core funding, some local stakeholders believed that larger community agencies are not interested in a specific geographic area, but driven by the opportunity to obtain more funding.

Their priorities were about.. making sure that they had continued funding so they could continue their operation (*Community organisation senior manager*)

While local stakeholders were keen to provide top-up services to accompany the core settlement services, they too were disappointed by the outreach model. In one particular case, the outreach experience had been across two programs: first when a Melbourne-based agency contracted to provide employment services had only dedicated a caseworker to be onsite twice weekly; and the second when the IHSS/SGP contract was awarded to a service provider approximately one hour away. From a local government perspective, such outreach provision was unsatisfactory and drew state government intervention:

The other complexity is that the agency that could have provided some of those settlement services is actually delivering them on an outreach basis here at times that suits the organisation. So there are all of those issues about do they meet the needs of those consumers of those services? No. Because (...), they had a couple of hours to spend on a Tuesday, or something like that. (...) Were it not for the State Government and their willingness to see this as a community and cultural development exercise, that was primarily augmented by some other settlement

services, then it would be the community still working hard and the council probably picking up those sort of things.

Outreach potentially disadvantages relationship and resource building at the local community level, where stakeholders are operating daily and where it is required for a successful transition from an area without migrants to a vibrant diverse area. As one employer, a key stakeholder in the research site criticized:

(T)here's not enough flexibility to say "ok, let's put the resource and the money in the hands of the people in (the local) area, those ones that actually (have) knowledge of what was actually happening on the doorstep. It all comes third hand by, no disrespect to (another provider); we are an outreach operation for them. (*Employer*)

On the positive side, outreach can allow some basic services to be provided in smaller communities where direct provision is not feasible. Such provision would be enhanced through greater liaison and partnership with local government. This could generate immense goodwill on the part of local communities, and also provide government with better information channels with which to plan and fund future settlement strategies.

It cannot be assumed that an agency with a multicultural focus is best placed to step in and provide services locally. For instance, health services and education providers may be well equipped to adapt their programs to accommodate culturally diverse clients. Multiple actors in one location sharing an interest in service provision to diverse clients engender a coordinated approach and could mitigate the risk associated with relying on a single provider. Potentially local, direct service provision allows for a focus on longer term sustainability with the goal of mainstreaming. Certainly stakeholders in regional and rural areas were realistic about their limited capacity, and relative lack of experiences with catering for culturally diverse groups and lack of understanding of basics such as pre-arrival experiences and language service provision, compared to many metropolitan areas. As noted earlier, positive working relationships and a shared vision for a local area are not substitutes for such specialist knowledge. However, the interviewed local stakeholders were overall receptive to being provided with specialist knowledge and training provided by specialist agencies in Melbourne.

Overall, the focus groups with local stakeholders in regional areas showed overwhelming support for more local government engagement in the area of settlement specifically and cultural diversity more generally. This interest is not unanimous however. Well-established community sector organisations that are funded to provide settlement services do not always view increased responsibilities of the council in settlement as desirable. There is a tension evident in the desire for greater local government involvement but uncertainty as to whether their expertise is adequate. Community sector organisations often see themselves as natural recipients of funding, and ‘turf’ battles occur when new players receive funding. This can include resistance against local government being recipient of settlement funding, as one regional community agency senior manager asserted:

I actually think the community sector has an important role ... and from our point of view, we do get frustrated when we see dollars being directed at local government by the state government without us having any opportunity to tender for that or to put up a model to run that ... I have great, great concerns that, where I have seen local government take on a much more direct role in terms of settlement, it has often failed.

In the two research sites where local government did take on more direct roles in settlement, the general view of research participants was that they had filled a gap and contributed to meeting clients’ needs. Support for local government development in the settlement area has come mainly from two places in the Victorian state government: the former Department of Business and Innovation (DBI⁵) and the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC). The DBI placed RCs in local governments, and VMC fulfilled in some cases a kind of intermediary role between local ethnic communities and local governments, and local and state government through the Victorian Standing Committee of Local Government and Cultural Diversity. Another key supporter of local government action in this area is the MAV which has also represented the Australian Local Government Association in national forums such as the Select Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs (MCIMA). MAV also provided some support to the Victorian Local Government Multicultural Issues Network (VLGMIN), an additional network resource for local government which has existed for over 20 years as a non-incorporated professional support network of local government diversity planners and others in government and the community sector.

Conclusion

As this paper has demonstrated, there is high variability in local government responses to regional and rural settlement in Australia, which we have summarized in three types of local government roles: a passive role of ‘watching brief’; a pro-active role as service provider; and the role of lead agency and facilitator. These differ from established typologies (Alexander 2003), due to the different remit of local government but also the specific local context of migration to regional areas in Australia. As Alexander (2003: 425) argues, local settlement policies must be based on qualitative research taking into account the local context, drawing on place-based analysis and wider immigration profile. Such research can assist in responding to the reality of continued mobility amongst migrants and refugees which affects planning and service-provision and may lead to an uneven patchwork of bottom-up responses from local governments in combination with the community sector. A context-sensitive analysis also acknowledges that to varying degrees among local governments, the settlement of migrants and refugees has become part of local politics (Gilbert, 2009; Ginger et al 2016).

As our analysis across six regional locations has shown, organisations left out of policy and planning decisions often find themselves unprepared for new arrivals, and have limited resources for responding to settlement-related needs. Centralised funding and contracting out arrangements are at odds with greater inputs from local governments and community groups. Discrete and short-term project funding is also a barrier to coherent and ongoing service delivery. We argue therefore that more flexible and sustainable settlement programs and funding arrangements are required, with local governments and community groups participating more fully in settlement planning and delivery networks and arrangements from inception to implementation. Regional and rural settlement service funding should be decentralised and directed towards locally-based organisations or entities that can demonstrate an ongoing presence in an area. Greater intergovernmental coordination, strategic planning and a clearer articulation of the role that local government and the community sector can play in settlement in Australia is needed at policy level but also potentially via structural reform within regional and rural local governance (Dollery & Crase, 2006). The settlement of migrants and refugees in regional and rural communities is likely to continue, and probably increase, due to targeted government programs and as part of the broader demographic movement of people to regional cities that have been growing faster

than the metropolitan gateway cities in recent decades. Local level actors such as local governments will likely be called upon to play an effective role in settlement.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ The research was carried out between 2009-2013 and all policy references are made to arrangements at the time of data collection (unless otherwise stated).

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Author/s:

Boese, M;Phillips, M

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