MIGRATION COMMUNITY NARRATIVE:

MINGOOLA

REGIONAL AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

BACKGROUND

Mingoola is a small rural community situated on the New South Wales/ Queensland border, 60 kilometres west of Tenterfield. It has a population of 150.

Agriculture is a significant industry in this district, with local farmers producing lucerne hay, herbs, vegetables, stone fruit, and cereal crops. Set back from the Dumaresq River, farmers in Mingoola are also involved in sheep, wool, beef, and goat production.

Mingoola's long history as a farming town and significant player in the tobacco-producing era of Australian agriculture is evident. If you drive around the region, old relics such as tobacco drying houses, are still clearly visible.

MINGOOLA'S MIGRATION STORY

In 2011, the Mingoola Progress Association drafted a community action plan to address the significant concerns it had about the town's future – an ageing population and unreliable workforce for the local farms.

For local resident Julia Harpham, her district was dying before her eyes, with very few young families living in this part of the world.

But it was the news in 2015 that the school was going to close due to falling student numbers, which put the wheels in motion for this town to seriously look at a migrant settlement program.

Julia called many different agencies seeking assistance, but it wasn't until she was introduced to refugee advocate Emmanuel Musoni, that progress started to happen.

Mr Musoni met with Julia and her husband Philip in Mingoola to see if the resettlement of African families was possible. As a result, Emmanuel put a call out to families in his database, and within a week he had 50 people on the waiting list.

By April 2016, two African families had moved to Mingoola, and another followed later that year. Because of its initiative to take in new residents, this rural community was able to keep its school open and now has 29 African migrants calling Mingoola their home.

While the children are busy attending the Mingoola Public School, their parents are farming on small plots of land made available by local farmers, as well as working on larger local farms.

Julia Harpham and her husband Philip are now widely known as the driving force behind what has been called 'The Mingoola Project'.

This project has attracted significant media coverage and earned Julia Harpham several accolades, including 2017 Rex Airlines Regional Woman of the Year.

QUESTIONS FROM MINGOOLA

1. How do we better assist regional settlement in cash terms, to help farmers to fix houses so they are suitable for migrant families to live in?

2. Can the immigration policy be changed so that migrants can choose where they want to live and not be limited to metropolitan areas?

LESSONS LEARNED

When Mingoola started its journey to resettle migrant families from the city to a small country town, Julia admits they had very little understanding of the whole process. She said apart from the assistance given to them by the Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development International, there was very little guidance available.

Her advice to other communities looking to take on this type of project would be to cultivate and foster relationships in the areas of settlement services, as well as at all levels of government.

"Assistance from State Member for Lismore, Thomas George, has been greatly appreciated, as well as support from Tenterfield Shire," Julia Harpham said.

When migrants arrived at Mingoola, communication was difficult due to the poor English proficiency amongst the adults. Had Mingoola known it could have accessed an interpreter, Julia said life would have been a lot easier for everyone involved.

Fixing up old houses around Mingoola to accommodate the new families was also an enormous task. Some of the family members stayed at Julia and Philip's own home until their new places were ready to move into.

"The Mingoola Community is hugely indebted to Habitat for Humanity for its contribution in helping to renovate the houses," Julia said.

Mrs Harpham also said they didn't have tenancy agreements drawn up before the new families arrived – a task she said is needed to manage everyone's expectations.

Another issue this community came across was managing the 'bush telegraph'. Word got around that Mingoola farmers were offering free land to farm. This led to hundreds of enquiries and many disappointed people.

When a rural community is doing something new like a regional settlement program, in many cases, this attracts media attention. In the case of Mingoola, ABC's Australian Story covered their project. While media attention is exciting for a small community, it does take its toll – especially when journalists are turning up outside the local school to interview the new residents.

Looking at the situation today, locals say they were very lucky with the families who came – they were a great fit for their community.

While the lives of these African families have significantly improved, the community's outlook on its future has also changed for the better. Julia Harpham says this community is very proud of the progress and achievements it has made together.

"The most important thing now is the Africans can feel they can live tangible and happy lives, self-sustaining, and their children can see they can work," Julia Harpham said.

CHALLENGES AHEAD

Mingoola is currently establishing a garlic growing enterprise so that refugees living in the community can be economically independent. They have developed a shared farming model, and its new residents also grow African maize and beans, as well as a number of other vegetables for domestic consumption. The families keep chickens and goats and eat fish as well.

Building on the success at Mingoola, Julia Harpham is continuing to work on developing the Mingoola Progress Association's model to connect refugees to regional Australia, break misconceptions about migrants, and show hope to other rural communities affected by declining populations.

Due to language barriers and cultural differences, the Mingoola community hopes that a government-funded 'job-ready' program could be established to help migrants prepare for work in rural Australia. In this community, farmers have work for migrants wanting a job, but training is needed.

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