



AGENDA

Employment is crucial for healing, and settlement in a new country. SHEILA PHAM reports on a seminar on employment and refugees.

Generating Sustainable Employment for Refugees

The pathway that a person will take from landing on Australian soil to landing in a job has dramatically changed over the years, a reflection of both the widespread industrial changes that have occurred as well as changes in legislation and visa categories.

Nowadays the form of assistance provided to refugees and new migrants comes in many different forms: from financial support, to education programs around Australian workplace culture, right through to the direct provision of employment. Although all these programs aim to directly deal with this problem to varying degrees of success, they are all similarly driven by the core belief that employment is pivotal.

Employment is a significant challenge in the resettlement process of refugees, alongside the difficulties of acclimatising to a new culture and learning a new language. Undoubtedly, gaining employment is one of the greatest enablers to resettlement in countries like Australia; not only in terms of developing skills and ensuring financial stability, but also in shaping someone's

identity and sense of purpose. Work provides social connections, and even more importantly, it can help produce a sense of belonging to a new place.

Given all of this, the focus of the STARTTS' Annual Community Development Seminar on 23 April 2015 was on generating sustainable employment for refugees. Three organisations were invited to present, alongside STARTTS, working across a number of sectors including agriculture, hospitality, food production and clothing. Some of the training programs were specifically about catering to a skills shortfall in Australia. These include more traditional forms of work, which have existed for decades, or even centuries. Other roles have arisen more recently to address the changing demands of the nation.

The organisations profiled below contrast with the work of STARTTS itself in this area. STARTTS runs a project that supports the growth of business ideas of our clients and is based on a model called Enterprise Facilitation. In a future edition of *Refugee Transitions*, we'll explore in-depth the work of STARTTS around enabling employment opportunities.

PHOTO: Courtesy of The Bread and Butter Project



Sita Rai at Brown Brothers vineyard, Launceston, Tasmania. PHOTO: Courtesy of Bright Employment

BRIGHT EMPLOYMENT

Bright was established in October 2013 with the goal of “developing meaningful employment pathways for marginalised communities, including refugees and asylum seekers”. This description was deliberately worded, as explained to the gathered audience at the seminar: “As a rule at Bright, we try not to use ‘refugee’/‘asylum seeker’ as tags, and try to use ‘migrant communities’. We see them as people; we don’t think they need to carry a tag,” said Tim Davies, CEO of Bright Employment.

Davies articulated that the agenda for the company, tackling skills shortfalls in agriculture (fruit and wine) and hospitality; the former in Tasmania involving some of Australia’s best known brands, and the latter in Sydney involving many of the country’s leading restaurants, hotels and catering companies.

Alongside the core business of employment, there is also the aim to address other relevant factors, such as the widespread perception that migrants do not integrate into mainstream Australian society as well as outright xenophobia and racism.

Davies argued that a great opportunity is being lost to invest in people who now call Australia home and in the process, forge stronger community ties. In addition, people are losing valuable existing skills, as is the case with communities like the Bhutanese and Hazara. However, they are being blocked at the entry level point by the huge influx of backpackers from the United Kingdom and other parts of Europe who are happy to undertake seasonal agricultural work in order to extend their visas.

Next year 200 students will graduate from the Bright Cooking School, which trains people in basic kitchen skills. There is also increasing support from the hospitality industry with a number of big players signing on as placement partners, willing to change their own practices to accommodate the needs of new migrants who may be struggling to adapt to Australian work culture and expectations.

The work of the agricultural arm is also promising, though Davies identified many challenges ahead. “To date we’ve secured work for more than 150 local Tasmanian refugees since we started. But the real challenge is the consistency of work. We have a group

of 50-60 people who have been working for about 9-10 months a year, consistently through summer and winter. The hard part is trying to get more people through that consistency of work and keeping them through that bad cycle of just bouncing on and off welfare.”

THE SOCIAL OUTFIT

In the heart of Sydney’s inner west in Newtown is The Social Outfit. It’s on the southern end of the King Street and the well-located shop is fitted out with plywood that provides a plain backdrop to the striking array of fashion items being sold.

Many of the items are in bold colours and prints; 60% of the fabrics used have been ‘upcycled’ from fashion industry donations. The resulting clothes and accessories are locally produced and ethically made.

Based on The Social Studio in Collingwood in Melbourne, The Social Outfit has been officially trading for around one year. As founder Jackie Ruddock said, “we believe in tapping into the rich creativity of the new migrant and refugee community, and we believe that this leads to empowerment and social inclusion.”

The focus is on education, training and employment in the fashion industry, through clothing production, retail training, and design and marketing.

Similar to Bright Employment, the approach of the Social Outfit is about capitalising on the existing skills of emerging communities. As Ruddock explained, “Many migrant communities have rich histories in sewing, tailoring, tapestry, all of those kinds of things. And we seek to take those skills and give them back value straight away as people settle and learn other things.”

A concept of adult education is a key premise to the work of this new social enterprise, understanding that some refugees may have received little formal education back in their countries of origin, and thus a supportive and enabling environment is needed to foster learning. “I think it’s a really nice community hub environment, where people are encouraged to learn and to grow as they go along,” said Ruddock.

THE BREAD AND BUTTER PROJECT

The Bread and Butter Project is a wholesale artisan bakery located in Sydney that produces high quality bread, including artisan sourdough bread. It began around two years ago when Paul Allam, co-owner of Bourke Street Bakery, was contacted to help get a bakery up and running again in an abandoned bakery and orphanage in a refugee camp in Mae Sot. The Thai town is on the border with Burma and is known for its large population of Burmese refugees and migrants.

It was a life changing experience for Allam and his partner, Jessica Grynberg, and sowed the seeds for the project which aims to provide employment pathways for people from refugee backgrounds. In so doing, a current need is also fulfilled in the Australian labour market for qualified bakers.

The business has been developed using a social enterprise model, which means that all profits are reinvested into baker training and employment pathways, among other things. Its first round of fundraising raised 1.3million in seed capital to fund initial set up and wage costs for the training program. The biggest single source of funding was an Australian federal government social enterprise grant of \$230,000.

“We know that there’s lower workforce participation for people from refugee backgrounds compared to other migrant groups. And we know that a lot of work opportunities that are available are in the illegal economy where people are getting paid cash, no superannuation, not covered in terms of their safety and that is concerning,” said Kayleigh Ellis, trainee support manager. “And we also know that historically migrants have done very well in the Australian hospitality industry.”

A point of difference with The Bread and Butter project is that a huge amount of additional support is provided alongside the hands-on training program, with Ellis’ role primarily dedicated to supporting the social and emotional wellbeing of trainees. This support also includes an ESL tutoring program delivered by skilled volunteers, which helps participants develop confidence to learn a raft of new skills to help them navigate Australian workplaces. R

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