Affirming inclusive communities: supporting identification as 'locals' by former refugees in regional NSW

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Abstract
This article is a practice example exploring the scope and impact of ‘I’m a Local…’, an initiative developed in partnership between a regional university, a resettlement community organisation, local businesses and organisations, and former refugees from the community. The initiative included the development of resources which explored the process of former refugees in developing the sense of belonging and beginning a process of identifying as ‘locals’, and was aimed at improving knowledge about refugee experiences, recognising the significant social contributions of former refugees, and supporting inclusivity in the local culture. This case study provides a positive example of an initiative which had significant local impact in affirming the self-recognition of belonging by former refugees, as well as raising awareness in the broader community about the stories and contributions of people from refugee backgrounds.

Introduction
In a global context of dwindling resources, environmental challenges and economic crises, the Australian government’s policies towards asylum-seekers are transforming Australia’s self-view as a “lucky country” characterised by a ‘fair go’, to one that is insular, divided and distrustful – a nation defined by rigid borders, peering anxiously towards a fearful future. Particularly since the commencement of the War on Terror, some Australian politicians and social influencers have also used concerns about migration, border control and criminality as wedge issues to their benefit politically (Anderson, 2015; Glynn, 2016). Suspicion of the asylum-seeker ‘other’ can therefore have implications for people of colour who are refugees already ‘settled’ in Australia. There is also a tension between the refugee identity and being perceived as a ‘local’. This can play out in how former refugees are treated by the wider society, and in the psyche of resettled individuals. The challenge for former refugees, as well as all those interested in developing more inclusive communities, is to broaden the experience of belonging in Australia and dismantle traditional borders that have been erected around ‘local’ identities. This can be particularly challenging in regional areas, which are often less well equipped for refugee resettlement and more mono-cultural than urban areas.
Since the Australian government has been increasingly advocating regional resettlement of refugees and migrants despite the known challenges, it is important to have a good reporting of factors that make regional communities more inclusive than others, in terms of being able to host resettled refugees successfully. Support in gaining employment and housing remains the most immediate challenge faced by refugees (Piper, 2017). In the recent past, in Lismore, an Australian regional town, the local council and non-government organisations, such as Triumph and Sanctuary, support refugees in their settlement process. The number of former refugees resettled both overseas and after resettlement was supported by organisations such as Sanctuary (ABS, 2017). Unsurprisingly, Lismore has a language other than English in the home was only reported for a regional centre, Lismore is highly culturally homogenous, and regional towns in many respects. The town and surrounding region have pockets of high socio-economic deprivation and are not as advanced culturally and linguistically distinct minority group in the Northern Rivers, 2018). The number of former refugees resettled both overseas and after resettlement (Piper, 2017; Sanctuary Program, in addition to supporting refugees in other ways from African countries through the sponsorship of Sanctuary (ABS), 2017). For 6.9% of households (22% nationally (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017). Unsurprisingly, Statistics for ensuring they developed a respectful, inclusive and hopeful attitude of the local community, and affirmed the potential for the town to become a truly inclusive community. The partner organisations received numerous letters of support to recognised sporting and educational events, including Trinity Catholic School in Lismore, which has a number of students from refugee backgrounds. The impact of the initiative was subsequently recognised by Southern Cross University with the conferral of the 2017 Excellence in Engagement Award for Community Impact (SCU, 2017a), and a video about the initiative has been produced for use in teaching at the University (Brine, Bell-Todd, & Anderson, 2018). Through 'I'm a Local…', the initiative highlighted in this article, we can consider how the particular local context within which we work meets the conditions set out by Piper.

That local context is the regional centre of Lismore in northern N.S.W. Lismore is generally typical of Australian regional towns in many respects. The town and surrounding region are characterised by high cultural and linguistic homogeneity, low levels of unemployment, and slightly lower employment and educational attainment levels than national averages (idcommunity, 2017; Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2017). Unsurprisingly, that Lismore is in some ways more prepared to adapt to and welcome migrants of different cultural backgrounds than some other regional centres in Australia, despite the maintenance of high levels of cultural homogeneity. This unique culture can be seen reflected in a variety of aspects of day-to-day life within the region, including the operations of NGOs like Sanctuary. In relation to this specific practice example, in addition to the support of NGOs and volunteering networks, the local council is also supportive of cultural inclusion initiatives, the local media are supportive of refugee resettlement, in particular the value of inclusive sporting, and the local government and non-government organisations, such as Triumph and Sanctuary, are supportive of refugee resettlement and willing to run ‘good news’ stories, there is a significant network of potential actors who can work together on initiatives to support refugees and former refugees within the Lismore community.

'I'm a Local…' recognising the process of becoming a ‘local’

The ‘I'm a Local…’ initiative emerged organically from an event held in 2016, when Southern Cross University (SCU) and St Vincent de Paul’s North Coast Settlement Services (NCSS) – decided to organise an event to alleviate the isolation of former refugees and simultaneously coordinated Refugee Week events, and many others contributed to positive word-of-mouth and other promotion of the project during and after Refugee Week, for example through the ‘I’m a Local…’ initiative (2016). The event was ‘I'm a Local…’: recognising the process of becoming a ‘local’ in the community (Garbutt, 2009), the region has also experienced successive waves of newcomers seeking broadly progressive or even countercultural aims (see Garbutt, 2014). These changes create a legacy of accommodation to cultural change which means that Lismore is in some ways more prepared to adapt to and welcome migrants of different cultural backgrounds than some other regional centres in Australia, despite the maintenance of high levels of cultural homogeneity. This unique culture can be seen reflected in a variety of aspects of day-to-day life within the region, including the operations of NGOs like Sanctuary. In relation to this specific practice example, in addition to the support of NGOs and volunteering networks, the local council is also supportive of cultural inclusion initiatives, the local media are supportive of refugee resettlement, in particular the value of inclusive sporting, and the local government and non-government organisations, such as Triumph and Sanctuary, are supportive of refugee resettlement and willing to run ‘good news’ stories, there is a significant network of potential actors who can work together on initiatives to support refugees and former refugees within the Lismore community.

Participants in the project described a wide range of experiences that helped them to feel a sense of belonging as ‘locals’ in Lismore, including not only formal membership in Australian society, but also experiences of regular routines (SCU, 2017b). The stories represented by the participants in the ‘I’m a Local project included elements of crossing national and cultural boundaries; even when resettled as permanent residents or citizens in Australian towns, former refugees still faced the additional challenge of transcending the label of ‘refugee’ placed upon them by others, and of forging a sense of identity and belonging in a new community. In addition to supporting refugees, the local council and non-government organisations provided a platform for former refugees within the community to share their stories and to be celebrated for their resilience and the significant contributions they make to the local community.

Among the stories shared through the ‘I’m a Local…’ initiative were those of Cassie Aguot’s family. Three generations of women from her family participated in the project, including her mother Mary Ajok (the eldest participant in the initiative) and her daughter Aigli Deng (the youngest participant in the initiative). Cassie (born in Kenya) and her mother Mary Ajok settled in South Sudan and later moved to Lismore when Aigli was born in Australia; being able to have her in a local and accessible childcare centre was one of the things Cassie nominated as making her feel like a local, along with her suburban community and being able to support her local basketball team. Brothers Anthony, Augustine and Aggrey Leju, who were all born in South Sudan and arrived in Lismore in 2008, all nominated sporting and educational experiences to be key aspects of their journey and detailing what it was specifically that made them feel like a ‘local’ in Lismore. Technical staff from SCU and a local photographer captured a series of photos and interviews that were as evocative portraits of seven of the project participants, which combined with their personal statements were produced as A3 posters.

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comes to offering a welcoming community’ (Piper, 2017:6), a contention also supported by the initial findings from a current Australian Research Council funded project on resettlement outcomes (Collins & Reid, 2018). Former refugees resettled in the Lismore region were purposefully brought to the community over a period of several years, and although they and those who support them and the building of more inclusive communities must combat the negative perceptions of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants propagated by some government and other public figures, this provides a solid foundation upon which to work to challenge boundaries around local identities and belonging, and to affirm that it is possible to build ‘welcoming communities’ in regional areas.

References

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**ANDERSON + CUMINGS + MENDES + MAPATANO**


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I'M A LOCAL...

“I love being able to take my child to childcare just around the corner from my place. I am qualified and work as an Assistant in Nursing.”

Cassie Aguot

Cassie was born in Kenya and is a proud mum. She came to Lismore in 2005. Moving for a short while to Adelaide, Cassie became homesick for Lismore and came back here to live. She is a member of her local basketball team. She is currently studying the ‘Preparing For Success’ tertiary preparation program at Southern Cross University.

I'M A LOCAL...

“I love Lismore because it has very good people and everything is so close – the shops and school.”

Mary Ajok

Mary was born in South Sudan. She has lived in Lismore since 2005 and loves being a local. Mary is a proud mother and grandmother. Mary smiles a lot.
I'M A LOCAL...

"I am a local because I participate in my local community. I play in the annual African All Stars vs Lismore Legends football match, attend my local church and have studied and continue to study locally. I am a member of Lismore Thistles Soccer Club. It has nice, friendly members who have helped me learn many skills."

Anthony Leju

Anthony was born in South Sudan and has lived in Lismore since 2008. He has been a student at Wyallah Road Public School and Lismore High School and is now studying a Bachelor of Nursing at Southern Cross University.

Augustine Leju

Augustine was born in South Sudan and has lived in Lismore since 2008. He started his schooling at Wyallah Road Public School and is now a student at Trinity Catholic College. Augustine is a very keen sportsman, starting to play soccer at six and now playing rugby union as well.