Karen refugees make $40m contribution to Nhill economy in Victoria's Wimmera study finds

PHOTO: Over the past five years more than 160 Karen refugees from Myanmar have resettled in Nhill. (ABC: Lucy Barbour)

A study of a refugee community in western Victoria’s Wimmera has recognised the social and economic contributions the settlement program has made to the local area.

Over the past five years more than 160 Karen refugees from Myanmar have resettled in Nhill, attracted by jobs offered by local poultry producer Luv-a-Duck.

A report published by Deloitte Access Economics and the AMES settlement agency said the initiative has added more than $40 million and 70 jobs to the local economy.

The settlement program was effectively begun by John Millington OAM, who in 2009 was general manager of Luv-a-Duck.

AMES researcher Jenny Blencowe said the welcoming town of Nhill had been instrumental to the program’s success.

"So it was really characterised by the local community working together, not just the neighbourhood house doing their bit, the Millingtons doing their bit or the Wimmera Development Association doing their bit," she said.

"Everybody worked together which I think is probably what happens in small communities."
AMES’ chief executive Catherine Scarth said jobs had been critical but there were other success factors.

"The leadership in the local community, so the [people] who worked for Luv-a-Duck at the time were instrumental in being able to talk with the community in Nhill and explain what would happen, the Karen themselves had leaders who were able to liaise and work with the Karen community and then I suppose the settlement agency, just being able to bring all those parties together," she said.

PHOTO: Hal Loo spent the first 18 years of his life in the Mae La Refugee Camp of Karen State. (Supplied: Melissa Powell Photography)

Refugee economic impact report to bolster shire case for more funding

The local Hindmarsh Shire said the new report would help it to secure more government assistance. Hindmarsh chief executive Tony Doyle said it was an important document that would help the shire to make its case for further funding.

"Both the state and Federal Government, who are important funding bodies for us to support the Karen community," he said.

"Any grants need to be backed by showing what the impact on the economy is and what the jobs impact is and this report clearly details that."

"You put the economic analysis side-by-side with the tremendous social impact and then you've got an outstanding example for all small rural communities in Australia."

Hindmarsh Shire CEO Tony Doyle

The shire said Nhill's refugee community should be a model for other rural towns.
Mr Doyle said it was an initiative that could work for other areas too.

"You put the economic analysis side-by-side with the tremendous social impact and then you've got an outstanding example for all small rural communities in Australia," he said.

"So there wouldn't be many small rural towns around Australia like Nhill that aren't suffering population loss and here's a great example of how that can be addressed."

The Nationals' federal Member for Mallee, Andrew Broad, said the report should help leverage his Government to continuing support for Nhill in next month's budget.

"So the Federal Government committed $40,000, which has been partnered by the Hindmarsh Shire and with Luv-a-Duck to provide some resettlement services," he said.

"That's due to come to an end on the first of July and I've been very vehemently lobbying my parliamentary colleagues to give some more money."

PHOTO: Ku Pow is one of many Karen refugees who have settled in Nhill and contributed to the local economy. (Supplied: Melissa Powell Photography)