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By Julius M. Marete

Introduction

Civil wars and ethnic fighting in Somalia and the crisis in the Darfur region in the Sudan have resulted in a steady stream of Somali and Sudanese refugees into the neighbouring countries of Kenya, Egypt and Yemen. Many of these refugees find their way to places such as New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Banki 2004). This study was inspired by questions relating to why these people were fleeing their own countries, what they hoped to achieve upon arriving in Kenya, and whether Kenya and other countries were doing what was necessary, not only to assist these refugees but to ensure that their countries were being supported appropriately. This paper is largely informed by my Masters level research at the University of Canterbury, School of Social Work and Human Services, in the years 2009–2010. This research aimed to bridge some of these gaps by providing a study of the perspectives, expectations and experiences of Sudanese and Somali refugees at various stages in their resettlement process to New Zealand. Therefore, it was important that in the midst of my study I returned to my home country of Kenya to visit the Dadaab refugee camps and meet the people whom I was researching.

Daadab Refugee Camps

The camp at Dadaab is huge and filled with people whose dreams of having normal lives appear to be in tatters. Many are forced to live in extremely difficult conditions, sleeping under open skies and with virtually no protection from harsh weather. They face shortages and lack the essentials of life such as clean water, food, sanitation, health care and, of course, shelter.

I was given guides from the refugee community to assist me as I carried out the interviews. The people with whom I spoke educated me on the realities of the camp. UNHCR officials interviewed reported that malnutrition rates were approximately 13% of the children under the age of five – a group that forms 20% of the total population of the camp. There is also an insatiable appetite for education, but there are few resources available to allow for these educational needs to be met.

A newly arrived Somali refugee in Dadaab camp described how the situation in Somalia has been:

...nasty things are happening there. People are being harassed and there's no peace now. There's just no peace, its gun fire all days. People don't consider life. For example if you have 1000 Somali Shillings which is just like 10 Kenya shillings (USD 10 cents). That is enough for you to be killed.

A Sudanese participant lamented that the camp:

is so windy and so sunny. The environment is hostile. Life is hard. The United Nations has to help people. The food is not nutritious and people eat one type of food for a very long time. That's why people have lots of rickets because of lack of a nutritious balanced diet. You have no choice of what you eat. You are just like a cow; they take you to go and eat grass every day.

While refugees are persecuted and tortured during their flight, in the camps they face insecurity, rape and structural oppression. They lack basic necessities and live in overcrowded and makeshift homes with no educational or health services. Therefore, the need for resettlement abroad is very high among camp dwellers, and many of them look at it as the only way to escape the misery of the refugee camps.

During a focus group in Dadaab, participants said that, to many of them:

...going overseas is just like a dream. If you study the situation in the camp, and you need to go out abroad, even though you may have choices, you just go. You may not even know what is going on there. You want to go away from the situation you are in because it is not a good situation. It is a bad situation. You are looking for a better life, and this is the first thing that comes to your mind (Somali focus group discussion).

While Kenya, like many other countries to which refugees flee, lacks adequate resources to cater for such large numbers of refugees, UNHCR has embarked on a resettlement programme to relocate some refugees to western countries.

Somali and Sudanese Refugee Resettlement in New Zealand

As a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, New Zealand has traditionally provided resettlement for refugees fleeing persecution and those in greatest need of protection (New Zealand Immigration Services [NZIS] 2004). Refugees enter New Zealand mainly through UNHCR's mandated quota system, commonly referred to as 'quota refugees' or through the family reunification program. This quota is set annually by the New Zealand government and currently stands at 750. The Immigration Department of New Zealand, in conjunction with UNHCR, selects refugees from the country of first settlement. Quota refugees spend a six-week orientation period at Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre. Relocation is arranged by a lead organisation called the Refugee Services (RS). Refugee relocation depends on where they want to be resettled. Many who have friends, family, clan members or whose compatriots are established in New Zealand prefer to be resettled near them, while others prefer regions with climatic conditions similar to their countries of origin. The refugees are resettled as permanent residents who can work, attend school, and enjoy all the benefits of being New Zealand citizens. They also receive free English courses and are entitled to a one-off re-establishment grant of NZ \$1,200 and a monthly welfare benefit to meet their basic needs. After five years, refugees can apply for citizenship (NZIS 2004).

Expectations and Experiences of Resettlement

Upon resettlement in New Zealand, Somali and Sudanese refugees report feeling secure and enjoying access to better education, health and social services. However, they also face challenges such as culture shock, different climatic conditions, language barriers, discrimination and racism.

The successful resettlement and integration of refugees in New Zealand depends on a number of factors ranging from government policy, support services, refugee community dynamics and the individual's capacities to cope with the stress of resettlement.

Many participants in the study agree that the following points are important in the resettlement experience of Sudanese and Somali refugees:

Acculturation; that is, the process by which refugees adapt to the host culture. Miserez notes that 'acculturation is cultural change that results from continuous, first-hand contact between two distinct cultural groups' (1998: 98). In the process, changes in gender roles and status, and the emergence of new values, identities and attitudes can lead to tensions and family conflicts. A Sudanese participant said 'we have our own African culture and our culture cannot work here because when you live in Rome you do what Romans do'.

Refugees from the predominantly patriarchal Sudanese and Somali cultures, for example, may have difficulties when women and children claim greater social and economic power than has been traditionally practised. The different social constructions placed upon gender, time, family, parenting and many other concepts highlights the complexities that a refugee must negotiate in a new culture.

Family separation. On arrival in New Zealand, many refugee families are not intact. Some family members may have been left behind in the camps. Others may be coming to join their family after a long period of separation. Some may have come without any family support like a young female participant in Daadab: 'Our mum called and said she was gonna bring us to New Zealand, and so many years went by, nothing happened, and then we waited and heard nothing'.

This kind of fragmentation has a profound impact on the family unit and weakens the social fabric (Lewig, Arney and Salveron 2010). Valtonen (2008: 136) argues that the 'long and anxious periods of waiting for family reunification often make the process of personal adjustment and adaptation more difficult'. Some may also suffer guilt because they are safe in New Zealand, while their family members languish in the camps or have disappeared during the wars.

Loss, discrimination and isolation. Some refugees discover that their life in the camps had not prepared them for life in resettlement. Unable to find work or otherwise realise their expectations, they feel angry and lonely. The financial pressure on those who feel obliged to help family members still in the camps can also be very stressful. Racism, discrimination, religious stereotyping as well as a lack of understanding of the issues facing refugees within the host society may further hamper their efforts to adjust to their new life (Refugee Services 2009). A Sudanese participant in Christchurch expressed his loneliness: 'You know where we come from we have association due to our culture and we know many people. Here we face loneliness'.

Education, employment and English language proficiency. Some refugees arrive in New Zealand with no formal education and with difficulty communicating in English. This makes it hard to find work, obtain a driver's license, or socialise with people from other backgrounds (Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2006). Their academic credentials may not be recognised in New Zealand. Gray and Elliot point out that 'language proficiency is one of the greatest needs of older people (refugees) [while] lack of it affects their ability to access public and private support services and limits their ability to interact' (2004: 6). This insight was supported by a female Somali participant who did not speak English:

You see here in New Zealand if you don't speak English, it is hard to understand and be understood. When I go shopping, and people say hi to me and I don't know how to answer back. And what they say about me, I can't understand and you see here people are always polite. So I cannot understand the feelings people have about me.

Mental health issues. Some refugees who have been exposed to traumatic experiences either in their home countries, in the refugee camps or in their countries of resettlement suffer psychological and emotional disturbances and other mental illnesses. This emotional disturbance is often referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (New Zealand Ministry of Health 2001). People suffering PTSD may feel mistrust towards people they interact with, and may be depressed, suicidal, or suffer other major psychological disturbances. An agency official interviewed reported that refugee migrants

have endured conflict, and direct involvement in the war, and in order to flee have made such incredible long journeys which brings with it some consequential health needs. One is PTSD, and I think the majority of them will have some element of that. This may affect their ability to resettle.

Conclusion

There is a need for more coordinated approaches to capacity building for human service providers. They should receive training in how best to deal with the unique issues facing refugees. Given their personal experiences, refugees who have been in New Zealand for a long time should be encouraged to take up such training so that it might be more culturally relevant for newer arrivals. This study highlights the role of the international community to ensure that there are collaborative proactive responses to the development of humanitarian crises. The findings point to other possible areas for future research. There is a need to examine the effect of family disintegration resulting from the flight of refugees from their home countries and their subsequent resettlement (Nash and Trlin 2004). This research pursued only the refugees' perspectives on resettlement and integration. It would, therefore, be valuable to examine the impact of refugee resettlement on the host communities in terms of their perception of the resettlement and integration process.

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