

Bhutanese Settlement and Community Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, three possible solutions are pursued to address refugee problems globally. These include repatriation of refugees to their country of origin; local integration or third-country resettlement. This article explores further the resettlement option, how it is currently approached by different resettlement countries, and opportunities for key stakeholders to work more collaboratively by adopting strength-based approaches. Role of service providers as well as communities and community leaders are explored in driving positive settlement as well as successful integration outcomes. The focus of this article is on learnings from the Bhutanese refugee settlement experiences in different settlement countries and the role community leaders can play in driving successful settlement outcomes.

Keywords: Bhutanese refugees, capacity building, resettlement, strength-based approach,

Introduction

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1951 to help the estimated one million people displaced by World War II to return home. Seventy years later, there are 79.5 million forcibly displaced people worldwide. Among them are 26 million refugees over half of whom are under the age of 18 (UNHCR, 2020). One percent of the world's population now have fled their homes because of conflict or persecution. This is a growth in atrocities and human suffering and is unacceptable.

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According to the 1951 Refugee Convention establishing UNHCR, a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his or her nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country" (Refugee Convention, 1951). The refugees of concern to UNHCR are spread around the world with over 73% hosted in neighbouring countries. Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar currently make up the top five source countries while Turkey, Colombia, Pakistan, Uganda and Germany are the top five hosting countries (UNHCR, 2020). Refugees live in widely varying conditions, living in open and make-shift shelters particularly during initial arrival periods such as the Maidhar camp to established camps such as Beldangi refugee camps in case of Bhutanese refugee settlement journey. Cost of supporting these refugees to help them survive and restart their life is huge. UNHCR now operates in 135 countries supported by over 17,000 personnel and its budget has skyrocketed to US\$8.6 billion in 2019 from a tiny sum of US\$0.3m when it first started.

Australia is a leading international partner in sharing refugee protection responsibilities and assisting those most in humanitarian need. Along with the United States and Canada, it ranks consistently among the world's top three resettlement countries. On a per-capita basis, Australia is the UNHCR's largest resettlement country (UNHCR, undated).

Resettlement and Key Players

UNHCR is mandated by its statute and the UN General Assembly Resolutions to undertake resettlement as one of the three durable solutions. It helps resettle refugees to a third country in cases where refugees cannot go home because of continued conflict, wars and persecution or they live in perilous situations or have specific needs that cannot be addressed in the country where they have sought protection. Although a small fraction - less than one percent of refugees are resettled each year, resettlement plays an important role in addressing the broader refugee issue globally. Once resettled, people not only focus on restarting their lives in a new country and a new environment, but many

individuals also support other fellow refugees overseas while others start championing for the broader refugee issue, supporting the work of UNHCR and relevant governments.

Only a few countries take part in UNHCR's resettlement programme. This is despite the fact that the world order has shifted significantly with a large number of newly industrialised countries joining the ranks of rich developed nations since the establishment of UNHCR in 1950. In recent years, the United States has been the world's top resettlement country, with Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Nordic countries also providing a sizeable number of places annually.

Bhutanese Refugee Resettlement

“Bhutanese refugees have a problem. The world outside Nepal does not know they are there. The arrival figures in Jhapa speak of the relentless pace of Thimphu's eviction program. The refugee-run Human Rights Organisation of Bhutan (HUROB), which manages the [refugee] camps, counts arrivals. There were 234 refugees in 1991 July, and an average of 1500 Lhotshampas arrived every month since then until December 1991, when there was a sudden dip to 412 arrivals for January 1992 – coinciding with Amnesty International's visit to Bhutan. Immediately thereafter, the arrival rate shot up to an average of 10,000 a month, where it remains today. By 23 July 1992, there were 62,723 refugees registered in the six camps of Maidhar, Timai, Goldhap, Beldangi I and II, and Pathri. UNHCR estimated 65,000 in the camps- a Kathmandu-based magazine (Dorji, 1992) aptly summarises the problem of Bhutanese refugees in Nepal in 1992.

The problem continued to grow and so did the refugee population. Initially, repatriation to the home country was the only option pursued by the Bhutanese refugees as well as other stakeholders. When the governments of Bhutan and Nepal started bilateral negotiations in 1993, people welcomed the move hoping for an amicable resolution of the problem and return home at the earliest. However, despite 15 rounds of talks spanning over a decade, the fate of over 100,000 refugees was not nearer to any solution. Bhutanese refugee issue clearly warranted international involvement and required the consideration of other options including third-country resettlement. Individuals and different

organisations in exile started actively lobbying the UNHCR and the international community in pursuit of this option.

Frustrated by the lack of any progress in Bhutan-Nepal bilateral talks, a core group of countries supporting the refugee in camps announced in 2007 to collectively address this long-standing issue by resettling some of the refugees. The Core Group included Australia, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway and the United States. In late 2007, the government of United States - committed to accept about 60,000 refugees (Pagonis, 2006) and started resettling them in 2008. The government of Australia also followed the USA. The first two groups of Bhutanese arrived in Adelaide in South Australia and Launceston in Tasmania in May 2008 as part of Australian resettlement programme.

According to UNHCR, more than 101,600 individuals have been resettled in eight different countries since the start of the resettlement programme: 5,692 people in Australia, 6,667 in Canada, 874 in Denmark, 327 in the Netherlands, 1,002 in New Zealand, 566 in Norway, 358 in the United Kingdom and 86,166 in the United States (UNHCR, 2016). UNHCR continues to seek solutions for the remaining refugees in Nepal. According to UNHCR official, “this is one of the largest and most successful programmes of its kind and the resettlement of nearly 9 out of 10 Bhutanese refugees is an extraordinary achievement” (Shrestha, 2015).

Settlement Experiences

In 2016, this author - a former Bhutanese refugee, undertook a study as a Westpac Social Change Fellow² and travelled to Norway, the United States, Canada and New Zealand. The observations below are based on the discussions with relevant government departments and stakeholders including the resettled Bhutanese communities in these countries, people involved in refugee settlement, refugee settlement experts and organisations.

² The Fellowship programme offered by Westpac Bicentennial Foundation aims at creating “positive social change in Australia by investing in people who have the drive and innovative ideas to improve the social wellbeing of Australians.”

It is worth noting here that one of the objectives of the overseas study tour was to find the best practice in refugee settlement and integration. However, I found that it was about ‘valuing and nurturing the local’ rather than ‘a best practice’ that can be applied across the board. Instead, I came up with some guiding principles (Dhungel, 2017) and I believe these principles are relevant to governments, UNHCR, service providers and other organisations working on refugee settlement and related areas.

Key observations and learnings from the study are highlighted below:

Very Grateful and Committed to Rebuild Their Lives

The overarching message that I received from the resettled Bhutanese community was - we want to learn the local language and develop necessary skills, we want to work and make our living, and we want to give back to the community that has generously welcomed us. Having spent extended period in refugee camps, the resettled people were committed and keen to start a new life despite challenges. It meant learning the local language, acquiring new skills and getting a job or starting a business.

Common Interest and Care for the Whole

Every community and the leadership that I met were passionate about general well-being of the resettled community. There was this inner desire, which is a great foundation for engagement and involvement, and work collectively for the greater good of the community and the society. However, there was also a sense of tension, particularly amongst youth who were struggling to balance this collective approach with the more individualistic approach in their new countries of settlement.

Overwhelming Aspiration for Home Ownership

Having grown up in an environment where every family usually owned home; families are generally very driven and committed to buying a house which gave them a sense of security and belonging in their new homeland. The aspiration to own a home has been a major motivating factor for people to learn the local language, acquire skills and seek employment or start a business. For instance, over 65% of families

resettled in Sydney have bought homes within 5-6 years of their arrival under the humanitarian settlement programme (STARTTS, 2017).

Positive Impact of Previously Settled Community Members

Out of the five countries covered in this study, Australia, Canada and the United States already had some Bhutanese settled prior to the humanitarian settlement. The presence of Bhutanese community members in places where Bhutanese people have been resettled gave a positive impact on the success of settlement. Having settled earlier, they were able to provide guidance, advice and assist the new arrivals in settlement journey.

Successful Settlement

Successful settlement means different things to different people. However, learning local language, getting into employment and buying a house were considered important for a successful settlement. There was also a common trait in people who considered themselves successfully settled and happy such as close-knit families, operating as a unit, making well thought-out decisions based on individual and the family's collective aspiration and well-being. There were also close community connections and people were integrating well in the local community, which gave them a strong sense of belonging.

Inspiring Success Stories

It was observed that every resettlement that the author visited has produced several inspiring success stories. Some standout achievements have been noted and captured in different areas including community contribution, youth leadership, employment, and academic and professional excellence from across Pittsburgh and Atlanta in the US, Halifax and Lethbridge in Canada, Christ Church and Palmerston North, New Zealand, Stavanger in Norway and Sydney in Australia.

More Successful Compared to Others

Across the countries visited, relevant government departments, settlement service providers and other stakeholders generally consider Bhutanese refugee settlement as more successful compared to other resettled communities. The Bhutanese people are more organised and work cohesively as a community. This can be partly attributed to the

values that the community developed while living in exile - well-organised refugee camps in Nepal, where people volunteered for the community welfare, helped each other, and learnt to live in harmony.

Settlement Challenges and Adapting

Starting with acceptance - coming to terms with the reality of living in a foreign land, people faced with the initial challenges of settling in a completely new environment. There were issues like isolation among the elderly, need for positive engagement for youth, and learning a new language, developing skills necessary to get into the workforce and getting employment.

For new arrivals who come from a community-based support system, the availability of a wide range of 'services' and 'service providers' is at times overwhelming. The availability and the need to access services from outside the community has in many instances led to the erosion of family discipline since individuals feel that they can access the 'services' they require from 'market' rather than from relatives. They neglect on building relationships, listening to elders of the family and community.

It has been observed that the shift from collectivism to individualism and the erosion of community and social capital is negatively impacting the quality of life for many.

Change in Family Dynamics

Traditionally, parents to a large extent controlled the family matters and maintained a level of discipline in the Bhutanese community. The family was an important structure with individuals adding to the collective – it was an inside out approach. Children would be guided by parents and they would take permission from parents for any major decisions. This was no more the case in many families when children, particularly upon reaching the official 'adult' age made decisions with little or no regard to the views of their parents.

There were, in many instances, total collapse of family discipline with children coming home and going out at their will; mothers cooking regular meals and waiting for children only to be told that they have already eaten outside and resulting in disheartened mothers and food

wastage. The situation was awfully hard to bear for many parents and were struggling to cope with since many of them had sacrificed everything to provide the best they could afford for their children.

Socio-economic Status Realignment

When people settled in new places, their individual and family circumstances changed significantly. Socio-economic status in Bhutan and in the developing countries are quite entrenched and normally take a long time to change. However, it is not the same after resettlement. People who started working early or families that had more working members progressed quickly and enhanced their economic as well as social status irrespective of their status back home or in the refugee camps. It was particularly interesting and encouraging to note that people were able to overcome the entrenched caste-based socio-economic discrimination and disparities of the past. Similar to the neighbouring countries, Lhotshampas practiced caste-based social hierarchy. This meant that some of the lower caste were not only treated as untouchables, but they also remained poor due to the traditional trades they confined themselves to which had limited opportunities for growth and prosperity.

Community Organisations and Structures

Every resettled Bhutanese community had formed one or more organisation(s) aimed at supporting the community in some way or other. Community initiatives have been based on the skills and strengths available within the respective community members. Each community was resettling in its own unique way and knowledge was being developed through their local interactions. Given the success stories emerging from every settlement that the author visited, it was clear that community work and community development generally cannot be practiced from a prescriptive framework. It rather requires finding what works in a community, nurturing it and doing more of it

However, community organisations were facing challenges with operating and managing themselves when differences arose within them, resulting in emergence of additional organisations. Community organisations were generally set up in the traditional top-down,

hierarchical approach practiced back home or in the refugee camps and didn't suit the purpose and clearly needed a rethink.

Driving Positive Settlement Outcomes

Community leaders could play an important role in the successful settlement and integration. Based on the extensive interaction and discussion with key stakeholders involved in the settlement process in different countries (Dhungel, 2017), the following areas have been identified as important for community leaders to act on:

Building Trust and Adapting to Democratic Culture

Prior to resettlement, people were often exposed to or had dealt with political parties, human rights and other social organisations in refugee camps. Due to the difficult circumstances and the environment that people lived in, it sometimes leads to the erosion of trust and people become sceptical about belonging or associating with any community organisation in general. As such, community building in resettled countries needs to start with rebuilding trust and developing relationships.

People fleeing from persecution generally do not come from a democratic culture; they are more used to a top down, command and control structure. This approach will neither be conducive nor effective in a community development setting. Building a community requires a different mindset. It requires a more collaborative and consultative approach; engaging people, identifying leadership at different levels and nurturing them to drive different aspects of community development.

Based on the settlement experiences in different countries, successful settlement and community development are about creating champions in the community and nurturing collective leadership. Leadership requires a democratic mindset and leading by example and not just giving instructions. Respect for expertise and experience and dealing appropriately with people who can add value to the organisation and the community in general is vital for the long-term sustainable development of a community.

Organisational Structures

After settling in a new country and a new environment, it requires a major shift in thinking and the way people approach settlement, community organisation and associated structure that are intended to serve the community. It is important that community members are involved in identifying the need and the benefit of having an organisation to provide a common platform for the community. It should be complementary to what already exists and consider the broader environment including the existence of social support and a wide range of service providers supported by the government and other funding bodies.

Operationally, the traditional top-down, hierarchical approach doesn't suit community development. As Carsten Tams notes, social influence is most effective when it comes from all directions (Tams, 2018). A bottom-up 'building-block' approach supports a sustainable model through an ongoing process of adding on to what has been built thus far. So even when a new team is elected to lead the organisation, it continues to draw on the expertise of the past committee members and other volunteers in the community and in particular, senior members who form the pivot for the community.

Newly emerging community organisations may start the process of forming, or reviewing their organisations by asking the following questions:

- What sort of future we want as individuals and as a community?
- How can we be proactive and start by utilising the resources – strengths and assets that we have within the community?
- How can we build our internal capacity?
- How can we quickly move away from the social security support that the government provides which can in turn be diverted to more needy in the host community?
- Having embraced a new country in a new environment, how can we be engaged, integrated and be active citizens so that we can start contributing back to the wider society?

Capacity Building

Building and enhancing internal capacity is key to successful settlement and sustainable development of a community. Relying only on external help means the system will collapse once the external input ceases. Developing and implementing projects by utilising the assets within the community allow people to build and hone their skills. At the same time, it provides volunteering opportunity, people develop confidence and leadership skills, gain valuable experience and much needed referee/references that the community organisation can provide for an individual to move into employment. There is a huge potential for community driven initiatives to be strengthened and enhanced by increasing the level of people's engagement as well as working collaboratively with service providers to fill any gaps, mainly aimed at community capacity building and empowerment within the resettled Bhutanese communities and more generally in any refugee settlement situations.

Community Leadership

In a community setting, it should be recognised that everyone in the community has talents and community members are kept at the centre of community building. Once basic needs are met, it is about what people have and not just what they need. Leaders play the role in building relationships and involving others and their role shifts from 'telling' people what to do to 'asking' people what their passions and aspirations are enable them to utilise their full potential and prosper.

In addition to the general leadership characteristics of honesty and integrity, courage, ability to care about others, communication and a sense of humour, a successful community leader requires the ability to:

- Adapt to democratic culture and collective decision making
- Work with and bring on-board key influencers within the community
- Build rapport, connect with and work across generations
- Put community interest first above personal including individual and family interest in dealing with community matters, and
- Commit to continuous learning.

Intercultural Matters

Newly emerging communities have an important role to play in building relationships and engagement with the wider community. By being proactive and working closely with local service providers and other stakeholders will help avoid ‘institutionalisation’ of issues. This includes community intervention before a ‘child at risk’ is removed from a family or an ‘irritant child’ in school is referred to a youth service provider. There have been instances where children have been removed from families with the intent of ‘protecting’ the child, however, it has caused immense psychological and social impact on the families concerned and added financial burden for the government.

Integration

Community leadership is particularly important in strategically creating a balance between what it does internally within the community promoting its tradition and culture and what it can learn from the wider community through active engagement with other communities. While it is important to maintain one’s tradition and culture intact, it is more important to learn about the people and the country and adapt to the new environment. It is about making the best of both worlds – retaining the best of what you bring in and learning the best practices from other communities.

Conclusion

At a macro level, the outcome of successful refugee settlement and community development is a widely shared vision for the future of the community, a community that has an enhanced level of citizen engagement and participation. It is also about strengthened individuals and an expanded leadership base, better use of resources from within the community and the commitment to continuous learning and willingness to adapt.

Refugee settlement and integration and broader community development is an ongoing process. It needs adapting to the changing external and internal factors as well as ongoing reinvestment of time and effort in the community, driving motivation and the fostering of new and diverse transformational leaders.

From a global refugee settlement perspective, over 100,000 Bhutanese refugees from the UNHCR camps in Nepal have been resettled in seven developed countries since the programme first began in 2008. The success of the Bhutanese refugee settlement in different countries as well as the refugee camps in Nepal being noted as one of the best run camps prior to the resettlement is a clear demonstration of the value of driving a paradigm shift in refugee settlement from a *Need-Based Approach* to a *Strength-Based Approach* - whether be in refugee camps or resettled countries, the focus is not just on people's needs but on the inherent strengths and assets that people have. This is the first such refugee resettlement programme of this scale UNHCR implemented with the support of several governments, the Core Group in this case. The resettlement programme warrants a close look at different aspects that contributed to this success including the way the refugee camps were managed, education and other activities in the camps, the role of refugee leadership and other relevant factors.

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