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The Settlers' Dream: Resettlement Experiences of Sudanese Refugees in New Zealand

Julius Marete

Kenya Methodist University

Abstract

This study focuses on Sudanese refugees who have resettled in New Zealand from refugee camps in Kenya. It examines their expectations and experiences in the Kenya camps and how these impact their resettlement in New Zealand. Through conducting in depth interviews and focus groups with Sudanese participants, the findings show that pre-arrival expectations and experiences can impact people's subsequent well-being and efforts to integrate into their new communities. Appropriate human service responses that could help to resolve refugee resettlement challenges are identified and issues requiring further research are suggested.

Introduction

Historical injustices stemming from colonialism, as well as other political and socio-economic factors, have contributed to numerous protracted conflicts between communities in Africa. In particular, political turmoil and the civil wars in Sudan have led to an influx of refugees into camps located in Kenya. The Kakuma and Dadaab refugee camps host about 360,000 refugees, mainly from Sudan and Somalia. Dadaab is one of the largest refugee camps in the world. Consisting of three sub-camps – Hagadera, Dagahaley and Ifo – it was designed to cater for 90,000 refugees. When the researcher visited it in August 2009, however, it held over 300,000 people, with insufficient land to expand and accommodate the more than 7,000 new arrivals each week.

The camp at Dadaab is filled with people whose dreams are in tatters. They lack essentials such as clean water, adequate food, sanitation, health care, and education. Aid agencies report that 13% of the children under five – a group that forms 20% of the total camp population – suffer from malnutrition. Their dirt-floor homes, made from twigs, plastic, bits of tin, and mud bricks, are often next to piles of garbage. Some have no shelter, sleeping under open skies with no protection from the weather. Barefoot children haul large jerry cans and queue up in oppressive heat to wait for water to arrive. Temperatures may exceed 40 degrees Celsius, with water available only every other day. Violence and abuse of human rights has posed serious challenges to the camp dwellers due to lack of security and

lack of any legal structures to address the increasing violation of human rights.¹

Because Kenya lacks adequate resources to cater for so many refugees, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has embarked on a resettlement programme to relocate some refugees in western countries, including New Zealand which is signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention and 1967 protocol relating to the status of refugee protection.² This study focuses on Sudanese refugees in New Zealand who have been resettled from these camps. It examines their expectations and experiences in the Kenya camps and how these impact their resettlement in New Zealand. These findings provide a greater awareness about the challenges of resettlement and offer insights into better service provision when working with Sudanese refugees.

The impact of expectations and experiences on resettlement in New Zealand

New Zealand has hosted refugees since the 1930's. The most common pathway is through the UNHCR's quota system, commonly referred to as 'quota refugees'. This quota, set every year by the New Zealand cabinet, currently stands at 750. The New Zealand Immigration Department, in conjunction with the UNHCR, selects refugees from the country of first settlement and places them in a six-week orientation program at Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre located in Auckland.³

In recognition of the economic opportunities immigrants bring into New Zealand and the need to support the immigrants' settlement initiatives, the government embarked on a New Zealand Settlement Strategy in 2003. This strategy set up a Settlement National Action Plan that recommended long-term settlement support for migrants and refugees. The strategy is implemented by the Department of Labour and, in the 2004 national budget, received a major boost of NZ \$62 million, earmarked to improve service delivery for migrants and refugees. Refugees are entitled to a one-off re-establishment grant of NZ \$1,200 and a welfare benefit depending

¹ Human Rights Watch. *Welcome to Kenya: Police Abuses Against Asylum Seekers near the Dadaab Refugee Camps*, <http://www.hrw.org/en/node/90848/section/7> (accessed 27 November 2010).

² New Zealand Immigration Service, *Refugee Voices: A Journey towards Resettlement*. Wellington: New Zealand, 2004, 3, <http://www.immigration.govt.nz/migrant/general/generalinformation/research/Refugees/refugeevoices/settlement.htm> (accessed 6 October 2011).

³ New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004, 5.

on the size of the family is paid weekly to meet their food, accommodation, and other basic needs. This strategy has enabled New Zealand to be internationally competitive in enhancing the country's social development and to implement viable programs to integrate migrants and refugees into New Zealand society.⁴ However, 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. All of these considerations have a bearing on the resettlement experience and how a person might respond to the challenges related to the following:

(i) *Acculturation*. This 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."⁵ 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.⁶ Refugees from the predominantly patriarchal Sudanese culture, for example, may have difficulty when women and children claim greater social and economic power than has been traditionally practiced. The different social constructions placed upon gender, time, family, parenting and many others highlights the complexities that a refugee must negotiate in a new culture.

(ii) *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. Such fragmentation has a profound impact on the family unit and weakens the social fabric.⁷ In traditional patriarchal families, the woman's role is often subordinate, focused on socialising and on raising the children, while the man is responsible for earning the money. In the absence of either the husband or wife, household roles change, causing problems that

⁴ New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004, 13.

⁵ Diana Miserez, ed., *Refugees--the Trauma of Exile: The Humanitarian Role of Red Cross and Red Crescent, Dordrecht*, (M. Nijhoff, Boston, U.S.A and Kluwer Academic Publishers: Canada, 1988): 98

⁶ Jay Marlowe, "Walking the Line: Southern Sudanese masculinities and reconciling one's past with the present," *Ethnicities*, available online at <http://etn.sagepub.com/content/early/recent>, (2011): 1-18.

⁷ Kerry Lewig, Fiona Arney and Mary Salveron, "Challenges to Parenting in a New Culture: Implications for Child and Family Welfare," *Evaluation and Program Planning* 33:3 (2010): 324-332.

negatively impact child development and the health of family members. As observed by Valtonen, the “long and anxious periods of waiting for family reunification often make the process of personal adjustment and adaptation more difficult.”⁸ Some may also suffer guilt because they are safe in New Zealand, while others in their family languish in the camps or have disappeared during the wars.

(iii) *Loss, discrimination and isolation.* Some refugee migrants 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, and a lack of understanding of issues facing refugees within the host society may further hamper their efforts to adjust to their new life.⁹

(iv) *Education, Employment and English language proficiency.* Some refugee migrants 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.¹⁰ Those with academic credentials may not have them recognised in New Zealand. The New Zealand Immigration Services point out that “language proficiency is one of the greatest needs of older people [who are refugees]. Lack of it affects their ability to access public and private support services and limits their ability to function within their own home and family.”¹¹

According to *Refugee Voices*, a report conducted by the New Zealand Ministry of Labour, refugees who had spent two years in New Zealand considered the country to be safe and found the people to be friendly. This report, however, may present a more positive picture than is

⁸ Kate Valtonen, *Social Work and Migration: Immigrant and Refugee Settlement and Integration* (Farnham, Surrey; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008): 13 – 136

⁹ Refugee Services, *Refugee Services Report to Department of Labour 2008/2009, 3rd Quarter 1 January – 31 March 2009*, (Wellington: New Zealand, 2009).

¹⁰ Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, “‘Active’ and ‘Passive’ Resettlement: The Influence of Support Services and Refugees’ Own Resources on Resettlement Style,” *International Migration* 41:5 (2003): 61-91; Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, “Employment Niches for Recent Refugees: Segmented Labour Market in Twenty-First Century Australia,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 19:2 (2006): 203-229.

¹¹ Allison Gray and Susan Elliot, *Refugee Resettlement Research Project, ‘Refugee Voices’ Literature Review*, New Zealand Immigration Services (NZIS), Wellington, (2001): 6.

warranted. And because the *Refugee Voices* research was conducted by the Department of Labour which has authority in resettling refugees, respondents may have been afraid to give a negative report lest it hinder their ability to assist other family members to enter New Zealand. This paper attempts to elevate the Sudanese voices of those who are now living in New Zealand to provide greater understandings of the positive outcomes and challenges related to successful settlement.

Study Design

This paper is largely informed through the author's masters level research at the University of Canterbury, School of Social Work and Human Services in the years 2009 – 2010. The research employed a phenomenological approach to examine the participant narratives. As described by Bogdad and Taylor, "the phenomenologist views human behaviour...as a product of how people interpret the world. In order to grasp the meaning of a person's behaviour, the phenomenologist attempts to see things from that person's point of view".¹² For the researcher to see things from the refugee's point of view, it was essential for him to go to the camps and directly experience the situation there in the Kenya camps from which many Sudanese refugees had resettled in New Zealand.

To understand the history of the camps, become familiar with the refugee issues, and build a rapport with the residents, the researcher's first task was to obtain basic information from camp administrators and community leaders. Agencies providing refugee services also helped in selecting and introducing participants for the interviews. The interviewees, aged 18 years and above, were selected through the snowballing method. Some of them were introduced by family or friends, while others were contacted by use of gatekeepers in organisations working with refugees. The interviewees were demographically diverse representing different occupations, age groups and gender. All interviews were recorded, with permission from the participants. Five in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted with participants from three camps within the larger Daadab camp in Kenya. Only one of the interviews required an interpreter; the rest were carried out in English or Swahili by the author.

The second phase of the project involved collecting data in New Zealand. Five in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted

¹² Robert Bogdad and Steven Taylor, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Phenomenological Approach to the Social Sciences*, (Wiley: New York, 1975): 13-14.

in Christchurch and Auckland with Sudanese refugees resettled from camps in Kenya. All transcripts were verified by the participants. The data was arranged in themes so the researcher could verify the information in subsequent interviews and determine what new data may be needed.

Results

There are various themes that emerged from the phenomenological analysis. Interviewees talked about their experiences in the refugee camps in Kenya and their dreams of resettlement in New Zealand. They also talked about their experiences of resettlement in New Zealand and how the expectations they had in the refugee camps impacted their new lives.

Dreams and experiences of resettlement

In order to understand the dreams of resettlement, a participant recalled their life in the camps in Kenya to highlight the dire circumstances that so many Sudanese refugees found themselves.

Kakuma is so windy and sunny. The environment is hostile. Life is hard you know. 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 they lack a nutritious 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.

Refugees' individual stories of hardship reveal starkly frightening tales as well as stunning examples of resilience of the human spirit. More often than not, however, the narratives highlight tragic examples of fragmented families and experiences of extreme adversity. One participant describes her journey to the camps in these words:

When the insurgents arrived in my village at night, they started shooting indiscriminately at everyone. We all ran helter-skelter. Hell had broken loose. My husband had earlier been killed in the fighting, so I had my seven year old son and four year old daughter to worry about. We ran for many kilometres, and at dawn, we all regrouped to check on our loved ones and plan our next move. I traced my seven-year-old son but my daughter was missing. We could not turn back to look for her; neither could we just wait without food and water. So we started walking till we found transport to the Kenyan border. I cried and cried, hoping my daughter would turn up with the rest of the people still fleeing the country. She never turned up. I am devastated, I would rather

know she is dead, than think every day that she could be somewhere suffering.

This experience is one example of the many that characterise the difficult living conditions and harsh realities of the daily challenges associated with forced migration. It also highlights a reason why the desire for resettlement can be very high among the camp dwellers. Many of them see it as their only escape from the misery of the camps. All those interviewed expressed high expectations regarding life in resettlement. Stein notes that “refugees’ expectations, often romantic and unrealistic, are quite different from what we know they should expect.”¹³ Many did not choose or even know which countries they were to be resettled in. All that mattered to them was resettlement in any Western country. As one participant noted,

You don’t have a choice! They take your forms. During our time, the New Zealand immigration officers came, and asked if we can’t to go to Australia, Norway, or any other country, why not come to New Zealand. You can’t say you don’t want to go. They will take you wherever.

Another Sudanese respondent said:

I have interests in New Zealand for education purposes. We came from a war-torn country and we must start our own life. In our country the government in northern Sudan charges us in the south for education. If more people were educated, there would be no problem. So we have big hopes of going to New Zealand.

Participants expressed various reasons why they would like to be resettled in New Zealand. Many wanted a better and secure life or a good education for themselves or their children. Others had expectations about better housing, work opportunities and family support. All were optimistic that they would be able to adjust to their new life in resettlement and rebuild their lives. Not all participants, however, felt that their expectations had been met after resettling in New Zealand. A respondent who had been in New Zealand since 2003 said that his expectations had initially been very high:

If I can draw a graph, I will show you. The expectations of 2003 were higher; expectations of 2006 were low; and they are going

¹³ Barry Stein, “The Refugee Experience: An overview of Refugee Research,” paper presented at a conference on the refugee Experience sponsored by the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Minority Rights Group: London, England, (1980): 10-11.

down. When I start having my income or anything my expectations will go high again. So when you are coming into this country, the expectations are high.

Borne of research with Sudanese refugee migrants in Australia, Marlowe criticises the labelling of refugees as 'traumatized people'. Such a label overshadows the "strengths, resilience and coping mechanisms that provide insight into how people respond to traumatic experience."¹⁴ Marlowe and others identify such labelling as among the factors that affect refugee integration and employment.¹⁵ A Sudanese participant reported one such experience in these words:

Most New Zealanders look at refugees as strangers, not like when we were in the refugee camps in Kenya. Here we look strange. So we find it hard to be accepted. When I applied to work in 2005, they gave me an interview date. When I spoke on the phone, they didn't recognise me as African because my English name is M (English name). Then when I went and knocked on the door, the lady was shocked when she opened the door. She asked me, "How can I help you?" I said I have an appointment, and she asked "Really? What is your name?" Before I even got to the reception, I said "Excuse me, can I go in?" and I indicated that to the person there. The door was open halfway and she was peeping as if it were her house and was looking scared. I said again, "Excuse me, this is a public office" because I like speaking my mind. I said I have an appointment at 10 o'clock. Then she asked again, "What is your name?" And I answered "M" and gave my last name. She was quiet and then asked "Do you have any documents?" and I said "Yes I have them." Then I went for the interview, and they said to me, "We are very sorry. We have run out of jobs." I said its okay, and started to compose myself. I missed the job. You see, there is this kind of racism that they don't want to show. They don't want to show it because some companies are against it, but they don't want Africans or such characters. This is a perception they have from television or wherever, which makes employers have no trust.

Among the challenges they face are adjustments to a new culture, gaining proficiency in the English language, becoming educated, finding

¹⁴ Jay Marlowe, "Beyond the Discourse of Trauma: Shifting the Focus on Sudanese Refugees," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 23:2 (2010): 183-198.

¹⁵ Val Colic-Peisker and Farida Tilbury, 2006.

employment, and generally meeting their basic needs. It highlights the contestations around what constitutes successful settlement.

Contested Considerations of Integration

The term 'integration' remains a controversial concept. Castles and Miller conclude that "there is no single, generally accepted definition, theory or model of immigrant and refugee integration."¹⁶ Two decades ago, the term had coercive overtones to refugee migrants who thought they would be required to abandon their culture in order to conform to the culture of their host community. In response, Breton defined integration as "the process whereby immigrants become part of the social, institutional and cultural fabric of a society."¹⁷ More recently, the term has taken on a more accommodating meaning. According to Valtonen, integration refers to "the situation in which settling persons can participate fully in the economic, social, cultural and political life of a society while being able to retain their own identity."¹⁸ This issue remains uppermost in the minds of many refugees as one participant highlighted:

We have a very strong culture and giving up your culture easily to accept other society's culture is hard. Unless you are not willing to drop your culture, you will not integrate into the society. So people who have given up their culture and took the western culture, it's been easy for them to adapt.

Many refugees arrive in New Zealand without skills to engage in meaningful employment. They point as well to discrimination and racism by New Zealand employers who do not understand the refugees' cultures or the issues facing them. Many newly arrived refugees record high rates of unemployment, while some find low-skill and low-paying jobs. The New Zealand Immigration Service reports that 16% of refugees found jobs after six months, while 26% found a job only after two years.¹⁹ Long periods on the unemployment benefit and a felt obligation to remit money to their relatives still in the refugee camps combine to put many of them under financial constraints which can lead to social exclusion and seriously affect their ability to integrate successfully.²⁰

¹⁶ Stephen Castles and Mark Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (4th ed. Palgrave: The Macmillan Press, UK, 2009): 12.

¹⁷ Raymond Breton. *Report of the Academic Advisory Panel on the Social and Cultural Impacts of Immigration*, (Canada: Research Division, Strategic Planning & Research, Immigration Policy Group, Employment and Immigration, 1992): 7

¹⁸ Valtonen, 2008, 62.

¹⁹ New Zealand Immigration Service, 2004, 12.

²⁰ Valtonen, 2008.

Refugee participants in this study emphasized the role played by the New Zealand Refugee Council and the newly formed New Zealand National Refugee Network. With branches throughout New Zealand, these organizations that are funded by the government, non-governmental organisations and well-wishers, help to ensure that refugee voices are heard on issues such as housing, funeral rights, employment, language, representation, health, and family safety.

It is important to note, however, that there are many things in New Zealand that Sudanese refugee migrants are happy about as a focus group participant states:

The law applies equally to everyone. The court system is also accessible to everyone. The health system and the social services are good. The other one is that no one is above anyone. If you know English or you don't, you will find anyone to help you translate and you will be like anyone else. The government system is very much appreciated. The other one is the driving system. It's really good.

Many appreciated the fact that they have been able to meet their educational goals, enjoy greater freedom of choice, and feel safe and secure. This comment, amongst others, highlights the need to consider both the strengths and the areas that need further consideration when examining the lived experiences related to resettlement.

Discussion: Harambee and an African model of empowerment

The findings of this research confirm the importance of an empowerment approach based on an African cultural value of harambee in Kenya. This is a term that literally means 'all pull resources together'. Sudanese refugees have often experienced marginalisation both in the refugee camps and in resettlement. Their successful resettlement rests on their involvement in an empowerment process and their participation in mobilising their own resources. As observed by Valtonen, "it is becoming more evident that 'refugee migrant' collectivities themselves will also have to participate in the work towards a shift in power relations in the interest of equal citizenship. They will also have to be seen as actors in the change process."²¹ As one participant noted:

This can be done by all people of refugee background coming together. When we talk in one voice we can influence the government... We are part of this country today. So what needs

²¹ Valtonen, 2008, 115.

to be done, is that we have (refugee) agencies, we have government agencies, we have NGO's. All these need to help refugees in New Zealand in a good manner, but for them to do anything; the community itself will have to identify their needs.

Harambee is a traditional African spirit of community self-help that is solidly grounded in many indigenous African cultures and has helped empower many communities to start important local projects. Ngau describes *Harambee* as “the collective and cooperative participation of a community in an attempt to fill perceived needs through utilization of its own resources”.²² Human service providers and social workers have an important responsibility within this concept, not only in helping refugees but in helping New Zealanders understand the issues they face. To provide culturally appropriate interventions, they need to understand the cultural diversity of New Zealand society and develop a level of intercultural competence to handle the unique needs of refugee migrants.²³

Historically, refugee issues have been considered by host communities to be foreigners’ problems. But in light of the serious abuse of human rights that refugees have suffered, their experiences represent human rights issues for us all to consider. And because issues of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work and human services practice, these professions must understand what refugees face if they are to empower them in adapting to their new environment. They play important roles in intervention, education, and advocacy against discrimination and racism. These different areas highlight important and diverse areas that social work and related professions must work to support new and emerging communities.

Participants in this research expressed a sense of self-efficacy and resilience in handling the difficulties they had encountered in their often traumatic past, and a strong desire to rebuild their lives. They have dreams for their future. They want to learn, to enrol in schools and universities, to work hard, and be recognised for their talents and achievements. They want to be recognised as New Zealanders and

²² Peter Ngau, “Tensions in Empowerment: The Experience of the “Harambee” Self-Help Movement in Kenya,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, 35: 3 (1987): 524

²³ Agi O’Hara and Zita Weber, *Skills for Human Service Practice: Working with Individuals, Groups and Communities*, (Oxford University Press: South Melbourne, 2006).

participate in their new communities. These are important personal characteristics. They expressed concern over the stigma of being labelled a refugee for the rest of their lives. This labelling may aggravate psychological problems for some who have survived traumatic experiences either in the camps or in their home country. As Marlowe said: “It is possible to understand refugees beyond trauma-focussed identities and, importantly, to learn what their hopes and aspirations are for the future.”²⁴ Because negative media coverage of refugee issues has led to stereotyping, discrimination, and racism by the host communities, such negative perceptions need to be identified and campaigns to counter such perceptions spearheaded by the governments of both Kenya and New Zealand.

Part of moving beyond trauma focussed perspectives is placing emphasis on people’s self-determination in developing coping mechanisms and crisis-solving abilities. Because refugee communities are often marginalised, human service provides need to work alongside these groups in collaborative ways to resources and opportunities that contribute to their well-being. According to Connolly and Harms social workers and others can be involved “in micro, meso and macro interventions that collectively address the multiple needs of refugees and at the same time advance their enjoyment of their human rights.”²⁵ During the annual World Refugee Day event held in Auckland on 24th June 2010, Adam Awad, the New Zealand National Refugee Network spokesman said:

Unemployment is a huge issue. People are in the welfare system for a long time because their genuine voice has not been heard in policy making. We want resettlement to take shorter time and be easier for the taxpayers. We want our new arrivals to integrate as quickly as they can.

This paper highlights the need for more coordinated approaches to capacity building. Human service workers should receive training in how best to deal with the unique issues facing refugees. Recognising the many levels that professionals within and outside the refugee community can work to support people impacted by forced migration, the participant responses in this study give rise to the need to address the human rights injustices pre and post migration.

²⁴ Marlowe. 2010.

²⁵ Marie Connolly and Louise Harms, *Social Work Contexts and Practice*, (2nd Edition. Oxford University Press: United Kingdom, 2009): 146.

Given their personal experiences, refugees who have been in New Zealand for a long time should themselves be encouraged to take up such training so that it might be more culturally relevant for newer arrivals. Through the previously discussed spirit of harambee, refugee migrants can involve social networks and community agencies in identifying and meeting personal, interpersonal, and political needs, thereby empowering them to take action to better their own lives.

Conclusion

The findings of this research direct 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. As this research pursued only the refugees' perspective on resettlement and integration, it would be valuable to examine the impact of refugee resettlement on the host communities in terms of their perception of the resettlement and integration process. In this article, it has been argued that the expectations and experiences Sudanese refugees have prior to their resettlement have an impact on their resettlement and integration in their new environment in New Zealand. Whilst it is evident from the findings that successful integration is partly dependent on individual refugees, the host government policies play an important role in refugees' integration in their new communities. This research further provided insights for human service providers and other stakeholders in order for them to give appropriate humanitarian intervention for Sudanese refugee migrants.

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