

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada: Lived Experience, Lessons Learned, and Promising Practices

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada Series – Summary of Session 2

Between October 2020 and February 2021, the Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement (RCIS) hosted a six-part digital series focused on Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and integration. The series aimed to engage stakeholders to consider Canada's approach to refugee resettlement and identify changes to policy and practice that will make Canada more inclusive and responsive to refugees' needs. Over the course of the six sessions, refugees, settlement workers and service providers, policymakers, researchers, and students were brought together to share insights and lessons learned from lived experience, settlement practice, and research.

The second session of the series took place on November 17th, 2020 and featured three speakers. Bayan Khatib spoke about some of the challenges faced by Syrian refugees, the Canadian private sponsorship model, and the community's role in easing refugees' integration. Hanen Nanaa shared her experience resettling in Canada after spending several years living in Turkey between leaving Syria with her family as a teenager. Dr. Bassam Abazed spoke about his experience resettling in Canada and the complex licensing process for internationally trained doctors. The session was moderated by Zainab Abu Alrob, a PhD student in Policy Studies at Ryerson University.

Presentation by Bayan Khatib, Executive Director of the Syrian Canadian Foundation

- The Syrian civil war and incidents that triggered the refugee crisis can be traced back to the Syrian government's violent response to children writing freedom slogans on their school wall. The imprisonment and torture of those children ignited a popular uprising, with Syrians engaging in months of peaceful protest, calling for democracy and an end to the dictatorship. The conflict escalated as the government began to systematically target schools, hospitals, and water and electricity facilities, and Syria soon became embroiled in a proxy war, with many international powers intervening in accordance with their own interest.
- Syria is now destroyed, with over half a million people dead, hundreds of thousands of people enduring what has been described as industrial torture, and millions of Syrians – over half the population – now refugees or internally displaced.
- Syrians who fled to surrounding countries encountered many barriers preventing them from accessing medical care, education, and employment. For this reason, many displaced Syrians risked their lives to get to countries in the west in hopes of finding better conditions.
- The dramatic story of a three-year-old boy, Alan Kurdi, who drowned in the Mediterranean Sea while his parents were fleeing the war had a major impact in mobilizing the Canadian government and society. Thousands of people came together to sponsor and resettle refugees, and by 2019, over 60,000 Syrian refugees were in Canada.

- Canada is unique for its private sponsorship model. Over one-third (35%) of Syrians to Canada came under the private sponsorship pathway, with the community carrying the responsibility of providing financial and social support for one year. Numerous cultural groups across the country (e.g. faith groups, charities, universities) collaborated to sponsor and resettle Syrian families with no agenda other than a humanitarian one. In addition to sponsoring refugees, the public played a crucial role by putting pressure on the government to bring more numbers and advocating for family reunification.
- Syrians who arrived to Canada as government assisted refugees were temporarily housed in hotels, including the Toronto Plaza Hotel in North York. COSTI Immigrant Services – the agency tasked with settling government assisted refugees – became overwhelmed with the speed of arrivals and put out a call for volunteers.
- Volunteers from many backgrounds raised funds and divided duties (housing, medical, education, social, childcare and kids programming, language, etc.) to support families. Housing was a particularly important area as it was necessary to develop relationships with landlords and convince them to give leases to Syrians.
- Having spent years advocating for Syrians, Bayan Khatib arrived at the hotel to help. She was in charge of the move-out packages for families moving from temporary to permanent housing, as well as a family-matching project connecting government assisted refugees with volunteers in an effort to simulate the private sponsor relationship. The Syrian Canadian Foundation was formed in the Toronto Plaza Hotel during this time.
- Overall, the welcome by the Canadian community has translated into Syrian Canadians reporting a strong sense of belonging, and developing ties, volunteering, and becoming engaged in civic life. At the same time, an ugly anti-immigrant undercurrent prevails. Syrian refugees in Canada have experienced hate speech, threats, and violent attacks. Islamophobia is a rising epidemic in Canada, with many Canadians believing that Islam promotes violence. Increasing incidents targeting Muslims tell us that while most Canadians believe in a diverse Canada, not all Canadians share this vision.
- It is necessary for Canadians to fight back against xenophobia. Each citizen must carry the responsibility of ensuring that Canada remains a welcoming and safe place for diverse individuals.

Presentation by Hanen Nanaa, student at Ryerson University and Founder of BAM (Books Art Music) Collective

- Hanen escaped the war in Syria by moving to Turkey with her family. She stayed there for a period of 5 years, over which time she learned Turkish and volunteered; however, because she was labeled as a refugee, she did not feel welcome and was unable to integrate. When Hanen learned that the Canadian government was sponsoring refugees, she applied on behalf of her family. The prospect of starting a new life in Canada was scary for her parents because they did not speak English and did not have friends in Canada, but it ultimately offered more opportunities for the young people in her family.

- Upon arrival to Canada, Hanen and her family stayed in a hotel in downtown Toronto and were supported by COSTI. Community volunteers came to the hotel, and Hanen volunteered herself as a translator despite having limited English at the time. She was able to use the information she learned as a translator to find a house for her family.
- Hanen's family experienced a major gap in accessing services because her parents were unable to speak English and were therefore unable to navigate services and needed to rely on volunteers. Hanen was also often the interpreter for her family because she was the only one who spoke English.
- Hanen's biggest barrier faced was in the educational sector. When she arrived to Canada in 2016, she was told to go back to high school. Despite being 18 years old, she was placed in grade 9. As someone who had escaped war, had already worked for several years, and had been responsible for her family, she was unable to connect with the other students and was unable to make friends. When she approached the school for a more appropriate solution, she did not get the support that she needed.
- Hanen quit school and volunteered for six months, during which time she learned English and met many people. She also co-founded a project to address the gaps that she saw in the education system to educate newcomers on postsecondary opportunities. She volunteered with students across the country with the group "Newcomers Educational Support – Canada," sharing opportunities and posting answers to education and employment questions on Facebook.
- Hanen eventually went back to school but this time to 'adult school' with students who were the same age or had similar experiences. In this more supportive environment, she was able to upgrade faster and got the credits she needed to continue to postsecondary school in less than a year.
- The problem is not newcomers; the problem is the system that is not designed for them. Hanen learned about system and figured out how to do what she needed on her own, but there are a lot of options that we do not tell newcomers about because we think we know better than them.
- This is why it is important for refugees to speak for themselves: engage them, listen to them, and give them the opportunity to propose solutions.
- Volunteering is not familiar to newcomers but is very important to filling in gaps. It is okay to take time to volunteer. Hanen was able to meet people and make connections by volunteering and this was ultimately the key to integration for her.
- Community organizations and government need to invest more in education and getting information to newcomers. Employers need to give opportunities to refugees and immigrants. Newcomers do have experience, and language is not a gap, it is a learning experience.
- Faith groups played an important role in Hanen's settlement. Her family was able to connect with them and ask questions and feel a sense of community, especially during holidays.
- Hanen started BAM (Books Art Music) Collective to engage newcomer and racialized youth. She saved money to fund the initiative and hosted an event before the 2019 election. BAM and Syrian Canadian Foundation are partnering to host a virtual social justice café providing space for newcomers and refugees to speak about social topics that matter to them.

Presentation by Dr. Bassam Abazed, medical doctor from Syria specialized in orthopaedic surgery

- Bassam was in Syria when the war started in 2011. He worked as a medical doctor in field hospitals, receiving wounded civilians. He transitioned to Jordan for three years working for the Syrian American Medical Society and joining Doctors Without Borders (MSF) as a medical manager.
- He arrived in Canada with his family in 2017 and was supported by COSTI. Through COSTI they met friends who guided them to visit websites to understand the Canadian system. There were also many people from Syria who had come years before who were able to help.
- Bassam has been in Mississauga for three years and is working but not yet in medicine.
- He originally wanted to stay in Toronto because he planned to join MSF again and help refugees, but he was advised to go to Mississauga where he would have help authenticating his credentials and be around others from Middle Eastern countries.
- Bassam connected with other internationally trained medical doctors and realized that he has to go through a complex licensing process in order to practice in Canada. He decided to focus on building his network and joined several WhatsApp groups with doctors in similar situations to his own. Through these groups he learned that there are doctors from many countries who are unable to practice their profession and use their experience in Canada.
- Bassam eventually became discouraged when he realized that more than 90% of people from the WhatsApp groups had been unable to progress after spending 3+ years of their lives working towards requalifying because of the limited residency opportunities available to internationally trained doctors in Canada. He decided that he would study and prepare for the medical requalifying exams but also needed to find another way to learn the Canadian system and build a network, while also thinking about an alternative career.
- Because he had worked with international organizations before, Bassam was able to network and reconnect with MSF in Toronto. His current hope is to join MSF once he has acquired his full Canadian citizenship because it is possible to work as a surgeon with them on missions outside of Canada. He is unable to travel at this time because of his ineligibility for international work permits without full citizenship, however he has submitted his citizenship documents and is awaiting their processing. With his experience he hopes that he will be able to find work with MSF or another organization which will allow him to practise – even if it is outside of Canada, and for only a few months a year.
- Canada does not take advantage of the great experience and talent newcomers bring. Bassam tried many times to find volunteering or auditing opportunities with hospital and clinics but was blocked. This is particularly surprising given the gaps in the Canadian medical system. The wait time in emergency rooms is shocking, and appointments with specialists can take several months. Canada is a very advanced country, but not everything in developing countries is worse than here. The health system – especially the emergency room – was better in Middle Eastern countries.

- Bassam had read about Canada before coming and joined groups to learn more, but it was not enough. He did not expect work to be so complicated, especially for educated people. However, alternative careers seem to be common in Canada, as many people who studied in Canada also work in totally different fields.
- Bassam went to LINC classes at Sheridan college but felt that he learned more English outside of these classes because people in these classes are not fluent. Canada needs to engage newcomers by giving them the opportunity to work in a field they have experience in and practice the language in a familiar environment. Bassam began volunteering and found that this was helpful for learning English.
- Faith groups can be helpful in providing a sense of comfort and protecting against culture shock. Despite being in a new country, people can take their kids to events and still have familiar experiences in these spaces.

Discussion Notes

- The government has done a good job supporting newcomers to Canada. Syrian refugees' arrival was an anomaly which made it necessary for the community to come through and provide support; however, in normal circumstances, the system is pretty stable. At the same time, innovation is needed in the way the government and settlement sector address Syrian refugees' resettlement. As a first step this requires a stable funding structure and incorporating people's lived experience/feedback into service delivery.
- Invest in local initiatives by community leaders and refugees because these people have better access to their communities and can make a larger impact.
- Newcomers are not able to access many services because of language barriers. There is a need for more language tutors versus more LINC programs as these are not always the most productive way to learn English because learners repeat the same courses over and over again. Identify gaps in mental health services and provide these services in the languages of refugees and newcomers.
- The government needs to invest more in education and language programs for refugees, more civic and political engagement for these communities, and sharing more stories of newcomers across the country. Make more work opportunities available to refugees.
- Newcomers need to be invited to events, meetings, and discussion forums regularly. Make sure refugees are at the table when decisions are being made and include them in the advisory committees and on the board of directors in settlement agencies.
- There is a need for an advocacy coalition between grassroots leaders and settlement organizations to report the issues that matter to them at the governmental level and improve refugees' experiences. Political parties and civil society must also put more pressure on the government to improve the settlement sector.