

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

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada Series – Summary of Session 4

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 fourth session of the series took place on December 18th, 2020 and featured three speakers, including Shireen Salti, Executive Director of the Canadian Arab Institute; Rania Younes, Co-founder and Director of Welcome Home TO; and Dr. John Carlaw, Research Fellow with the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration at Ryerson University. Shireen and Rania responded to questions around non-governmental organizations' (NGOs) involvement in and the structuring of Canada's resettlement response, partnerships between NGOs and civil society, and the impact of governmental policies on advocacy work. John responded to questions around the role of universities in Canada's resettlement response, and students' contributions to refugee advocacy and settlement initiatives.

Summary of responses by Shireen Salti

- The Syrian refugee resettlement response was a stark contrast to past refugee intakes and resettlement efforts. Canada's combined intake of refugees across all pathways exceeded over 30,000 for the first time since 2006 and surpassed 40,000 for the first time since 1992. It also marked only the fifth private sponsorship event since 1979.
- The success of the initiative was the result of collaboration between all levels of government, NGOs, and the public. Existing sponsorship and settlement structures galvanized the public's response. Heightened awareness was necessary to ensure a positive integration trajectory, and this was achieved through educational sessions and initiatives offered by various stakeholders in the settlement sector.
- Canada's private sponsorship program is an essential refugee pathway that not many other countries have. While there is a global agenda to push such initiatives, the same level of public response has yet to be seen outside of Canada.
- A legitimate framework is needed to bolster sponsorship and settlement partnerships between civil society and NGOs in Canada. For example, in the case of Syrian refugees, many orientation sessions were delivered, however these varied significantly in terms of their timing, location, and providers. While the sessions were supposed to relay everyday information and supports that refugees could rely on, they were insufficient because of their inconsistency.
- More consideration of where refugee cohorts are coming from, and what kind and how much information they need during the first months of arrival is needed when

preparing resettlement initiatives. An emphasis on understanding premigration experiences will lead to better insights into the needs and challenges refugees will ultimately face in settlement.

- Thus far, little attention has been given to understanding these experiences and priorities from refugees' own perspectives. This misconception results from host societies' tendency to perceive refugees as an issue.
- In principle, resettlement countries believe that refugees should plan and largely take responsibility for their own resettlement and that the role of society and organizations is only to facilitate it. While recognition that refugees know their own needs best is needed, it does not absolve host countries of responsibility.
- Research into refugees' needs is particularly delayed. We tend to wait 10 to 20 years to go back and study an issue rather than asking refugees about their issues now and putting steps in place to resolve them.
- There needs to be social capital support throughout refugees' journey. The public's commitment to refugees must extend beyond the first year of settlement. True integration relies on social capital. Ensuring that actors at points of entry are promoting an inclusive environment is key. In particular, involving cultural ambassadors who speak both languages – which requires acknowledging the value of their lived experience – is important to meeting refugees' cultural needs. It is the optimal way to sustain trust and empathy in order to nourish social inclusion. Refugees' sense of safety in Canada is increased through matching refugees with opportunities to increase social capital.
- One of the main barriers facing refugees related to COVID-19 is lack of access to other Canadians. Studies have shown that refugees and other vulnerable groups feel extremely isolated without anyone to talk with.
- Newcomers often come from a much different sense of belonging. In many countries it is strange to not interact with your neighbours. This in itself can be felt as a form of social isolation upon arrival. Increasing access to mentorship programming is one way to address this.

Summary of responses by Rania Younes

- The Syrian refugee response was very much a national project that everyone took part in and which demonstrated what can be achieved when everyone comes together. At the same time, it is necessary to realize that refugees come in everyday – it is not a one-time thing. If we open our hearts and work together, Canada can be a different country and many challenges can be resolved.
- Currently, there are not enough partnerships between NGOs and civil society – not just on refugee issues, but also on Canadian immigration as a whole. NGOs need to be much more involved. Some NGOs are mandated to do settlement work, and some are not. Some services are direct, and some are indirect, but more collaboration is needed.
- We are lucky to have pathways like the private sponsorship of refugees model that make Canada special in terms of engaging civil society and which work to demonstrate the better results that can be had.

- It is always important to remember that, at the end of the day, refugees come to Canada and need friends to be there for them. Very limited attention is paid to the social integration of refugees in Canada, but refugees need people who care beyond what settlement sector is mandated to provide.
- The resettlement response is getting better but is still unstructured – not legitimized. Encouraging social integration has its own barriers because immigrants and refugees represent a more vulnerable client set. There is a sometimes-prohibitive set of rules working against public collaboration and engagement. The paperwork involved in just being someone's friend can be discouraging.
- When speak of advocacy, there is a difference between social advocacy and actual advocacy work. In the case of NGOs, there is a limit to how much advocacy they can do. On one hand, it is ultimately not the mandate of settlement-focused NGOs to do advocacy. On another, the limited funding available to NGOs and other organizations make advocacy challenging by creating a form of competition. This results in NGOs not putting the user experience of refugees at the heart of their work but rather the funding model. This is not because NGOs are bad, but because of how the settlement sector is structured.
- A key issue for refugees is their lack of English language proficiency upon arrival in Canada and not feeling confident to find employment. The lack of communication creates a barrier to accessing to resources. Unfortunately, no one asks refugees how they are best able to receive settlement information. Instead, they are directed to LINC classes which were originally developed for economic immigrants. You cannot engage a person in language who is illiterate in their own language. At the same time, illiteracy means different things. Even if a refugee says that they are illiterate they still know something because they clearly thrived back home at some level.
- Trauma is very real, and it happens to all migrants, but we stigmatize it for refugees. Refugees do not need fixing, they need opportunities. They are ready to contribute and participate, but they lack opportunities to do so.
- We need more civil society engagement. Only when civil society became engaged in refugee resettlement did they realize the difficulty of settlement and integration in Canada. The more you involve civil society the more settlement innovation will occur.
- Lack of accessibility to information and resources is a major barrier. Many people do not know about the issues refugees face. Misinformation in the media can fuel misconceptions about the level of support refugees receive (e.g. travel loans). Categorizing people as vulnerable also makes it difficult to engage volunteers because of the perception that not everyone should have access to vulnerable people. This can have an isolating effect and work against resettlement efforts.

Summary of responses by Dr. John Carlaw

- According to the UNHCR, more than 79 million people are displaced. In light of this, Canada and its universities can and should do much more than they are currently doing for refugees. In terms of their potential in the settlement process of refugees, universities are an underutilized resource in Canada. Engagement in refugee resettlement efforts is a tremendous learning opportunity for students.

- Some Canadian universities have made great contributions. The Ryerson University Lifeline Syria Challenge (RULSC) was a great example of collaboration between civil society and universities which over the course of 4 years generated nearly 100 refugee sponsorship groups and sponsored well over 400 refugees. RULSC was the result of a partnership between university leadership, students, community, and donors.
- There is a need for universities to invest in staff to support initiatives, as well as a donation structure for such initiatives.
- In Canada there is also the work of the World University Service of Canada (WUSC) which is currently the most sustainable university initiative that exists. Across 95 Canadian campuses it sponsors about 130 refugee students per year. It also teaches students how to run referendums for refugee sponsorship.
- Wilfred Laurier has an initiative called International Students Overcoming War which uses the student visa path to support refugee scholars and bring people more quickly.
- In general, university students have tremendously contributed to the work around integration of refugees. When students have doors open for their ideas they make remarkable contributions.
 - At York University, the refugee awareness week was founded by students, and student regularly do awareness and fundraising activities for refugees both overseas and in Canada.
 - Samantha Jackson at Ryerson University (a co-founder of RULSC) used her wedding as a fundraiser and raised over \$60,000.00 for refugee resettlement.
 - Canada charges refugees for their transportation to Canada in the form of loans and there have been many student fundraising efforts to help pay these.
 - York University has had partnerships with Canadian Amnesty International and the Canadian Council for Refugees around supporting refugees.
 - Refugee Support Sponsorship seminars were run by Pierre-André Thériault as a PhD student at Osgoode Hall at York University and he won an award acknowledging these efforts.
- Principle of additionality: civil society's contributions to refugee resettlement must be in addition to government efforts – not replacing government efforts.
- One policy that both Conservative and Liberal governments share is imposing limitations on private refugee sponsorship. In Canadian society governments do not allow private groups to sponsor refugees without a cap. This was lifted only temporarily with Syrian refugees. Another common element between Conservative and Liberal governments is that they only allowed private sponsors to accept refugees who had UN certificates or other government recognition; however, these are difficult to get in many parts of the world.
- Two challenges in relation to private sponsors were processing times and shifting policies around refugee resettlement. As a result of long processing times, by the time refugees arrived in Canada, the cohesiveness of the groups supposed to welcome and support them were not necessarily what they should have been. Additionally, the government temporarily removed caps for certain organizations deemed Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs). The bureaucratic steps involved in sponsorship were far less onerous for SAHs than for Group of Five sponsorship meaning that while the cap was lifted, they could take on many refugee applications. However, once the

government reimposed the caps, groups lost the ability to work with SAHs to bring refugees to Canada, and Group of Five applicants faced more restrictive conditions.

- The Conservative government has historically admitted fewer refugees than the Liberal government, but, with the exception of the 2015 intake, the Liberal government's commitment to refugees has not represented as big of a departure as some would assume. Ultimately, civil society is doing much more of the labour than government. Additionally, while both Conservative and Liberal governments have boasted about Canada's generosity towards refugees, both have also imposed very restrictive measures when it comes to accessing the refugee determination system for refugee claimants.

Discussion notes (responses are paraphrased)

- The audience was asked to comment on the extent to which they believe that the federal, provincial, and municipal governments have assisted refugees.
 - **Dr. John Shields (Professor, Politics and Public Administration, Ryerson University):** ACCES Employment has collaborated with all levels of government on a Barista training program through Starbucks and another program through IKEA employing refugee youth. These programs were created to provide an opportunity for refugee youth to gain Canadian experience. Such programs also help in terms of developing social networks and practising English language through interaction with clients.
 - This type of programming is innovative in the sense that employers have often not been involved in resettlement and integration efforts, but of course they are the ones responsible for hiring workers, so it is important for them to be engaged. There was also an initiative with the Canada Building Trades Union for Syrian refugees to become engaged in trades which has proven successful.
 - Language learning has been added to these initiatives to assist refugees in practising their English at the same time as doing work which tends to be a more effective approach.
 - Some other initiatives are around assisting refugees to start up their own small businesses. Many refugees were engaged in entrepreneurial activities in their home countries but of course need support to understand and become established in the Canadian context.
 - **Rania Younes:** All levels of government tried to pitch in, but the part that most people missed is that they did not work together. They remained siloed despite huge opportunities to collaborate. To bring settlement efforts to the optimal level more coordination between government levels needs to happen. Many official authorities went out to communities and engaged with refugees, but there is a lot of replication and duplication of efforts which needs to be addressed.
- The audience was asked to comment on what resources communities need to improve their involvement in the resettlement process.
 - **Dr. John Carlaw:** One promising practice that Canada has is called the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP). Communities need support and training on how to properly conduct refugee sponsorship – especially on

- how to navigate power imbalances, ethics, as well as the bureaucratic requirements of the sponsorship program. In recent years a positive development has been that more communities have had access to RSTP and its work; however, for the quality of resettlement to improve, some of the needs that exist in wider society which also impact refugees (e.g. affordable housing) need to be improved. All levels of government need to be working to address these things.
- **Rania Younes:** A program which used to exist was the HOST program. It was a social mentorship program through which refugees were matched with a mentor to assist them with all aspects of their settlement and daily life. The program was funded for years but was ultimately discontinued because it was too difficult to measure its impact. What needs to be remembered is that sometimes social impact and return of investment cannot be measured in numbers. You can see the ripple effect come through in longitudinal studies, but the funding structures do not accommodate longitudinal evidence.
 - The audience was asked to comment on how public awareness around refugees can be continued.
 - **Rania Younes:** We are not using technology enough. There are lot of tools that can help us respond better but we are not using them. There is not any one place where you can go to get everything you need. We need to fund projects that can provide accessibility faster. This is possible with artificial intelligence – a system which asks you who you are and what you bring and connects you accordingly – but this requires funding and no investment is being put forward.
 - **Dr. John Shields:** The role of technology is a good point and the pandemic has brought this to the fore. Part of the problem has been that the government invests in programming but has limited funding in terms of the operations and infrastructure. Some of this has been realized with the pandemic and there is now some effort to invest in technology because it is critical. Settlement agencies will not go back to normal after the pandemic; a lot of it will be online, but we need the investment and training of staff and this requires a significant commitment and the funding model needs to change to reflect this.
 - Some community-based public spaces are important, such as libraries. Many newcomers including refugees use libraries as a major settlement resource as well as just to initially get connected to technology. Maintaining such spaces is critical and helps to build resilience. This being said, access to libraries in smaller towns is more difficult than accessing libraries in cities.
 - **Rania Younes:** This is a great point. We often fail to see the systems approach. For example, the unaffordability of housing has made refugees go out into suburban areas which do not have transportation, and which impacts access to libraries and other services. We need to consider the picture at large and connect the dots to improve accessibility.
 - **Beverly Tjarera (Program Manager, Newcomer Services, YMCA of Northern Alberta, Fort McMurray):** In Fort McMurray where Edmonton is the closest city the sense of isolation is already great for Canadian-born residents but even more amplified for newcomer populations. Access to technology

- during COVID has been the greatest need for our community in terms of connecting newcomers to the services available to them. We are trying to tackle access and digital literacy but have so far only been able to provide settlement services to people with access to technology (~800 since the start of the pandemic). I have met people who have been here since earlier in pandemic and did not know about settlement services until now. Some young newcomer students do not have technology at home and also need access to translation and interpretation services for their parents to understand what is happening with their child's education and the changes to school structure during COVID.
- **Shireen Salti:** Geography is so important when understanding refugees' needs. For example, I visited Yellowknife and met with Syrian refugees who did not have access to other Syrians. The culture shock layered with pre-migration trauma and marginalization in isolation creates a new type of post-migration trauma. We need to think about where we put refugees when we bring them to Canada and the role that this plays in their access to settlement services, their access to social capital, and their opportunities for advocacy.
 - **Dr. John Carlaw:** There might be civil society organizations in Fort McMurray – local schools or religious institutions – who can help with some resettlement issues such as a need for technology or winter coats. Even having a media story saying that you are experiencing these issues can be really effective because it does not cost people a lot of money to help. I suggest that you be very specific about what you need if you decide to go through the media though because some people take this as an opportunity to clear out their closet.
 - The audience requested more information about how refugee students at York University helped other refugee students in their social integration:
 - **Dr. John Carlaw:** A key part of the WUSK model is university students being leaders of the sponsorship and integration of refugees. Many of the refugee students who come to Canada actually take on prominent roles in WUSK initiatives providing support to other refugee students. It is a peer-to-peer model so students help each other and make contributions to their communities by meeting people at the airport, showing them how to buy books, etc.
 - The audience was asked to comment on how in a reimagination of refugee resettlement the political participation and civic engagement of refugees can be ensured.
 - **Shireen Salti:** Most institutions expect refugees to understand voting and to be politically engaged, but when people arrive, they are worried about basic necessities and also often come from a place with no background in democracy where it is dangerous to be engaged. For these refugees it takes a long time to want to be engaged. Refugees contribute in all aspects of civic society whether through trying to give back, refugees supporting one another (e.g. hiring one another), and this speaks to their sense of community. Political participation is often studied in the literature without any understanding of the political context from which newcomers are coming. The best approach is to simply ask refugees what they need. Integration will only prevail if we spend time not only lauding our accomplishments but also humbly acknowledging areas of failure and ensuring that we work to address these.

- **Rania Younes:** We have seen a lot of very positive cases during Syrian resettlement of how some newcomers who used to have roles with the UNHCR and other social organizations have been given contracts to work with settlement agencies. Many also initiated enterprises like newcomer kitchens and choirs. They were newcomers themselves and took on the responsibility of helping others. They often had some sort of social work background and were able to relate to and understand the experiences of refugees because they were themselves refugees. We need to make sure we understand the value of their contribution in helping their communities resettle. There are so many ways we can go in reimagining the settlement system, but one is that there should be more of a collaboration between civil society and government. Many smaller communities are very welcoming, but isolation is a huge factor which must be considered. We need to think of models of communities. Taking refugees in batches for example and saying that we as a community will help you settle. We also need to address our stigma against the word refugee. Only when we break it down will we be able to imagine a better system.
- **Beverly Tjarera:** We need to ask refugees what they want. Regardless of what we understand about refugees' understanding of political participation, they may have a different perspective.
- **Dr. Faida Abu-Ghazaleh (Resource Centre Coordinator, Centre for Refugee Studies, York University):** With first-generation refugees, voting is potentially not part of their culture, but I have found it is very different with the second-generation or children who grew up here – they are very involved in politics. Sense of belonging is also a very tricky concept that is not easy to define. Some will say that they belong to Canada but ultimately feel like they belong more to their previous country. Some first-generation newcomers have a more hybrid sense of belonging.