

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

Refugee Resettlement and Integration in Canada Series – Summary of Session 6

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 sixth session of the series took place on February 26th, 2021 and featured three speakers, including Dr. Idil Atak, Associate Professor within the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Arts' Criminology Department and Director of the Criminology and Social Justice graduate program at Ryerson University; Dr. Jennifer M. Hyndman, Professor in the Department of Geography and the Department of Social Science and past Director of the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University where she is Resident Scholar; and Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou, Canada Excellence Research Chair (CERC) in Migration and Integration and Professor of Sociology at Ryerson University. The session was moderated by Sohail Shahidnia, a PhD student in Policy Studies at Ryerson University.

Summary of responses by Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou (paraphrased)

- Following 1989, European countries seemed to switch from intense xenophilia to intense xenophobia overnight. Dr. Triandafyllidou became interested in understanding how racism could so quickly manifest, the social justice implications of increasing migration at the time, and the obligation to defend those more vulnerable for the benefit of civil society.
- In Europe, most countries do not have resettlement programs, apart from Norway and Sweden, which have significant resettlement programs comparative to their size. The situation at Roxham Road in Quebec is the exception in Canada but is the rule in Europe. For this reason, the general public in European countries thinks all refugees are asylum seekers and does not know the difference between them, though they are more familiar with the term 'refugee' than 'asylum seeker' (which is more of a technical term).
- Globally, people differentiate between migrants and refugees and do not have a good understanding that motivations for migration can be mixed, and that people can be fleeing both economic hardship and political persecution or violence at the same time.
- Settlement agencies do not exist in the same way in Europe. Even countries that are significant migrant destinations do not have a proactive immigration policy forecasting the need to settle migrants to the same degree as Canada. There is a fluctuation of pressures limiting the possibility of planning in relation to incoming migration. The pressure of refugee acceptance and their situation fluctuates in relation to what

happens in other world regions. In the case of Syrian migration, it was difficult to anticipate that flows would become as massive as they did, because migrants began to move further away from home as the conflict protracted, but this happened gradually.

- What European countries do have are civil society organizations providing support for both migrants and asylum seekers and not necessarily distinguishing between the two in any specific way. Some organizations are more similar to Canada's heritage organizations – supporting cultural needs; general integration; as well as family, children, and educational support; and there are other organizations supporting more vulnerable migrants who are less accepted.
- Different countries have different models of engagement with migrants based on their different models of funding. Religious organizations have a steadier presence because they always have significant networks of volunteers, but other organizations rise and fall in relation to funding. Some organizations have structured funding while others do not. The lack of structural support for NGOs in some parts of Europe also limits possibilities for advocacy.
- During more recent increases in refugee flows, significant funding has been released, creating an important surge of aid and job opportunities in this field, and in certain countries, the political economy of reception in their border areas made up for the loss of tourism, preventing mass protest. However, this effect is largely deflating, with significant repercussions for NGOs and support for refugees in general.
- The initial wave of solidarity quickly turned sour (within ~6 months) and there was a lot of debates about refugees, with politicians saying, 'if you want to help them, take them to your home.' Canada has stepped up in this regard. However, generally people in Europe think that the sponsors in Canada are family members of the person who is a refugee. The origin of this belief is likely due to how details about the Alan Kurdi story were covered.
- When the so-called 'Iron Curtain' fell and communism imploded, a lot of people voted with their feet, leaving their countries and heading to countries in southern and western Europe. Particularly with regard to Albanians going to Italy, the term 'economic refugee' was coined. This is a contradiction; however, though people were leaving their countries for economic reasons, it was felt that their hardships were such that they were refugees. Usually in Europe there is no nuance to the understanding of refugees: they either are, or they are not. In Canada, there is the notion that if you are a refugee you have been vetted and verified, but in Europe this up for discussion, and people ask, "are they true refugees?"
- Limited refugee flows to Canada make it is easy to be generous to refugees in Canada, but it is more difficult to be generous in Europe. Conversely, it is also easy to be indifferent to refugees in Canada, but in Europe you need to take sides.
- "Moral panic" was a term coined in the UK in the late 80s/early 90s to describe the reaction of the media and the government in relation to refugees and notions of 'fake' or 'bogus' asylum seekers (i.e. who is deserving and not deserving, asylum seekers as a threat, the securitization of migration and securitization of humanitarianism).
- The media has a major role to play in the politicization of refugees. Because people are not experts and do not want to become experts, they rely on the media.

- Leadership is also very important in determining what is legitimized as an acceptable behaviour. For example, in September 2014, over 200 people died in a shipwreck South of Sicily, and this created a wave of sympathy for refugees amongst the Italian people. The Italian government took the opportunity to engage in a discourse privileging the notion of solidarity. Statistically speaking, the chances of drowning are significantly high between Libya and Italy, so the government sent search and rescue teams to meet the refugees. When baited with cost analyses of how much was being spent on refugees versus Italian citizens, the government refused to engage and said that they would not sit and watch while people were drowning.
- Governments often use military vocabulary to speak about refugees (e.g. “the refugee is the enemy”), however, people are in desperate situations thinking they will be able to go through the border. Of course, there is misinformation, but it is necessary to try to humanize the whole thing.
- National identity is interactive, and populations selectively take elements of identity to justify their views and politics. For example, Greek identity is very ethnic – based in a belief of common descent – and not very civic. However, in order to delegitimize migrants coming without papers, the civic element of Greek identity became emphasized. When refugees were framed as ‘people violating our laws,’ suddenly being a good citizen was a quintessential aspect of Greek national identity.
- The way certain issues are presented and framed makes a big difference in determining what is seen as acceptable behaviour and what is not. Often, governments’ statements and rhetoric are addressing what they think the citizens want to hear, while on the ground their policies may be different, because they realize that support is needed. This is not to say that this is always the case or that citizens are bad and governments are good, only that even when governments’ may have a level of awareness that something needs to be done, their statements often reflect a degree of hypocrisy and double standards dictated by citizens’ assumed concerns.

Summary of responses by Dr. Jennifer M. Hyndman (paraphrased)

- During employment with CARE Canada and UNHCR, Dr. Hyndman became more aware of the differences between ‘locals,’ ‘nationals,’ ‘refugees,’ and ‘internationals,’ and came to understand that we need critical refugee studies looking at the operations and practices on the ground. We cannot afford to lose the UNHCR’s protection mandate, however imperfect it might be, but we also need to build on gaps and be attentive to issues. Dr. Hyndman came into this work with equal parts criticism and desire to make it better through constructive application of knowledge.
- Like agencies in Europe, Canadian settlement agencies are very highly tied to funding; however, one big difference between the Canadian and European contexts is that in Canada organizations are contracted by the government to deliver services to refugees. People are often quick to say sponsorship is better or that settlement agencies are better, but there are advantages to both. We need settlement agencies but also organizations like Canadian Council for Refugees, Canadian Council of Churches, Amnesty International – all three of which are currently in court taking the government to task over whether the Safe Third Country Agreement is even legal. It is really important to have all manner of independent civil society organizations at an

arm's length from government because those funded by government are often so dependent on government that they cannot be critical and do not want to bite the hand that feeds.

- The notion of cold-water geography: Because Canada is surrounded by 3 big oceans, it is hard to just land in Canada and make asylum claims. As a result, we can control asylum, and therefore plan for settlement.
- In the language of the international refugee regime resettlement is a “durable solution,” but it is a strategy and a decision made by people who are displaced. Maybe they will eventually return, but right now they need education, healthcare, housing, etc. We need to undo the notion of resettlement as necessarily an end state.
- Two ways of framing sponsorship: The first is as unprecedented civil society mobilization over four decades during which time people have been brought to Canada through the personal, voluntary support of private citizens. The other is public-private sponsorship in which the government says, ‘yes, this person is a refugee, and meets the selection criteria,’ and then civil society steps in and says, ‘we can support a family.’ Both framings are about human rights, social justice, humanitarian obligations, etc. When speaking with sponsors we frequently hear references to social justice – broad wrongs, human rights violations, and how to do something about it at a local level. Then the most hidden group of sponsors is refugees themselves who speak about wanting to help those left behind.
- Motivations of sponsors: one of the key reported reasons for sponsorship is because sponsors see assisting other refugees as an ethical thing to do. Also, some sponsors do it because they themselves were sponsored as refugees before. However, the power dynamics of needing to be reliant on someone else for a year and avoiding ‘parentalism’ in sponsorship is tricky to navigate. More than 80% of sponsors are over 55 years old and sponsors are generally women. IRCC recently put out a call looking to increase the capacity of sponsors. People are getting tired and sensitive, especially with increased reporting requirements.
- The difference between refugees and asylum seekers is important: when you can plan, select, and bring in controlled numbers of people and provide support for them before they even arrive, it is a completely different equation. The term ‘asylum seeker’ is rarely used in Canada (recently it is ‘irregular arrival’). The pitting of asylum seekers versus refugees needs to be viewed critically.
- The notion of ‘competing nationalisms’ is militarized. Refugees being cast as a threat (i.e. they do not check the box) is part of a tacitly White but nationalist discourse that existed in the previous government (Harper’s Conservative government). This government also commissioned research to see if people from diaspora regions (in this case defined as ‘conflicted areas’) coming to Canada imported conflict. Such research is steeped in white nationalist defensiveness. We need to examine our own projects in Canada critically.
- No matter whether people are walking across the border, arriving by boat, etc., it is as if Canadians are stuck on this notion that they need to be invited, and the punishments for those who come uninvited are harsh (e.g. detention for children).

Summary of responses by Dr. Idil Atak (paraphrased)

- While working with the Turkish government, Dr. Atak began to see that undocumented migrants and asylum seekers were among the most marginalized populations in the world – criminalized, excluded, and having their rights violated. This trend has continued over the past decades. Dr. Atak became interested in teaching and awareness raising about the criminalization of migrants as part of a resistance strategy challenging these trends.
- One of the most pressing issues in Canada is access to justice. Despite the fact that we are geographically protected compared to Europe, and we receive a smaller amount of asylum seekers, there has been a proliferation of responsibility sharing mechanisms, which are actually burden sharing mechanisms, in Canada. Such mechanisms prevent asylum seekers from accessing justice, partly because they portray asylum seekers as issues. The Safe Third Country Agreement is the perfect illustration. It is currently debated before the Federal Court of Appeal, and last year the Court ruled that the agreement is unconstitutional because it violates section 7 of the Rights of Asylum Seekers. The Federal Court has also said that Canadian authorities cannot evade their responsibility to asylum seekers through detention and refoulement practices.
- Another mechanism is the 2019 change in the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act in which asylum seekers who come to Canada and who have previously applied for refugee status in countries with which Canada has an information sharing agreement are automatically ineligible. Their claim will not be referred to the Immigration and Refugee Board.
- Another trend is the exchange of biometric data as a tool of asylum management and border management. It is worrisome that Canada refers more and more to ‘migration diplomacy.’ This term is frequently used in the implementation of the two migration compacts (migration and refugees), whereby Canada helps other countries to combat irregular migration, migrant smuggling, defend borders, strengthen border controls, etc. This term is problematic in terms of access to asylum. This and other terms (e.g. ‘capacity building’) seem positive and neutral but beneath is an effort to contain asylum seekers in their countries of origin and in transit countries and evade responsibility and international obligations to asylum seekers.
- We have seen more repressive policies adopted in the refugee system in Canada with the arrival of refugees since 2009. One example is Designated Foreign Nationals (DFN) which is part of the Immigration and Refugees Protection Act. These are individuals who are designated by the Minister of Citizenship and Immigration to have come into Canada in ‘groups’ with the help of smugglers. There is a list of repressive policies against such individuals in Canada, including mandatory detention for those aged 16+, despite the Charter. The Trudeau government did not get rid of these policies. And in general, there have been some harsh policies under Harper’s government regarding asylum seekers that Trudeau’s government has not undone.
- After the election of Donald Trump, there was a spike in irregular border crossings between the US and Canada. Due to the Safe Third Country Agreement, which would have those arriving at official ports of entry immediately sent back, many asylum seekers went between the official ports of entry and crossed illegally so that they would

be allowed in. In response to a number of surveys showing declining support for refugees at the time, measures were taken to strengthen the border and manage these crossings. However, such policies paradoxically created a sense of crisis, leading people to think that the government had lost control of the situation at the border.

Discussion (paraphrased)

- Question by Dr. Mehrunissa Ali: *Is the paternalistic attitude of private sponsors toward Syrian refugees due to colonial history and/or due to socio-economic and class differences?*
 - Dr. Jennifer M. Hyndman: The answer is both yes and no. Yes, in terms of newcomers coming to Canada – a White settler society – where they are pressured to be socially included and be part of it. In other words, ‘you newcomers are on the home team and let us White settlers show you the way to integrate to the society.’ I am not advocating that sponsors act like parents, but I will say that there is a lot of awareness of this dynamic, and sponsors want to try to sponsor refugees on their terms. No, because it is a settler state: newcomers are more welcome to the country than in places such as Germany where such notions do not exist. Yes, the settler state is a colonial construct, but it also leaves room for openness to newcomers, so it is a double-edged sword. Sponsors are also generally people of the middle-upper income class, and a lot of people who wanted to sponsor someone did not have the money necessary to do so, so we need to think carefully.
- Question by Dr. Mehrunissa Ali: *Do we have reliable figures for how many private sponsors sponsored ‘strangers’ versus friends and relatives?*
 - Dr. Jennifer M. Hyndman: No, and one type of sponsorship is not better. When family members are being sponsored, they still need to meet the criteria of a refugee, so it is not like family reunification. There was a language ushered in that we need to assist the most vulnerable – which in practise means those who are UNHCR recognized – but we should assist both. Not everyone can access the UNHCR, so family linkages can fill these gaps. Also, often cannot afford to sponsor family, so it ends up being strangers sponsoring their family members, or a group of five mixture. We do not want to pit categories and labels against one another.
- Dr. John Carlaw: *If you were disposed to try to tease it out somewhat, how much of the Liberal government’s more recent troubling directions re: border crossings from the USA would you (or wouldn’t you) attribute to pressure from the right, as the Conservatives’ discourses were highly reactionary (of course not forgetting the Liberals brought us the STCA originally)?*
- Question by Dr. Corey Robinson: *Talking about migration diplomacy and capacity building, in your view, is there convergence or divergence when it comes to Canada and the EU’s approach to migration diplomacy and externalizing migration management via migration diplomacy? For example, when it comes to working with intergovernmental organizations and ‘source’ and ‘transit countries.’*

- Dr. Idil Atak: The pressure from Conservatives on the Liberal's response must be considered when it comes to the issues at the border. Pressure from the right could be a factor in the Liberal government's response certainly, because they do not want to look too lenient, but when it comes to the Safe Third Country Agreement, for both Conservatives and Liberals, it is very risky to claim that the US is not a safe country. So certainly, such diplomatic relations play a role in the responses of our government. The Liberals' record in terms of asylum policy is disappointing – it is good for resettled refugees, but any asylum developments are only thanks to Court judgements and audits and not a result of the government's will to make a positive change.
- Dr. Anna Triandafyllidou: Political leadership is important – even if not perfect – but I often worry that we risk speaking to the converted all of the time and risk being completely detached from the lay person. I am torn between advocating for the highest principle and not wanting to risk burning a bridge by engaging because it is those who differ the most in opinion who we need to reach. The government makes decisions relationally. For instance, when it comes to US-Canada relations, the diplomacy between Trudeau and Trump was a factor in government decisions in Canada. Of course, it depends how the other country is doing and how you as a country want to present yourself and your stance on immigration issues, but, for instance, a lot of policies are the result of Canada trying to distance itself from US over last few years. Politicians sometimes need to take difficult stances, but we need to decide where the red line is. I believe that there are some things that are not fully in line with international law but which can be acceptable under certain circumstances, but some things are not.
- Question by Dr. John Carlaw: *Do you have any ideas of how we might promote the principle of additionality (and maybe more GARs) in refugee resettlement more effectively? Should we call for something such as a matching principle (e.g. GARs matching PSRs) and lifting of sponsorship caps? The CCR has called for 20,000 GARs a year, but we're a long way off of that.*
- Question by Dr. John Shields: *The points raised about civil society are very important but there is another argument that private sponsorship in some respects can be about the government not fully taking up its responsibility and shifting this on to private actors (a rather neoliberal approach, especially interesting in IRCC's call for increasing private capacity). I am very aware this is complicated, but I wonder if you can address this dimension of private sponsorship.*
 - Dr. Jennifer M. Hyndman: How the number of privately sponsored refugees now seriously exceeds government sponsored is quite unheard of, because government sponsored have always exceeded private. As for the notion of this being neoliberal, I have been wary of this argument until recently. Sponsorship is a community practice – a decision by civil society members to do something, whatever the reason. However, we need to be aware that sponsors are feeling burnt out. The recent call for private sponsorship capacity building from IRCC is a sign of privatization. BVOR can be improved, for example if BVOR folded into government assisted, but we do not want to burn through the program, run out of sponsors, and leave people skeptical, and I do see that happening, so we need to be careful about getting the balance right.

- General roundtable question: *In a reimagination of refugee and asylum seekers settlement and other rights in Canada, how can we ensure their voice is heard? How can we ensure the participation of refugees and asylum seekers in civic and democratic activities in Canada?*
 - Dr. Jennifer M. Hyndman: There are groups in Canada that need to be represented in global forums – e.g. “nothing about us without us” – but we also need to be careful not to essentialize and label people as refugees for the rest of their lives. We do not want to reify the refugee label too much.
 - Dr. John Shields: This is where voice organizations come in – particularly ethno-racial organizations serving immigrants and refugees which can really magnify the voices of the groups they are working with on the ground. However, during COVID-19, such organizations are the ones under much more intense pressure because of their loss of funding and volunteers.
 - Dr. Usha George: We need to hear from refugees while they are settling. Research is often too retrospective, learning about refugees’ needs only after they have been overcome. Feedback is important at the time when they are trying to settle and integrate so that institutional structures can be modified. Whether the structures really get modified is a different question, but we need to hear those voices at the right time.
 - Dr. Idil Atak: Undocumented migrants’ voices are rarely heard. There are some sanctuary city initiatives recognizing the precarious situation of undocumented migrants, but we need to work more with undocumented migrants and push for regularization programs.
 - Dr. Mehrunissa Ali: We need an opening of the economy to acknowledge the skills refugees are bringing in. There are barriers in regulated professions but there are also barriers in low-skill professions which we do not talk about so much.