

Introduction

Refugee Reception and Integration: Best Practices

Marzia Ali

The recent international conference in Sweden on the reception and integration of resettled refugees was a key event. It provided an opportunity for participants to have a broad and collective perspective on issues related to integration. Integration has a fundamental role in rebuilding lives in the host society. For many years, host communities have not practised the view that integration is a two-way process. Traditionally integration has been about the adaptation of refugees and newcomers to the norms and the values of the host society. This represents a very narrow perspective as it fails to focus on the adaptation of the host society to the norms and values of refugees and newcomers. It has been demonstrated very clearly in most of the articles in this publication that host communities play a critical role in determining whether refugees and newcomers will become full participating members of their new communities or whether they will remain on the margins.

There is a very strong link between the long-term stability of the host societies and the sense of belonging that refugees and newcomers experience. Belonging is personal and subjective; however, at the same time it is socially constructed. The host communities have the challenge of building civil and hospitable societies where rights are respected and differences are recognized and affirmed. This is what leads us to celebrate diversity and create a sense of belonging. Refugees and newcomers contribute in many ways to their host communities. Unless we find ways to acknowledge and incorporate their contributions, we cannot expect them to call the host community “home.” In many ways the challenge of integration becomes not only theirs but ours as well.

Four articles in this issue address these themes related to refugee reception and integration. Deborah DeWinter’s piece gives an overview of the recent international conference on the issue held in Sweden, and the process resulting in the adoption

of fifteen *Principles* to guide successful integration programs for resettled refugees. Elizabeth Ferris’s article explores global trends, such as restrictive governmental policies, xenophobia, and racism, and questions of citizenship and identity, which impact on the receptivity of communities to refugees and migrants. Jeff Chenoweth and Laura Burdick’s piece discusses the needs of and challenges faced by refugee elders in the resettlement process, recommending creative program design to ensure that their dignity and vitality are strengthened through reception integration. Finally, in her article on the integration of Guatemalan refugees in Mexico, Edith Kauffer Michel explores the complex dynamics involved in the resettlement process, as “ex-refugees move towards becoming “new immigrants,” settled and politically integrated in the host state. Collectively, these four contributions highlight the two-way nature of reception and integration, and the creation of belonging which is so essential to the successful integration process.

Marzia Ali is currently Program Coordinator for Action Réfugiés in Montréal, Canada. She has a Masters Degree in social work from McGill University. Her previous experience includes co-chairing a working group on Overseas Protection and Sponsorship at the Canadian Council for Refugees; work with battered refugee and immigrant women; and work with UNHCR New Delhi and Turkmenistan in the area of refugee resettlement. Ms. Ali was also involved in the planning of the International Conference on the Reception and Integration of Resettled Refugees.
