

Building Hospitable Communities

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Abstract

Receiving communities play a critical role in determining whether refugees and other migrants will become full participating members of their host societies or whether they will remain on the margins. This paper reviews global trends which impact the receptivity of communities to refugees and migrants, including the growing public debate on migration, increasingly restrictive governmental policies, xenophobia and racism, public confusion, and increasing questions of citizenship and identity. This is followed by an examination of the roles played by national and local governments, the media, and civil society in creating communities which welcome newcomers, affirm diversity, and encourage full participation of all who live there.

Résumé

Les communautés d'accueil jouent un rôle crucial qui décide si les réfugiés et autres migrants deviennent des membres à part entière de leurs sociétés hôtes ou s'ils restent marginalisés. Cet article passe en revue les tendances globales qui influent sur le degré de réceptivité des communautés vis-à-vis des réfugiés et des migrants, y compris les débats publics croissants sur l'immigration, les politiques gouvernementales de plus en plus restrictives, la xénophobie et le racisme, la confusion du grand public et le questionnement grandissant sur la question de citoyenneté et d'identité. Suit ensuite un examen des rôles que jouent les gouvernements, tant au niveau national que local, les médias et la société civile pour que soient bâties des communautés qui soient accueillantes envers les nouveaux venus, qui célèbrent la diversité et encouragent la pleine participation de tous ceux qui y vivent.

Most countries in today's world are multicultural, multi-ethnic and multireligious societies. While there are variations, of course, in the number and role of foreign-born in a society, it is hard to think of a single country in which there is but one ethnic or national group. Sometimes these differences are a source of dynamism and national pride. Sometimes the differences are a source of conflict which, as we have seen too often, can even lead to war. The way in which communities respond to newcomers largely determines whether refugees and other migrants will become full participating members of their host societies or whether they will remain on the margins.

The challenge of building, nurturing, and sustaining communities which welcome newcomers is an important means to affirm diversity, to encourage full participation of all citizens, and to resolve conflicts within societies. Such hospitable communities facilitate integration of refugees, whether they come through resettlement programs or as asylum seekers. Refugees are not a homogeneous group; they bring resources and skills that can contribute to their host societies, but they also have specific needs. Like almost all migrants, they arrive in societies where they will be seen, in many ways, as outsiders. However, the issue of how refugees will fit into their new host societies is central not only to their own well-being, but also to the well-being and long-term stability of the host societies.

The need to create hospitable communities raises questions which go to the heart of our own societies. How do we recognize and affirm differences? How do we enable individuals from different cultures, religions, contexts, languages, and life experiences to live together? How willing are those in the "receiving community" to change their ways of living in order to create communities where all feel comfortable, valued, and affirmed? What are the mechanisms that exist within a host society that can help to resolve conflicts between different groups?

Hospitality means more than being a good host or making guests feel welcome.

Hospitality means incorporating newcomers into a community in ways that give them virtual parity with 'old timers' in terms of the social and economic benefits that the community provides. Hospitality empowers newcomers to behave as if they belonged.¹

Volunteers working to support refugee resettlement often report that they have themselves been enriched and changed because of the experience. And as Richard Parkins points out, volunteers in the host community often become advocates on behalf of refugees as a result of becoming aware of the situation in which refugees find themselves.

Different countries do, of course, have different traditions, histories, and experiences which shape their receptivity to newcomers and their ability to create and sustain hospitable communities. Generalizations are always difficult, but nonetheless it may be useful to examine several important trends which seem to be widely experienced.

Growing public debate about immigration. The issue of international migration has become a salient political issue in all regions of the world. Heated political debates about how many immigrants a society can sustain, about the political effects of immigration, and about national identity itself are taking place not only in Europe, Australia, and North America, but also in South Africa, Malaysia, Japan, and Lebanon (to name only a few examples). In some countries, such as Germany, special parliamentary immigration committees have been set up to review these questions. In others, such as Switzerland, national referenda have been held on the acceptable percentage of foreigners in the country. In the public debate about migration, however, important differences between refugees, asylum seekers and other categories of migrants may be ignored.

Increasingly restrictive policies. Governments in many countries are making it more difficult for migrants to enter their territories by implementing increased border patrols, restrictive entrance and visa requirements, and airline sanctions. Many governments are also turning back would-be asylum seekers and detaining those who manage to arrive, in efforts to deter future arrivals. As Rachel Reilly points out, "[u]nlike most other areas of human rights where it is possible to chart progress over the last decades, states have largely regressed in their commitment towards protecting refugees over the past fifty years."²

As the criteria and opportunities for legal immigration have become more restrictive, international human smuggling networks have sprung up to meet the demands of people, very often under appalling conditions, seeking to cross borders outside the law. The nature of these often high profile arrivals of large numbers of asylum seekers can often give rise to

xenophobic popular reactions on the part of the receiving countries' populations. In many cases, migrants who cross borders with the assistance of these traffickers are doubly victimized. Often cheated by the traffickers, the migrants lead a precarious life of exploitation while living underground or are deported by governments when they are caught. The outcry against human trafficking and undocumented migration very often spills over to resettled refugees who arrive with the full support of their host governments.

Rising xenophobia and racism. There are reports of increasing xenophobia and racial violence from most regions of the world. According to a victim survey undertaken in 1996–97, eighteen per cent of the immigrants questioned in Finland reported that they had been victims of a serious crime.³ Politicians sometimes seem to stoke the fires of xenophobic hatred. Most dramatically perhaps, President Lansana Conte of Guinea announced in September 2000 that the border would be closed to Sierra Leonean refugees and launched an appeal to his countrymen to rid the country of the foreigners. Among other inflammatory statements, he charged that UNHCR was not neutral in this situation. Armed gangs sought out refugees, attacking camps and rounding up foreigners in the towns. An unknown number were killed; looting, beatings, and rapes were widespread. One UNHCR staff member was killed, another kidnapped. Hundreds of thousands of Sierra Leonean refugees are now trying to return to their still-dangerous country because they cannot feel safe in exile.

Expressions of racism and xenophobia are particularly traumatic for refugees and asylum seekers who have undergone torture and persecution.

Racial prejudice reinforces feelings of isolation, shame and guilt and therefore perpetuates the survivors' struggle and preserves the intended goal of persecutory regimes. Racial taunts or trends towards racially prejudiced social policies can reinforce fear and feelings of worthlessness. Where racial prejudice results in verbal and physical acts of violence, any sense of security and safety is undermined.⁴

While expressions of racism and xenophobia can thus have a devastating effect on refugees themselves, they also serve to reinforce attitudes within the community which exclude those who are different. A society which tolerates racist and xenophobic stereotyping may be opening the doors to other negative stereotyping directed, for example, towards those who are physically or mentally challenged or have different sexual orientations.

Governments must be mindful that policies designed to assist newcomers to integrate into their new host societies may have the unintended effect of giving rise to latent xenophobic and racist elements in society. One example is the case of Sweden which experienced significant outbreaks of racially motivated violence due to the perception that resettled refugees in that country were receiving a “better deal” than mainstream Swedes collecting financial assistance from the government. The perpetrators of xenophobic and racist violence rarely distinguish between resettled refugees, asylum seekers and other types of migrants.

Public confusion. Popular misperceptions or confusion about the different types of migrants can also be a source of problems. Most ordinary citizens do not differentiate between refugees and migrants. As one NGO worker in Romania said:

Ninety-nine per cent of Romanians don't know the difference between refugees and migrants. Romanians have always migrated to other countries and people here don't understand why foreigners are coming to our country.⁵

Some political groups may blur the difference between refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants. In Australia, asylum seekers arriving without proper documentation are routinely referred to as “illegals” and “queue-jumpers,” contributing to a climate where asylum seekers are seen by many as criminals rather than as people in need of assistance and welcome.

Hate groups tend to lump all foreign-born together on the basis of racial or religious categories. Reports of racist riots in Madrid in March 2000 said residents screamed “death to the Roma” and then went hunting for foreigners after allegations that several Roma had beaten up a sixteen-year-old youth.⁶ While there are now many Romani migrants throughout Europe, the Roma people have been in Europe for six hundred years.

Tension between ethnic groups. In some traditional immigration countries, the arrival of new refugee or immigrant groups has provoked tensions with other ethnic groups, including refugees or immigrants who arrived earlier. In the United States, for example, there have sometimes been difficult relations between African-American communities and Vietnamese refugees. In addition, refugees and immigrants bring with them their own prejudices and stereotypes, which may further contribute to difficulties in relations with other groups, including immigrants and minorities, in societies.

Questions of identity. In countries which do not consider themselves countries of immigration, the presence of many people of different cultures, languages, and religions raises questions about citizenship and national identity. There are now more Muslims than Methodists in Great Britain. In Nor-

dic countries, national identity and religious identity were often linked; being a member of the Church of Sweden went along with being Swedish. Although that formal relationship has now changed, the question of national identity remains. What holds a nation together if its inhabitants speak different languages, practice different religions, and come from different backgrounds?

Creating Communities Which Value Diversity

We live in a world where migration is increasing and will continue to increase in the future. If this migration is to be a positive contribution to our societies, then we need ways to recognize and appreciate differences. National political leaders can contribute to creating a climate where differences are affirmed, but much of the essential work of building hospitable communities has to be done at the local level—where people live, work, worship, and go to school.

Governments

Governmental authorities at various levels are important actors in confronting xenophobia and in creating hospitable communities. At the national level, laws prohibiting discrimination and providing for rapid naturalization may have a direct impact on the way that refugees and migrants are perceived by their host communities. The existence of a legal framework which prohibits discrimination and racist behavior is important. While many governments have such laws on their books, some governments are going beyond the legal framework to emphasize not only that racism and xenophobia will not be tolerated, but that communities should adopt proactive policies of welcoming new arrivals. Thus in Ireland, the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform is currently involved in a major information campaign to promote awareness and acceptance of diversity aimed at both the receiving community and new arrivals. In recent years, the Canadian government has initiated integration promotion campaigns focussing on themes such as “Canada, we all belong” and “Welcome home.”

Most refugee advocates see citizenship as an important stage in the process of refugee integration. Governmental requirements for citizenship send a clear message to refugees and migrants about the way their participation in society is viewed. The amount of time that a resettled refugee must live in a host country before obtaining citizenship varies from two (e.g. Australia) to seven years (e.g. Denmark.) Most countries require some knowledge of the political, historical, and geographical details of the resettlement country and some degree of fluency in their official language.⁷ In countries

which have not traditionally viewed themselves as immigration countries, requirements for citizenship can be complex and lengthy.

Decisions about placement of resettled refugees may have a long-term impact on the building of hospitable communities. For example, in Finland, efforts are made to avoid resettling groups that are experiencing conflicts with each other in their home countries in the same areas. Among the factors governments consider in placing refugees, along with such characteristics as availability of affordable housing, is the receptivity of the community to refugees and immigrants. In many countries, refugees are placed in large urban areas where there are significant refugee communities which can facilitate their initial reception. Placement of refugees in small towns or rural areas may lead to refugees feeling isolated and to their eventual migration to cities where they feel that they will be more comfortable.

At the same time, however, there are many examples of small, ethnically homogenous communities which have been far more welcoming of refugees than large ethnically diverse cities; these communities have not only welcomed refugees but have been transformed in the process. The experience of resettled refugees in U.S. states such as North Dakota and Iowa, states which twenty years ago were relatively homogenous, suggests that decisions about refugee placement must take a host of factors into account.

National policies toward provision of services to refugees and migrants are often crucial, not only to the integration of refugees, but also to the public's perceptions of refugees. Policies which support language training, affordable housing, job placement, vocational training, education, and access to health care and to other social benefits all make a difference to the way in which refugees integrate into society and to the way in which they are perceived by the public.

A particularly difficult and important issue is the recognition of credentials of migrants and refugees. Migrants are often unable to obtain recognition of their credentials and resort to employment in low-skilled and low-paid fields.

This situation often leads to a decline in the self-esteem of refugees themselves as well as the mistaken assumption on the part of the host community that refugees are not well educated and lack important skills that would allow them to make a significant contribution to the host country's economy. This can foster pre-existing stereotypes that refugees are limited in their capacities to contribute economically to their host countries and represent a drain on the social security system.⁸

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles has recommended that a system of recognition of previous experience and qualifications should be set up at the EU level. This should

establish EU-wide verification and assessment criteria and a set of recommended practices for bridging gaps between refugee qualifications' levels and industry or education standards in countries of durable asylum.⁹

Governments can also play an important role in providing information about new arrivals to host communities. In Norway and Denmark, efforts have been made to pass on to local communities the selection mission's first-hand information on refugees prior to arrival.

Likewise in Iceland, volunteer support families in the receiving communities are provided with background information about the refugees as well as courses in psychological first aid. These families help orient the refugees and teach them about life in their new community.¹⁰

It is at the local level where most refugees encounter public officials and their experiences with teachers, police, health officials, and other public workers will have an impact on whether they feel welcomed into the community. In some countries, service providers, churches, and other NGOs have worked with local police authorities to raise their awareness of the reasons refugees are resettled in host countries and about conditions back home. Sensitization of public workers in all domains to the specific needs and cultures of refugees and migrants can be an important component in communities that welcome newcomers and embrace differences. In Greece, as in many other countries, churches and NGOs looked at the needs of refugees and migrants and decided that an important task was to work with the police to raise their awareness about why people were coming to Greece and about conditions back home.

Pindie Stephen reports that in Minnesota, U.S., where large numbers of Somali refugees ultimately resettle, some public schools have introduced "halal" cafeterias that respect traditional Islamic food preparation requirements. Many employers, schools, and universities have gone beyond simply respecting Muslims' right to pray by creating areas at the workplace where their employees can put down their prayer rugs and take five-minute "prayer breaks."¹¹ In making these changes, the public and private sectors can themselves be changed by acquiring a more open and more global worldview.

The Media

Many commentators have reflected on the difference in public reaction towards the Kosovar Albanian refugees in April–June 1999 and towards other groups of refugees and asylum seekers arriving from other countries. The outpouring of public support and sympathy for the

Kosovar Albanians was undoubtedly due in large part to the media attention to the conflict in the region. Communities understood why people were fleeing their country and were anxious to help. In other situations, the reasons for refugee flight are less well known. Although statistical data are lacking, it seems that communities are more responsive to refugees and migrants when they understand the reasons for their flight. In this respect,

...the media can play an important role in preparing receiving communities through human interest stories and reporting on international events. The media can help to remind people that before they were forced into exile, refugees had full lives with respectable places in their own societies and that it is important they find a place in their new society in order to regain their dignity and respect as quickly as possible.¹²

Too often, however, the media play a role in adding to public confusion. Reports of illegal immigration, falsified documents, and smugglers are often seen as more newsworthy than stories about refugees who have worked hard to build new lives for themselves. Moreover, as Tom Denton explains, the media mirror the community from which they spring and their attitudes reflect the community's values. Some governments and NGOs have had a positive response in working with the media by educating them about who is arriving in the communities and why.

While countries that have resettled refugees or received immigrants for a long time have generally found a positive climate toward refugees, the situation is more difficult with asylum seekers. Refugee resettlement programs are implemented by governments and are, by and large, orderly and planned processes. Refugees arrive according to a particular schedule, based on specific procedural requirements. Asylum seekers, on the other hand, simply show up on a border or are apprehended by police forces for living illegally in the community. People in the community frequently don't understand why they have come to their country; efforts by the government or the media to portray them as criminals can contribute to public indifference or hostility.

Civil Society

In some countries there is an immigrant tradition, a long history of successful refugee resettlement and a network of experienced service providers. But many countries, whether they have a long immigration tradition or only a few recently arrived immigrants, have civil society organizations that can be helpful in creating hospitable communities. Churches and other faith communities, ethnocultural and migrants' associations, trade unions, educational institutions, and social and economic associations all have a role to play in creating envi-

ronments where migrants and refugees feel affirmed and welcomed. In South Africa, civil society organizations organized a campaign to "say no to xenophobia" by holding up positive examples of the contributions which immigrants are making to South Africa. In Canada, civil society organizations and government have used different means to recognize and highlight the many positive contributions immigrants are making to that country through sponsoring award programs and scholarships such as the Calgary Immigrant Aid Society's "Immigrants of Distinction" awards and the Provincial Government of Manitoba's immigrant entrepreneur award program.

In order to become self-sufficient, refugees need to find employment. The sensitivity of employers to the special needs and resources of refugees can be a crucial factor, not only in the refugees' integration into their new society, but in the way in which the community receives them.

In addition to one's own individual work ethic, work mores are often culturally bound; and within the place of employment, there are also particular "corporate cultures." So it is not surprising that, given this variety of conflict ethics, cultural diversity issues can fast become cultural clashes.¹³

When the community perceives that refugees are working hard, that they are self-sufficient and not draining taxpayer dollars in social services, community receptivity increases. Working with employers to ensure sensitivity to refugee needs and understanding of cultural differences can thus have long-term benefits. In the United States, for example, employers working with Muslim employees have had to learn the rules of religious accommodation in terms of such practices as the wearing of a headdress (hijab), ritual foot washing, and hand-shaking across gender prohibitions.¹⁴

Non-governmental organizations are crucial providers of services during the initial weeks and months after arrival and many governments administer their refugee assistance programs through NGOs. NGOs often provide a full spectrum of services, from counselling of torture trauma victims to language training to advocacy on their behalf. In some countries, NGOs rely on large numbers of volunteers to support refugees in their integration process. Volunteers often develop lasting friendships with refugees, a process which not only aids their integration into society, but also represents a constituency of refugee supporters, which is particularly important in countries where there is a popular backlash against immigrants and refugees. In countries where services are delivered almost exclusively through gov-

ernmental institutions, refugees may feel isolated from the larger community. They may not have the opportunity to meet “ordinary” people, beyond the officials who are charged with assisting them.¹⁵ This bureaucratization of immigration is more apparent for resettled refugees than for asylum seekers who generally do not receive the same level of services as resettled refugees. In countries which offer private sponsorship, such as Canada, opportunities seem to be greater for refugee interaction with the broader community.

While NGOs and governmental agencies provide important services, “this assistance may be limited to the first few months after their arrival. Consequently, resettled refugees have to find—or develop—support networks to assist them in accessing essential services and adjusting to the rhythm of life in their new homelands.”¹⁶ Many refugees have friends and relatives in the host country who can serve as interpreters, child-care providers, and advisers on the myriad details involved in starting a new life. In many places, refugees and asylum seekers often turn to their own communities and ethnic-based associations which have been established to support the community. These ethnic-based associations, which may receive support from governments, vary in nature from large, multi-service agencies to small political associations of a particular ethnic group. Refugee groups and ethnocultural organizations can be important actors, not only in affirming their own cultural identity and serving as bridges to the host society, but also in playing important roles when conflicts emerge. But ethnic-based networks are often susceptible to the larger economic and political developments taking place both in the host country and in the newcomers’ home of origin.¹⁷ Moreover, people coming from the same region or country may not necessarily view themselves as kin of the cultural group to which they might be assigned by those unaware of deeply held differences among subsets of a larger refugee group.¹⁸

Hospitable communities do not just proclaim wonderful concepts on a general level, but they engage in the countless details and discussions which translate these concepts into reality. These differences and conflicts are often manifest in seemingly petty details, which, if left unresolved, can lead to tension and escalate into hostility or separation. For example, a study conducted by Church World Service (U.S.)¹⁹ sought to identify why some churches had vibrant multicultural communities while others were unsuccessful. Among the obstacles to hospitable communities were issues such as “different concepts of time and punctuality” and “unpleasant odors from ‘their’ food.” It wasn’t possible to create an inclusive, mutually accepting community until these sorts of every day issues were discussed and resolved. The study also found that non-threatening “easy” activities such as organizing cultural evenings with food and music from different groups often led to deeper

discussions about cultural differences and to communities of mutual understanding and support.

Building hospitable communities is not an easy task. Open, honest encounters between people of different backgrounds can lead to painful soul-searching on all sides. It can be painful for people who think of themselves as tolerant and open to discover their own racist or xenophobic feelings. It can be hard for feminists to truly understand why women from other cultures do not have career aspirations. It can be difficult for those in positions of power to share that power with immigrant or refugee groups—particularly when those groups decide they want to do things differently. But even though it is difficult, the process of building hospitable communities is often a self-revealing and even transformative process for those who participate openly and honestly in it. Democratic societies are strengthened by the existence of hospitable inclusive communities that affirm and appreciate cultural differences. Ultimately, these are the key components of strong democratic, open, and tolerant societies.

Notes

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