

Changing how we measure success in resettlement

Justin S Lee, Suzie S Weng and Sarah Ivory

Refugees should be treated not as poor, traumatised foreigners but as strong and capable people who can be resources in their countries of resettlement.

While it is evident why resettlement countries are interested in the self-reliance of refugees, these are not necessarily the same benchmarks of success against which refugees measure themselves. By investing in understanding more about how refugees define their own success, we can improve our capacity to evaluate and adapt programmes intended to support refugees in their transition into permanent resettlement. Furthermore, by reframing our definition of what makes an outcome successful, we have the opportunity to build on the strengths of the refugees themselves, and to improve our capacity to demonstrate not just a reduction in the perceived burden on receiving communities but also the value that resettled refugees can add.

Nearly all of the 15 permanently resettled refugees interviewed on the subject of how individuals define their own success reported that they measure

success not by their individual economic self-sufficiency but by their ability to ‘give back’ to their communities and to maintain a connectedness to their culture of origin. Though this finding does not necessarily reflect the sentiments of all refugees, it does offer insight into important gaps between how receiving countries measure success (through employment statistics) versus how those receiving services in these countries measure success.

Supporting resilience

Resilience is often cited as the main determining characteristic for successful integration into a new community and, in that context, is often seen as a characteristic required of the individual alone. However, if resilience is “...the capacity of individuals to access resources that enhance their well-being and the capacity of their physical and social ecologies to make those resources

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available in meaningful ways...¹ it also requires a resettlement country to share the responsibility for the level of success that a refugee community achieves by ensuring that opportunities and resources exist which support long-term success.

For example, the United States (US), the world's largest resettlement country, evaluates programmes almost entirely based on a single outcome – rapid early employment. This can be effective in demonstrating financial self-sufficiency and elimination of public dependency; however, this alone does not guarantee that the foundation is set for resilience and long-term success. Imagine asking not just “what is the minimum qualification for success?” but instead, “how do refugees define their own success, and what impact does this have on our community?” Asking these questions might, for example, highlight instances in which stepping stones provided by receiving communities to achieve short-term success serve as stumbling blocks for longer-term positive results. For example, finding employment within the first three to four months in a new place might achieve immediate self-sufficiency but upon further investigation we might find that it limits refugees' access to language training – training that might have far more added benefit in the long term for potential upward mobility in the job market.

Strengths-based perspective

Resettlement countries that are able to recognise the inherent assets and capabilities that refugees have developed through their own personal experience and who use this information to design programmes that bolster rather than restrict these talents will benefit most.

Although, at the level of bureaucratic systems, infusing policy with a person-centred strengths perspective is a daunting prospect, it is much less so at the practitioner level. At this level it is already happening but is not well supported or accounted for in the outcomes. One example is that of a young refugee who had come to the US as an unaccompanied refugee minor. His

caseworker recognised the young man's capacity for leadership and his passion for helping others in the programme; with her help, the young man started a support group for newly resettled unaccompanied minors. This blossomed into a valuable venue where young refugees could support one another, share practical knowledge, develop personal relationships and begin to heal their sense of community and belonging. In this instance, the resettlement agency was able to support an environment in which the refugee's strengths could be shared with his community in a meaningful way. Had the case worker focused only on that individual's deficits and trauma, this outcome would not have been possible.

Giving back

When host countries measure the success of resettlement only in terms of economic self-sufficiency, a great resource is being overlooked – the drive and dedication of resettled refugees to give back to their communities, countries and cultures of origin. Some of the resettled refugees volunteered with a resettlement agency, some sent money home to relatives still in refugee camps, and some started service and non-profit organisations that have an impact on thousands of displaced people globally. So important was the commitment to ‘giving back’ that they described it as a major motivating factor for gaining an education and achieving a high-paying job.

It is clear that newcomers who achieve their potential as measured against their own definitions of success have positive contributions to make in their resettlement communities and further afield. Effectively leveraging this potential, however, requires receiving countries to create environments in which resilience is nourished and strengths are recognised.

One thing that receiving countries can do to support this is to expand the benchmarks by which we measure success in the first place. New measurements that take into account a broader spectrum of successful integration would provide opportunities to demonstrate the positive impact of refugee

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September 2015

resettlement to the communities that receive them. This could in turn increase support and resources aimed at improving those outcomes and thus supporting programmes that improve the environments into which we receive refugees. Ultimately, this would create a positive feedback loop that would make resettlement programmes stronger and more sustainable over time.

1. Ungar M (2008) 'Resilience Across Cultures', *British Journal of Social Work*, Volume 38. <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/38/2/218.full>

Justin S Lee jslee4@uncg.edu

Assistant Professor of Social Work, University of North Carolina at Greensboro www.uncg.edu

Suzie S Weng s.weng@unf.edu

Assistant Professor of Social Work, University of North Florida www.unf.edu/

Sarah Ivory sivory@cwsglobal.org

Regional Director for US Programs, Church World Service www.cwsglobal.org/