

Resettlement and livelihoods innovation in the US

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Conversations with multiple stakeholders in the US help to highlight barriers to economic self-sufficiency for resettled refugees and opportunities for innovative approaches.

The US has admitted over 2.5 million refugees for permanent resettlement since 1975. Its goal has always been for them to achieve economic self-sufficiency in the most expedient manner, under the assumption that legal entry into the workforce would provide refugees with dignity and sustainable livelihoods. But despite the US having some of the world's most liberal work rights, many refugees have been living in poverty for long periods of time, never acquiring the health care, language skills, market access or human capital to become self-sufficient.

The Forced Migration Innovation Project at Southern Methodist University is investigating the long-term outcomes of those who have been in the US for more than 20 years in order to better understand where the constraints and opportunities lie, from the points of view of all stakeholders involved

in livelihoods.¹ Whereas humanitarian innovation calls for including 'user' or refugee opinions in the process of problem solving, our participatory approach falls more in line with facilitating an exchange of knowledge between stakeholders, and then drawing on those conversations for collaborative livelihoods design and implementation. Below are the primary barriers to refugees obtaining sustainable livelihoods in the US as seen by the stakeholders, and the implications for potential innovation solutions.

The view of the service provider: Service providers in our research lament the fact that they are required to get as many refugees as possible into work within 180 days, which allows little time to focus on the quality or appropriateness of the jobs. Because renewal of agency funding depends on numbers into work, service providers lack incentive

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to draw out refugees' potential, often pressurising them to take low-paid jobs.

The view of the private sector: Mainstream job training programmes within the private sector often do not include refugees, who lack job-appropriate language and educational skills. There is also misunderstanding within the business community about who is a refugee, their rights to work, and the standing of credentials earned abroad.

The view of the receiving society: Refugees are strongly perceived to be passive recipients of help, and their contributions to the host societies often go unnoticed. They are also widely assumed by the general public to fit better into the lowest paid jobs, regardless of their educational backgrounds or the skills they bring from before they became refugees. One significant challenge in resettlement is that the host community is largely unaware of the diversity and complexity of refugee economies.

The view of the refugees: By and large, the refugee population sees that learning the language, and gaining skills and entrepreneurial training is the quickest path to a living wage. However, because government support ends after just a few months in the country, they are forced to take jobs at minimum wage to survive rather than develop skills for the long term. The barriers they face to gaining vocational skills include limited access to training, lack of language proficiency, course fees, limited time, and unreliable access to child care and transportation.

However, in listening to refugees we uncovered a more complex picture. Firstly, many characterised a 'good job' as one that paid enough money for them to survive rather than a career path that offered substantial growth opportunities. Secondly, recently resettled refugees tend to think of themselves as having no marketable skills even when this was not entirely the case. Many Burmese refugees whom we interviewed were reluctant to inform caseworkers about particular job skills, because they felt that without

being able to speak English, they would not be able to utilise those skills in a job. Additionally, many did not think their skills would be transferable in the US market.

The view of the state: In the current anti-immigration climate it is difficult to secure support for immigrant-specific programmes or funding to enable immigrants to access mainstream services. Policy debates over raising minimum wages to living wages are undermined by assumptions that those working these jobs are transient, temporary workers who do not rely on that income for a living.

Innovative solutions

Examples of innovative solutions that seek to enhance refugee livelihoods include partnerships with the private sector and policymakers. The Holt Bread Kitchen, for instance, is a business started by an American master baker with a passion for social justice. This group works to increase the economic security of refugee women by providing artisan baking and culinary business skills that lead to jobs in the higher paying specialty food industry. This programme works because it is sensitive to refugee women's pre-flight skills, market demands, and the need to earn a living wage.

Many among the Ethiopian community in Dallas use easy-to-find jobs at convenience stores with managerial programmes, for example, as a training ground for business management skills. "We have dreams of opening our own businesses but we need to learn the [market] system here first." Better understanding of this strategy – used in the absence of affordable entrepreneurial training – could help shape possible future collaborations with companies willing to offer programmes for refugees. Small business administration classes designed for refugees could also help orient newcomers toward loan opportunities and the skills that would facilitate entrepreneurship. Resettlement agencies could consider building more partnerships with businesses that pay living wages, provide on-the-job training, offer

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distinct career development opportunities, or scholarships to online universities.

Capturing the enabling environments for sustainable livelihoods from each of the stakeholders holds promise beyond the US. For example, what if skill training programmes for multinational corporations could begin in protracted situations? Not only would it prepare those bound for resettlement for living-wage jobs but it could simultaneously train a skilled overseas workforce that could

open up new potential markets for the private sector. In this way we propose an expanded relationship between refugees, resettlement states, humanitarian actors and the private sector in livelihood innovation.

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1. Thanks to MaryBeth Chrostowsky, Lydia Rodriguez, Sergio Lopez and Carrie Perkins for their contribution to this article.