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Extra-regional refugee resettlement in South America: the Palestinian experience

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South American countries have been increasingly opening their doors to resettle extra-regional refugees. One of the most visible initiatives was the resettlement of Palestinian refugees in Chile and Brazil during 2007 and 2008.

The Humanitarian Resettlement Programme for extra-regional refugees built on the Solidarity Resettlement Programme that emerged from the 2004 Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action. The Solidarity Resettlement Programme was designed for refugees in need of protection within the region, and the later Humanitarian Resettlement Programme reflected a desire to extend the scope of this South-South cooperation and to enhance the role of the region in international refugee response and protection.

Chile and Brazil each received more than 100 Palestinian refugees, who had been living in protracted situations in refugee camps on the border between Iraq and Syria and in the Jordanian desert. Although the number was small in comparison with the intake of traditional resettlement countries, the programme raised great interest and significant funding, and triggered the establishment of a network of civil society organisations, local municipalities and private actors that supported the initiative. Research undertaken between 2012 and 2014 explored the refugees' experiences of integration in both countries.¹

Managing expectations

One of the main dimensions affecting the Palestinians' resettlement experience in both countries was the tension that developed between refugees and the organisations involved in resettlement, as a result of what they identified as 'unfulfilled expectations'.² Expectations were created by refugees and by the resettlement organisations alike. Common expectations among Palestinian refugees in both countries related to having their immediate needs covered, socio-

economic stability, the learning and use of a new language, better access to naturalisation, and opportunities for family reunification. Expectations were created from the moment they received resettlement information, whether they were in their first country of asylum or in their refugee camp at the time. In Brazil more than 70% of Palestinian refugees surveyed stated that the country did not meet their expectations, while in Chile over 50% of refugees had similar perceptions.

"They told me, 'Look, there in Brazil you are going to study Portuguese, you will find a house, you will have a job, everything.' And nothing [was accomplished]." (Mahfoud, Brazil)³

"Here it is different from what I thought it would be. I thought that in this country I would have a good situation and that I could live well... that you could work and have everything. But when we arrived, finding a job was difficult and we worked so much for very little money." (Rahal, Chile)

Nacira, a Palestinian refugee in Brazil, stressed that if the resettlement organisations had provided accurate information from the beginning the refugees could have made a more informed decision. The interview 'missions' (visits by officials from the country offering resettlement) and the information provided at the refugee camp or at the first country of asylum are clearly pivotal in this. In the case of Palestinians who came to Brazil, there was no mission and it was left to staff of UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, in Jordan to provide the information. In the case of Chile, a mission with government officials, UNHCR and the implementing NGO's representatives went to the Al-Tanf camp but they did not have translators who knew both the language and

the Chilean context, so accurate explanations and descriptions proved difficult.

Both countries have since improved their communication with refugees who are considering resettlement, by translating some key documents into different languages and by providing written information about the programme for use during the missions. In 2014, UNHCR and its implementing partners in Brazil published a booklet for refugees in Brazil.⁴ This includes sections in Portuguese, English, French, Spanish and Arabic, providing basic information about the rights and obligations of refugees, how to obtain or renew documentation, how to apply for permanent residence, where to find answers to specific questions and a list of useful contacts, including the contact details of all organisations involved in refugee reception. Chile had created a similar booklet with practical information about the country for Colombian refugees. Both countries also held group events with refugees in order to evaluate the programme.

Through interviews it became clear that those administering the resettlement programmes in both countries also developed a set of expectations based on the understanding of 'self-sufficiency' as refugees' capacity to reach economic stability and independence, whereas the refugees viewed self-sufficiency as a combination of economic autonomy and agency over their own resettlement process. When refugees complained or raised the issue of 'unfulfilled promises', some members of the organisations involved referred to them as 'ungrateful'⁵ and as having a 'refugee mentality' from years of having been assisted.

Belonging here and there

Another cross-cutting theme emerging from interviews with Palestinian refugees was that their sense of belonging was divided between two or more locations. For instance, participants emphasised how language was a key dimension affecting their integration experience. The acquisition of Spanish or Portuguese in the host country represented the first form of 'membership' sought by most of the resettled refugees.

At the same time, Palestinian refugees highlighted that use of their language of origin was important in order to preserve their identity and as an element of intimacy within the home or where communities got together. It was also important in maintaining relationships with family members and friends displaced elsewhere.

"It is very important to speak Arabic inside the house, so the children don't lose it. We talk to our children about the Qur'an and what it says. We also teach them about our language and they learn little by little." (Zoheir, Chile)

In the country of resettlement, learning the local language served different purposes. For some refugees, learning the language allowed them to make friends and build relationships, while for others language was necessary for finding jobs, accessing services and avoiding marginalisation. Refugees criticised how the language classes were delivered, the poor quality of the material and the lack of a methodology specific to the refugees' needs.

Naturalisation and access to rights

In both countries, refugees' experiences of integration were framed by the legal status that resettled refugees received upon arrival. According to most of them, the immediate regularisation of their status allowed them and their children to access health and education (primary and secondary) like any other citizen in Chile and Brazil. However, refugees also spoke of those rights which they could not access because of their temporary status or because their situation was not known to local service providers. Some of these restrictions included access to pensions, housing and higher education subsidies. Lack of access was particularly acute in Brazil. In Chile, refugee status granted to resettled individuals and their families guarantees permanent residence; in Brazil, however, refugees are granted a two-year temporary visa, which can then be renewed for another two years, before they are eligible to apply for permanent residence. Despite the initial difficulties, both countries have since made improvements in these areas. For instance, Chile has enabled

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all Palestinian refugees to obtain housing subsidies without requiring five years of permanent residence. In Brazil, meanwhile, a recent decision of the Federal Supreme Court states that foreigners are eligible to receive the state pension even without naturalisation.

The question of naturalisation – as a form of identity and to allow mobility – affects Palestinian refugees in particular. According to Palestinian refugees in both countries, naturalisation was one of the promises made when they received the offer of resettlement.

“For me it is a dream to have a nationality, because now I am 50 years old and I have been a refugee all my life. I don’t have a recognised nationality, no passport. It is very difficult.” (Hafid, Chile)

In Chile, Palestinian refugees – with the support of some politicians and civil society – demanded that the government support their request for naturalisation. By June 2015, 65 adult Palestinians had obtained Chilean passports, and by a year later 45 children and adolescents had received naturalisation. Children born in Chile are automatically recognised as nationals. Brazil, meanwhile, has been less supportive of providing naturalisation, with only one family in the process of obtaining naturalisation when interviewed back in 2014. Until recently, refugees could apply for naturalisation after four years of permanent residency in Brazil (that is, after a total of eight years, when temporary residence is taken into account).

Conclusion

There are clearly recommendations to draw from the above: better information provided in their own language of origin for refugees considering resettlement, improved language teaching provision in the countries offering resettlement, and a greater appreciation of the importance of legal rights such as access to naturalisation. Exploring refugees’ experiences enables the limitations of the programme – and the refugees’ desire for greater agency – to be better understood and recognised, in order to enable further policy development.

South America – and indeed the whole of the Latin America and Caribbean region

– is committed to demonstrating solidarity with international humanitarian crises through the implementation of resettlement, as stated in the Brazil Declaration and Plan of Action.⁶ The understanding of the experiences of extra-regional resettlement is key to success in this endeavour. While Chile is getting ready to receive 60 Syrian refugees from Lebanon at the end of 2017, Brazil is discussing how to move forward with their own resettlement programme to support unaccompanied children affected by the Syrian conflict. This programme will complement the humanitarian visas that Brazil has been granting to Syrian refugees since 2013. Argentina has also implemented humanitarian visas for Syrian refugees since 2014 and is now developing a private sponsorship resettlement programme. Uruguay was the first country to resettle Syrian refugees, facing several challenges during its implementation.⁷ The extra-regional efforts of the sub-region are now mainly focused on supporting Syrian refugees. Learning from previous resettlement experiences, like the one of Palestinian refugees in Chile and Brazil, could contribute to the better planning and implementation of resettlement.

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1. This comprised 80 interviews (including with refugees, government officers, UNHCR and implementing agencies), 86 surveys and participant observation. The research, that included Palestinian and Colombian refugees, was supported by CONICYT and fieldwork grants from RGS-IBG Slawson Award, SLAS and SIID.

2. See also: Vera Espinoza M (forthcoming 2018) ‘The Politics of Resettlement: Expectations and unfulfilled promises in Chile and Brazil’ in Garnier A, Lyra Jubilut L and Bergtora Sandvik K (Eds) *Refugee Resettlement: Power, Politics and Humanitarian Governance*. New York: Berghahn Books.

3. The names of all refugees interviewed have been changed.

4. UNHCR (2014) *Booklet for Asylum Seekers in Brazil*
<http://bit.ly/ACNUR-Cartilha-Brasil>

5. See Moulin C (2012) ‘Ungrateful subjects? Refugee protest and the logic of gratitude’ in Nyers P and Rygiel K (Eds) *Citizenship, Migrant Activism and the Politics of Movement*, pp54-72.

6. www.acnur.org/t3/fileadmin/Documentos/BDL/2014/9865.pdf

7. See article in this issue by Raquel Rodriguez Camejo.