

East African refugees adapting to life in the UK

Samuel Bekalo

This article reflects on the first-hand life experiences of refugees of East/Horn of Africa origin on arrival in the UK. The experiences – some of which could be seen as humorous or sad – may be informative and relevant for other practitioners.

In recent years an increasing number of African refugee community groups have 'settled' in large UK cities and towns far away from the capital, London. This is in part due to the government's introduction of a dispersal system for new asylum seekers across the UK and in part due to shortage of accommodation in the capital. These African refugees and asylum seekers arrived in the UK having fled political and religious persecution as well as prolonged war in their countries of origins. The challenges they face include the complex issue of adjusting to the local culture and economic norms. Let us take a look at few examples of such refugees' initial UK life experiences.

"On my first train journey in the UK, on my way to my dispersal place from my Home Office interview, wearing suit and tie I borrowed from a friend, I ended up sitting in First Class. The other carriages were packed and when I spotted a nice carriage with plenty of seats and fewer people, I sat there comfortably, wondering why other people standing in the other carriages did not do the same. On top of having a comfortable seat, I was offered free drinks and snacks without charge. In fact, I helped myself twice... Then I started chatting with the man sitting across from me in broken English, wondering about and appreciating the comfortable train of my 'adopted' country and the free treats.

Until the train conductor arrived, everything was fine and I was happy. When I showed the ticket to the conductor, he told me that I was in the wrong place and added that either I pay the full First Class fare or leave the carriage. The passenger who was chatting with me, also dressed in full suit and tie like me, burst into laughter. I think the passenger and the conductor might have thought that I was loaded because of my borrowed suit, not realising that I am a confused penniless new asylum seeker, although I had a respected high-earning business in my country before I fled due to fear of government persecution. The remaining journey after that was not quite the same."
(45-year-old male refugee)

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that most refugees came from a country where the authorities are often arbitrary and brutal, some also initially show suspicion and reluctance to seek or receive help from the UK law enforcement authorities as the following rare incident illustrates.

"We were being attacked out of the blue whilst walking near our house by people we did not know. They were shouting at us in fast English for no apparent reason. Luckily, we were spared from a full assault by passers-by, who were also white like those attacking us. Yet they stood up for us and chased the attackers away and called an ambulance. They also explained the situation to the police in our support even though they didn't know us.

However, when the police came to our house next day to ask us about the incident, we were terrified. We thought they would

ask us for our papers and deport us back. In particular, when they offered us a free drink and brought us a free lawyer at the station, we became suspicious again. To our surprise, they were polite and did not bother us much except checking our records with the Home office and taking our statements."
(Three adult male refugees)

The new refugees also face the complex issue of adjusting to the new socio-cultural norms. In particular, adapting to the relatively liberal and progressive British culture appears to be tricky. One interesting observation is the difficulty of adjusting to changing gender status and family relations. The following discussion I had with refugee families during their children's birthday party gives some insights into this.

"You see, when we come to this country the status of the husband and wife automatically changes. Men, who have had a good education and respectable job in our countries, suddenly find themselves jobless, confined to the house or doing small manual jobs. On the other hand, women who have had little or no job opportunity back home find cleaning or casual restaurant jobs. They are at least in a better position than us (men) here.

On top of this, some of our women go too far and too fast and they start nagging their husbands to look after babies all day long and to change nappy and all that stuff. When they go to college and workplaces, they mix with those women of this country called feminists. Then they think that all British men do all the domestic stuff for their wives, although some of the local men we know here behave exactly like our men back home – they don't even know how to cook proper food as some of us do. We think there are misconceptions and exaggerated expectations amongst some of our community members as to how husband and wife and family function in this country."

Those who attempt to maintain the traditional status quo risk collisions with the new reality, which in rare cases result in family breakdown and in more serious tragedy. Those who make sensible adjustments to embrace the new reality and the positive aspects of the liberal UK tradition are managing to navigate through these additional life changes.

Same-sex relationships have also been another 'shocking' experience to the new refugee community groups. I note below one couple's reaction.

"Once we got lost and ended up in a Gay Parade which was near the coach station. Being new to the country and the city, we had no clue of what was going on and could not even tell who were the men and who were the women, as their make-up and costumes were deceptive. All looked women to us. My wife, who speaks better English than I, approached a passer-by woman (turned out to be a man from closer look and his voice) to direct us to the coach station. At this point, my wife could not conceal her reaction of surprise and shock... Yet, to our surprise,

we found the gay man and his friends to be extremely polite and helpful. They patiently directed us all the way to the coach station. In our continent, let alone acting in street like this, even in private places, gay people would be in serious trouble. But, then again, this is a different, free country. It is good to know gay people are helpful but to be honest it will take us a while to properly get used to the whole idea of same-sex relationship."

Even getting used to packed supermarket food can be a challenge for the first-timers, particularly to those who came from rural farming communities. Remarkably, in spite of initial challenges and numerous setbacks, refugee community members adapt to the new situations and some even thrive and positively contribute to the wider community much more quickly than one might anticipate. But how?

Coping and support mechanisms

Among the most important and unassailable assets are close family/community cultural bonds and strong work discipline and faith. The refugee community groups tend to live in close proximity for comfort and mutual support to dull the teething problems of new settlement. At this stage, social interaction and leisure are often restricted to visiting friends in each other's accommodation. On the one hand, their accommodation becomes the main site for socialising; on the other hand, it also becomes a place of exclusion and isolation, particularly when dispersal housing is located in deprived areas and hostile environments.

In the recent tough economic climate of budget cuts and dwindling mainstream support services, charitable organisations and local British volunteers often step in to support disadvantaged groups such as refugees. Encouragingly, the refugees also organise themselves into formal community and faith support groups. Faith groups, in collaboration with local churches, play a key role in lifting the spirits of the newly arrived refugees battered by the odyssey of their journeys and the challenges of the new world. Although it is difficult to quantify the contribution of the faith/church groups, they appear to be more sustainable than other formal groups of refugees. As to how and why this is the case, however, is another matter which requires more time and careful analysis.

The largely fair UK governance and support system (including appeal procedures) have been crucial for these refugees' ability to settle. Given that they came from troubled countries in terms of the lack of respect for human rights and peace, they recognise and appreciate the freedom, peace and tranquillity of the UK. Their own innate courtesy and their adopted country's respect of the rule of law encourage members of these refugee communities to stay out of trouble and aspire to move forward.

The young African refugee communities are already leaving their indelible footprints across many UK cities' and towns' socio-cultural and economic landscape. Less

than a decade ago, vibrant African food and culture were non-existent outside London, especially far up in the North. Both in the good and bad economic times, they have contributed significantly to the local labour market, including working unsociable hours, during holidays and especially at the lower end of the skills market where needs are often great. They have also contributed – and are proud of doing so – in professional capacities and in job-creating entrepreneurial activities. The Somalis and Ethiopians, for example, are noted for establishing small businesses such as restaurants and money transfer internet cafes. One can only hope that the young and ambitious African refugee communities will continue to offer a unique added contribution to multicultural Britain.

This discussion, however, would be incomplete without touching on the effects of the current global economic climate. Inevitably, the economic slowdown is affecting these refugees, not least because they find it hard to keep or find scarce jobs during the cuts. Once again, they are resorting to their resilience and resourcefulness. With regard to cutting the sky-rocketing cost of energy bills, for example, the words of advice I have overheard might be relevant to others like myself living



As part of a project to encourage inter-community integration, many representatives of the local community took part in a party to celebrate the Ethiopian Millennium 2000 (2007 by the European calendar) in Leeds, UK.

on a tight budget – advice such as not turning on the heater until snow arrives, wrapping up oneself with cheap (but warm) fleece blankets from nose-to-toes and sleeping with a hot water bottle (two recommended for single person). One of the urgent problems which no one has yet come up with a solution is as how to have a hot shower without incurring energy costs. They say there is no shortcut for this. Another critical thing they say there is no shortcut to is learning the English language. It has to be learned one way or another, although the government cutbacks in free English courses since 2007 makes life more difficult for new asylum seekers and refugees. Some manage to access free language courses offered by charitable or faith groups. Some try a sort of self-taught method and advise that:

“Even when one watches TV, you should watch it as work with a dictionary, not just as an entertainment. After an hour, you might get a bit of a headache from concentrating on a telly with a dictionary but if you keep on going you will get used to it. It will pay off eventually. My English became pretty okay after a year or so.”

Refugee communities have come to recognise the strength and limitations of their traditions and those of the UK. By taking the best of the two cultures, they are paving a future path for themselves and their children. Accommodating and supporting the struggle and the ambitions of the new refugee community groups seem to me to be central to achieving progressive social cohesion. As one refugee puts it, such inclusion needs to go beyond the jazzy corporate shows of poetry and cultural shows. What is more important is to quickly and adequately address the initial, crucial cultural challenges; this could be done by employing multilingual and multiculturally-oriented members from within the refugee communities. Lastly, it would be both interesting and instructive to periodically revisit and reflect on the experience of these young African refugee communities.

Samuel Bekalo Samuel@aye90.freeseve.co.uk is a freelance research fellow/educationalist and a Minority & Refugee Community Development Worker.
www.ein.org.uk/bekalo