

Improving resettlement support for Kosovan refugees in New Zealand

by the Auckland University of Technology Refugee Research Group

UNHCR/LaMoyné

New Zealand is one of a small number of countries accepting regular quotas of refugees mandated by UNHCR.

In 1999, UNHCR appealed for additional assistance for refugees fleeing the political crisis in the Balkans. The Albanian community in New Zealand also asked the government to help with the evacuation of their relatives from war-torn Kosovo. In response, the government agreed to accept Kosovan refugees in addition to its annual quota. Those with relatives in New Zealand were offered permanent residence under a special emergency programme. The Albanian community residing in New Zealand had to make a commitment to act as sponsors for the refugees, organising accommodation and giving resettlement support.¹ The New Zealand offer of permanent residency was accompanied by the option of an assisted return airfare home. (Most other countries offering assistance provided only temporary protection, with refugees sent back — sometimes forcibly — to Kosovo after the war.²)

On arrival, the refugees attended a short government-funded programme

which included English language classes, life in New Zealand orientation, health care and counselling, a resettlement grant for purchase of furniture and household necessities, a loan to cover bonds for rental accommodation, and automatic entitlement to an emergency unemployment benefit. The government also provided funding to assist local schools to provide special English teaching for Kosovan children and advice and support for their teachers.

Public interest was high when the first group arrived in Auckland. The Kosovans were greeted with great fanfare at the airport, not only by friends and relatives in the local Albanian community but also by the Prime Minister and other ministers, members of parliament, local dignitaries, Maori tribal representatives and a host of journalists. The media coverage also generated a generous community response. Donations, such as electrical goods, teddy bears, bedding and clothing, flooded in for

these first arrivals.³ The degree of public compassion for and interest in the Kosovan refugees, however, diminished with subsequent arrivals, mirroring the diminution of media attention.

Researchers examining the effectiveness of the reception programme interviewed refugees between six and twelve months after their arrival.⁴ The accounts which emerged highlight the difficulties of cultural adjustment and the factors which have helped overcome the barriers to acculturation.

Problems of cultural adjustment

Difficulties of cultural adjustment reflected the high levels of stress and emotion associated with living through a war, arriving in a new country and being reunited with family. In addition, the change in status from independent, professional, home-owning citizen to unemployed tenant refugee unfamiliar with the language made adjustment to life in New Zealand more problematic.

Arrival in New Zealand was an emotional time for the refugees. They were thrilled to be reunited with

Kosovan refugees, 1999



friends and family and there was an overwhelming sense of relief at being away from the traumas of war:

"I came to a new place where you saw no weapons, no army... I felt I could breathe... it was a psychological relief, my dream was being fulfilled — light and beauty on all sides."

However, for some, the welcome itself was rather traumatic; the strangeness of the place made them anxious and they were aware of themselves generating curiosity "like rare animals in a cage":

"The first thing that offended me was the presence of TV cameras and journalists that took pictures of us... They should have given us time to prepare ourselves psychologically... because at that very moment... you are not any more you. You are just a refugee, nothing else."

Despite anxieties associated with the move to a new country, expectations had been that the Kosovan refugees would fit relatively easily into New Zealand society. They shared a

European heritage with the majority of the host population and came from a developed country where home ownership was common. A significant proportion of the refugees was highly educated and came from professional occupations.⁵ At the time of their interviews, however, most of them were still unemployed, living in rental accommodation and dependent on the government for financial support. Although the children had settled relatively easily into their schools, the adults had much more difficulty in adjusting to life in New Zealand:

"Life is going on out there without you. You are and are not in New Zealand. You have to be more connected to the people and the community...."

Their self-esteem and identity related to owning their own home:

"It is the tradition of Albanians to feel comfortable in their own house. A house that is his own property. Whether the home is one, two or three stories, or just a cottage, an Albanian feels all right in his own property only."

There was a pride associated with their professional skills:

"We are people that if we were skilful in our profession we were proud of that... So it is very hard when you come with all that experience somewhere, that you need to start from the beginning to show them who you are."

And it was important for them to feel that they were making a contribution to society:

"The people of Kosovo are vital, hard-working, and the feeling of expectation, waiting and being a person who consumes goods created by someone else from the national income is different from the feeling when a person contributes to the creation of the national income."

They also believed that work is important for personal well-being:

"My motto is that no matter how old a person is, he should continue with his work... When a person just sits all the time... then illness, aging and death will reach him earlier."

Kosovan refugee children, New Zealand



They were used to being independent and strong. However, their position as beneficiaries meant that they were unable to be proper role models for their children:

"Children like their parents to be strong. You have to be as an example... You are a mother that cannot find a job, behaving like a beneficiary. This is terrible."

The refugees realised the importance of acquiring the language — *"When you can't speak the language, it is like being deaf."* — and were grateful for the steps taken by the schools to assist their children to settle in. However, they contrasted the way in which their children had advanced in English with their own problems with the language:

"They helped my kids a lot too. They didn't know even one word of English... the teachers were so kind to them. Now my kids speak English very well. And they say to me always: 'Please don't speak English, because you don't know how to.'"

They also saw the connection between their financial situation, their difficulties with learning English and the lack of jobs:

"We have no money because we have no work. We have no work because we do not speak the language. We do not speak the language because the classes have been delayed, and our retraining has been so slow."

Their financial insecurity prevented them from being able to experience aspects of New Zealand culture, or from exploring the country:

"We can't ever go to a movie. I can't mention the theatre. It's impossible to buy a book or a professional magazine. And I can't even think to go to a museum or an art gallery. We are not able to attend cultural events in Auckland, and we can only dream of going to Wellington."

Generally they felt very conscious of their lack of status and a sense of not belonging:

"It is true that we have a physical security here but in our souls we suffer. Most of us while we were in Kosovo used to have a good reputation. This is an issue of dignity. Here no one knows us."

Assistance towards cultural adjustment

There were a number of aspects which the refugees identified as having a positive effect on their resettlement, such as the help given by staff at the schools, the support of their relatives and sponsors, and the efficiency and friendliness of the staff at the reception centre:

"I never thought it would be done so fast... All paperwork was done in one week — community card, bank card, all these things. In one week, we were ready to go to our homes and continue life. All of us had been ill, leaving a war, irregular food, living with NATO supplied lunch parcels, and then in a week we were cooking our own food."

And the orientation programme provided proved very useful:

"The orientation programme... was an incredible help to us because it taught you about life in New Zealand, rights and obligations towards the state... It helped us not to make beginners' mistakes."

Suggestions for improvements

We need to listen to the suggestions for improvements in resettlement which the refugees put forward. They include:

- more focus on children and youth support
- loans for purchase of homes
- grants for tradespeople to buy their own tools
- a central system for accessing second-hand goods
- recognition that the right to work is a basic human right
- schemes, with financial incentives, to enable qualified refugees to work in a voluntary capacity to acquire job experience and improve language skills
- greater matching of refugees' work skills with training opportunities
- vocation-related English language training
- an Office of Refugee Research to ensure that improvements to the resettlement process are identified and taken forward

Postscript

For some of the refugees, the challenges of settling in New Zealand were too great and the urge to return home irresistible. In August 2000, 100 returned to Kosovo, taking advantage of the airfare offered by the New Zealand government. Some of the metaphors used by the refugees to describe the difficulties of cultural adjustment describe their feelings very well:

"When I am out of my homeland I feel like a bird in a foreign place."

"If you take a hedgehog out of the bush and put him on the asphalt, after a few seconds he will go back to the bush."

For those who stayed, unemployment remains a significant issue. The refugees' proposals for solutions to some of the problems need to be heard at a level where they will have an impact on effective settlement provisions and policies in New Zealand.

This article was written by a team of researchers at the School of Education and Social Sciences, Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand: Heather Devere, Teuta Kajtazi, Man Hau Liev, Lumi Mazlloom, Keryn McDermott, Qemajl Murati and Jane Verbitsky.
Email: heather.devere@aut.ac.nz

1. New Zealand offered to take 200 families or up to 600 refugees. In all, 404 Kosovans opted to come to New Zealand.

2. Canada, the US and Ireland were exceptions to this.

3. In addition to donations of material goods, many New Zealand communities undertook fundraising for Kosovan refugees both in New Zealand and in the crisis zone itself.

4. For details of the research methodology see Keryn McDermott 'The Evolution of a Cross-Cultural Research Model Appropriate for the Exploration of Refugee Resettlement', paper presented to the New Zealand Action Research Network Conference, 18 September 2000.

5. For example, there were 5 dentists, 7 doctors, 5 nurses, 17 school teachers, 4 university professors, 12 engineers, 4 lawyers, 3 accountants and 2 film directors.