

How refugee community groups support resettlement

G Odessa Gonzalez Benson

Refugee community groups often fill in service gaps after resettlement but remain unrecognised and not fully incorporated in formal resettlement processes.

Very soon after the arrival in the United States (US) of the first Bhutanese refugees in 2008, they began forming small groups in nearly every city to address their community's most pressing needs. The community groups formed out of existing social networks from the bottom up, offering an effective means for broad outreach to the community and reflecting what is perhaps a fundamental drive in migrant communities to come together and to address shared difficulties. The leaders were those with higher education, English proficiency, and existing reputation and work experience, including leadership or teaching roles while in the refugee camps.

Because resettled refugees were often placed in close proximity to each other, it was easy for word to spread about these key individuals and it was relatively easy to reach them to seek assistance. The (unpaid) advice and guidance they provided sought to ease the emotional difficulties in the community's transition. They were also the go-to persons in times of crisis, such as medical emergencies. As a group, they organised informal public discussions, English classes, and celebrations of traditional cultural and religious events.

Locally based, grassroots refugee community groups have long been an integral part of the resettlement process in the US, complementing professional services and filling important gaps, while pursuing actions towards self-determination in other ways. At the official level, nine nationally based non-governmental resettlement agencies are contracted and funded annually by the US federal government's Office of Refugee Resettlement to provide professional services for refugees' transition, basic needs and self-sufficiency in the earliest phases of resettlement. These agencies are consulted by the government in

policy-making and planning resettlement processes, including determining appropriate placement in US cities.

Included – but not fully incorporated

Professional workers in resettlement agencies and leaders of Bhutanese community groups provided similar forms of assistance, particularly in the earliest stages of resettlement, but they differed in terms of legitimacy, resources and support received. Case workers also offered English classes, for example, as part of mandated services. Professional workers, however, often could not meet the diverse and immediate needs of all refugees, given limited resources and high caseloads. Also, federally funded case management services lasted only eight months generally, and only special cases were eligible for additional support. Furthermore, it was especially difficult for case workers who spoke only English to communicate with and assist those Bhutanese refugees who spoke only their native language. The leaders of the Bhutanese community groups thus stepped in to fill these gaps in resettlement agencies' services.

Indeed, resettlement agencies recognised the value of the community groups and their leaders, often hiring them for services and work written into grant-funded projects. Resettlement agencies also often consulted with group leaders to ensure culturally appropriate and effective service delivery and to gain community participation in projects.

Rarely did such employment and consultation evolve into more meaningful partnerships, however. Many Bhutanese community leaders felt they had no voice in planning resettlement and no access to the resources and institutional links available to their counterpart workers at the resettlement

February 2017

www.fmreview.org/resettlement

agencies. Over the years, few community groups gained sufficient technical and financial assistance to be able to strengthen their organisational capacity and there was little room for legitimate incorporation of community groups with resettlement agencies. Ownership of programmes and projects was rarely transferred or shared with community groups, despite their being actively engaged on the ground.

While efforts by Bhutanese community refugee groups complemented professional services in addressing more general social and practical needs, community groups also sought out new ways of attending to specific emergent needs and broader aims. In one city, leaders of the Bhutanese community group worked with a local advocacy group. A large number of Bhutanese families and their children were placed by resettlement agencies in an area that was just outside the zone covered by school bus transportation. Many Bhutanese children had to walk three miles to and from school along a busy road that was deemed unsafe. The community group teamed up with the advocacy group in organising public events, the largest one attended by hundreds of people, to raise awareness about the issue and gain broader public support. As a result, school administrators changed school bus zoning policies to better accommodate the needs of the newcomer families.

In another city, the municipal government emerged as a partner for the Bhutanese group. One of the projects in this case was a farming programme that was widely appreciated by the Bhutanese community, many of whom were traditionally farmers in their home country. Bhutanese were part of the planning and implementation teams along with city workers. As with conventional farm cooperatives, the team secured funding



Bhutanese refugees resettled in the US work in the community gardens they have developed with the help of NGO Citizen D. www.citizend.org

and a plot of land and organised workers and volunteers for planting, harvesting, marketing and administration. The farm not only yielded sufficient produce to sustain a small business but also produced engagement and a sense of ownership among community members.

In a third case, a Bhutanese community group in another city looked internally and then to new partners to address the issue of citizenship for Bhutanese elders. Gaining citizenship is important for political and symbolic inclusion, as well as for the economic stability that such membership offers. However, most elderly Bhutanese do not speak English and cannot pass the language requirements of US citizenship tests, thus remaining without citizenship and ineligible for much-needed public assistance that they would otherwise have received. The mainstream organisations that offered citizenship classes for immigrants did not effectively address the specific language needs of elderly Bhutanese. The community group thus developed its own curriculum and strategies for teaching elderly students, and offered citizenship classes in both Nepali and English taught by volunteer leaders. Community leaders sought out legal and medical experts for guidance and direct

assistance for obtaining waivers to citizenship examinations. Although they aimed not only to resolve individual cases but also to provide more comprehensive solutions, the lack of citizenship for elderly Bhutanese refugees remains a largely unresolved social problem.

Recognition of refugee community groups

These cases show what is possible outside the formal resettlement process, thereby also showing what is missing in the process. Turning to advocacy groups, local government and specialised professionals may usher in new ways of addressing new challenges and of moving beyond merely meeting the most basic requirements of resettlement. Disregarding such community-

led efforts seems to indicate not only a lack of support but an active 'taking from' the community's potential. Perhaps a first step would be recognition of the validity of existing community strategies and capacities, by way of public statements of endorsement and acknowledgement. A second would be to legitimise refugee groups and their services by financially compensating community-based assistance, mandating refugee leaders as part of planning teams, providing technical assistance for capacity building and, importantly, authorising refugee community groups as a formal part of resettlement policy.

G Odessa Gonzalez Benson obenson@uw.edu
Doctoral Candidate, School of Social Work,
University of Washington <http://socialwork.uw.edu>