
Rethinking how success is measured

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Despite the Canadian Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program being praised for integrating refugees into the job market faster than government-assisted refugees, there may be limited cause for celebration.

The application form for Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program asks for the applicant's 'intended occupation', to which the applicant is supposed to answer in half a line what he or she intends to do in Canada. This question is almost always met with a blank look. Most refugees have been living in their host countries for years, where they are either banned from working or only

have access to low-grade jobs. The freedom to choose, the ability to aspire to something different, has been out of reach for years or in some cases has never been in reach at all.

After careful deliberation, one father writes 'accountant' and the mother 'nurse', the professions they held before fleeing their country; for their three-year-old child, they select – with a smile – 'doctor'. What



Ethiopian refugees in Hargeisa, Somalia, attend English language classes in preparation for resettlement to Canada.

is written in that box matters. It matters to the family, of course, and it matters to Canada, which tends to measure the success of resettlement by how quickly refugees become productive members of society.

By making employment, and how quickly it is obtained, the main measure of success in refugee resettlement, we reinforce the notion that refugees are a burden. We are saying that the sooner refugees are able to get a job the better: any job, as long as they are able to meet their basic needs. The experience of refugees previously sponsored to Canada emphasises this point. For example, a report published by the Canadian government established that if privately sponsored refugees tend to seek employment earlier, it is often out of a feeling of necessity!¹ One of the main

reasons cited by refugees is that they fear becoming a burden on their sponsors.

Despite employment being an important stepping-stone to integration, there are risks associated with refugees being pushed into employment too quickly. The report highlights that half the refugee participants surveyed by the government had not had time to engage in language training, mainly because they started working upon arrival. The participants furthermore indicated that the perceived urgency to work prevented them from learning new skills or upgrading their previous skills, and limited their ability to find employment in a field related to their knowledge and skills. It therefore comes as no surprise that, despite having 'successfully resettled' by virtue of having secured employment, these refugees earn much less than the Canadian average for some years after being resettled to Canada.

But, of course, resettlement is first of all about protection. When asked why they want to go to Canada, most refugees are quick to answer that Canada is a peaceful country, a country respectful of human rights and a place where all are treated equally. And protection is where the expectations of Canadians and of resettled refugees converge. Canada is offering a safe home to individuals in need of resettlement, corresponding to refugees' primary concern for short- and long-term safety. Ironically, while many refugees aspire to contribute to Canadian society and their communities, Canada does not actively stimulate the engagement and strengths of newly arrived refugees.

Canada's refugee resettlement programme stems from humanitarian considerations,

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whereby refugees are selected based on their protection needs over their language skills, education level or overall ability to integrate. Canada does not expect resettled refugees to become the country's greatest contributors but neither does it sufficiently recognise refugees' respective strengths and experiences. Instead of solely trying to demonstrate the reduction of the financial burden on Canada, we must also consider and build on the myriad dimensions in

which the strengths and experiences of resettled refugees contribute to our society.

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1. Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2007) *Summative Evaluation of the Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program*
www.cic.gc.ca/ENGLISH/resources/evaluation/psrp/psrp-summary.asp

