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Refugee resettlement and activism in New Zealand

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From 2013 the Doing Our Bit campaign has been calling for New Zealand to double its refugee quota from 750 places to 1,500.

Until Canada's recent intake of Syrian refugees, New Zealand was the only country in the world that received more refugees through a UNHCR resettlement system than through asylum seeker applications. To make up for the fact that only 300 asylum applications are made every year, New Zealand seeks to do its fair share through a quota system. The limited number of 'quota refugees' welcomed into a population is based not on the claims made by asylum seekers based on rights, however, but on what public representatives think the public wants.

A rights-based framework asserts the rights of people to seek protection regardless of economic value. A rights-based framework is also useful for organisations representing quota refugees once they arrive in resettlement countries. However, democratic institutions – not simply politics and elections, but also the media, advocates, activists and government departments – can offer an additional avenue for the protection of refugees with the number of quota refugees welcomed into a population based not on the claims made by asylum seekers based on rights but on what public representatives think the public want.

In New Zealand, a lack of public debate about refugees meant that the size of the annual quota – 750 – did not grow for 30 years. In that time the country's population grew by 41% and real GDP per capita more than doubled. Those who advocated for a larger quota during this time, however, did so with only limited engagement with the wider public.

In 2013 I started the Doing Our Bit campaign to double New Zealand's refugee quota. The campaign began with no funds and no established public profile. That made social and alternative media the only way to begin. We also focused on friends in the arts, academic and activist communities

as a way to amplify our message to the general public. These connections led to our first meetings with sympathetic Members of Parliament from opposition parties and we were able to convince the major opposition party, Labour, to include an increased refugee quota in their election manifesto – a step in the right direction.

By February 2015 other advocacy groups also were campaigning to double the quota. In time we also drew in celebrity endorsements and the support of mayors and



Mat Grace

Campaigners protest outside government buildings, Wellington, New Zealand.

of other refugee service provision agencies. Engagement with the general public was pursued through public meetings, pamphlet drops and art exhibitions. Two years into the campaign, and before the migrant crisis arrived in Europe, one poll showed that 53% of New Zealanders were in favour of a quota increase. In September 2015 the government announced that it would provide 600 more quota places (for Syrians) over three years.

Despite our focus on democratic institutions, claims on the values of human rights were important for the campaign. However, human rights were used to make an appeal to the public via democratic institutions, rather than as a basis for a legal claim in court. Alongside human rights, the campaign was also based on narratives of fairness ('doing our bit') and driven by compelling statistics that compared our contribution with that of other countries. An important message for the campaign was that even though Australia, for example, treats asylum seekers terribly, New Zealand also shirks its responsibilities through having a tiny and stagnant refugee quota.

We, and refugee service provision groups, had been showcasing positive stories about resettlement outcomes and had framed the wider narrative around the lack of an increase in the quota. A campaign for higher refugee quotas can be made without creating a narrative where the quota becomes the only legitimate avenue for refugee protection, especially if advocates work with the mainstream media to clarify the two categories of refugee protection. In fact, a focus on the quota led to less traction for overblown, negative news stories about asylum seekers, and most discussions of security issues around bringing refugees to New Zealand are now based on the government screening of the refugees arriving through the quota.

Resettlement shortcomings

In New Zealand the refugee resettlement quota is planned at three-year intervals. This allows planning for incremental increases to the quota while avoiding narratives of chaotic intakes or 'floods' of refugees. So

while asylum seeker applications would be expected to fluctuate with changes in conflict and persecution, groups advocating on the refugee quota must mobilise public support around these moments of review as well as at elections. Though the international focus on the recent refugee crisis helped to speed up the increase in our permanent quota, we were confident we would achieve an increase.

In June 2016, the government announced that the refugee quota would permanently grow to 1,000 places from 2018, with developing opportunities for community sponsorship. That increase did not match what we and others had campaigned for; however, both main opposition parties have now adopted the policy of increasing the quota to 1,500 places, editorials in all major newspapers condemned the small growth in the quota, and public sentiment is still broadly in favour of accepting refugees.

There are four main challenges with New Zealand's resettlement intake of refugees. First, it is easy for states like New Zealand to prioritise certain kinds of refugees. Without the recent public interest in refugees, policymakers have picked refugees who they think will settle best rather than focusing on the most vulnerable. While categories were established for medical and disabled cases these have been substantially curtailed since 2009. The current government has also limited new quota refugees from the Middle East and Africa only to those who already have family in the country, in direct rejection of UNHCR's focus on the most vulnerable people.¹

Second, government selection and transportation of refugees through a quota system normalises a system that requires refugees to wait for places that are far fewer than the number required.

Third, the focus on refugee quotas in times of crisis can detract from other immediate needs such as aid to countries that host most refugees. Ultimately the calls for increased refugee quotas need to be tied to calls for increased aid rather than made in competition with those calls.

Finally, New Zealand is only just beginning community sponsorship programmes that would allow for public

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sentiment to be more responsive at times of crisis. One reason why the success of the Doing Our Bit campaign was limited is that much of the initial enthusiasm from the public was squandered as the government tried to slow down its response so as not to alienate some of its supporters.

The New Zealand experience of trying to increase a long-stagnant refugee quota showed that a rights-based framework is necessary but not sufficient for a strong resettlement programme. An exclusive emphasis on resettlement can also

lead to a situation where movements of individuals seeking asylum are delegitimised and the rights afforded in the Refugee Convention negated. The function of a democratic framework is to push for protection measures beyond and in addition to a rights-based approach.

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Doing Our Bit campaign www.doingourbit.co.nz

1. UNHCR *Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2017*
<http://bit.ly/UNHCR-ResettlementNeeds2017>

