

Causes and consequences of Canada's resettlement of Syrian refugees

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By the end of February 2016, Canada had fulfilled its promise to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees. However, this initiative has put a considerable strain on the settlement services that refugees receive after arrival, and raises questions about fair treatment for other refugees.

Canada's pledge in late 2015 to accept 25,000 Syrian refugees for resettlement came at a time when certain other countries were considering measures such as confiscating assets of refugees, registering Muslim refugees entering their country or closing borders to refugees altogether. Why did Canada buck a growing trend and what have been the consequences?

A few factors can help explain Canada's action. First, Canadian public response to the Syrian refugee crisis had gathered a significant amount of momentum over time. This was further reinforced by the news of the death of three-year old Ayan Kurdi, a Syrian child who drowned while travelling by boat from Turkey to Greece with his family – a family who, it emerged, had previously been refused resettlement to Canada. This event marked a tipping point, strengthening the public outcry for the Canadian government to change its previously more restrictive policies towards refugees.

Secondly, national elections in Canada in October 2015 proved timely. During the pre-election phase, prime ministerial candidates responded to public opinion in favour of increased resettlement by each offering their own pledge to resettle Syrian refugees.

Thirdly, citizens wanted their government to match the rhetoric of Canadian identity as compassionate, actively engaged in the international community and open to newcomers. It was no surprise that citizens pushed the government to make an effort towards resettling Syrians, given the long-standing willingness of many citizens to be actively engaged in sponsoring refugees themselves. Civil society in Canada plays a significant role in resettlement as individuals

can resettle refugees through what is known as the 'Group of Five' scheme, whereby five or more Canadian citizens or permanent residents apply to sponsor refugees to come to Canada and take responsibility for supporting them after arrival.¹

Resources for resettlement

Resettlement is a form of responsibility sharing and a recognition of international cooperation between countries. However, there is no legal imperative to resettle refugees, and countries choose to accept refugees voluntarily and may set their own quotas and criteria. Canada's decision to accept 25,000 Syrian refugees² was, in this sense, its own choice.

The newly elected government's commitment to resettle Syrians was primarily driven by the momentum of the elections, and later by the need to demonstrate the new government's capacity to swiftly implement promises. In fact, once the government had been voted into power in October 2015, it was not clear how it would fulfil its promise to resettle 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada. As a result, deadlines had to be pushed back from the end of 2015 to the end of February 2016. Since being elected, the federal government has made huge efforts to meet its target of resettling 25,000 Syrian refugees but the focus on quantity to be



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resettled may have been at the expense of the quality of settlement services provided.

Disappointingly, settlement services in Canada have not yet received the same support from the government as was offered in physically resettling the refugees to Canada. In other words, with such a huge and rapid influx of refugees, settlement services have been stretched beyond capacity, without sufficient resources to adequately address the refugees' needs, or the time to invest in additional fundraising.

After repeated cuts in the settlement sector by the previous government, 'newcomer' services – those engaged in welcoming and assisting resettled refugees and other immigrants – have been struggling to respond to the increase in arrivals. As a result of the scale of arrivals, enrolling the refugees in language classes and/or schools and allocating housing, to name but a few services, have proved challenging. For

example, refugees have been staying in temporary accommodation for weeks longer than usual.³ In response, the private sector and civil society have played an extremely active role in responding to the needs of the thousands of Syrian arrivals to fill this gap. Yet there is also a need for trained professionals to support this specific group of

people and their varied and complicated needs, particularly for government-assisted refugees, who have greater needs and more vulnerabilities than other newcomer groups.

Fair treatment?

In responding to popular opinion, the Canadian government has been offering special benefits to arriving Syrian refugees. For instance, Syrian refugees who arrived after the new government came to power do not – in contrast to refugees of other nationalities and previous Syrian refugees –

have to repay the government's travel loan which enabled their journey to Canada. But what of Syrians who came while the previous government was in power? What about other refugees who are resettling at the same time as the Syrians? By trying to put forward a helpful and empathetic view towards the Syrian population, the government has effectively created two classes of refugees, disregarding fairness and equity. Others – including many in the private sector and social services – have followed suit in offering various benefits to newly arriving Syrians in Canada. Yet this welcome has the effect of making invisible any other refugees. Refugee experts, practitioners and advocates in Canada have been calling for fairness and equity in this response.

Canada is, at a national and international level, making a clear and very positive commitment to refugees. The amount of action taken in the last few months has been remarkable for a national government body, as has been the welcoming response by the general Canadian public. Furthermore, Canada has a high standard of settlement services given the country's priority to integrate newcomers and the existence of an already established settlement system. But what thought has been given to the long-term settlement implications of these refugees – and of others? Given that approximately 10,000 refugees resettle to Canada in any given year,⁴ 25,000 Syrian refugees in the space of four months on top of the resettlement of 10,000 additional government-assisted Syrian refugees by the end of 2016⁵ will surely put a substantial strain on the provisions of services to refugees for the next year and beyond.

With the recent attacks in Paris and Brussels, and subsequent waves of Islamophobia, the initiative to resettle Syrians to Canada has come in for increasing challenge by Canadians. Security in resettlement processing has become a point of public discussion and contention, with the new government undertaking regular information sharing about resettlement in order to ease the fears of Canadian citizens.

Only time will tell whether the new government will continue to bolster support



to the settlement sector and demonstrate – after the deadlines have passed and targets have been reached – that it values the successful integration of refugees. But if this much action can be successfully achieved, and ambitious quotas can be met given the right circumstances, many are hopeful that the momentum of this response can be maintained for future resettlement initiatives in Canada. The question now is whether this extraordinary support for refugees in Canada will translate into a full-scale, stronger post-arrival network of support and services for the refugee arrivals as

well as into maintaining support for large-scale resettlement in the years to come.

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1. www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/sponsor/groups.asp
2. A mix of government-assisted and privately sponsored refugees.
3. www.cbc.ca/news/canada/refugees-housing-moving-in-1.3476893
4. www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/canada.asp
5. www.cbc.ca/news/politics/liberals-immigration-levels-plan-2016-1.3479764