

Vancouver Centre of Excellence



Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

Working Paper Series

No. 06-07

The First 365 Days: Acehnese Refugees in Vancouver, British Columbia

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June 2006

RIIM

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

The Vancouver Centre is funded by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Citizenship & Immigration Canada, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. We also wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Metropolis partner agencies:

- Health Canada
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Department of Canadian Heritage
- Department of the Solicitor General of Canada
- Status of Women Canada
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Correctional Service of Canada
- Immigration & Refugee Board

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The First 365 Days: Acehnese Refugees in Vancouver, British Columbia

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June 2006

Acknowledgements: We thank the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia, especially Harry Limanto and Chris Friesen, for support and assistance throughout the study period. We are indebted to the Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis (RIIM) and to the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (SSHRC) for their financial support. Finally, our gratitude to the reviewers of this paper on earlier drafts. Any errors remain ours alone.

Abstract: This study focuses on the resettlement of refugees from the Aceh region of Indonesia to Vancouver, British Columbia. We explore why and how these refugees came to Vancouver and provide an assessment of how they have fared in acquiring housing, official language proficiency and employment. A defining feature of this group is that they are the first Acehnese refugees settled in Canada. A defining feature of their resettlement was the decision by the Canadian Government to locate the entire group selected in one city, rather than spreading them across several cities which tends to be normal practice. Our analysis is based on research conducted between January and August 2005 during which a survey of housing, employment, and income issues was conducted with 80 of the 104 Acehnese refugees who had relocated to Vancouver since February 2004. In addition, a one-day, three-part series of focus groups was held during which 47 members of the Acehnese community took part. Discussions centred on three key moments during their migration: 1) while in Malaysian detention camps; 2) upon arrival in Vancouver, British Columbia; and 3) during the subsequent first year of settlement in the city to ascertain common settlement experiences, policy implications, and the short-term 'success' of the resettlement. We outline a number of policy implications stemming from discussions with the Acehnese refugees in order to enhance both settlement policy and services in Canada.

365 Days: Acehese Refugees in the First Year of Settlement, Vancouver, British Columbia

*First Allah gave us life. Then Canada gives us another life.*¹

Introduction

In 2004 more than one hundred government assisted refugees, previously held in Malaysian detention camps after fleeing some thirty years of conflict with the Indonesian government, were relocated to Vancouver, British Columbia. Our first purpose is to assess the successes and challenges of this particular government mediated refugee settlement process and determine what changes, if any, are required to improve this process. A second aim is to provide an overview of the settlement process from an Acehese perspective. Have they been able to access services to acquire sufficient English language skills? Are they finding income opportunities beyond part-time, temporary day labour that would allow self-sufficiency? Are they developing a ‘sense of place’ and belonging in Vancouver, whether social, cultural, political, or economic? Three hundred and sixty-five days after the detention camps, how successful has this particular resettlement strategy been for the people it was implemented to aid?

After a brief outline of methods employed, we tell migration stories of the Acehese refugees, identifying the double displacement, first from their homeland in the province of Aceh to detention centres in Malaysia where authorities detained them for entering as undocumented migrants, and then to Vancouver. Once in Vancouver, an initial concern facing all refugees is finding adequate and safe housing. We explore the living conditions prior to resettlement in Canada in order to provide a context for analyzing the process of finding housing and for understanding salient issues associated with housing and living conditions and safety. Refugees must also turn their attention to official language acquisition and employment. We provide a discussion of the challenges of these efforts during the first year of settlement in Vancouver. In the final section, we briefly explore small but important ways that a sense of community has taken root among the Acehese, though most who arrived in Vancouver knew each other somewhat from Malaysia. To conclude, we situate the Acehese settlement experience during the first 365 days of resettlement within a broader discussion of immigrant research, focusing briefly on the second wave of findings in the Longitudinal Study of Immigrants to Canada (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005).

¹ Unless otherwise stated, excerpts are taken from our focus groups held in April 2005. These comments have been translated from Indonesian to English by interpreters, digitally and manually recorded, and converted to first person.

Methods

No Acehese refugees lived in Canada prior to this particular resettlement. Initially, 104 individuals, almost all male, arrived in Vancouver between February and September of 2004. Given the contained conditions under which they had lived in detention for up to five years as well as the conditions that precipitated their involuntary uprooting from Aceh, earning trust of this group was important to the quality of the findings. In their research with newly arrived Burmese refugees in Vancouver, Hyndman and Walton-Roberts (1999) found it difficult to solicit comprehensive answers from interviewees, despite community partners and interpreters known to them. They deduced that fear of the state in Burma and in Thailand, where Burmese refugees are often unrecognized, was transposed to fears about 'research authorities.' Like the Acehese, the Burmese refugees were a relatively 'early wave' of refugee migration to Canada. With the help of a non-profit immigrant and refugee serving agency, the Immigrant Services Society of BC, a settlement counsellor familiar to the Acehese was able to deliver and administer the surveys in participants' homes. With his help, we then invited the community to a day of focus groups, providing transportation funds, childcare services, and a small honourarium for their time. Men and women were divided into separate groups, so that the women could speak more freely. Funds were provided for food preparation, undertaken by several Acehese women and men. In this way, their participation (and ours) became more than academic and offered a social space for interaction.

In the final dissemination event held in June 2005, several policy recommendations gleaned from the focus groups were presented to 43 members of the Acehese community as well as a number of representatives from the provincial and federal governments. These recommendations for further consideration are focused on improving the settlement process of refugees to Canada and reflect the salient issues brought forth by Acehese members. They are intended to create further spaces for dialogue and provide a platform on which to renew a commitment to facilitate the successful settlement of refugees in Canada.

Conducted between January and August 2005, the study is based on 70 individual survey responses provided by members of the Acehese community and five focus groups made up of 47 Acehese participants during a day-long series of three focus groups. While the survey focused on baseline data (where people lived, income, household composition, employment status, etc.), the focus groups provided the opportunity to hear migration stories in connection with three key settlement moments: immediately prior to departure from detention camps for Canada; upon arrival to Vancouver and the days immediately following; and finally the critical first-year of settlement.

Refugee resettlement in Canada, British Columbia, and Vancouver

Over the past decade the Canadian state has selected 7300-7500 government-assisted refugees (GARs) annually to come to Canada. This group is selected overseas, normally through referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) based on eligibility criteria outlined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Vancouver receives a relatively modest number of these government-sponsored refugees annually, between 800-900 people. Montreal receives the greatest proportion of refugees in relation to other classes, while Toronto settles the greatest absolute number of refugees. Across the country, another 3000-4000 refugees are sponsored privately, normally by community groups and faith-based organizations, and the remainder is made up of refugee claims made at a Canadian port of entry which are decided by the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), an appointed body that adjudicates all eligible cases.

Through federally funded programs that are contracted out by the province of BC through a federal-provincial agreement, programs such as the Refugee Assistance Program (RAP) and English Language Services for Adults (ELSA) provide critical support to newcomer refugees, both financially and in terms of services for official language acquisition. Most services targeted specifically for refugees may be federal or provincial in terms of their funding sources, but most are located in the Greater Vancouver area. As noted, the federal government department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) decided to settle the entire group in the same urban area, Greater Vancouver. One aim in this paper is to shed light on the successes and challenges of this particular scheme.

In another government policy decision related to refugee resettlement in BC that is the exception to the rule, refugees from Kosovo/a were sent to several small communities outside of Vancouver (Sherrell, Hyndman, and Preniqi 2005). The Canadian state has been trying to 'regionalize' immigration of all kinds for some time because of the concentration of immigrants in Canada's largest cities. Smaller centres that have declining populations need immigration to bolster numbers and skills. The success of this policy decision for the Kosovo/a refugees has been mixed: those with job experience in factory work ended up in cities where services in tourism, health, and retail provided the majority of jobs, resulting in few employment prospects for most. Others located in cities close to Vancouver were able to find full-time work and lower cost housing, faring better in many ways than those in Greater Vancouver itself. In all locations, those who have come to Canada have little desire to return to Kosovo/a; many have gone back to have a look, only to find the economy in ruins and those who did return regretting their decision (Sherrell and Hyndman 2006).

Comparing the Acehnese to other refugee groups in Canada is also difficult, given that those from Aceh are so ‘new and few’ to the country. In contrast, the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, based mostly in Toronto, has been built upon refugees coming to Canada in considerable numbers since the mid-1980s. Well over 200,000 Sri Lankan Tamils live in the Greater Toronto area alone, making Canada host to the single largest Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora in the world (McDowell, 1996; Cheran 2000: 170). The institutional environment of the city expresses this urban refugee concentration. There are ten weekly Tamil language newspapers, four Tamil language radio stations, and three cinemas that show Tamil language films [most are produced in Tamil Nadu]. Toronto is also home to the largest Tamil video and music store in the world (Cheran 2000). By contrast, the Acehnese group with whom we worked on this research project has left little if any mark on the Vancouver landscape, as of yet. We now turn to the specific story outlining the first year settlement experience of the Acehnese.

Twice Displaced: Leaving Aceh

It's very ironic: we have a gas plant [in Aceh] but we were cooking with wood.

For more than 120 years many Acehnese have sought independence, initially from Dutch colonial power, and for the last twenty-five years from the Indonesian government. This recent struggle for independence has coincided with nearly three decades of conflict, displacement, and death and charges of human rights abuses levied at the Indonesian government military and police forces (Bajic 2002). The Free Aceh Movement (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka or GAM) has been fighting for Aceh's independence since 1976. Resentment against the Indonesian Government stems from perceived abuses by the Indonesia military, and a widely held view that it has not shared the proceeds from the province's rich natural resources with the Acehnese people (BBC 2003). These resources account for 20% of the Indonesian national budget and therefore are perceived as critical for economic stability and growth (Bajic 2002). The Aceh secessionist movement in Indonesia is based on these perceptions of unequal access to the revenues generated by offshore oil (Ross 2003). Access to those revenues has been demanded by GAM on behalf of the Acehnese and against Javanese-dominated Government in Jakarta.

In May 2003, the government declared a state of emergency in Aceh, and the region was massively militarized by the Indonesian government which installed 40,000 troops to forcibly relocate insurgents (Hedman 2005). The government imposed martial law in Aceh, increased restrictions on Acehnese ability to freely move about the province, and implemented the requirement that residents

carry identification cards validated by local officials (US Committee For Refugees 2004). Thousands were killed and many more thousands were displaced, both internally and to government run camps in Aceh, and externally as people fled to, amongst others, Thailand and Malaysia.

In Aceh, conflict, violence, and the massive counter insurgency have displaced more than 300,000 people since 1999:

There is no human rights in Aceh [sic]. We were treated not like human beings, we were treated like animals.

The fighters were called GAM and the Indonesian government is looking for them, so they will go into a place and they ask the locals, and if they cannot find them they will burn down the houses and maybe shoot some people.

I was in Northern part of Aceh, in my experience there was a war battle between the separatists and the Indonesian government, so the Indonesian government sent in troops and burned down all the houses.

If [people] were trying to leave the house, they push them back in and lock them in and burn the house.

Thousands of Acehnese remain in detention camps within and outside of Aceh, displaced and disconnected from their homes, families, and country.

From Malaysia to Canada

For those who came to Vancouver, fleeing the tyranny in Aceh meant relinquishing legal status of belonging upon arrival in Malaysia. Many avoided capture by building huts in the mountains outside of towns. This information was passed back along the migration chains so that new arrivals knew where to go:

They have mountains. And when we were on the way [from Aceh] we heard already there is a location in Malaysia where there are Acehnese. They are illegal...they already know where to go in the mountain...there are other Acehnese, on just about every mountain there are Acehnese people hiding.

We have to hide and our fear is that if we get captured they will send us back to Aceh and we will die...When we see some area, like in the mountain, where no one lives, very quiet, we start to build a hut, a really big hut, and we all live in one place together. [When] we feel like someone knows about our existence we burn the hut and move away, move to a quiet place and we build again.

Many Acehnese in this group spent as many as ten years living in the Malaysian country side without protection and finding day work where ever they could. Once caught by the police and put

into the detention camps, for some, another five years passed before Canadian immigration officials interviewed and accepted them for resettlement to Canada:

I feel we will be secure and safe [in Canada] compared to when we live in Aceh. All Acehnese when they run away to Malaysia and get captured by Malaysian police, they treat us like rebels to the government so they torture us. Really bad conditions in Malaysia. Our life is nothing, no value in Aceh. Maybe you can compare our life with one bullet, basically no value. Because we are treated like refugees, every time we are captured we could get killed.

Conditions in the camp were difficult:

[It was] kind of like a warehouse; flat, cement. They all sleep on the cement.

A lot of Acehnese are in jail in Malaysia...some of them have been in the jail for two or three years and the food is meager, maybe just some rice and fish or some bread.

Yeah, living in the camps is like living in hell and you will die eventually. I still have friends in the camp in Malaysia and the level of suffering is more and more.

When we were in the camps, I was there one year, two people die. The water, the food is not good.

During the time between acceptance and actual departure, anywhere from between three to four months, the Acehnese did little more than wait:

Nothing. Just waiting.

[In the camps there was] no pen, no paper, no book, nothing in the camps.

Many Acehnese received little specific information about daily life and what to expect in terms of housing, work, and learning English upon arrival to Canada. When information was provided (in the form of a ten-page booklet), it was done so unevenly; only Acehnese refugees from one of three camps received the information package in writing. Others received oral information which they said was generally difficult to absorb. Those who received the booklets indicated that they were a valuable asset in preparing to come to Canada but wanted even more information on day-to-day life in Canada. The materials provided were general, including suggestions to obey laws but with few details as to what they were, and strategies to find housing and employment but without a sense of initial income support and average rents or potential job prospects.

Upon arrival, the Immigrant Services Society of British Columbia (ISS) – contracted by the federal government to assist refugees in settlement – provided the core settlement services, including orientation, interpretation and translation, referrals, and housing assistance. Refugees to Canada are far less likely than other immigrant classes to have any family or friends already settled in Canada to

contact for support (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 19), hence the role of refugee-serving agencies is a critical one. In this case, there were no other Acehnese refugees in Vancouver prior to Canada's decision to sponsor this group. ISS also facilitated access to English training (English Language Services for Adults, or ELSA), employment training and search assistance, and information on transit, health, and immigration services. The focus groups were a venue in which we heard repeatedly how invaluable, then and now, such services were to the Acehnese. Of course ISS' role in helping to coordinate the focus groups also meant that participants may have felt obligated to play into the script of being 'grateful' for ISS' assistance, a potential research bias we could not evaluate in this project.

Policy Implications: Preparation for Resettlement

The two policy implications that follow suggest a fine tuning to correct inconsistencies and fill gaps in the provision of information to accepted refugees. The first implication relates to the uneven provision of information to refugees in Malaysia, once they were selected and confirmed as Canadian-sponsored refugees. The 'down time' they experienced could be available to orient and educate refugees in what they might expect, and even in English as a Second Language. Ideally, an evaluation of existing CIC procedures could be undertaken in an effort to re/design and provide a pre-departure refugee preparation package that augments the existing Canadian Orientation Abroad program. This would include basic information on what a resettled refugee can expect during her/his first days and weeks in Canada, ensuring it is delivered to all potential government-sponsored (and privately sponsored, if possible) refugees accepted by and destined for Canada. In addition, some understanding of potential culture shock before arriving in Canada could be beneficial.

Another key moment in the settlement process is arrival in Canada at which point a different scale and level of detail regarding information becomes appropriate. Thus, a second policy question, one that relates to refugees beyond Aceh and immigrants beyond the refugee class, is how to better facilitate people's entry into official language training and employment upon arrival. Unsurprisingly, this desire 'to work' was also raised repeatedly in the focus groups. What is ironic, of course, is that most 'urban refugees' in the world live in cities, often without documents, so that they can earn an income, become self-sufficient, send their children to schools beyond the primary level. In the Canadian context, the reverse is true: refugees from Aceh who come to Vancouver have legal status from the outset; they even have basic income support (federal support delivered by the province in year one, then social assistance like other Canadians, if they need it thereafter). What they lack is access to, or knowledge of, how to access the labour force. As we know from the work of Dan Hiebert and David Ley (2003) among others, without employment opportunities and a sense of future, immigrants to Canada do not integrate well and may not stay in Canada at all (i.e. in the case of

‘astronaut families’, the wage earners return to Hong Kong, Shanghai, or Manila to work, while other family members remain in Canada; see Waters 2001).

Collated responses from the focus groups regarding desirable information point to more emphasis on local area, maps, directions, transit, emergency services, healthcare provider, additional services on library, recreation, and other opportunities for social activity and learning English. We return to policy implications and specifically those pertaining to employment issues in greater detail later in the paper, but now turn to a discussion of housing.

Moving In: Setting up House

Any analysis of the housing conditions which Acehnese living in Greater Vancouver endure must be contextualized by the preceding discussion of the Acehnese migration story. The survey results we collected reveal that 90% of respondents opine that the maintenance of their house or apartment is ‘good’ or ‘acceptable.’ In terms of feeling safe and secure, 97% indicate that their neighbourhoods are safe, and 100% feel safe within their own house or apartment. A more nuanced response, however, emerged during the focus groups where elaboration was possible, particularly from one female participant:

[We live on] East Pender. I don’t feel comfortable in this area because of drug addicts, so I am moving to Burnaby...looking for cheaper housing.

As reflected in the survey, many respondents are ‘doubling up’ in order to make high rents more affordable:

It was not difficult to find [an apartment], but we need to find a place to fit our budget. It has to be under \$1000, and even if it is under \$1000, we have to share with four other people.

Thus, density and rooms per person may be a better indicator of housing conditions. Of the 70 survey responses, 64% feel that their current house or apartment is large enough given the number of people living there. The ‘doubling up’ of people, however, indicates that housing conditions may not be optimal:

If we have a one bedroom apartment, two people share, but if it is a two bedroom we will share with four...mostly if they live in the basement, there will be four.

Despite this statement, 81% of survey participants are living with 4 or more other people in their house or apartment and 26% are living with 6 or more. This alone does not indicate crowding necessarily. Comparing the number of people in a house or apartment to the number of rooms per household (rooms other than the kitchen and bathroom), 22% are living 3 or more people per room.

The highest ratio of people per room is five to one, indicating that the high cost rental market in Vancouver, as well as high rent, is negotiated by refugees through strategies of doubling and tripling up in order to spread rental costs among more people.

What challenges did refugees face in finding housing immediately upon arrival? The Immigrant Services Society of BC provides short-term housing for refugees at its Welcome House refugee reception centre in downtown Vancouver. This integrated facility, where a settlement office to help new refugee arrivals is mixed with motel-like apartments, provides a base from which they can familiarize themselves with daily life and begin to look for rental accommodations with ISS assistance and interpretation. At such an early moment in the settlement process, the aid of a bilingual settlement counsellor and/or an interpreter is critical:

The interpreter is very important because at that time we do not speak English at all, do not understand English at all and so we need someone to translate for us.

We had an interpreter accompany us to help find their place. The interpreter goes with us to show us the units and if we like it, we take it. If not, they keep looking with us.

The accommodations at Welcome House are time-limited, so finding permanent housing is an immediate concern:

We didn't have much time to think [about the kind of housing we wanted]. We had only a 15 day limit at Welcome House. We saw it (the apartment) and took it.

In Vancouver, where real estate has been the most expensive in the country for several years, affordability can be an issue. Typically, over 90% of skilled migrants and other economic immigrants enter Canada with savings. This is rarely the case with refugees; some 85% enter Canada with no savings (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005 27). Affordability tops the list of renting criteria, but is not the sole housing issue for this group:

Cost is the main consideration but there are other things. It has to have a heater. We come from a very warm country, so we have never experienced a cool country.

Those individuals with children also noted proximity to schools as important, while almost everyone noted access to transit (especially the Skytrain) as a factor in deciding location:

I live in Renfrew, close to the school and close to the Skytrain, and it's more convenient for me.

It's more convenient in Joyce. My place is close to the bus stop and close to the Skytrain. I become more mobile; I can go anywhere.

When an interpreter or settlement counsellor from Welcome House was unavailable to accompany the Acehnese for in-person rental inquiries, the challenge of finding satisfactory housing was met with different strategies:

When we got the house, some of us didn't know if they had washers and dryers or heat...and we just moved in because we didn't know how to ask those questions...because of that, once we find out, we have to move. If we had known that before we wouldn't have chosen that particular place.

I moved for the third time now. Sometimes when you go to the coin laundry there are all those papers, advertisements. I call them myself to try and find out...I try to call about the price and location but for further information I tried to find someone else to help me. Other Indonesians who can speak better English.

For many, finding housing through trial and error has resulted in secondary migration and moves within Greater Vancouver, as they seek accommodations that better fit their needs and expectations. Others have sought out those with better English in the broader South Asian community, at mosques, at soccer games, and through language training institutes to help them find appropriate housing.

Policy Implications: Finding Homes

While finding housing through a bilingual settlement counsellor or friends has been a challenge, housing conditions have not been an overwhelming concern during the first 365 days of the settlement process. The focus groups told us that arranging housing for incoming refugees for the first year might be a consideration for settlement agencies and in terms of government policy. Participants would have liked more involvement of settlement counsellors in terms of locating housing and greater access and availability of detailed information on how to look for housing: what questions to ask, what rents to expect, and other seemingly practical questions that would further enhance house-hunting strategies.

From a service provider perspective this suggestion is well taken, but the issue is resources, both financial and in terms of available, culturally appropriate staffing:

- Additional resources to recruit a designated staff person focused entirely on housing search, providing escorts and interpretation, developing practical tools (e.g. a housing search board along with specific orientation) would be valuable.
- Contingency funding plans are required to ensure adequate funding is available to provide necessary adjustment and settlement services for at least the first two years.

- The implication of the federal government decision to bring brand new refugee communities to, in this case, BC where the provincial government is responsible for the distribution of immigrant settlement funding necessitates more federal-provincial /discussions.
- Differential funding formulas that take into account whether or not refugees are ‘special needs’ (that might require more resources) might be one consideration.
- Federal government funding for refugee information and orientation support services (income support aside) is currently limited to the first six weeks in Canada.
- Finally, more advance notice of refugee arrival by federal CIC authorities would be helpful in settlement planning, particularly if dealing with brand new ethno-cultural communities.

English Language/Employment

Acquiring official language skills – English in the Vancouver context – is a significant concern in the Acehnese community, as it is in other recently arrived refugee communities in Canada (Sherrell, Hyndman, & Preniqi, forthcoming). Lacking English language skills makes acquiring adequate housing, health, and settlement services difficult, even impossible at times without the aid of an interpreter or bilingual settlement counsellor. The absence of official language ability hinders both social and economic integration (DeVoretz, Pivnenko, & Beiser 2004; Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005). Moreover, lacking basic skills to communicate may dissuade individuals from accessing other services offered, for example, at school, local libraries, community and recreation centres. The most challenging barrier that insufficient English language skills presents for many refugees is accessing employment (Hyndman & Walton Roberts 1999; Henin & Bennet 2002).

We discuss the issues of language and employment in this section because we do not see them as separate issues, either analytically or practically. Nor do most of the Achenese:

Jobs and English: I want them to go hand-in-hand instead of one at a time.

Our mind is focused on two things: language and earning money. But we cannot get jobs without English, they go hand in hand. And we can't focus on our studies because we are worried about money.

Most pressing is the lack of sufficient English language skills and the impact on the ability to acquire adequate and suitable employment. On one hand, stable self-sufficient employment is difficult to attain if one does not speak the language of the everyday work environment. On the other hand, learning English is a challenge for a group of people whose home government invested little in their formal education, and who have never learned to speak English formally or otherwise:

The government [in Indonesia] did not give us the opportunity to improve ourselves or give us jobs in Indonesia because they didn't want us to be improving ourselves.

Moreover, the challenge is furthered for those who have little opportunity to improve their English outside of English language training schools in Vancouver:

We are happy to come to school. We know we need to come to school every day but when we come home we are just with our own and we cannot practice and so it is harder to practice and be better at English.

Many experience a disjuncture between acquiring language skills and the period of federal income support provision. Currently, the federal government agrees to provide one year of financial support and the provincial government provides English language training up to a lower intermediate level. However, due, in part, to adult English language assessment wait-lists and seat shortages, few could access and complete their basic language training within their first year in Canada:

I have been living here for one year and they just put me in language school last month so how can I learn the language.

While federal income support is provided for one year, many are only starting English language training at the end of that year, the result being dim employment prospects. During this period of waiting for placement into a language class, some Acehnese went to the library to read books and listen to cassettes to begin to learn English; however, many stressed that they mostly stayed home, waiting for a notification letter or phone call.

Once federal income support finishes individuals can apply for provincial employment assistance. Acehnese who accessed provincial support, however, were in some cases encouraged to abandon English language training and undertake active job searches, with the goal of taking any job available. This issue highlights a potential contradiction between the goal of integration or full participation in Canadian society and provincial welfare requirements that force individuals to actively seek employment. The bitter irony, of course, is that without suitable English language skills such searches are seriously impaired. To find work that does not require English is an option, but should not preclude ESL training or segregation from and lack of participation in everyday activities will only be reproduced.

In comparison to other immigrant classes, refugees face greater challenges in finding employment and experience the highest levels of unemployment during the first 6 months of settlement (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 59-60). Repeatedly, however, members of the Acehnese community told us that they were ready to work; they wanted to work, but without better English

language skills they were unable to look for work. When they tried to find work, they were often turned away because of language deficits:

We are ready to work. If you ask me if I am ready to look for a job, I'm not ready to look for a job because I don't know how. But I am ready to work.

We have the ability to work and we want to come over here to work. We have the intention of coming over here to work; we can do the work.

I just wish that when we first came over here, (the government) just set us up with one job at the same place, same factory or whatever, and then we could go to school at the same time, it would be easier for us.

Rather than we just stay home and go to school and (the government) support us, it would be faster if we could just work and go to school at the same time.

Lower employment rates in refugee communities may be attributable to higher rates of studying English during the first six months of settlement, so one might expect subsequent rates of employment to increase thereafter (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 59). We found that even after the first year of settlement, all members of the Acehnese community were experiencing difficulty finding stable employment, and continued to cite lack of English skills and 'Canadian' work experience as the reason for their failure. Participants repeatedly called for more ESL availability, as well as more innovative ESL/pre-employment job placement pilot programs. For them, extant federal and provincial employment assistance models are not working well for non-English speaking refugees. We understand the resource limitations of government in relation to these fundamental services, but suggest that consideration be given to make no-fee ESL a priority policy and practice, within existing funds allocated by the federal government to the province for this purpose.

Policy Implications: Learning English/Finding Work

When asked what one thing focus group participants would tell future Acehnese refugees coming to Canada, most indicated that learning English, as little or as much as one can, would make the settlement process easier. Therefore, pending funding availability, we suggest the establishment of a pilot program to deliver basic/conversational English language training during the waiting period between notification of acceptance and actual date of departure to Canada. As previously noted, the Acehnese waited for between two and four months in the Malaysian detention camps after being notified of their acceptance by Canadian immigration authorities.

The suggestion stems from the numerous comments concerned with the length of time it took for people to access English language training after having arrived in Vancouver. In some cases, ESL classes for the adults were simply full. Some had closed due to funding cuts. The result for many

Achenese was the coincidence of an end to federal income support and acceptance to ESL classes. Any policies to ensure prompt placement of refugees into English language training programs with appropriate childcare provisions where needed should be examined. On acceptance to Canada while they are still in camps, perhaps government-sponsored refugees could be put on waiting lists to expedite the waiting time.

Although finding adequate employment is a challenge most newcomers face in Canada, English and employment are not perceived to be separate challenges in this community (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 6).

From the Ground Up: Building Local and Initiating Transnational Communities

Despite challenges that newcomers to Canada face in relation to language, employment, and housing, establishing social networks within and beyond cultural communities is an important indicator of ‘integration’ to use the terminology of the state (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 84). In this final section, we briefly explore ways that the Acehnese are participating in life beyond English classes and employment searches after 365 days in Vancouver.

The Acehnese presence is notable in small but important ways. During the first year of settlement there have been concerted efforts to establish and maintain social networks within the Acehnese community.² We have identified two processes of community growth and formation amongst the Acehnese: one local and one which might be characterized as transnational. These processes of community formation coalesce around three central spaces: the mosque, the soccer field, and the newly formed Acehnese Society of Canada.

The first process of community-building is local, though based on the federal decision to relocate all the Acehnese refugees in the same location, Vancouver. In the focus groups, the Acehnese were clear in their assessment of the uniqueness of this resettlement strategy:

Well done, good idea, we are very happy. We have become united in one community. We can share, we can have our community. And we prefer it this way.

This was the best idea, best situation, because we are totally new.

Social networks formed prior to arrival have been critical to facilitating local community during the initial phase of settlement (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 84). Many friendships and social networks formed amongst the Acehnese while they were still in Malaysian detention camps. As

² We realize that ‘community’ is a contentious term, as it evokes exclusion as much as belonging. Here we use it to refer to the cohort and specific group of Acehnese who came to Vancouver together from three camps in Malaysia.

detainees were relocated to Vancouver, these existing social support systems and friendships were also relocated. The familiarity amongst the refugees and the immediate, 'ready-made' community support has been a benefit to the community as it grows in Vancouver.

A particularly salient issue for the community, however, is the desire to bring Acehnese women in future resettlement schemes. The Acehnese community in Vancouver is overwhelming skewed toward males, largely because more men than women fled political persecution in Aceh, a common demographic in refugee movements (Hyndman and Walton-Roberts 2000). Of the 70 surveys completed in our study sixty-six were male. The average age of this group is 29 and only 18 of the 66 men are married. So, while most focus group participants in Vancouver express appreciation and gratitude towards Canada, a significant portion of this community would like to see the resettlement of more [female] Acehnese, to establish a better gender balance and the potential to establish families in Canada. At the follow up consultation held in June 2005, participants noted that they did not speak sufficient English to meet other women nor have strong ties to people beyond the Acehnese community because of limited English language skills.

New social networks have been established, however, particularly with other Asian diasporic communities. These connections were made at mosques or through sport, thus providing some early indications of integration:

We share religion as a basis for bonds.

We met people from Iran, Pakistan, Indonesia...we talk on the phone, and we are networking for a job if someone knows of a job, or ask for directions in the city.

Socialization around sports (notably soccer and volleyball) is an important aspect of Acehnese living in Aceh and continues to be an important activity in which the Acehnese community is itself strengthened, but bridges are also forged across ethno-cultural communities:

We play soccer every week. It is a very popular sport in Indonesia; even in the villages in Aceh.

Every Sunday we play soccer together at 29th Avenue; to play soccer and to talk...We bring the kids and they can play in the park while we play soccer. After soccer, maybe go back to someone's house for dinner together. We have a very close relationship with one another; like brother and sisters.

We are close to one another here, but we welcome others to the group.

The Acehnese are also beginning to negotiate political space in the Canadian, global and transnational context. While almost half of new immigrants to Canada plan to sponsor relatives or help others come to Canada, refugees are the most likely class to report efforts toward reunification

(Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 88). This process of community building is still at an early stage, but the intention was noted during the focus groups. Acehnese in Canada advocate for the safe resettlement of Acehnese still in detention camps in Malaysia as well as those who remain in Aceh. They push especially for family reunification:

Because we are the first Acehnese here it is hard for us to build community.

We want to bring our parents here.

Is it possible to bring everyone over to Canada?

Concern for those still in Aceh and Malaysia is the impetus for forming the Acehnese Society of Canada, a community-based organization that seeks to strengthen both local and global connections among people from Aceh:

We are happy over here, we want them to be happy over there too.

Sometimes...we have a meeting and we pray for family, relatives, and friends still in Aceh. We meet in Burnaby in one of our houses that is big enough to accommodate everyone.

The Acehnese Society of Canada's [focus is] cultural. About the Acehnese. To help people in Aceh, to bring them to Canada and make their life easier, and to send some money to the refugees in Aceh. To help the people in Aceh.

In practical, everyday terms, the Acehnese participating in this study continue to have settlement difficulties in terms of access to and acquiring employment and English language training within the first year of federally funded income support. However, they have begun to settle in other ways including the strengthening of their own communities' presence on local and, eventually, global and transnational landscapes. Accessing public libraries, making non-Achehnese friends, working periodically, and remitting funds back home when possible were all expressions of participation and early stages of integration. Furthermore, these small but important steps in the settlement process have coalesced around the mosque, sports fields, and the Acehnese Society of Canada in ways that strengthen the Acehnese community. These early indicators of 'success' suggest that state policies to settle new refugee groups together, especially when those migrating are 'new and few,' is a good decision. Policies and programs of support surrounding employment and language, however, need ongoing development in order to facilitate a smoother and speedier adjustment and settlement process.

Policy Implications: Building Strength in Community

While the provision of first language instruction and employment assistance are undeniably important, one must also concurrently move from direct service provision in the short term to multi-year community capacity-building and development of host communities in the longer term. Preparing receiving communities for new Canadian who come as government-assisted refugees has not always been forthcoming (Sherrell, Hyndman and Preniqi, forthcoming). Canadian cities with declining populations may want immigrants for economic reasons, but do not necessarily have corresponding attitudes that welcome newcomers as neighbours (Hyndman, Schuurman, and Fiedler, forthcoming).

Conclusion

Our goals in this study have been to examine the settlement encounter among Achenese refugees and to gauge the outcome of one settlement policy that shaped it, namely the decision to locate all Acehnese refugees in the same metropolitan area. Why have we conducted yet another study of refugee settlement experience in Vancouver? First, both policymakers and the refugee-serving agency involved in settlement were interested in the impact of their decisions and programming. In large part, the research was proposed by ISS, an organization that is funded to deliver services and has no research budget per se, to faculty at Simon Fraser University. The study has direct implications for improving settlement services for refugees, especially when they are ‘new and few.’ Second, being ‘new and few’, there is virtually no research on the antecedents that compelled them to come to Canada and their initial encounters with the Canadian state and society. How refugee diasporas operate when there is little community on which to lean in the early days of settlement is important to ascertain, but perhaps more crucial to document are the ways in which this group has begun to build community among its few members. This clearly relates to the policy decision to settle them together. This research ultimately aims to augment settlement policy and programs, facilitating a smoother transition during the first year for future Acehnese refugees, indeed all refugees seeking a new start in Canada.

I am thankful the Canadian government takes us over here; we cannot live in Aceh. The government over there makes us flee. But if the Canadian government wants to help us, they have to help us thoroughly and completely.

The policy implications outlined here suggest revisiting existing policies pre-departure refugee preparation and offer, for example, ESL instruction to incoming refugees in a pilot project

and/or placing them on waiting lists for ELSA classes upon acceptance as refugees before their actual arrival in Canada. Greater employment assistance (including unpaid internships) and initial housing placement strategies were requested by Acehnese participants in order to facilitate a smoother transition in future resettlement strategies.

In 2005, Statistics Canada released the “Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants to Canada: A Portrait of Early Settlement Experience” (the second wave of data) which documents settlement conditions experienced by refugees across Canada in comparison to other immigrant groups. The LSIC reveals that refugees face greater language-related challenges when seeking housing and when housing is secured they are more likely to ‘double-up’ in order to make housing more affordable (Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 24-25). ‘Doubling up’ is one strategy that Acehnese refugees are employing to make ends meet during their first year of settlement.

Refugees are also more likely to experience and report language barriers as the most difficult challenge when accessing education and employment (Hyndman & Walton-Roberts 1999; Statistics Canada: LSIC 2005, 48). Current federal policy to assist refugee settlement allows for one year of income support and access to English language training up to an upper beginners/lower intermediate level, so as to prepare individuals for independent living, education, and employment once the federal assistance ends. None of the members in the Acehnese community with whom we spoke were able to secure full-time employment 365 days after arrival. Only a handful had been able to take all three basic levels of ESL offered to refugees, ostensibly upon arrival in Canada. Without adequate resources to fund these fundamental settlement services for newcomers, the Canadian Government should be cautious about increasing immigrant numbers. There remains a disjuncture between the settlement support intended in year one and the actual services provided during the first 365 days.

Despite challenges posed by official language deficits and poor employment prospects, the Acehnese community is growing and strengthening its presence in Vancouver. The sports field and mosque continue to form some basis of building community from the ground up in Vancouver while the Achenese Society of Canada holds the promise of extending those connections back to Aceh and other Acehnese diasporic communities. Given the severe social, economic, and political uncertainty in Aceh, perhaps it is not surprising to hear, so early in the settlement of the Aceh community, a deep connection to Canada. The final words are those of Acehnese focus group participants themselves:

[We are] 100% happy in Canada...we think of Canada as our second country...we would never go back to Aceh for good...Canada is now our home...our sense of belonging lies in Canada.

We want to earn more money...we want to bring our parents here...we want our children to be educated and get good jobs...we want to be happy...we want our children to be useful.

One day, if all my family or relatives or friends are coming here, please explain to them about school, how to get a job, the future situation, how to get a life in Canada...I think my friends agree with me that if you can provide some training for us, because it's not like we cannot do anything, some of us are good at driving, at forklift, or in a warehouse, but if you can provide some training for us, to prepare us [then] what is the problem is only language...language barrier.

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