

Intersections

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Compiled by Brian Dyck

Challenges and opportunities in refugee resettlement

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The world is facing a global refugee crisis. With more than 65 million people forcibly displaced globally, many of them living in protracted situations of displacement, the work of enhancing, improving and expanding mechanisms to provide durable solutions for forcibly displaced people has rapidly increased in urgency.

The solutions for forcibly displaced people in part depends on the nature of their displacement. As the chart on the next page shows, forcibly displaced persons around the globe can be grouped into four main categories. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) make up nearly two-thirds of the total number of forcibly displaced people. IDPs fled their homes because of violence, but did not cross an international boundary. A little over one-quarter of the world's forcibly displaced persons, meanwhile, meet the refugee definition set out by the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. The convention defines refugees as persons who have a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group and are outside of their country of citizenship or habitual residence. A smaller group of the world's forcibly displaced persons are asylum seekers, refugees awaiting decisions on their applications to stay in the country to which they have fled. Finally, the more than five million Palestinian refugees globally fall within their own category. Their initial displacement predates the 1951 refugee convention and so the protection mandate of the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) does not extend to them. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) addresses the humanitarian needs of Palestinian refugees; since the early 1950s, however, no United Nations agency has actively worked for durable solutions for Palestinian refugees.

As part of its protection mandate, UNHCR explores three types of durable solutions for persons meeting the convention's definition of refugee: repatriation to one's home country, local integration into the first country of asylum and resettlement to a third country. This issue of *Intersections* explores some of the challenges and opportunities of refugee resettlement.

Refugee resettlement is by no means the only durable solution for refugees promoted by MCC, its partners or global organizations. In many countries around the world, MCC works with local partner organizations to

support displaced peoples in efforts to return to their homes or to stay closer to their homes. Meanwhile, through peacebuilding, livelihoods, food security, humanitarian response and other programs, MCC and its partners work to prevent the creation of refugees. Given the staggeringly large number of refugees globally and the comparatively limited number of resettlement placements, refugee resettlement cannot be the primary way the international community seeks to respond to the global refugee crisis. Nevertheless, refugee resettlement, alongside voluntary repatriation and local integration into host countries, represents an important tool for addressing the global refugee crisis.

Refugees themselves look at resettlement in different ways. For some, resettlement to a third country can feel like a denial of their true being and identity, which are inextricably tied to the land they left. For these refugees, voluntary repatriation to the land from which they were displaced may be the preferred solution. For others, resettlement appears as the only hope for a future.



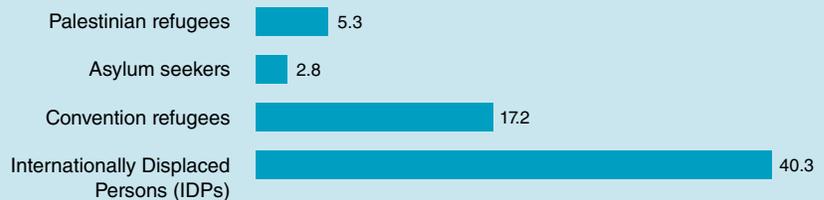
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Global number of Forcibly Displaced Persons (in millions)



In 2003, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, also known as the UN Refugee Agency) began promoting the “strategic use of resettlement.” A central idea of this approach is that resettlement countries will demonstrate “burden sharing” (now called “responsibility sharing”) with the countries of first asylum who host the bulk of the refugees globally. So, for example, countries like the United States and Canada would share the responsibility of addressing the needs of Syrian refugees, the majority of whom have found first asylum in countries such as Jordan, Iraq and Lebanon.

The results of the “strategic use of resettlement” approach have been mixed. Selection of the most vulnerable refugees is challenging, while the task of integrating vulnerable refugees can be difficult for resettlement countries. Still, resettlement has remained an important part of the response to forced displacement globally. Access to other solutions seems to be dwindling as more conflicts drag on and appear intractable, making prospects of repatriation seem dim, and with host countries like Jordan buckling under the burden of more refugees.

MCC has a long history of supporting refugee resettlement, including support for Mennonite refugees from Europe to the U.S. and Canada. In 1979, in response to the war in Vietnam, MCC Canada became the first agency in Canada to sign a Master Agreement with the government of Canada to sponsor refugees as an organization. More recently, the refugee

crisis related to conflict in Syria and Iraq has generated significant interest in refugee sponsorship again. Between September 2015 to July 2017, MCC Canada submitted 2,349 new applications to sponsor refugees, with 2,367 MCC-sponsored refugees arriving in Canada within that same period. This represents more than a tenfold increase in annual arrivals from 2014 to 2016.

Two key issues define the refugee resettlement challenge: selection and integration. While the UNHCR estimates that about 1.1 million of the 22.5 million refugees in the world require resettlement in both 2017 and 2018, only about 10% will have the opportunity for resettlement. These sobering numbers can make selection of refugees for resettlement extremely challenging. Those who do get resettled usually face a range of challenges in becoming integrated into their new home communities.

The articles in this issue examine the challenges of both selection and integration. Barbara Treviranus, who has extensive experience making difficult selection decisions as a UNHCR resettlement officer and as a Sponsorship Agreement Holder representative in Canada, writes about the current challenges in an environment in which the number of refugees is increasing and the number of resettlement spaces appears set to shrink. Nathan Toews explores a unique situation in which a partnership developed by Mennonite churches in Colombia and Canada and facilitated by MCC addressed the resettlement needs of internally displaced Colombians. The remaining articles by Saulo Padilla, Katie Froese, Shalom Wiebe, Stephanie Dyck and Christine Baer examine different dimensions of the challenges and opportunities facing efforts to support resettled refugees as they integrate into their new communities. Taken together, these articles help us think through the opportunities and challenges for Christians in Canada and the United States to respond to the biblical call to welcome the stranger (Matthew 25:35) through refugee resettlement.

Brian Dyck is the migration and resettlement program coordinator for MCC Canada. He is also chair of the Canadian Refugee Sponsorship Agreement Holder Association.

Opportunities and challenges facing refugee resettlement: the perspective of a former UNHCR resettlement officer

With decades-long conflicts preventing the return of millions of refugees and newer outbreaks of violence leading to ongoing mass outflows of refugees from numerous countries, global resettlement needs have increased significantly alongside rising refugee numbers. For UNHCR, resettlement to a third country is a crucial tool to provide the most vulnerable refugees with protection and support they could not otherwise access. It is a durable solution for refugees who can neither return to their country of origin nor integrate in their country of asylum. Providing refugees with the legal status and support to rebuild independent lives is a significant state contribution towards responsibility sharing with countries hosting large numbers of refugees.

“ For some, resettlement to a third country can feel like a denial of their true being and their identity, which are inextricably tied to the land they left. For others, resettlement appears as the only hope for a future.”



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Resettlement is a small part of the solution for refugees. The *UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2018* document estimates that close to 1.2 million of the post-WWII global high of 22.5 million refugees need resettlement. Despite the diversification of resettlement involvement to 37 states and a record number of refugee submissions in 2016, the number of resettlement places committed by states has dropped again, with global needs outnumbering the 93,200 resettlement places states have pledged to make available in 2018 by a factor of 13 to 1. This drop is a sharp reminder of the vulnerability of the resettlement tool to political changes and the fragility of public support in many countries for voluntarily accepting refugees through resettlement.

The Syrian crisis put a focus on growing resettlement needs, and states responded. Many new states answered the appeals to offer resettlement places, particularly to Syrian refugees, either through formal resettlement programs or through other humanitarian admissions schemes, but the greatest increase in total numbers was offered by the United States, already the highest contributor. The Obama administration set a goal of admitting 110,000 refugees from the around the world in fiscal year 2017 (which started on October 1, 2016), an increase from 85,000 in fiscal year 2016 and from 70,000 in each of the previous three years.

Increased targets and financial support enabled UNHCR submissions to reach a 20-year high in 2016, with at least 162,575 refugees referred to states for resettlement consideration. Significantly, 44,000 of these submissions were from sub-Saharan Africa, the highest number in almost 15 years, and over 107,000 of these 2016 UNHCR submissions were made to the U.S.

The decision by the current U.S. administration to cut the resettlement arrival numbers to 50,000 in fiscal year 2017 has changed global resettlement dynamics. The combined total of 93,200 new places made available by states this year is a 43% reduction in what was offered in 2016, with particularly severe reductions in sub-Saharan Africa. Refugees themselves are devastated by this blow to their hopes and expectations, especially nationalities resettled by very few countries other than the U.S., such as Somalis. This drop has also exacerbated UNHCR's challenges associated with effectively identifying those refugees most in need of resettlement and selecting those to prioritize for submission. This significant reduction by the U.S. government has also highlighted how vital the support of the receiving domestic population is to resettlement.

UNHCR assesses refugee populations' prospects for durable solutions to identify refugees in need of resettlement as part of its mandate. However, with places available for less than 10% of those in need, the final selection of individuals and families who will have their cases submitted to a resettlement state is among the most challenging aspects of the resettlement process.

The production of a UNHCR resettlement submission is time-consuming and labour intensive. Well-established and closely monitored standard operating procedures ensure that the process is tied to the protection strategy for individual population groups and managed with integrity and transparency, but many factors impact decision-making. Every effort is made to prioritize based on the needs of the refugees and to sensitively manage refugee expectations against the number of resettlement places allocated. However, state preferences, logistical factors related to the accessibility of

the refugees to be interviewed and the availability of resources to assess protection needs and process resettlement cases within set timeframes inevitably also play a role.

UNHCR has closely collaborated with states and other resettlement partners for decades. States have endorsed UNHCR's submission categories and are responsive to the vulnerabilities identified in countries of asylum as articulated in the *Global Resettlement Needs* document. UNHCR calls on states to make multi-year resettlement commitments to allow UNHCR to plan effectively, but also to be open to urgent and emerging needs and to accept diverse caseloads. Individual resettlement states also understandably follow their own criteria, and are subject to pressures at home, particularly regarding perceptions of the needs and integration prospects of specific nationalities and profiles. As a result, although countries may request submissions from among the vulnerable groups identified by UNHCR in a specific country of asylum, such as survivors of violence and torture, women and girls at risk, children at risk and refugees facing legal and physical protection needs, UNHCR may still not be able to submit the neediest cases for resettlement.

There are never enough places for emergency cases that need immediate resettlement or for those with severe medical needs. Families with many children, single men, people with certain political profiles and persons with mental health challenges are not accepted by some countries. Other factors include the refugees' inability to articulate their own refugee claim, medical or social conditions that the country is not able to address or security or other logistical issues that arise and make certain camps or locations inaccessible for resettlement processing. Furthermore, states with smaller quotas may legitimately wish to restrict their selection to a few nationalities to simplify the post-arrival integration supports required, or restrict their interview locations to reduce costs. With needs so far outstripping available places, UNHCR must inevitably make compromises.

On a practical level, UNHCR resettlement caseworkers are driven by the need to produce a set number of completed resettlement cases each week from among those identified with resettlement needs. Detailed interviews are required to ensure that the refugee claim, resettlement needs and family links are thoroughly and accurately documented. As part of the preparations, staff must update registration data often collected years before, assess dependencies to retain family unity and ensure that the best interests of unaccompanied and separated children are considered. There are many logistical factors, including limited access to the registration database and to certain camps, which may delay the completion of individual cases and challenge the ability to meet set targets.

From the perspective of staff in direct contact with refugees, it is painful that even refugees facing extreme difficulties must be told that no resettlement places are available for them. Tragically, the loss of hope of being resettled, coupled with the restrictions placed by many states on family reunification, is driving desperate refugees to travel onwards from their first countries of asylum. In doing so, they expose themselves to the risks of trafficking, kidnapping, sexual and other abuse, the possibility of death on open waters and rejection in new countries of asylum.

While the reduction of resettlement spaces offered by states in 2017 is disheartening, a greater awareness of resettlement needs globally has developed alongside an encouraging growth in the engagement of civil

“ From the perspective of staff in direct contact with refugees, it is painful that even refugees facing extreme difficulties must be told that there are no resettlement places available for them.”

society and the private sector. One hopes that the promises embodied in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, endorsed by every member state of the United Nations, will truly lead to states increasing their commitment to help refugees find durable solutions through resettlement or alternative migration pathways and to being more flexible in their family reunification processing. The world's refugees deserve nothing less.

Barbara Treviranus has facilitated Canadian private sponsorships and was founding manager of the Refugee Sponsorship Training Program (RSTP) which trains and supports private sponsoring groups in Canada. She rewrote UNHCR's Resettlement Handbook in 2011 and has worked for UNHCR as a resettlement caseworker in Nepal and a resettlement officer in Kenya and Ethiopia. This article reflects the personal perspectives of the author rather than the official position of the UNHCR.

Church accompaniment with Colombian displaced families

MCC's partnership with the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in accompanying internally displaced people (IDPs) is an example of a multilayered approach for dealing with the practical and personal aspects of forced displacement. With its presence both in Colombia and Canada, MCC connected the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá with churches in Canada to take advantage of Canada's Source Country Class Program to resettle some IDPs to Canada who faced protracted threats from armed groups in Colombia. The uncertainty of this process required flexibility, discernment and patience in walking with displaced families through the resettlement process. Additionally, the church and MCC workers provided personal accompaniment, listening to families and paying attention to the emotional and spiritual elements of their journey.

While the conflict in Colombia is decades old, more IDPs began fleeing to Colombian cities such as Bogotá in the late 1990s, making the conflict more visible for people in the capital city. In an early effort of accompaniment, members of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church in Bogotá supported IDPs who occupied a government building as they demanded their rights. These early church initiatives quickly turned into accompanying IDP organizers whose lives were threatened. The church eventually developed programmatic efforts to meet IDPs' basic needs and to provide them with safety.

For some IDPs, fleeing to the city was insufficient to guarantee their safety, as armed groups operated across the country, threatening and killing persons who could incriminate them. In 2000, with more displaced families becoming a part of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church community, the congregation made an intentional decision to accompany IDPs by forming the Justice and Peace Committee. At the same time, Canada's unique Source Country Class (SCC) allowed IDPs in Colombia to apply for resettlement as refugees without leaving their country of citizenship. While Canada provided government selection and support for thousands of refugees who applied directly for resettlement at the Canadian visa office in Bogotá, Colombian IDPs could also be nominated for resettlement and sponsored through the Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) Program.

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At first, the Justice and Peace Committee of Teusaquillo Mennonite Church contacted Mennonite congregations in Canada directly to see if they would sponsor families identified by the committee as in need of resettlement. In time, a partnership was forged with MCC Canada's Refugee Program, in cooperation with MCC Colombia. MCC Canada worked through the network of refugee program coordinators in the five provincial MCC offices in Canada to find sponsoring churches for IDPs identified for resettlement by the Teusaquillo congregation.

An important component of this work was the placement of an MCC worker to accompany and support the Justice and Peace Committee and assist IDPs identified for resettlement. The MCC worker also functioned as a liaison with the MCC refugee coordinators in Canada. This coordinated effort of the Teusaquillo Mennonite Church, MCC Colombia, MCC Canada and Canadian Mennonite churches helped over 70 families resettle in Canada between 2002 and 2015.

While the mechanics of this project came together, IDP accompaniment did not always lend itself to obvious answers. All parties faced challenges. For the Teusaquillo congregation, the decision to open its doors to the newcomers came after much discernment. Some in the church feared that the displaced population that would meet in the church building for prayer services and lunch once a week would bring threats from armed actors to the church. Others sensed that the church was giving more attention to displaced families at the expense of traditional members.

For the church's Justice and Peace Committee, the process of accompaniment and of determining the threat level and the appropriate response for IDPs were not always clear. The capacity for resettlement depended on MCC staff in Canada convincing congregations to take on this ministry of resettlement. The Justice and Peace Committee often helped families move to different locations within Colombia, providing IDPs with food and help finding temporary work. In Canada, the lengthy processing time meant churches struggled to maintain motivation and funds. Preserving hope along with keeping expectations realistic became a critical factor in the collaboration between MCC and the churches in both Colombia and Canada.

The multilayered partnership between MCC and the Teusaquillo church not only refers to the variety of levels of project coordination but also to the personal attention given to victims of forced displacement. Such personal accompaniment was an important component of the program, because it touched not just those resettled to Canada. Colombian pastor Peter Stucky and his brother, the psychologist Paul Stucky, often reminded the Committee of the emotional and spiritual aspects integral to any accompaniment offered by the church. This included understanding the impact of trauma on displaced families and the importance of providing opportunities for healing. The church needed to be a spiritual guide, providing a sense of safety in community and newfound meaning even amid the ongoing traumatic stress of forced displacement.

This accompanying aspect of the work was perhaps the one of the most important and personally rewarding parts of this project. As I reflect on accompanying displaced families in Colombia, I fondly remember the simple act of sitting and listening deeply to the sadness and hope of resilient people looking for another opportunity at life. This personal

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attention and sense of human connection made MCC and the church's accompaniment truly holistic and suitable for addressing the complexity of forced displacement and resettlement.

Nathan Toews is Seed program facilitator for MCC in Bolivia. He previously worked as a psychosocial accompaniment worker with MCC in Colombia.

Refugee resettlement and family reunification challenges

As governments consider the current refugee crisis, one area of special concern must be the well-being of children and youth. Research in this area is scarce and data is limited. Nevertheless, organizations working at resettlement must continue to search for better practices and support systems for resettling children and youth.

In my work with MCC U.S., I encounter many children and youth in various stages of migration. My thoughts on the topic of resettling children and youth start with my own experience of the resettlement of our family in 1986 from Guatemala to Canada. On the evening of February 18, 1986, many people from our church community and neighbors in Guatemala City came to our home to say farewell. We were departing the next morning to reunite with my father who had fled Guatemala for Mexico in May 1980. He was ultimately accepted as a political refugee in Canada in January 1981. I was 15 years old when I left Guatemala. I remember being happy to jump on an airplane for the first time and travel to Calgary, Alberta, and reunite with my father. This reunification had been our family dream for years. In retrospect, I wish our family had been better informed regarding what was about to happen.

As I reflect on our migration and resettlement process, I have often described it as a new birth, with all the pain, pushes and pulls of labor. We knew a few things about Canada. My mother had cousins in Toronto who had fled there a few years earlier, so we had seen photos of Canada, including of the majestic Rocky Mountains where we would be living. However, no photos or stories could prepare us for what we were going to encounter. Upon our arrival, the government provided some support to help us settle. We received winter clothes at the airport, along with some money to help us start life in Canada. We were enrolled in the health care system and a social worker was appointed to us, although we rarely saw him and he did not speak Spanish.

The first challenges that many newcomers to Canada speak of is the weather. It was -20 Celsius (-4 Fahrenheit) when we landed in Calgary. We had never experienced that kind of weather in Guatemala. Like newborns out of the comfort of the mother land, we were cold all the time and had to be clothed differently. While the first few months of snow were part of our honeymoon, the extended winter, followed by a blizzard in early May, which left us stuck without electricity for three days, challenged us. We started to miss home. Within a few months of arriving, we started asking our father over and over if we could go back to Guatemala. Nevertheless, the weather was not an insurmountable challenge.

The system makes you believe that the one major hurdle is learning the language. However, I believe that too much emphasis is put on language learning. Language will come with time and does not deserve the amount



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MCC U.S. advocates for the rights of asylum seekers who seek refuge in the United States and, in some locations, provides legal services to assist in the process of applying for asylum. See “7 Ways to Support Refugees” at: <https://mcc.org/media/resources/3889>.

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of importance that it is given. A bigger challenge for us was to become family again. My parents had their own communication issues, even though they spoke a common language. They had lived apart for a long time and developed their own survival modes of functioning. We children would side with our mother in their arguments and this would upset our father. Even when our family was reunited, we were more fragmented and fractured than when we were separated from our father. Supporting families with counseling and emotional support as they reunite and resettle must be a priority in the resettlement process.

In conversations with resettled refugees, I notice that a common tendency is to measure the success of the migration by what the family has accomplished in the new homeland. As I reflect on where we as a family are now, I am not so sure that is the best measure of successful integration. In many ways I am a success, because I learned English, got a series of good jobs and an education. However, thirty years after my family resettled from Guatemala to Canada, I am still trying to unpack the effects of our migration by different measures. It took only a couple of years to adapt to a Calgary winter and within four years of arrival my brothers and I were speaking English well. However, our family separated again. My mother has suffered from depression which lingers into the present. While my two brothers still live in Calgary, my mother and my sister returned to Guatemala. My father has a new family and lives in British Columbia. I live in Goshen, Indiana.

Looking back on our resettlement experience, I believe that supporting family reunification was an important piece of the resettlement process that was not adequately addressed. Because of this experience, I continue to seek ways to better understand how resettlement affects families and children. My hope is that resettlement agencies can adjust policies and practices to lessen the adverse impacts of resettlement on refugee families and to empower refugee families with children to make informed decisions about movement.

Saulo Padilla is the immigration education coordinator for MCC U.S.

Changing power dynamics for resettled refugee families

All families with children probably experience delicate tensions as the children become teenagers, with subtle struggles for power unfolding between parents and their adolescent children. For resettled refugee families (or newcomer families), the immersion in a new culture, language, norms and values exacerbates those challenges. When a newcomer family has experienced forced migration, the challenges are even greater. Agencies tasked with resettling refugees must attend to the impact of resettlement on family dynamics, especially on relationships between parents and their adolescent children.

Newcomer families often experience a shift in power dynamics within their family units. Youth are immersed in mainstream culture, language, norms and values through their participation in school. As such, they quickly become masters of their new environment. Parents, in contrast, typically have less exposure to the new cultural context, while also holding deeper connections to their native cultural contexts. They therefore not surprisingly often adapt more slowly to their new environment than their

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teenaged children. This contrast in adjustment periods lends itself to the scales of power being tipped in favor of the youth.

One way this power shift plays out is in language acquisition. Teenage newcomers' developed language abilities often place them in the role of translator and cultural navigator for their parents. Parents might rely on their teenaged children at doctor's appointments, school meetings, interpretation of government documents and more, placing newcomer children in a position of both responsibility for and power over their parents. The pressure of added responsibility experienced by resettled refugee youth can exacerbate familial tensions. It can also lead to awkward family dynamics. For example, children may be put in a position of communicating a parent's intimate health condition to medical professionals.

School is another place for integration struggles. For youth who have experienced forced migration, interrupted schooling has a significant impact on their ability to resettle. The Canadian school system aligns students' ages with their grades, which can result in students' grade placement conflicting with their school experience. A 16-year old who only completed grade 5 may be placed in a grade 10 classroom. Such young people understandably often experience feelings of isolation and frustration at their difficulty in adapting to the curriculum and the expectations of educators and peers. As a result, newcomer youth sometimes become vulnerable to participating in destructive behaviors.

A further point of tension arises from conflict between the values held by newcomer students' families and the values espoused by schools and service providers. Zeinab (not her real name), a young woman in high school whose family had recently resettled in Winnipeg after fleeing war in Somalia, was delighted to find out that she made the high school basketball team. Teachers and support workers at the local community center celebrated with her and encouraged her to pursue this extracurricular activity. In their eyes, this represented an opportunity for Zeinab to develop friendships and find her place in the new school environment. Zeinab's mother, however, did not approve of this activity. As a single mother with three young children at home, she needed Zeinab's help after school. Zeinab, feeling frustrated and confused at the diverging opinions of trusted adults in her life, soon began sneaking away from home to play basketball. When her mother challenges her behavior, Zeinab threatens to call 911.

Newcomer mothers and fathers cite feelings of a loss of authority in parenting their teenage children. The child protection policies meant to strengthen families in Canada can be misunderstood by parents and misused by youth. Stories of government authorities removing children from their homes circulate within newcomer communities—children's threats in the heat of an argument with their parents to call an emergency helpline incites fear into newcomer parents and simultaneously strips them of their confidence to enforce boundaries or expectations. This shift in power dynamics within resettled refugee families can also lead to greater vulnerability of newcomer youth to engaging in destructive actions.

Organizations working with newcomers seek to strengthen newcomer family bonds during these times of stress. In Winnipeg, the General Child and Family Services Authority seeks to combat fears associated with their services within the newcomer community. The Authority developed

and circulated a video resource among newcomer-serving agencies to familiarize newcomer parents with Manitoba's child welfare system and parenting rights, responsibilities and laws and to facilitate dialogue, break down barriers and support newcomer families in their transition to life in Canada. Organizations supporting resettled refugee youth in Winnipeg provide programming that facilitates relationship building between parents and their children, such as the Newcomers Employment and Education Development Services (NEEDS) Centre's Mentorship Program, which pairs newly arrived refugee youth and their families with a Canadian-resident mentor. Field trips to local events and activities allow parents and youth to interact in a neutral environment and create positive memories together.

The changing power dynamics experienced by resettled refugee families can produce considerable strain on the family unit. By supporting parent-youth relationships, service providers are laying a foundation for newcomer family success and simultaneously mitigating the vulnerability of newcomer youth to increased participation in destructive behaviors.

Katie Froese is MCC Manitoba International Volunteer Exchange Program coordinator. She has worked with resettled refugee youth at NEEDS Centre in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Colombian refugees' stories of navigating settlement

Having to flee one's home as a refugee is traumatic. Resettlement, which can be full of hope and seem like a way out of this trauma, is difficult as well. In 2013, I interviewed seven adults, now all Canadian citizens, who immigrated to Canada as refugees from Colombia over a decade ago. The study explored participants' experiences of being refugees and starting new lives in Canada. Two key metaphors recurred throughout these interviews: uprooting and rebirth.

One source of refugee trauma stems from fleeing home. Agencies working to resettle refugees must understand and account for this trauma. A resettled refugee I interviewed, who had worked for the human rights of rural, small-scale farmers, offered an agricultural metaphor commonly used by displaced people from rural, agricultural areas to explain the essence of becoming a refugee:

Displaced people use a word that expresses very well what it means—*arrancados*—to be uprooted. . . . To *arrancar* is to grab a plant and rip it out of the ground roots and all, it doesn't matter if it is bruised—bruise it!—but pull it up with its roots from the ground. I think this is like the reality of a refugee. We are roughly ripped up from our land, and this obviously creates deep wounds And so obviously you arrive with very profound feelings of emptiness.

He further explained that becoming a refugee is “a total life change and it is something that you are forced to do. It's not a ‘free decision’ that you take because you want to look for a better life. No, it is something that you do because you have to, because you have no other option.”

Numerous study participants described the experience of resettling in Canada as a new birth, using metaphors of “being reborn,” “being a

“ The experience of resettling in Canada was described by numerous study participants as a new birth, using metaphors of ‘being reborn,’ ‘being a newborn,’ ‘starting from zero’ or ‘rebuilding one’s life.’”



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newborn," "starting from zero" or "rebuilding one's life." One study participant explained what he meant by a new birth:

I want to leave all of that behind. I don't want to go back. Never. I want to be reborn. I want to be another person and I want—yes, I would like to start a new life. That is to say, a new life, a new birth. Like I said, you don't have English, you don't know how to speak, you don't know how to walk, you go out—you get lost . . . you don't know how to read, you don't know anything. You are a newborn here.

Another participant made references to losses in the process of being reborn:

Everything was lost. But it had to return. . . When we touched down on Canadian soil I said to my wife, "Here we will be reborn." We have to learn the language, we have to learn how to survive, we have to learn how to make friends, we have to return to being a family. These are the big things that happen. And so each of us started.

Explaining the metaphor of being reborn further, he elaborated:

It's like the stages of life, I think that it comes in stages. How was the birth? How difficult was the labor? My birth was difficult . . . with a whole lot of complications, which were my family beside me. . . Then, how we developed and how we ourselves became the physicians that dealt with the situation. And we began to find solutions and make our own medicines. . . After that comes the process of maturing in English . . . between zero and three years you are learning to listen and learning the words. Later, it's like getting to know the world, knowing who are going to be your parents, who are your siblings. It's like the book of life—being reborn and doing all that in a short period of time.

The challenge of starting over as adults was described by another participant as "starting from zero, in every sense. The only thing is that we are 40-year-old bodies, but totally empty because we don't have the language, we don't have friends, we don't have money, we have absolutely nothing." Such vivid metaphorical descriptions of starting from zero and being reborn highlight the challenges refugees face as they rebuild their lives, often in middle age, in Canada. Perhaps not as obviously, these depictions of resettlement as rebirth also contain hints of possibility, hope and determination.

Having started again once before, participants emphasized that, while difficult, starting again is in fact possible. In speaking about the idea of resettlement as rebirth, one participant described what being reborn could imply in the long run: "You arrive here to be reborn, to start to study, to start to grow. . . to learn to volunteer, to volunteer more than you already do. . . and to give what you have to help people who arrive." Several women in the study emphasized their ability to overcome obstacles and barriers in the settlement process, and one mentioned the importance of "having time for everything" (work, family, friends, helping others) in life. She explained "You have to give to receive. . . We say 'we were blessed, we have to bless others.' And we have done so a lot of times."

The two images of uprooting and rebirth open a window onto the struggles of resettled refugees. While the beginning of the refugee experience is one of being roughly uprooted and starting from zero, this does not define the

entirety of the refugee experience. As the new country becomes home and as life is re-established, an opportunity for rebirth arises. While rebirth is fraught with challenge, it can be a hope-filled image to guide refugees to settlement in their new homes.

Shalom Wiebe is a program manager for HOPE International Development Agency. She previously served with MCC in Colombia as a support worker for internally displaced people.

Private Refugee Sponsorship in Canada: an opportunity for mutual transformation

Resettlement of refugees from a country of asylum to a third country is one of three durable solutions for refugees, alongside voluntary repatriation and local integration. In Canada, the federal government's Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR) program allows private citizens to sponsor refugees through organizations who hold sponsorship agreements with the government. While the central purpose of the program is the successful resettlement of refugees, a recent evaluation of MCC Manitoba's work with its sponsoring groups shows that it also presents an opportunity to promote mutually transformative relationships as these groups learn what it means to accompany newcomers.

In late 2015, I conducted an evaluation of the interaction between what sponsors bring to the resettlement experience and the role of MCC Manitoba's migration and resettlement program in helping sponsors navigate the resettlement process. Constituent groups that sponsor refugees have significant influence over the sponsorship process and settlement outcomes. MCC staff work through these sponsorship groups to serve refugees being resettled in Canada.

When asked to name the key challenges faced in the sponsorship and resettlement process, sponsors invariably turn to the practical and instrumental details of resettlement. The first weeks and months are intense and require daily hands-on support, from obtaining health cards and social insurance numbers to teaching newcomers how to run their appliances and take public transportation. While sponsors have access to checklists to cover off these tasks and prepare for them in advance of the refugees' arrival, more complex variables are at play the instant the newcomers step off the plane. Navigating cultural differences and misunderstandings, managing the expectations of both newcomers and sponsors and learning how different personalities and experiences will impact resettlement are all factors that cannot be predicted in advance.

Many sponsors recognize that their responses to these unpredictable variables are key to successful settlement outcomes and at the same time often feel ill-equipped in their responses. This is particularly the case when attempting to help newcomers process the trauma they have experienced. Groups that have participated in multiple sponsorships have also gone through their own process of grappling with doing what they can to ensure a smooth resettlement and allowing newcomers to make their own decisions and learn from their mistakes. Previous research has identified the need to exercise caution in the language used to characterize newcomers so as not to negatively impact their ability to

“ Time and again, sponsors have identified building meaningful relationships as the most transformative part of the sponsorship process. Studies of past sponsorship initiatives have shown that, despite the dependence that others have argued is embedded in the program, most newcomers were able to establish relationships with sponsors that were trusting enough to overcome the challenges in the process.”

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resettle successfully (Lamba and Krahn, 2003). Instead, the relationship between sponsor and newcomer should be framed as one of sharing and partnership that recognizes the years of education, professional experience and social networks that newcomers bring with them when they resettle (McKinnon, 2009; Lanphier, 2003).

MCC staff have much to offer in supporting constituent groups as they accompany newcomers and help these recently resettled newcomers make a successful transition to life in Canada. To be sure, constituent groups sponsoring refugees will naturally learn certain lessons over the course of the minimum one-year commitment they make to the resettlement process. Sponsors learn to expect the unexpected and to have their worldviews challenged and expanded. However, sponsors also express openness to engage in deeper planning for and walking through the sponsorship process. Specifically, sponsors have indicated that they want to understand at the outset of the resettlement process what the evaluation criteria might be for a successful resettlement. This provides an entry point for MCC staff to provide information on best practices for how sponsor groups can work together with newcomers on goal setting, to help sponsor groups understand their own cultural biases and positions of power and to emphasize the relational aspects of sponsorship. The evaluation of a sponsorship can also include mechanisms that pull in feedback from sponsors and provide them an opportunity to reflect not only on the outcome of the resettlement, but also on their supporting role in the process. These learnings can in turn inform future sponsorships.

Time and again, sponsors have identified building meaningful relationships as the most transformative part of the sponsorship process. Studies of past sponsorship initiatives have shown that, despite the dependence that others have argued is embedded in the program, most newcomers were able to establish relationships with sponsors that were trusting enough to overcome the challenges in the process (Neuwirth and Clark, 1981). Given its nearly four decades of experience with refugee sponsorship, MCC is well placed to encourage sponsoring groups to move to deeper levels of engagement with the individuals and families they sponsor. Through this support, refugee sponsorship has the potential to be a mutually transformative process of integration and community building.

Stephanie Dyck is an MCC humanitarian relief and disaster recovery coordinator.

The role of Welcome Teams in the U.S. model of refugee resettlement

While refugee resettlement in the United States has enjoyed longstanding support from lawmakers and communities, 2017 has seen the creation of policies aimed at limiting and decreasing arrivals. Resettlement efforts in the U.S. involve collaborations among governmental agencies, non-profit organizations known as Voluntary Agency (or Volags) and communities. Congregations and faith partners have played an important role since formal refugee resettlement efforts began in 1975. Now, even as refugee resettlement has become a political hot topic, churches continue to carry out a significant role in providing welcome, especially in terms of building lasting relationships and serving as community guides to newcomers from around the world.

From its inception, the U.S. refugee program intended for the public and private sectors to partner in the welcome and integration of refugees. The Refugee Act of 1980 formalized these partnership efforts at refugee resettlement, creating the Federal Refugee Resettlement Program. At present, nine Volags hold contracts with the federal government to welcome and assist refugees in their initial transitions to communities around the country. Each agency manages its local offices across the U.S., while each office interacts closely with the surrounding community. When congregations like Conestoga Mennonite Church in Morgantown, Pennsylvania, welcome refugees, they form partnerships with a Volag responsible for resettling families in their area. For Conestoga, the partnering Volag was my employer, Church World Service (CWS) of Lancaster, Pennsylvania.

On a sunny afternoon in May 2017, a home in New Holland, Pennsylvania, underwent a special transformation. The brick house, down the street from a tractor supply store, was outfitted to become the new home for a Congolese family. While the Conestoga Mennonite Church Welcome Team was hard at work cleaning and organizing in preparation for their arrival, the Congolese family (a mother, father and their four children), were still waiting for their flight from Tanzania to New York.

It had been decades since congregants of Conestoga Mennonite had sponsored refugees. In early 2016, the congregation began conversations about welcoming another family to eastern Lancaster County. Pastor Bob Petersheim notes that “Conestoga has a long history of mission support local and global. . . . [We] have deep in our congregational DNA the Matthew 25 words of Jesus that state, ‘if done to the least of these, it has been done to me.’”

Conestoga formed a committee, received a refresher on system changes since they had last sponsored and began the work to prepare for a family. The Welcome Team involvement has added additional support to the family’s resettlement journey, providing further assistance to integration efforts. CWS case manager, Alyssa Anderson, notes that “the stability and support the Conestoga Mennonite Team provides to the family is so crucial. The family knows that they have a community that not only welcomes them, but loves them, and that makes such a difference.”

Some churches want to help with refugee resettlement, but do not live within the permitted resettlement range of a registered Volag to be involved. Without a way to privately sponsor a family, these communities are limited in their ability to extend welcome. One such community currently navigating this situation is Gainesville, Florida. Richard and Eve MacMaster, members of Emmanuel Mennonite Church, began organizing interfaith and community efforts with the expectation that welcoming refugees to Gainesville would be the bulk of their work. They soon realized that their church is 75 miles from the closest resettlement agency. The congregation’s efforts have now shifted towards organizing volunteers and donations to be sent to newcomers in the closest resettlement town. If given the opportunity to either welcome a resettlement agency to Gainesville or privately sponsor a family, the MacMasters say they would “very definitely” jump on board.

An additional challenge for the U.S. refugee resettlement program is that the work of resettlement agencies is tied to the political will of the nation. The media coverage of the Syrian crisis has seen an increase in community

“ The stability and support the Conestoga Mennonite Team provides to the family is so crucial. The family knows that they have a community that not only welcomes them, but loves them, and that makes such a difference.”—Alyssa Anderson, CWS Lancaster case manager



United States State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration: <https://www.state.gov/j/prm/about/index.htm>.

United States Department of Health and Human Services Office of Refugee Resettlement: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/orr>.

interest to volunteer with refugees, but a decrease in the political will to fund the program and allow families to arrive. Regardless of community support and money raised, agencies are now faced with being unable to perform the vital work to which they have been called.

Community and faith partner support is invaluable to the work of resettlement agencies in the U.S. Many times, the relationships established within the first months of transition last a lifetime. Although this has been a turbulent year for refugee resettlement in the U.S., congregations like Conestoga Mennonite and communities like Gainesville are stepping up to show that there is space for refugees and immigrants in our communities as our neighbors.

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