Report of the 1st Good Practices in Refugee Resettlement Roundtable

June 21, 2003

Forced Migration Laboratory
Center for Comparative Immigration Studies
University of California, San Diego

Introduction

On June 21, 2003, the Forced Migration Laboratory (FML) at the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS), University of California, San Diego convened the 1st Good Practices in Refugee Resettlement Roundtable. Framed in the context of refugee resettlement in San Diego County, California, the Roundtable brought together a panel of practitioners, policymakers, and academics currently engaged in work with this group. Complimenting the local participants were several practitioners that engage in similar work at the international level. This provided the roundtable with valuable comparative insight and helped direct the discussion toward making preliminary recommendations for strengthening existing programs and practices geared toward assisting San Diego’s refugee and asylee populations.

The Roundtable specifically focused upon two major, inter-related areas in resettlement: micro-enterprise/job creation strategies and psycho-social programs. By looking at these two areas, the Roundtable provided a venue for stakeholders to share information, inform on new programs and practices, and strategize ways in which to strengthen existing programs and practices.

NGO Involvement

Two San Diego-based NGOs, International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Survivors of Torture International, were represented at the Roundtable and provided a brief introduction to their programs. Both deal with refugees and asylees, and presently collaborate with one another in an effort to assist these populations further.

The International Rescue Committee, represented by Regional Resettlement Director Bob Montgomery, conducts programs in micro-enterprise (with emphasis on encouraging

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women entrepreneurs by providing them a business incubator and micro-loans) and psycho-social issues (including educational courses geared at assimilation). Both programs have succeeded in boosting San Diego’s resettled refugee population. However, as Montgomery pointed out, for these programs (and others like them) to be successful, community cooperation, continued outreach efforts to refugees and asylees, and ensuring there is adequate funding services to provide assistance is extremely important.

Survivors of Torture International, represented by Executive Director Kathi Anderson, works with asylees who became victims of torture prior to their plight to the United States. The organization provides clinical psychological therapy, case management services, and programming initiatives. Anderson noted the importance of designing programs that seek to build trust and create a supportive community. Some of the programming Anderson has helped implement include a cooking class for asylees which emphasizes community and adds a practicality component. Another is taking asylees on trips to watch the Padres baseball team, which allows the group to become part of and connected to the larger San Diego community.

**Participant Discussion**

The participant’s discussion centered around the need for the “whole” person approach when working with resettled refugees and asylees in San Diego. Immigration attorney Lana Khoury raised this point, providing the example that when interviewing asylees for legal support, it is vital to build trust and to understand the person as an individual, rather than just another case, i.e. “cookie-cutter” approach. Khoury noted that the importance lies in understanding the person’s psychology, language, and expectations, while trying not to apply any pre-conceived assumptions.

Clinical social worker Arlene Kahn-Shifrin reinforced this, emphasizing the need for strong psycho-social programming for both resettled refugees and asylees. Kahn-Shifrin added that these persons are experiencing issues of loss, grief, identity, and trust, and it is important to continue [practitioner’s] learning of this to make programs more effective.

Dr. Tiffany Lightbourn, Assistant Professor of Psychology at Vassar College and CCIS Visiting Fellow, raised the issue that along with the importance of the individual is the importance of legal education. This includes access to and information on legal support, provided by local practitioners. For example, when is the filing deadline for asylum? What are the procedures? The ability to make asylees and refugees aware of NGOs and other resource groups who can provide assistance in the community is important. Such also emphasizes point of the “whole” person approach.

Programs that assist refugees and asylees cope and help overcome “every day” problems are also very important and compliment the approaches noted above. Dr. Emily Moore, a local consultant, raised this issue and spoke of her experiences assisting the Nile Sisters, a San Diego-based organization run by former refugees for newly resettled refugees. The organization assists refugees with assimilation by teaching about everything from how to
utilize public transportation to shopping and cooking. Moore noted the importance of such an organization, since it was developed and implemented by refugees who could utilize their own experience in assisting others in the community.

The ability to link the resettlement experience from the beginning, i.e. in the camps, to the final country of permanent asylum is an important issue because it provides much needed context in understanding how to implement local effective programming. James Schechter, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Colorado, Boulder, offered this point, emphasizing that creating adequate social responses is very important in this context, especially where it may help as a potential solution for existing protracted refugee situations abroad. Schechter noted that, at present, such programs as peer counseling, talk therapy, peace education, and gender equity are available in Kakuma Camp, Kenya [one of the largest and oldest refugee camps in the world]. However, for those who are chosen for resettlement to countries like the United States, there lacks any sort of preparatory programming.

Bob Montgomery added that the lack of resources in camps, such as Kakuma, creates tension, especially towards those who are to be resettled in the United States. September 11 made this even more problematic. The problem of the United States being too selective on who it resettles is an issue which will continue to disrupt the resettlement process. Montgomery gave the example of the Bantu and Lost Boys being resettled in San Diego, the media attention it created, and the acceptance of those two populations by the community. However, he argued, what about all of the others who deserve this opportunity as well?

Dr. Loren Landau, Research Coordinator for the Forced Migration Studies Programme at the University of Witwatersrand, South Africa, spoke of South Africa’s struggle to build up a fair and equitable refugee and asylum program. He noted that present efforts by the government are exploitative of these two populations and raised the issue of the importance of a program’s organization; this both for South Africa and other receiving countries. Landau also raised the point that, when studying resettlement programs, it is important to consider the attitudes of those working with refugees and asylees, and the interactions that occur.

Questions and Recommendations

It is hoped that the questions and recommendations raised during the Roundtable will further the growth and development of locally based programming. The Forced Migration Laboratory intends to use this information to foster further debate and study; and realizes that this Roundtable is just the beginning of the process.

Questions:

- What are the attitudes of those working with refugees and asylees in San Diego? How can we understand and measure this to create better programming?
• How do we create a community for those resettled here for who there is no pre-existing community base?

• With respect to integration, do the resettled refugees want to be placed in their community here in San Diego or do they fear it?

• How can we help refugees and asylees obtain better access to social and community services? How can we inform them of these services?

• What are some additional benefits that NGOs and other stakeholders can create for refugees and asylees in San Diego?

• How can we provide adequate intervention for refugees and asylees in San Diego?

Recommendations:

• Identify what San Diego-based refugees and asylees need and want by including them in program development. Create a protocol for such an initiative. After this process, identify gaps that exist and address them in a community-based setting and process.

• Create additional methods for disseminating information to refugees and asylees in San Diego about the logistics of settling into their new home, i.e. how to access public transportation and services.

• Improve access to affordable housing for refugees and asylees in San Diego.

• Offer community-based language training and legal education for refugees and asylees in San Diego.

• Conduct public outreach activities concerning the importance of the relationship between San Diego and the U.S.-Mexico border, since it is often the place where many ask for asylum upon crossing.

Roundtable Participants

Bob Montgomery, Regional Resettlement Director 
International Rescue Committee

Kathi Anderson, Executive Director 
Survivors of Torture International

Arleen Kahn-Shifrin, Clinical Social Worker 
San Diego
About the Forced Migration Laboratory (FML)

The mission of the Center for Comparative Immigration Studies (CCIS) is to conduct comparative research on international population movements, especially in the Asia-Pacific, North American, and European regions. In its first three years of operation, CCIS focused mainly on voluntary, economically motivated international labor migration. In adding the Forced Migration Laboratory, CCIS is committing to the programming necessary to address the problems of those for whom displacement was involuntary, or forced. The initial emphasis will be on projects that use San Diego County as a laboratory for studying the resettlement experiences of San Diego’s large communities of forced migrants who originated in the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Central America.
The field of forced migration studies has been, to date, ad hoc. While many researchers are engaged in the work, there is really no established forum in which to share results, with the exception of the biennial conference of the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration. The Center believes solutions can best be found, disseminated, and put into practice through a broadly collaborative effort. Therefore, a major emphasis of the Forced Migration Laboratory will be to establish an ongoing forum for such collaboration. The Laboratory will seek to create a community of persons from diverse backgrounds who are concerned with forced migration issues, locally, nationally, and internationally. We will include academics from other university centers, NGO-based practitioners, public policymakers, and philanthropic institutions. This effort will build on institutional partnerships already in place between CCIS and 29 other migration research organizations around the world (please see http://www.ccis-ucsd.org/institutional.htm).

The Forced Migration Laboratory will focus on a single overarching issue each year. In 2003-04 that issue will be refugee resettlement, in the context of San Diego County. We will draw on the work of the International Rescue Committee, whose micro-enterprise/job creation program in San Diego has produced a number of successful “graduates” who have established successful businesses in the local area. Such a program provides encouragement to other newly resettled refugees, puts San Diego “on the map” as a successful metro area where refugee resettlement has occurred, and breaks the stereotype that refugees deplete local resources by relying solely on public assistance. Our study of this program will include field interviews with successful graduates, a series of case studies of refugee-owned microenterprises, and analysis designed to educate the general public on the issues involved and to help promote such programs elsewhere. The Laboratory will seek to build collaborative relationships with other local organizations such as the Alliance for African Assistance, the UCSD Civic Collaborative (which has established partnerships between groups of UCSD-based researchers and a wide range of community organizations), and Survivors of Torture, a San Diego-based NGO that provides psychological counseling and social support to refugees who have experienced physical abuse. In 2003-04 FML will host a series of roundtable discussions aimed at building up a network of practitioners concerned with resettled refugees in San Diego and beyond. For more information, please contact Laboratory director Nathaniel H. Goetz at ngoetz17@aol.com.