

The Afro News

THE VOICE OF UNITY

[A Better Place to Live Refugee resettlement challenges all of society](#)

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On August 30, 2008, a public radio forum sponsored by The Afro News and La Palabre Radio Program aired live on the topic of “Settlement Issues of African Immigrants & Refugees. The panel discussion and call in segment explored the theme of “How can we make Vancouver a better place to live?” The show was hosted and sponsored by La Palabre’s director and Afro News Publisher, Honore Gbedze. The show runs weekly on Saturdays in the 11:00 a.m to noon time slot on 96.1 FM in Vancouver. It offers local and international listeners news, interviews, special features and music of interest to African peoples, their co-workers and friends round the globe. The special call in show featured guest panelists: Dr. Charles Quist-Adade, Professor of Sociology and Geography at Kwantlen and UBC (phone in), John Nuraney, MLA Burnaby-Willingdon, Jenipher Wasike, REACH Multicultural Family Services, Patience Nzamakunda, a Vancouver refugee claimant, Bitisho Bembeleza, a government assisted refugee and Jenny Francis, MA student at UBC, author of forthcoming HRSDC report: African Immigrants/Refugees’ Experiences of Housing & Homelessness in Greater Vancouver.

Panel participants highlighted both the debt to the Canadian humanitarian efforts and then the difficulties experienced by refugees once they are beyond the initial rescue on their arrival and long term. In this feature The Afro News presents a distillation of the radio show’s content. In addition, there is information shared by three individuals involved with the people, process and policy associated with government assisted refugees (GAR) on a daily basis.

Who are we seeing?

All foreign arrivals may look the same to Canadians who have established themselves in the country for years or generations. New arrivals may be perceived as immigrants. They may be seen with the same eye and therefore expectations of adaptation – no matter their race, colour, status, health and most critically the conditions of their uprooting. To immigration and community workers, however, there are very clear and present differences. “The lot of the refugee looks far different from that of the independent, educated and skilled immigrant who has come by choice,” says Jenipher Wasike, advocate and outreach worker with REACH Community Services. The immigrant of our imagination may have varied financial power but they have arrived on their own will. In the main, says Wasike, “they have left their country of origin seeking change, a better life and opportunities. Perhaps they speak English or French and are eager to apply themselves by their own will and decision.”



Honore G Host, John Nuraney, MLA
Burnaby-Willingdon, Jenipher Wasike,
REACH Multicultural Family Services, Plus
the rest of Panel

Refugees seek protection in dire conditions. It is not their ambition to leave their home lands and families. While it is understood that all ‘transplants’ have personal, professional and physical challenges of resettlement, it’s the nameless others who come as refugees – specifically – government assisted refugees or GARs on which we are going to shed light. Wherever an assisted refugee’s journey might have started – a harsh discriminatory situation in their home country, displaced persons’ camps or at the heart of a war torn area – as soon as they land in Canada they are immediately vulnerable to a new slate of challenges. “Once in Canada, the government needs to address refugee needs with specialized knowledge of this population for customized versions of mainstream programs,” says Wasike.

Barriers to Being

According to Wasike there are many barriers facing refugees. They include culture shock, inability to communicate, lack of or severe under employment, poor shelter and health. Compounding all are political sensitivities and the insecurity not only of their present position but the constant worry for the fate of families still left behind in often dangerous circumstances.

"Prior to coming to Canada, refugees may have been promised certain situations," notes Wasike, "On top of this they may have other expectations of their own imaginings about an almost legendary good life that might await them." The reality is that 50% come from camps where they have seen trauma, lost family and belongings. For most, the immediate previous situations were rough and totally different from life here. Wasike goes on to detail that "mental health is often already deteriorated – then a safe place is promised yet they experience something quiet different from the "small heaven, or Golden Land" image they have built up." All this adds up according to Wasike, to more than culture shock. "It means we need specialized training and approaches to the people we have brought here." Who, she wonders is doing the training and taking a closer look.

In the meantime, refugees live in this incongruent picture with no affordable, suitable or appropriate housing. Refugees may come as a lone or dual parent with a large family. "They go up and down the street to find a house and soon realize they are homeless and nothing is waiting," says Wasike. Communication is a key to unlocking most of the barriers. Lack of English language skill or familiarity with the systems here leads to more than lack of cultural understanding of their new surroundings and vice versa. It may mean the difference between asking for timely medical help, or support for family members unable to survive, never mind thrive, given the trauma they are dealing with. For Wasike and countless other outreach workers the situation is also stressful. They know many of their clients have seen torture and pain, yet there is no time, place or funds in the resettlement process set aside to help them heal from the inside out. While exterior needs are being looked after, awkward and sometimes frightening incidents arise. Refugees may be thrown together with the very people they fled. "These people they meet may be either contacts in the process of adaptation or residents in the temporary residences they share at reception centres," says Wasike. "For them it is the nightmare they were escaping, revisited and threatening their every moment. New arrivals don't have the experience of the Canadian system. They have no trust, only fears. Governments have not helped them in the past."

Multi – Dimensional Living

Refugees live in more than one dimension. Struggling to balance a lifetime lost from the past and trying to adapt to a present doesn't leave too much time, energy or funds for a future. Social service contacts fear that refugees face more rejection than anyone else and are concerned that they may withdraw and fall through the cracks. Typically they don't voice their experience or needs because they fear, personal or medical issues that go untreated. The imbalance also affects the social fabric of the peoples who are enduring the changes. The drop into a new culture often without the local language may mean translation difficulties that result in: joblessness, entry into lower academic levels if at all possible with limited or no prior education. Parents may be dependant on the quicker adaptation to English of their children. The result is the premature aging of children and their promotion into positions of heavy responsibility and blurred boundaries. The information and position that is bestowed on children inverts the power balance in a family where kids simply may know too much too soon and can become insolent and out of control by natural familial authority. "Political leaders talk about inclusivity, fairness and multiculturalism, but we have yet to see it in full force," says Wasike. Current policy also dictates that GARs bear another cost – the repayment of loans after a year of residency in Canada. Wasike notes that proud male family heads bear this burden in their attempt to do the best and support their families. With no or minimal pay work, high loans levied for transportation to Canada, medical tests and the shortfalls on ongoing expenses may force them to stay on welfare." Not moving into the mainstream – or doing menial jobs has long lasting effects on all family members. Is this a particularly African experience? Wasike says it affects all government assisted refugees and she hopes that more resources will be assigned. "We have most of what we need in place – we simply need more of it and we need it customized to the cultural, family and communication needs of the people we serve. The ones we have brought here."

Shifts in Intention and Outcome

How could such deplorable conditions come about given Canada's tremendous reputation as a helping nation? Chris Friesen, Director of Settlement Services for ISS BC explains the numbers that add up to this situation. "Over the past two decades – the influx of government assisted refugees coming to Canada has stayed the same. It is about 7,300-7,500 a year and of these 8-900 come to BC." The year of lowest arrival numbers was 1989. Then the safe 3rd country agreement was signed and BC saw a 30% increase in refugee claimants from Spanish speaking countries, including Mexico. Refugee applicants are

interviewed, screened and brought to Canada for resettlement from 30 different countries. Recently most arrivals are from Asia. "There has been a significant shift in source countries in the past 2 years," notes Friesen. Five to eight years ago, refugees came predominantly from Afghanistan, Franco-African countries and Sudan. Changing political conditions in Africa and peace accords have led to a drop in GARs in Canada, and also less from Afghanistan." The next wave is expected to shift to refugees in protracted refugee situations, like the Karen (pronounced Karin) from Myanmar, also Vietnamese Montagnards as well as the Bhutanese based in Nepal for the past three decades.

Annual refugee claimants now number 1,200-1,500.

One other critical change came in 2002 with IRPA (Immigration Refugee Protection Act). Prior to the new immigration act Canada identified refugees from abroad who had a success possibility of integrating between 1-2 years of arrival. With IRPA it changed to a 3-5 year period for resettled refugees to integrate and this is the framework all workers and budgets must function. "At the end of the day the Canadian refugee program is a 'humanitarian' program. Resettlement assistance has been static since 1998. The new act split immigrants from refugees which means humanitarian vs. economic objectives. New policy is in line with refugee protection and core funding to support refugees once they are in Canada has remained the same since 1998". With 1998 funding and program goals the same and yet more complex challenges that include special needs, lone parent families, kids with no or low education, trauma, larger families and more medical needs – managing and providing has become more difficult. For Wasike and Friesen a major financial issue is also the refugee debt load which may hobble progress even if all the challenges are met. In addition the disconnect between policy framework and the program goals and funding is leading to disturbing tendencies. Kids in school simply disappear after frustrations in trying to catch up and housing is increasingly difficult.

Who is likely to make it? English or French speakers Those with higher education Those with prior job experience

Non-visible minorities

Is there any good news?

Everyone agrees that new awareness may bring change. Lobbying and advocacy efforts are in place, although more is needed in terms of action

and budgets.

Ideas such as staged housing are being discussed. First stage housing and shelters might deal with immediately known problems and decisions on options. Second stage might settle families and then a move to school every day to acculturate all family members and to facilitate greater communication.

Future Forward Report

Jenny Francis is a local advocate for immigrants and refugees. She is also the author of a forthcoming HRSDC report looking at the experiences of African refugees and housing in Greater Vancouver. Here she shares the main recommendations from the draft report:

1. Intensive orientation on arrival for GARs (government assisted refugees) and RCs (refugee claimants) including accompaniment for at least 2 weeks, depending on need; following which, GARs move to waiting apartments that are suitable, appropriate and affordable.
2. Raise RAP rates to reflect reality, and leave them in place for one year.
3. Speed up CIC processing times for refugee determination, work/study permit and family sponsorship.
4. Expand the mandate of, and provide adequate funding for immigrant serving agencies so that they can effectively assist refugees with housing.
5. Defer/extend/waive the repayment of CIC travel loans for GARs.
6. Expand the availability of social housing and housing subsidies for refugee families. Aug 30 La Palabre radio show in studio panelists

John Nuraney, MLA Burnaby-Willingdon Jenipher Wasike, REACH Multicultural Family Services Patience Nzamakunda ,Honore Gbedze (DJ KMG) Deidre Heim, Bitisho Bembeleza, Jenny Francis MA student at UBC

Refugee Services encompass the following unique programs:

Resettlement Assistance support to all government-sponsored refugees destined to British Columbia ;

Pre-settlement support to primarily Chinese and Spanish speaking refugee claimants through Settlement Orientation Services; and, Primary health care screening and treatment through the Bridge Community Health Clinic

Who is involved?

-The Resettlement Assistance Program supports government-assisted refugees within their first six weeks in Canada Settlement Orientation Services (SOS) target refugee claimants who are primarily, but not exclusively, Chinese and Spanish speakers.

-Bridge Clinic services are limited to refugees, with or without legal status

-Department of Citizenship and Immigration Canada

-Ministry of Advanced Education and Labour Market Development and Immigration Branch, Province of British Columbia

-Vancouver Coastal Health

Learn More – Access These Resources on Line Listen online to the panel discussion. Click podcast feature on: www.privilegegroup.net ISS publications and reports: Faces of Refugees button on www.issbc.org

Francis, J. You Can Not Settle Like This: The Housing Situation of African Refugees in Greater Vancouver:

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