

A fair chance for all - Breaking the disadvantage cycle Submission

ChangeMakers Resettlement Forum works with 17 refugee background communities in Wellington with the vision that communities from refugee backgrounds Communities (RBC) (Asylum Seekers, Convention refugees, Quota refugees, and Family Support Categories) participate fully in NZ society and practice the same rights and responsibilities as other New Zealanders. We work towards our mission through advocacy, research, and community development programs.

We thank you for the opportunity to submit feedback on the productivity Commission's interim report, "A fair chance for all – Breaking the disadvantage cycle."

Feedback on the interim report

We are heartened by the Commission's interim report on the "Fair Chance for all, breaking the cycle of persistent disadvantage". We acknowledge and support the commission's systems approach, to find the root causes of inequities and disadvantages. We also acknowledge that the Commission has been bold to discuss confronting issues like the ongoing impacts of colonisation, institutional, systemic racism, and the question of who holds power. Also, for raising some important fundamental questions about the purpose and nature of our public services. Most importantly, we appreciate the Commission's emphasis that new values must be grounded in te ao Māori in recognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti), as well as the adaptation of the He Ara Waiora wellbeing framework.

However, lack of representation for the refugee background communities in the report is concerning. Previous research on RBC, as well as anecdotal evidence from our ongoing interaction with communities has shown that the problems facing RBC over the decades have remain unchanged. There is danger of this systemic marginalization turning into an intergenerational curse, the longer it remains unaddressed. RBC face similar systemic disadvantages as other marginalized communities, and therefore they too should have representation in the final report.

NZ commitment to refugee resettlement:

New Zealand became a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1960 to share the humanitarian obligation to help resettle refugees in Aotearoa. Initially, NZ had committed to

resettle 750 quota refugees each year, however the number was increased to 1500 in 2019. Regrettably, this number has not been met in the past two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

In 2012 the New Zealand government approved a new integration strategy specifically for quota refugees with a vision that “Refugees are participating fully and are integrated socially and economically *as soon as possible*” (MBIE, 2012). The strategy further outlines the need for RBC to have access to equal rights and a sense of belonging. But the problem with this strategy is that it is geared exclusively towards *adult* quota refugee migrants and no mention of their children. Furthermore, other refugee categories, are classed as regular migrants, which puts them in a marginal position. For instance, conventional refugees, and families under Family Support Category. Asylum seekers are in essence left in a liminal position for long periods of time before they are eventually granted refugee status (if they are lucky)

Te Tiriti and Refugee Communities

There is an obvious gap in the current refugee resettlement strategy as it seems to overlook the significance of te tiriti partnership. Exclusion of Tangata whenua from the refugee resettlement processes can lead to inter-ethnic tensions between Māori and refugee communities. So, the strategy should have a provision for tangata whenua to be meaningfully involved in both the welcoming of RBC and the resettlement and processes. Involvement of the tangata whenua in the refugee resettlement processes will foster and grow positive inter-ethnic relationships, for socially cohesive communities.

Lack of data and database on people with refugee backgrounds

It is evident that data plays a vital role in planning and providing tailored and targeted support to communities. According to our information, there is no comprehensive database on the number of refugee background communities in Aotearoa. In addition, there is not enough data and research on how well the communities are doing in all areas of their life. The lack of data creates an environment where community members become invisible and continue to be disadvantaged. Grassroots organizations such as CRF, academics, researchers, policymakers, and local councils have expressed a lack of data as a limiting

factor in community support. Therefore, the problem of not being accounted for leads refugee community members to consistently live on society's margins and miss out on necessary support systems. A comprehensive database on RBC is necessary to ensure that everyone is accounted for. This could be broken down according to the gender (all types), age, refugee status, country of origin.

The need for an additional layer of analysis around the background

People with refugee backgrounds face different challenges than economic migrants while resettling in NZ. They are often put in the same categories while making decisions and policies. Often, these decisions are made without consultation of people with lived experience. As a result, some of the policies are often inadequate or culturally inappropriate. There is a need for an additional layer of analysis when social policies are created. The diversity of social backgrounds needs to be taken into consideration, For example, language, family dynamic, cultural and socioeconomic background. A one size-fits all approach is problematic as it poses the danger of leaving out those who don't fit in the model. As a result, people continue live on the margins of the periphery despite support effort.

When refugees arrive here, they start and build their lives from scratch, and it can take years to adapt to the new socio- cultural environment. During this initial period of resettlement RBC participation is significantly limited due to a complexity of barriers, including language, limited social networks, discrimination, racism, and lack of financial means. These missed opportunities and experiences have a negative impact later people's life. Thus, if the purpose is to identify and explore issues that matter for the future well-being of the people of New Zealand, we strongly recommend considering looking into the details of the backgrounds mentioned above.

Government agencies and their relationships with communities

Government approaches remain transactional and don't acknowledge relationships with the communities. Over the years, there have been many hui and consultations held with the communities to get feedback. However, there is often no follow up efforts to build sustainable relationship with the communities. And as such, the government agencies have

had limited knowledge of community dynamics. For example, there is a heavy reliance on old community contacts, which minimises the community diversity and demographic growth. There is general lack of voices of women, youth, disabled, and rainbow community members at the table. People with language barriers are categorized as “hard to reach” group, an idea which in itself is a barrier for this group to be heard.

Also, questions and concerns have been raised around the safety of RBC to share their honest thoughts, and challenge the status quo given the existing power dynamics at the decision-making level.

Refugee background communities and Social Inclusion

The refugee community is among the marginalized and most vulnerable communities in Aotearoa. For RBC some of the key barriers to participating meaningfully in NZ society range from negative stereotypes and discrimination, low socio-economic status, lack of English language proficiency, through to education and systemic marginalization. Lack of a comprehensive database and insufficient funding exacerbate the refugee community's marginality.

Beyond policy provision for equal access to opportunities and resources, the idea of inclusivity extends to participation in decision-making processes. Being included and given the opportunity to have an input in long-term decisions such as investment in future generations is necessary if we are to break the cycle of systemic marginalization. Currently, the New Zealand education curriculum does not reflect the country's rapidly growing ethno-cultural diversity. School aged children and youth from refugee background are compelled to double their effort to “fit in”, an issue which often leads to identity crises due to loss of mother language, culture and religion. RBC communities are full of intergenerational dissonance emanating from parent/child communication breakdown due to children's loss of mother tongue as many parents lack in English language proficiency.

Policy making and Funding

Grassroots organizations rely heavily on government funding to support and strengthen the voices of RBC through research and advocacy. The funding enables these organizations to address basic community needs at grassroots level. One of the key areas of focus is

capability building, which enables communities to run and manage their projects and programs independently. However, there are limitations on the level and extent of advocacy due to government funding policy constraints and inadequacy of the funds. Due to inadequate funding, most RBC community-based projects (where attempts are made) are run on voluntary basis, which is difficult for people who are already struggling to support their families. For RBC communities to fully participate in society, a lot more support, as well as acknowledgement of skills and contributions that people bring to the country is required.

Evaluation on Monitoring

Reliance on numbers as standard measure for success and outcomes for government funded programs is insufficient as it does not capture the social impact of these programs. For instance, the success indicator across all resettlement areas is the number used, i.e. housing, employment, health, and education. There is a need for ways to measure the social impacts of these projects. Focusing only on numbers as an indicator for success misses out other necessary information such as programme quality, social impact and community contribution.