

Refugees' reception and settlement in Britain

A report for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

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Introduction

Although conditions of reception and settlement have rarely been given priority when policies on asylum were developed by states, international conventions, NGOs and refugee associations place considerable emphasis on this area. The 1951 Geneva Convention itself makes a number of recommendations pertaining to settlement. In Europe the European Parliament, the Council of Europe and more recently the European Commission have concerned themselves with this question. On an international plane the UN Universal declaration of Human Rights stresses the right to satisfactory conditions of living, employment and education. In addition, a number of other international instruments dealing with this question also apply to refugees. Settlement has an impact on asylum policies in so far as it may influence the host society's attitude to refugees. The country which has given protection to refugees has a moral responsibility to take them fully into its national collectivity and to minimise distinctions between them and its own nationals. Good settlement is not only beneficial for the refugees themselves but also for the societies in which they settle. Positive policies enable the refugees to make a contribution instead of being a potential burden. A dramatic example which illustrates the point is the 15 Nobel prizes won by refugees who have settled in the UK¹ and there is a much greater number of less spectacular examples of contributions by refugees to their society of reception. However developing adequate policies is more easily said than done. One major problem is the lack of cumulative knowledge across or even within reception countries because of insufficient co-ordination and a dearth of comparative research². The same mistakes are likely to be repeated and good practices are often not capitalised upon. Unfortunately the existence and arrival of refugees is more likely to be a consistent than transient feature of today's world, as it constitutes a structural characteristic of our contemporary societies.

The question of refugees has risen high onto the political agenda in Europe and in Britain. In Britain it has motivated the formulation of an Act including asylum in its remit for the first time in the 90s. A steady flow of asylum-seekers continues to arrive

in the UK, a good proportion of whom are here to stay (see detailed figures in Joly with Kelly and Nettleton 1997). Issues of reception and settlement are raising new questions with regards to refugees. It cannot be assumed that patterns, policies and answers formulated for established ethnic minorities can adequately meet the needs of refugees³.

The main institutions and agencies which may be involved in reception and settlement are the following: central government, NGOs, local government, and refugee associations. The private sector may constitute a useful partner in some specific areas of policies such as housing or employment examined below. There are several models possible which call upon varied combinations of the above and present differing advantages and shortcomings.

Many areas call for attention where refugees are concerned. These include housing, medical care, language and education, employment, special needs of women, children and elderly people, social, cultural and political rights, family reunion, travel documents, naturalisation and even a possible return. Finally racism and xenophobia against them permeate society and may be articulated through public opinion, media and politicians; this in turn affects the delivery of appropriate services. Policies and programmes must be brought under scrutiny and lessons can be learned for future refugee groups.

The latter question is partly informed by the status and concomitant rights awarded refugees. The paths to settlement and integration are inherently unequal where asylum-seekers / refugees are concerned since they enjoy differentiated social rights enshrined in the legal status attributed to them. They are also particularly disempowered as, unlike established ethnic minorities, they do not have political rights.

The report will accomplish the following:

- Identify the different categories of refugees according to their status (such as asylum-seekers, exceptional leave to remain, temporary protected and Convention refugees), and the legal/social rights concomitant with respective statuses.

- Examine the main policies involved, the impact of these policies on refugees' settlement, the agencies concerned and the gaps in service delivery and implementation.
- Analyse the issues at stake and the pattern of needs for specific groups according to their specific characteristics linked to status or other criteria such as gender, age etc. and what resources can be and have to be called upon for the meeting of those needs.

The aim of this report is to provide an account of the current situation for refugees in Britain. We intend to articulate the major issues concerning refugees, using examples of available research to illustrate those issues. We also look at the future for refugees, and the implications of possible future legislation.

Refugees in Britain face a host of difficulties. Some of these difficulties will be similar to those facing immigrants and caused by lack of familiarity with the English language and British culture and way of life. Other problems are directly related to the fact of their being refugees.

There are several broad questions which are currently important for refugees in Britain, and these in turn relate to other issues.

The major areas are:

- High rates of unemployment and underemployment among refugees
- Health problems and stress induced illness caused by the refugee situation
- Concentration of support services in London
- proposals contained in the white paper for the treatment of asylum seekers
- problems of racism and hostility towards refugees, and the role of the media and politicians
- appropriate training for staff who come into contact with refugees

These are interlinked and overlapping, and will affect many areas of the refugees' lives. Health problems and stress can affect the individual's ability to access and make full use of education and language provision. Unemployment or underemployment can

damage an individual's self esteem and contribute to mental health problems. Racism and discrimination affect the ability to obtain employment.

The data for this report is mostly derived from secondary sources. Published and unpublished literature were surveyed and studied. In addition, interviews were carried out with the main NGOs involved. Internal reports from service delivery agencies were sought out and analysed as well as grey literature not readily available from published sources.

There is great variation between local authorities in the distribution of refugees, the level of funding for refugee support services, and the agencies working with refugees, and attention was paid to these differences. The report was also based on the considerable research experience of the authors in this field. We have included a comprehensive bibliography in order to enable the reader to pursue specific areas of interest in greater detail.

What is a refugee?

The term refugee corresponds to a very precise legal definition; however social reality covers a much broader population of refugees which can be deemed to include a cohort of people whose legal status is different, and who therefore have differing rights. In this report, unless specifically mentioned otherwise, the term refugee shall refer to the following groups of people:

- Refugees: those to whom the government has given the legal status 'refugee' under the 1951 Geneva Convention
- Exceptional leave to remain (ELR): persons who applied for asylum (refugee status) and were refused this status but were allowed to remain in Britain with the immigration status, exceptional leave to remain
- Asylum seekers: persons who have made an application for asylum but who have not yet received a decision, or who are appealing against that decision
- Persons admitted for temporary protection by agreement with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees
- Evacuees from Montserrat

Each of these broad categories carries with it different legal status and also different rights. There is a variation in the degree of certainty that people of different status will have about the future. This will vary from asylum seekers who, since they are awaiting a decision, do not know how long they will be permitted to remain in the UK, to those with refugee status who will know that they are permitted to remain in Britain.

Asylum seekers

Asylum seekers are those who have made an application to the Home Office to be considered as a refugee. They will eventually have a decision made about their application which either allows them to remain in Britain or which should lead to them leaving the country. The length of time taken for a decision to be made about an asylum claim varies considerably, and can take several years.

Currently, asylum seekers' entitlement to welfare benefits depends on when they arrived in the UK and whether they made their application for asylum at the port of entry to the UK immediately on arrival, or whether their application was made after they entered the UK. Those whose applications for asylum were made before 5.2.96 are allowed to continue to claim welfare benefits, though social security is paid at 90% of the usual rate. Those who applied after that date but who made their application for asylum as soon as they reached their port of entry to the UK are also allowed to claim welfare benefits. However if the application was made after entering Britain, then there is no benefit entitlement. And none will remain for any asylum-seekers according to the new government plans (1998-1999).

Under the Children Act 1989 asylum seekers with children and unaccompanied children must be supported by the local authority. For those without children the National Assistance Act 1948 gives local authorities responsibility for those persons in their area who are destitute, and it is this legislation which is currently being used to try to ensure that those who are not entitled to benefits get some sort of support. However, this assistance must be in kind rather than in the form of direct payments. Some form of shelter must also be provided.

Asylum seekers cannot apply for family members to join them in Britain. They are allowed to take up employment six months after they made their application, but must

first apply for permission from the Home Office. Their dependants are not allowed to get employment except in very exceptional circumstances, for example if the main applicant is unable to work due to a long term disability.

In 1998 there were 46,015 applications for asylum, although this figure does not include dependants. Of these, approximately half made their applications at the port of entry, and the other half applied in country⁴.

One sombre area of concern which raises serious human rights questions is the detention of some asylum-seekers, without charge or conviction, in camps or in ordinary prisons when those are full. They do not even enjoy as many rights as convicted prisoners.

Refugee status

Asylum applicants who are deemed to meet the conditions set out in the Geneva Convention are given refugee status. The convention of 1951 states that a refugee is someone who "... owing to a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country or ... is unwilling to return to it"⁵. The rate of recognition of refugee status has considerably decreased over the last ten years on account of a more restrictive interpretation of the Convention definition accompanied by numerous other restrictive measures in the European Union and in the UK.

Indefinite leave to remain (ILR) is granted immediately that refugee status is awarded⁶. This is a recent change, as up until July 1998 refugee status was awarded for four years, and then ILR could be applied for⁷.

Persons granted refugee status are entitled to the full range of welfare benefits available to British residents from the date that the decision is made. In addition, they can claim back benefits to either the date of their original application or, if they have appealed against an earlier refusal, they can have benefits backdated to the date of that refusal.⁸ They are allowed to work and do not need a work permit, and their dependants may also work⁹. They may apply for permission for spouses and children

under 18 to join them as soon as their status is granted. There is no official policy on the treatment of refugees once their status has been decided, apart from the entitlement to welfare benefits. There is no Government organised scheme for housing, training, etc., except sometimes in the case of refugees arriving as part of an organised programme. Occasionally there are refugee programmes as a result of international initiatives responding to particular problems, for example the programme for Vietnamese refugees which began in the late 1970s. The Vietnamese arriving under this programme were awarded refugee status on arrival and a range of support services were provided¹⁰.

In 1997 fifteen per cent of the total decisions on asylum applications (5,200 cases) resulted in the granting of refugee status. 40% of those granted refugee status were from Somalia, and a further 25% were from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia¹¹.

Exceptional Leave to Remain (ELR)

Sometimes asylum seekers are not considered to meet the conditions necessary for granting refugee status, but their situation is such that the government feels it cannot deport them from this country, or there are overwhelming compassionate reasons why they should be allowed to stay in Britain. In this case, they may be granted Exceptional Leave to Remain, a category outside the normal immigration rules. It is similar to having refugee status, but carries with it fewer rights. ELR is granted for one year initially, then it may be extended for three years, and after this time indefinite leave to remain can be applied for¹². This is a recent change, and before July 1998 those with ELR had to wait seven years before applying for indefinite leave to remain¹³.

Persons with ELR are entitled to the full range of welfare benefits from the date the decision is made, although unlike those granted refugee status there is no possibility of benefits being backdated to before this date. They are allowed to work without needing a work permit, and so are their dependants. They may apply for family reunion, but only after four years. As with refugees, there is no official programme of assistance or reception for those with ELR apart from entitlement to benefits.

Exceptional leave to remain was granted to 3,600 asylum seekers in 1997, accounting for ten percent of all decisions made that year. Nationals of Somalia, Afghanistan and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia accounted for almost 60% of these¹⁴.

Temporary protection

There are around 2,000 Bosnians in Britain whose status is that they have ‘temporary protection from the conflict in former Yugoslavia’. They came as part of an agreement with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, and were given their status on arrival in the UK, although they could apply for asylum if they wished¹⁵. This was the first time that Britain awarded this status rather than another pre-existing status, for a group of refugees.

The temporary protection status gives the right to apply for family reunion with no initial waiting period, allows the holder and dependants to take employment without getting permission from the Home Office, and allows access to welfare benefits and health care on virtually the same basis as for those with refugee status. However, the documentation clearly states that the holder will be expected to return to Bosnia when it is safe to do. On arrival, the persons on the temporary protection programme were housed in reception centres before being resettled in cluster areas throughout the country. There was an organised programme of reception and settlement, with a team of caseworkers in each area to provide support to those settled there.

Evacuees from Montserrat

A series of eruptions of the Soufriere volcano on the island of Montserrat has forced the majority of the island’s population to leave. Initially those who wished to come to Britain were given leave to enter for two years. In 1997, following further eruptions, a scheme was established to provide assisted passages to enable those remaining on the island to travel to Britain. The majority of the island’s population has now been evacuated, and of the original population of around twelve thousand, only two and a half thousand remain. The majority of those evacuated have remained in the Caribbean, but around three thousand have come to Britain¹⁶. The Montserrat Project began in January 1998 with a remit to assist those arriving from Montserrat and

support the resettlement process. This was originally funded by the Home Office and run by Refugee Action, but control of the project has now been passed to a community based organisation. Those evacuated from Montserrat are included as refugees in this report, despite not meeting the UNHCR definition of a refugee, since the group experiences many of the same problems as refugees and has been treated in the same way as refugees by many organisations. However, many of the evacuees do not consider themselves to be refugees and all are British passport holders.

Needs of Refugees

Distinguishing Between Refugees and Members of Minority Ethnic Groups

It is often assumed by policy makers and service providers that the needs of refugees will be the same or broadly similar to those of minority ethnic populations who came originally as labour migrants. Whilst refugee and minority ethnic populations may have features in common, it is important to assert the differences between them in order for refugees to obtain the services they need. The first major difference is in legal status, with the majority of the minority ethnic population having British citizenship whereas refugees do not. Refugees are not politically enfranchised, and so face greater difficulties in obtaining political support. Many who originally came to Britain as labour migrants retain a hope that at some time in the future they will return to the country they came from. This is often true for refugees as well, but whereas for labour migrants this is a matter of choice, and an issue of nostalgia, for refugees the issue of return is almost always by definition not possible. Return may only be possible when circumstances change in their home country, and refugees are aware that no matter how bad things get or how much they fail to resettle in the country of asylum, there is no option of return. Refugees do not have the option of returning to their country of origin, since by definition it is too dangerous to do so. Refugees are often separated from close relatives, and whilst migrants may also be separated from family, refugees often are concerned for the safety of relatives whilst having no hope of reunion.

It is not easy to determine what differentiates refugees from other migrants and no definite agreement has been reached on this point. However, it appears that when all the variables have been examined, what remains is that refugees had to leave as a result of factors which in the last analysis were not primarily economic and they did not make a decision with primarily positive connotations. What all refugees have in common is that they left their country of origin because a dramatic change jeopardised the life they were leading although this change need not always be sudden. If things had continued as before the change, they would have stayed. Their move also involved a collective character. In that respect they differ from so-called economic migrants as the latter have an individual project to change their life circumstances to improve them. This brings us back to the involuntary character of refugee movements¹⁷.

As a consequence, economic migrants can prepare themselves psychologically and materially for the move because they were able to plan it. The vast majority of refugees did not have a chance to do so and this adds to the often precipitous and traumatic circumstances of their flight, sometimes also fraught with experiences of detention camps, severe persecution, prison, torture and fear of death. Following from this many, although not all, refugees are dispersed at the whim of fate so that the discrepancy between their society of origin and of reception is likely to be greater unless they are able to remain in the vicinity of their country of origin. This sometimes combined with the legal restrictions governing entry in reception societies to prevent or reduce the possibility of chain migration. This is particularly the case of many refugees coming from the Third World to Europe. As far as these refugees are concerned they have been traditionally selected by the distance and the expense of reaching Europe. This means that Third World refugee groups arriving in Europe will include a larger proportion of educated and middle-class persons because of their know-how and resources. However this often does not apply to 'programme refugees' including current refugees from former Yugoslavia. But in any case it would be less valid for refugees resettled through international agencies and NGOs; moreover, the popularisation of air transport is making Europe accessible to broader categories of people, from far-away lands. Refugees display differentiated attitudes to settlement in the country of reception: sometimes there is a greater willingness to adapt to the new society as fast as possible, sometimes a long-drawn resistance to change and

attachment to the past. Similarly refugees can display a very passive and resigned attitude alongside great daring.

The available research suggests that the needs of refugees are often different to those of the general population or the needs of immigrants, and those needs are often not being met by agencies providing services to the general population. This leads to the debate on special integration programmes and measures for refugees. In a sense the refugee population has 'special needs' which warrant special measures.

What is important is to understand the refugees' specificity. What refugees have in common despite their great diversity is the fact that they have been disempowered, more than any other migrant. They have been deprived of their political, social and human rights in the society of origin. Their social world and community networks have been dislocated. Often they have suffered severe traumas before and during their escape, sometimes compounded by transit periods in camps or in precarious situations 'midway to nowhere'. Moreover for many, this may entail an added handicap because of their continuing concern for their home country. Thus, one key objective when designing policy is to enhance their capacity of action and empowerment.

Information on Refugees in Britain

There is very little information available in Britain on refugees and asylum seekers. The Home Office publishes statistics on asylum applications and decisions, but the form in which they are published makes research difficult. Whilst one may ascertain the countries of origin of applicants, their ages, decision rates according to nationality, and the number of applicants in a given year, it is not possible to discover what happens to the asylum seeker once a decision has been made. The Home Office does not make available information on the addresses or area of residence of asylum seekers or refugees. Information on immigrant groups and ethnic minorities can be derived from census results, but the census does not reveal information on refugees¹⁸.

The total number of refugees in Britain is not known, but various researchers have used government statistics and derived estimates of the total number of refugees and asylum seekers vary from 220,000 to 300,000¹⁹. There is no data on departures from the UK of refugees, other than for those deported, which makes arriving at a total

figure very difficult. There are a number of persons within the UK who were refused asylum or ELR but who have not left the country, but the Home Office does not know how many. The Home Office estimates that in May 1998 there were 17,000 people who had absconded, but they include in this figure people whose asylum application has not been completed but they have lost contact with the Asylum Division of the Home Office, perhaps by changing address without informing them²⁰.

Importance of Integration Measures

The 1951 United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees forms the basis and provides a legal framework on which individual states signatory to it base their asylum legislation. As well as giving a definition of a refugee, it also makes certain stipulations on the treatment of refugees. These include the provision that refugees should not be treated less favourably than other non-nationals in areas such as employment and welfare issues. The United Nations considers that there should be a durable solution, that is they believe the outcome for refugees should have a degree of permanence. This solution can be one of three: resettlement in a third country, local integration in the country of first asylum, and voluntary return. This integration remains undefined by the convention, but is usually assumed to mean legal, social and economic integration²¹. The UN convention therefore imposes on states obligations beyond the admission of refugees.

The question of asylum has been on the political agenda many times over the years, and often becomes more pertinent for politicians in times of economic recession. It has been suggested that political and public support for refugees is influenced by the degree to which they appear to be integrating into their new community²². This means that successful integration measures are important not only for the well being of the refugees involved, but also for maintaining a climate of opinion whereby those seeking asylum will be able to turn to Britain. In addition, they will enable refugees to make a contribution to the reception society.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees lists the most important factors for successful refugee integration as²³:

- employment/ income

- language
- support of persons from similar backgrounds
- support of and unification with family members
- good settlement services
- good physical and mental health (access to appropriate care)
- access to education
- appropriate housing

UNHCR also gives what it considers as the main factors which mitigate against successful integration. These are:

- lack of employment
- racism/ discrimination
- delays in family reunification
- inability to speak the language
- qualifications and experience not recognised
- lack of resources dedicated to integration programmes
- lack of suitable housing

In addition to these practical issues of integration, several emotional factors have been identified. These are:

- continued separation from family
- reversal of family roles
- mental illness caused by factors leading to the individual becoming a refugee (for example post traumatic stress disorder)
- depression and mental ill health caused by the refugee's new situation

All the above areas need to be researched in order to gain a better understanding of appropriate strategies and policies for satisfactory settlement.

Research on refugee needs

There have been few large scale studies of refugees in Britain. The Home Office has funded some research into refugees in Britain, although on an ad hoc rather than strategic basis. Reports produced in 1995 and 1997 examine the issue of refugee needs in detail. There have been few longitudinal surveys of refugees and few national surveys. There have been few comparative studies, and the majority of research presently available is either a snapshot of the current situation for a particular group of refugees, or a report on the workings of a particular project involving refugees²⁴.

However, despite these limitations some general conclusions can be made about the needs of refugees. The available research gives some insight into whether refugees are being integrated into British society, and which factors affect that integration.

Employment

A crucial ingredient in the successful settlement of refugees is that they should become self-reliant and self-sufficient. For this reason employment is paramount and unemployment disabling.

Because of difficulties in collecting information the rate of refugee unemployment is not known precisely. A Home Office report on refugees in Britain²⁵ found that employment is important for the settlement of refugees, but there are very high levels of unemployment. Though two thirds of the sample had been in employment in their home country, only a quarter were in employment at the time of the survey, and many of those with employment considered themselves to be employed below the level of their qualifications. Several reasons are given for this. Firstly, the refugees find it difficult to re-establish themselves in the job market because of the break in employment caused by flight. Secondly, they lack work experience in Britain, and often find that the qualifications they have are not recognised. Thirdly, they may not have sufficient fluency in English.

A report by Refugee Action²⁶ found similarly that refugees who are employed are often in low paid or insecure jobs, and that two years after arriving in Britain more than 75% of refugees remain unemployed. Reasons for this included lack of recognition for qualifications and experience obtained outside the UK, poor English

skills, and discrimination. A study carried out in Brent and Harrow of found that 57% of refugees in the area were unemployed, and again lists barriers to refugee employment as difficulties with English, lack of skills or training, lack of child care, and non recognition of qualifications. Finding highly qualified graduates unemployed or in unskilled menial jobs was described as ‘not uncommon’ by a report on refugees in inner London²⁷.

The difficulties faced by refugees in the area of employment are not unique to Britain. A study of refugee employment in the European Union²⁸ found that refugees, more than other groups, suffer from unemployment, and under-employment. Barriers to employment which were identified include communication problems, lack of recognition of qualifications and experience, discrimination, lack of appropriate skills, and lack of understanding of the workings of the job market.

Many of the initiatives in the field of employment focus on traditional measures such as careers advice and enhancing job search skills, or accessing training schemes. There is little work in the area of more active schemes such as mentoring, volunteering, or creating jobs for refugees.

Community organisations and refugee specific initiatives offer potential for voluntary and paid work for refugees, however the relationship between voluntary work for refugees and their future employment is unclear.

Compared to other areas of services to refugees, employment and training initiatives receive the lowest levels of funding²⁹. Research and action are needed to identify what leads to the fruitful employment of refugees. Data provided on local labour markets which project trends in patterns of employment can play an important part in matching new careers or job opportunities with the skills, ambitions and experiences of individual refugees³⁰. There is a dearth of research on this question.

Health

Access to healthcare is an important issue for all disadvantaged groups in society, including refugees. Health provisions do not appear to be sufficient to meet refugee health needs, however, and there is under-use by refugees of primary and secondary health services despite the fact that a high proportion of refugees, comparable to the

general population are registered with a general practitioner^{31,32}. A Home Office study³³ found that in its sample of refugees sixteen per cent suffered from a physical health problem which affected their way of life, and two thirds had experienced depression and/ or anxiety. The report also found that almost no help was available for physical and psychological problems caused by the refugees' past experiences and present situation.

Refugee Action carried out a study of refugees in Leeds, and found that refugees often arrive with physical and mental health needs³⁴. The mental health of the refugees surveyed was affected by their experiences of loss, trauma, bereavement and persecution, and their problems continued for a long time after arrival.

Several factors contributed to the difficulties refugees face in accessing health services. In the first place there are many obstacles barring access to health provisions such as the lack of language proficiency, of knowledge of the system in a particular country and the fear of not being able to pay. Interpretation services are often inadequate, and interpreters may not be available for languages spoken by the refugee. In any case it is important that they are properly trained and culturally aware, since they may need to interpret the context behind the language being used³⁵. It was also found that questions regarding refugee health could not be completely divorced from questions regarding housing and employment.

However the main issue at stake remains the health providers' ignorance of the refugee situation which requires great sensitivity and understanding. Refugees' health problems are often psychological or stress related³⁶, and health professionals are often unaware of the aspects of refugee experience which can lead to these problems³⁷. In addition, the length of time spent waiting for a decision on status can itself have an adverse effect on the individual's mental health. And yet the refugee's physical and even more psychological state may determine their capacity and readiness to make a success of settlement (to study and work for instance). It is important to make a distinction between mental illness and psychological and behavioural problems due to stress and trauma. Whilst there are people with mental health problems in all communities, the causes of mental ill health within a refugee population are more likely to be the result of experiences of war, displacement and persecution³⁸. Because of this the treatment they need will be different to that of other groups. There is a need

for counselling services provided in a culturally appropriate way, and for psychotherapeutic services rather than psychiatric services. The Medical Foundation for the Victims of Torture provides an excellent standard of care and support for its clients, but has a long waiting list and rarely is able to assist refugees from outside London.

Some positive initiatives have been taken by medical staff in several countries and have contributed to a better approach, and examples from other countries show that a good programme of reception which explains and demystifies the society of settlement, combined with conditions which encourage the preservation of their community, has been shown to make a positive contribution to mental health.

Medically qualified refugees, who might otherwise be useful in the treatment of refugees, are often unable to practice their skills as nurses, doctors or therapists because their qualifications are not recognised. This means that a pool of talent is being wasted. Some projects have sought to utilise these skills, for example the pilot project on mental health for Bosnian refugees instituted by Refugee Action which yielded very positive results,³⁹ but on the whole refugees who are trained health workers remain unable to practice.

Housing

The provision of suitable housing is an important factor for the long term resettlement of refugees. A combination of language difficulties, fears of hostility and unfamiliarity with society lead to refugees spending a large amount of time within the home, making the quality of housing more important to them⁴⁰. The home provides a space for the refugee's culture and social customs, and can provide safety and a measure of security for people who have lost everything in their search for asylum. Refugees suffer from many of the housing problems faced by those on low incomes and the homeless, with the added disadvantage that they are unfamiliar with the workings of the housing system. In addition newly arrived refugees are more likely to be single, and so deemed to be low priority for housing providers.

Research has shown that many refugees live in unsuitable accommodation. It is virtually impossible for refugees to find initial housing without help. A survey of refugees in Brent and Harrow found that a third were living in temporary

accommodation, and many expressed problems with their accommodation including damp, overcrowding, lack of heating, and reluctance of landlords to carry out repairs⁴¹. Similarly a Home Office survey found refugees have difficulties entering the housing market, and the reduction of the stock of rented housing has reduced the options available to refugees. Forty per cent of those in this survey said that repairs were needed on their home, but half of these did not know who was responsible for carrying out these repairs. Nearly half wanted to move from their present accommodation, and reasons for this were that their current accommodation was of poor quality, too small, they were concerned about hostility or security, or they were seeking permanent or more independent accommodation⁴². There can be problems accessing suitable accommodation for those wishing to live with extended family members. In the case of refugees from Bosnia, this led to families being split up, or extended stays in reception centres⁴³.

The situation for asylum seekers who are not entitled to benefits is worse than for others. Some have been placed in bed and breakfast accommodation, others have been placed in hostels for the homeless. There has been little research on the effects on them of this situation, but it is unlikely to incur any benefits to them.

In Britain, the common method of determining whether refugees have been successfully settled has been housing. This has not been the case in other countries, and in France, for example, a refugee is considered successfully resettled from a reception centre when they have a job and housing. In Australia, refugees are often directed to areas where there are employment opportunities, and then housing is sought. In Britain, however, housing has traditionally been given paramount importance. For example, the location of settlement of both Vietnamese and Bosnian refugees under the respective programmes was determined by the willingness of local housing providers to make housing available. As there are generally more houses available in areas of high unemployment and a shortage of houses where employment is buoyant this strategy had a negative impact on the ultimate success of the refugees' settlement.

Refugees and those with ELR (but not asylum seekers) have rights to housing under the current housing legislation. This entitles those with children to be housed by their local authority. Those without children can apply to be housed by their local authority

or housing associations but will have no automatic entitlement. Some refugee groups have established housing associations to attempt to overcome the problems refugees face when looking for housing⁴⁴. Those that have been established have many advantages for refugees over traditional housing associations and will provide some employment opportunities to the refugee population. Refugee group initiatives cannot meet the housing needs of all refugees, however, since those which exist are too small and own too few housing units to house all those that approach them⁴⁵.

Language and education

Possessing the language of the reception society is an essential tool for being able to function in it, whether it be work, study, socialisation, or negotiating with its institutions. Few, if any, refugees have English as a first language. Research on refugees' familiarity with the English language has shown that a substantial percentage of refugees, between one third⁴⁶ and two thirds, have little or no English on arrival⁴⁷. English language ability often increased over time, but many still required help in certain situations several years after arriving in Britain.

There is no entitlement to adult education, for example English classes, though in many cases language tuition can be found. The provision varies greatly between areas, and although classes in English as a second language will often be available, these are not always appropriate for refugees. Many classes cover 'tourist' English, and do not cover issues which are vitally important for refugees such as filling in forms, nor do they cover medical terminology⁴⁸. When language classes are provided one difficulty is the disparate levels of education and aptitude of the students; another one is that they are not only learning a language but also a culture sometimes far removed from their own⁴⁹. A strong input of language learning on arrival with no follow-up cannot bear sufficient fruit. The refugees may initially have little motivation to learn if they are still under the trauma of their experience; anxious to find a job; or trying to secure the reunion of their family etc. In addition the acquisition of language through classes will be strengthened once social interaction takes place through employment, for instance and perhaps with the motivation of getting a better job⁵⁰. Little is known on all these aspects. What is certain is that the problem of language has to be resolved. Insufficient mastery of the language is a recurrent obstacle to vocational training,

further education, or obtaining better employment. This is especially true of qualified persons. Another barrier to access to training, education, and language acquisition is the lack of income to enable refugees to carry out such activities.

Children of refugees who are of school age are expected to attend school. Though asylum seekers have lost access to most benefits, their children are still entitled to access state education. Many schools will make special arrangements for pupils who do not speak English, but there is no nationally agreed policy on the education of refugee children. Special arrangements for refugee children will therefore vary widely between local authorities and between schools in the same authority, depending on awareness of needs and the number of refugee children in schools. Teachers often lack an understanding of the refugee situation and its effects on children, and so may be unable to respond adequately to their needs.

Role of community groups

Community groups play a vital role, supporting and assisting new arrivals and providing a link between the members of the community and the rest of society. Research shows that in many cases refugees prefer to live in areas where there are others from the same background⁵¹, and that the presence of a strong community group can help to reduce adjustment problems. The mechanism whereby a community group emerges is unclear, and likely to vary between populations.

Several refugee communities have established community associations. The exact nature of these groups varies, but in general they exist to provide a measure of social and/or practical support to members of their community. Some also take on a political role, campaigning or publicising the situation of their compatriots either here or in the home country⁵². In many cases these refugee associations provide invaluable assistance to their communities, and although the refugees may feel alienated from the rest of society, they are able to find support from their own community⁵³. Refugee associations can play a pivotal role in the settlement of refugees. UNHCR summarised the central role played by refugee associations in five central areas: they help new arrivals with vital matters relating to integration and continue to do so at a later stage; they provide psychological and material support; they help refugees maintain their

cultural identity; they promote a positive image among nationals of their host country through their cultural presentations⁵⁴; and they provide an opportunity for meaningful activity, enhancing the self image of refugees⁵⁵.

Community associations and community based support groups appear to become established as an attempt to meet a perceived need within the community. As such, they may be expected to know how best to meet the needs of their community, and perhaps in some cases to be the best provider of support. However, there is an inevitable time lag between a group existing and constituting itself into a community and forming an association or support group. This implies that in the intervening period there are refugee needs remaining unmet, and in some instances no community is formed. Research has shown that in many cases the establishment of support groups depends on the presence of earlier arrivals; a well educated section of the community; or a cohort of persons familiar with the British way of doing things⁵⁶.

Refugee communities do not all establish the same types of support groups. For instance, some establish employment and training groups whilst others do not. It is unclear whether this is because some groups have a definite need in this area, or because only some groups have people who are willing and able to establish the group. Establishing a support group can put a lot of pressure on the members of a community, particularly if the community is small, since the burden of work on the individuals involved may be large⁵⁷.

Some refugee populations contain within them religious, ethnic, political, and linguistic divisions, and this can lead to several groups being established, all claiming to meet the needs of a particular community, or to a community association failing to represent the interests of all those it claims to represent. This becomes problematic when service providers seek to establish the needs of a group via consulting with 'community leaders'. In particular, the needs of women, single parents and elderly refugees may be marginalised⁵⁸.

The location of refugees settlement is a sine qua non to make community building possible. Refugee communities can only become established when refugees are gathered in sufficient numbers in the same area. When refugees are scattered, or for those members of a community who are settled in an area where others from their group are few in number, community based support will not be forthcoming.

Effects of racism and bad publicity

Racism is an unpleasant feature of life in Britain for minority groups, including refugees. Refugees also have to contend with media stories and political pronouncements which portray them in a negative light. There is little research on the impact of these on refugees, and the possible connection to harassment and discrimination. However the importance of public attitudes to refugees and incidents of harassment was shown by Home Office research, which found that personal experience of abuse or discrimination was the single most important variable in determining an individual refugee's settlement in Britain⁵⁹. This research also found that half of the refugees they interviewed had experienced racial discrimination, almost a third had experienced verbal abuse, almost a fifth had been threatened, and thirteen percent had been attacked. Those who had more contact with British society were more likely to have experienced abuse, which means that those who seek integration place themselves at greater risk of harassment. One comparative study on Chilean and Vietnamese refugees in France and Britain points to the attitude of the reception society as a major factor in the success or failure of their settlement⁶⁰.

Variations in populations

Theoretical studies of refugees predict that the make up of a refugee population will vary according to the type of conflict from which a refugee flow originates, and this variation will be in gender proportions, age profile, educational standards, ethnicity, and religion⁶¹. Though there is little information on differences between refugee populations, the available research suggests that not all refugee communities are the same. For example, a study of refugees in inner London found that the proportion of women among the Somali population was 49%, but in the Zairian population it was 27%. Similarly, among the Somali population the age breakdown was found to be children 38%, 17 to 30 years 44%, and over 31 years 18%, whilst for the Zairian population the figures were 51%, 25% and 24% respectively⁶². In addition the profile and needs of a refugee population will change according to the length of time the population has been established.

Population variations need to be taken into account when services are being provided, as different populations may have different needs. Research in inner London found that in most cases communities did not have detailed information on their community members, even though this information might be useful when trying to obtain special services for refugees⁶³.

Effects of asylum regulations

Very little research has been done on the effects on refugees of different statuses. One report⁶⁴ found that refugees believed that their status was an important impediment to employment, since employers were often uncertain as to the legality of their residence and the need for work permits. Status is also likely to impact upon mental health, especially during periods of uncertainty while status is being determined and when there are changes in asylum legislation⁶⁵, which increases feelings of anxiety. In most cases, however, there is little attention paid to the effect of differing statuses on refugees. Very little is known about the effects of delays in the asylum process, whereby some applicants can find themselves waiting several years for a decision on whether their claim for asylum has been accepted. Some research has suggested that delays in asylum decisions contribute to anxiety and hence have a negative effect on refugee mental health.

The effect of policy on family reunion is also under researched. Those awarded refugee status are allowed to apply for family reunion immediately, whilst those with ELR have to wait four years, and those who are awaiting a decision on asylum may not apply at all. In this context family means spouse and children under eighteen. There are no concessions in the case of extended families, or for the admission of parents. Again, there may be a detrimental effect upon refugee mental health. There may also be a negative effect on the ability of a refugee to settle successfully, due to the absence of support from their family. Research has found that many refugees experience feelings of loneliness and distress caused by separation from their family⁶⁶

The situation of those who have been refused asylum but have remained in Britain without status has been largely ignored. It is known that there are many people in Britain whose asylum claim was rejected, but they have not left the country. As a

group they may be particularly vulnerable and open to abuse, for example by unscrupulous employers. Groups working with refugees are reluctant to involve themselves with those without documents because of fears that it could jeopardise the situation of those with refugee status or ELR. Refugee agencies justify the admission of refugees and special support measures by referring to the genuineness of their claims, and so find it hard to justify work with those who cannot be considered as 'deserving' support⁶⁷.

Place of settlement

The geographical location of refugees is known to have an effect on their settlement. When refugees arrive as part of a programme, there is a measure of direction involved in their place of settlement. A dispersal policy has been used in several European countries and in the UK. These policies often failed, since refugees generally regrouped, forming communities and networks. Those who failed to regroup suffered from the absence of support that these can provide. For Ugandan Asians, there was strong encouragement from the government and support agencies to settle in areas where there were not considered to be too many Ugandan refugees already. This was not very effective, however despite much discouragement many settled in areas such as Leicester where earlier arrivals had already settled. When refugees began arriving from Vietnam, there was a policy established early on to limit the numbers in any particular area to prevent over burdening the local authorities, which led to a situation whereby 4 or 5 families was the usual amount to find in a particular local authority area⁶⁸. This policy was later considered to have been mistaken, since many Vietnamese moved to large conurbations such as Manchester, Birmingham, and London as soon as they could. This was because the small numbers in their area made them feel isolated, and once a sizeable population was formed in an area support services were developed.

When the Bosnian programme started, an effort was made to avoid repeating earlier mistakes. It was decided to settle Bosnians in clusters of 100 to 200 persons in areas where housing could be found for them. It was felt that this was a small enough number to prevent claims of unfair over-burdening, but large enough that the group could develop a sense of community and eventually act as a support mechanism for its

members. This policy was largely successful, since there was very little secondary migration, i.e. few people moved out of their original area of settlement⁶⁹. This suggests that policies which attempt to direct refugees to particular areas are more likely to succeed if they the result is sufficient numbers to create a refugee community rather than a few individuals.

Currently refugees (other than those on official programmes) are not directed to any particular area and are free to travel and settle where they wish, though local authorities may be reluctant to provide support to asylum seekers who were previously supported by another authority. Though exact figures are not available, it is estimated that 85% of refugees and asylum seekers are within the Greater London area, with the remainder distributed throughout the UK⁷⁰. Proposals in the Immigration and Asylum Bill 1999 seek the introduction of measures which may result in a renewed dispersal policy, potentially repeating the same problems over again.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF REFUGEES

Whilst legislation exists on the admission of refugees and the determination of their status, there is no legislation or formal national policy on the settlement or integration of refugees and asylum seekers. This does not mean that there are no efforts made to integrate refugees. There are many organisations working with and on behalf of refugees who are funded by central or local government, who seek to improve the situation of refugees through a variety of ‘refugee specific initiatives’⁷¹ (RSIs). This provision of funding can be considered as official recognition of the need for extra provision for refugees, above and beyond the provisions generally available. Many initiatives have been undertaken as a direct result of research showing a particular need in a particular area. This research evidence can then be used to obtain funding from central or local government or charitable organisations to carry out the initiative.

It is important to consider the nature and intention of programmes seeking the integration of refugees and addressing areas of need. The aim of programmes of work with refugees must be to enable the refugees to regain power as social actors, and to participate fully in and contribute to society on an economic, social, political and

cultural plane. The debate on the integration of immigrant minorities in Western Europe has rejected assimilation as a desirable objective and points to a form of integration which enables the groups concerned to preserve their identity while enjoying equality of rights and opportunities⁷². On one hand refugees have been deprived of rights in the most ultimate manner in their country of origin. It is thus all the more important to ensure that they do not become caught up in another process of marginalisation and exclusion in the reception country. On the other hand for refugees more than for any other immigrant group it is vital that they be able to retain their identification with their community and country of origin as they were forced to leave⁷³. Cultural rights are paramount for them.

Agencies working with refugees in Britain

The agencies involved in the reception and settlement of refugees in Britain are:

- European Union
- Central Government
- Local authorities
- NGOs
- Refugee Associations

Unlike the situation in Denmark, for example, where there is a clear demarcation of roles for the different agencies involved in refugee settlement, in Britain there is often a degree of overlapping. It is important that there is good co-ordination between the different agencies, along with a spirit of co-operation, in order to achieve the best outcome for the refugees themselves. A co-ordination committee at national level and a multi agency approach at local level has been suggested as a model of good practice⁷⁴, but as yet this is not in place in Britain.

European Union Involvement

At a European level, until very recently attention focused exclusively on harmonisation of procedures for the admission and determination of asylum claims, and the issue of treatment after admission and of refugee settlement and integration was ignored. In 1997, however, the European Union established a budget for measures which address the socio- economic integration of refugees. The intention is to make funds available for three areas: the development of pilot projects for the integration of refugees, targeting the achievement of independence and at the same time preventing social exclusion; action to improve public awareness and understanding of the situation of refugees and the necessity of their integration; and action to improve NGO activities and co-operation in the field of integration of refugees. The emphasis is on the European dimension, however, and only a small proportion of the funds are available for nationally based projects⁷⁵.

Central Government

In Britain the government's role in refugee reception and settlement is in two areas, admission policies and funding of settlement organisations. The government determines, through asylum legislation, who has the right to enter Britain as a refugee, and sets the conditions for their initial reception. The government has not set out formal policy on the settlement or integration of refugees, and official policies concerning refugees have thus far been restricted to the provision of limited funds to various voluntary organisations in order to develop welfare services or community self help structures. The integration of refugees has been considered to be an issue for non governmental bodies, in line with the prevailing ethos in British society that places emphasis on the role which can and should be played in society by charities, volunteering and active citizenship⁷⁶. The only government department with a specific remit to fund activities concerning refugees is the Community Relations Unit at the Home Office. This provides funding to a limited number of agencies, for example the Refugee Council, regional refugee councils and Refugee Action, in order that they can provide a measure of reception and integration services. Other government units may fund bodies whose work impinges on the lives of refugees, but this is incidental to their work rather than specifically addressing the needs of refugees.

Local Government

Local government is inevitably implicated in settlement issues, as refugees will sooner or later become the responsibility of a local authority when they are housed or settled in a locality. Local authorities sometimes give grants and assistance in kind to refugee community associations in their area, and so play an important role in the creation and maintenance of formal associations. In some cases authorities employ a worker with a remit to provide assistance to refugees in the area. As the body with overall responsibility for education in their district, local authorities may develop policies on ways of working with refugee children in schools. Similarly the social services department may develop policies in order to assist refugees in their area. The lack of specific funding may make local authorities reluctant to allocate resources to refugees, and local authorities often overlook the needs of refugees in their area⁷⁷. In order to cater specifically for the needs of refugees, local authorities need earmarked funds allocated by central government, as happens for example in Sweden, Netherlands and Denmark, and also trained staff to act as referral points, which they generally do not have⁷⁸. What is still missing so far among local authorities is a clear awareness of what refugees there are in their locality and which of their needs are unmet⁷⁹. However, the information work done by NGOs with local authorities seems to have enhanced their knowledge about Vietnamese refugees.

Local authorities have been forced to become much more closely involved with asylum seekers by the current legislation, since the duty to look after destitute asylum seekers and those with children falls on their shoulders. The distribution of destitute asylum seekers is not known precisely, but it is known to be uneven, with inner London and some coastal towns supporting large numbers⁸⁰. Some of the cost of supporting destitute asylum seekers is met by central government, but many councils have found there is a shortfall and consequently are having to use their own resources.

Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs)

The government has handed much of the responsibility for refugees to NGOs. NGOs are thought to offer greater flexibility and more commitment and understanding of the

refugee situation, and are also said to organise settlement at less cost than government bodies⁸¹. There are many NGOs involved in the settlement of refugees in Britain. These include national organisations such as the Refugee Council, Refugee Action, and regional or local groups such as the Midlands Refugee Council. In addition there are many community organisations formed by refugees themselves. There are around three hundred refugee community and support groups in London, and more outside London, though their number is not known⁸². Both refugee associations and NGOs have sought to meet the needs of refugees through a variety of arrangements which have been termed ‘refugee specific initiatives’.

Two possible shortcomings where NGOs are concerned are amateurism and lack of co-ordination between them. This is often compounded by ad hoc tranches of funding which impede long-term planning and the building up of an institutional memory.

Refugee specific initiatives (RSI)

Refugee specific initiatives are organisations or projects which seek to meet the needs of refugees rather than general service users. A recent Home Office report focused on the role of Refugee Specific Initiatives in meeting the needs of refugees⁸³. These may be instigated by refugees themselves, refugee associations, NGOs working with refugees, or by service providers who act to meet a perceived need within the refugee community.

There are two types of refugee specific initiative. The first attempts to improve service provision for all refugees. This can be achieved for example by improving the understanding of service providers of the refugee situation, or by initiatives which involve a refugee agency working together with a service provider to improve access for refugees and appropriate services. Some examples of this have been very successful in adapting mainstream services, but often this has not been possible and in order to meet the needs of refugees independent services have been developed. These are of the second type of refugee specific initiative, which encourages self help through community development. This second approach has four strands:

- development of community associations
- skills development among refugees and staff of organisations

- resource development to fund activities of the refugee community organisation
- employment and training initiatives

Most RSIs develop in response to an urgent need, rather than as a result of research and planning, largely because knowledge and awareness of what needs are is so scanty. As a result, they are often ill equipped to develop their services at a later date in order to expand the services they offer or meet increases in need⁸⁴.

Funding of refugee specific initiatives

For all RSIs, funding is a major problem. In order to move from voluntary, ad hoc arrangements to an organised group, funding must be available. However when available, funding is almost always short term, and groups may find that a significant part of their resources are spent on securing funding year on year. Whilst larger organisations such as the Refugee Council and Refugee Action receive a large proportion of their funding from the Home Office, medium and small sized organisations usually rely on local government and charitable organisations. This is often location or project specific, and may be provided either for a limited period of time and subject to periodic renewal, or it may be intended as start up funding with no expectation of renewal. The level and nature of funding for both refugee initiatives and refugee organisations is an important issue. There is often insufficient funding of core costs, as many groups operate on a project funding basis. Inevitably there is competition between refugee initiatives, and between refugee projects and other projects for disadvantaged people, for limited funds. Research has shown that many refugee groups require training and support in order to make successful funding applications⁸⁵.

Insufficient funding can also lead to insufficient time to spend with the refugees. Organisations may seek to save time by for example completing forms on behalf of the refugee, instead of taking the time to show the individual what needs to be done. This in turn can create a dependence in the client, but the organisation may feel that this is necessary in order to help as many people as possible. Groups set up to meet one or two particular aims, such as refugee health or employment, may find that their time is being taken up by helping to solve other problems the refugees may have if

there is not adequate casework support from other agencies. The short term nature of funding also leads to job insecurity for staff, and can lead to loss of expertise as experienced workers leave to seek more secure employment⁸⁶.

Implementation of initiatives

With government admission policies becoming ever tighter, and persistent debate on the genuineness of asylum seekers claims, many agencies feel that they have been forced to neglect the social dimension of work with refugees and concentrate instead on the legal issues and the defence of rights for asylum seekers and refugees⁸⁷. They often feel they have been unable to pay sufficient attention to questions of integration of refugees as their agendas are increasingly being determined by the restrictive policies of government.⁸⁸

As already mentioned, the level of funding available can affect the way organisations carry out their work. However, there is no general agreement on ways of working and best practices. Each organisation determines its own policies, and there is no generally agreed definition of what is a good service, or of how to assess services. Both Refugee Action and the Refugee Council are beginning to institute ways of assessing their own work, and eventually hope this will be passed on to initiatives and community groups. Further research is needed to determine what quality is in this context. The absence of detailed information on refugee communities makes assessments of the effectiveness of services difficult, especially if attempts are to be made to address the needs of groups who are often overlooked, whether they be women, elderly people, children, or minority groups within the refugee population.

Addressing the special needs of refugees can be problematic, and attention needs to be paid to working practices and the way that policies are implemented. It is important with all programmes of work that refugees are not treated as passive and incapable victims, and so contribute to their incapacitation and disempowerment. The skills and talents of refugees need to be recognised, rather than emphasis placed on their inabilities and lack of knowledge of British society. At the same time, special measures for refugees could be perceived as privileging outsiders, and so create a backlash from the general population. One possible way of avoiding this is to have

programmes addressing the needs of refugees which involve the participation of refugees in decision making and implementation, but which also involve the local population and from which the local population also benefits. This may appear difficult, but has been achieved by some groups. One refugee housing provider uses a holistic approach, providing a range of services as well as shelter. In addition, around one quarter of their tenants are not refugees⁸⁹. To encourage this type of work, examples of good practice need to be identified, and groups providing services to refugees need access to the information. There is often a lack of consensus on what are good practices⁹⁰, or a lack of recognition that the findings of work in other areas may be of relevance⁹¹.

Needs of specific groups

Just as provisions for the general population often fail to meet the needs of refugees, so measures intended for refugees in general may overlook or ignore the needs of sections of the refugee population.

Refugees outside London

The concentration of refugees within London has meant that services which have developed to support refugees are also concentrated within London. Whilst there are still gaps in the provision of services within London, those refugees outside London have far fewer organisations to look to for support.

Research has shown that the presence of a community group is central to the successful settlement of refugees, and suggests that policies on settlement should reflect this need for community support.

The majority of refugees are to be found in London, and it is important to remember that refugees have needs wherever they are based. There are many groups operating to meet the needs of refugees within London, though this does not mean that all needs are being met, and it is important that the needs of those refugees outside London are not overlooked.

It is more difficult to establish refugee specific initiatives where the size of the refugee population is small, since the cost per person is increased. Outside London, those responsible for implementing services for the general population have less experience in refugee issues, and may be less aware of refugee needs. Expertise in refugee issues is concentrated in London, which means that projects outside London may find it harder to recruit experienced staff, or may be forced to employ staff with little experience in working with refugees.

Newly arrived communities

Special problems and issues can arise when refugees are from a community which does not have a history of exile in Britain. Applicants from Turkey, Sri Lanka, and Somalia, for example, have been arriving in Britain consistently over the past ten years⁹² and can often find existing support services directed towards the needs of their community. By contrast, when Bosnian refugees arrived in Britain there was no pre existing community who could assist them in their settlement, and this was true also of Chileans and Vietnamese when they first began arriving in Britain. This can have implications for the members of these communities. Psychological and emotional distress may be exacerbated by the inability of the refugee community to offer traditional forms of support⁹³.

The lack of a historical presence can also mean that the process of establishing support services and community groups will take longer. In many cases the support services and community groups of refugees are established with assistance from persons linked to the community with a knowledge of Britain⁹⁴. This may be persons who have been resident in Britain, perhaps as students, and subsequently become refugees, or it may be members of the community who have permanent status in Britain who assist newly arrived refugees from their home country. These individuals and the support groups they establish provide a valuable bridge between the new refugees and British society. Groups without this history have to learn for themselves the way things are done in Britain, and this takes time⁹⁵.

Elderly Refugees

Elderly refugees are unlikely to have community networks and extended families to support them. Services which have been developed to meet the needs of members of minority ethnic groups who aged in the UK are unlikely to be appropriate for recent arrivals. There is therefore a need for services for elderly refugees. Research on elderly members of the Vietnamese community reported that elderly refugees were particularly vulnerable to mental health problems, caused by isolation and lack of community and family support. These problems were found to be lessened in areas where there were specific support services for them, such as lunch clubs and meeting places⁹⁶.

Private pensions, company pensions and personal savings are important for avoiding poverty in old age. Refugees are less likely to have access to these sources of income, even after several years in Britain, due to their increased chances of unemployment. Poverty is therefore an issue among elderly refugees, as well as the general population.

Women

Legal protection and social assistance measures for refugees do not benefit women and men equally. There are many reasons for this, but one major obstacle is that empirical data on refugees on the whole does not give a breakdown by gender. This leads to the situation of women and issues concerning gender being invisible to policy makers and planners⁹⁷.

The factors leading to an individual being forced to seek asylum may be different for men and women. In some cases women have become targets for persecution because of their position as community organisers or because they have been demanding recognition of rights for themselves or family members. Other women may have been targeted because of their perceived vulnerability, for example because they are mothers. A woman may be targeted for torture and ill treatment to increase the punishment of a partner or relative. Women may have been attacked, not because of who they are or what they have done, but because of what they represent. Women may be perceived as the embodiment of a group's ethnicity and the source of its survival

because of their reproductive capacity, leading to attacks on women in order to attack the whole group⁹⁸. Women refugees may have experienced rape⁹⁹.

The needs of women refugees are often overlooked. It is often assumed that other than issues relating to child care and pregnancy the needs of women refugees will be the same as the needs of men. However, this ignores the impact of gender as an organising principle of life in asylum¹⁰⁰. Women refugees may come from societies where gender is extremely important in defining one's role in society, but arrive here without their partner. This separation from their partner can make adapting to life in this country very difficult. It can have effects on their health and their ability to cope.

Where women are with a partner, problems may arise if the woman's status derives from that of her partner. The partner may choose to return or move to a different country of asylum, but since the woman's status depends on his she may be forced to accompany him. Difficulties may also arise if the relationship breaks down¹⁰¹.

Groups working with refugees need to be aware of differences in cultural attitudes to women. Within some cultures, women are expected to avoid contact with men, and this can reduce the ability of women to seek advice and support from refugee groups. It can also lead to an assumption by men within a community that their activities are meeting the needs of women, without the women themselves being consulted.

Children

Refugee children have rights under the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees in the same manner as adult refugees. In addition, they have rights as children under the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that in procedures concerning children, the best interests of the child must be considered.

Special facilities are provided for refugee children who arrive unaccompanied. There is a panel of advisers whose role is to ensure unaccompanied refugee children have access to legal representation and access to support services. Though unaccompanied children must satisfy the same conditions as adults in order to qualify for refugee status, priority is given to consideration of their applications, and caseworkers have special training in order to deal with their applications. Where asylum is refused, ELR

will normally be granted if satisfactory care arrangements cannot be relied upon for the child in their home country¹⁰².

Children and those who arrive in Britain when young often adapt more quickly than older people and their command of English improves rapidly through schools and interaction with British children. This can lead to children being used as interpreters for other family members. Whilst this may not always be problematic, there are times when this is inappropriate. Although refugee children have rights to education in state schools in the same way as children in the general population, there is no right to special provisions or mother tongue education. In addition those who are not competent in English may find it difficult to obtain a school place if they are of sixth form age. They are also, on a par with ethnic minority children, disadvantaged by the area where they are generally housed.

Asylum seekers

A substantial proportion of asylum seekers will eventually be given ELR or refugee status, and will therefore become settled in Britain. The question of the reception of asylum seekers is therefore sensitive and needs to be paid attention to, as it may facilitate or prejudice the interests of those who will subsequently obtain status which enables them to remain. In effect, settlement starts from the day an asylum seeker arrives, and it is therefore important that policies surrounding their reception will not subsequently have a detrimental effect on their integration and settlement.

There were 46,015 applications for asylum in 1998, and the Home Office made decisions on 26,720 cases, some of which will have been applications made in earlier years. By the end of 1998 the number of applicants waiting for an initial decision on their claim had risen to 64,770. This means that some asylum seekers are having to wait several years for a decision to be made on their application, during which time they face an uncertain future.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to take employment during their first six months in Britain, though after that period they are allowed to work if they first obtain permission from the Home Office. Those who are unemployed or who are not allowed to work must seek alternative means of support, either from social security benefits or from charities.

The current support system for asylum seekers is complicated, and whilst some are entitled to welfare benefits others are entitled to nothing. For those who receive benefits a measure of independence is possible, though this is severely constrained by limitations on taking employment. They will face the range of problems in health, housing, and so forth already described for refugees in general, but in addition family reunion cannot be applied for until a positive decision on status has been made, and the lengthy period spent awaiting a decision on status creates anxiety and distress.

Despite these problems, the situation for those in receipt of benefits is far better than for those refused benefits. Anyone who made an asylum claim after February 5th 1996, and did not make their claim immediately on entering the country, is not entitled to any welfare benefits. Several thousand people have been placed in a position whereby they are unable to work, unable to claim benefits, and they are completely dependant on voluntary organisations or any family or friends they may have. As a consequence they are marginalised, possibly more than any other group in society, and become easy targets for scapegoating. To this is added the potential risk of criminalisation of this group. This is almost a self fulfilling prophecy, since the image projected by the media focuses on refugees' alleged 'bogus' nature and inherent criminality, but the lack of welfare benefits provides few alternative ways for refugees to support themselves. Destitute asylum seekers, and those with children, can seek some support from local authorities under the National Assistance Act 1948, which allows for the provision of support in kind for the destitute, or under the Children Act 1989, which requires that the needs of children be met wherever possible without breaking up families. However, some asylum seekers are not receiving the practical support that they need and are facing extreme hardship. A survey of users of the Refugee Council's advice service for refugees found that 62% of asylum seekers had slept rough at least once since they arrived in Britain, 61% regularly did not have enough to eat, and 74% were completely penniless, lacking even money for bus fares or other basic necessities¹⁰³. The period spent awaiting a decision on their asylum claim is therefore unlikely to make a positive contribution to their subsequent settlement since the lack of individual autonomy created by their dependence on charity leaves them occupying a marginal position in society. A substantial proportion

of the asylum seeker's time must be dedicated to matters of survival, leaving little time for personal adjustment or integration.

The Government has proposed in the Immigration and Asylum Bill 1999 that asylum seekers should lose the entitlements these Acts give, and also that they should lose all access to social security benefits. Instead, support for asylum seekers will be provided with support in kind by a government agency. Though the precise workings of the agency are yet to be announced, the Home Secretary has said that the agency will make an offer of accommodation to asylum seekers who cannot rely on family or friends, but that only one offer will be made and this will be outside of London and the South East of England¹⁰⁴. Though there is likely to be a small 'pocket money' allowance, vouchers will be provided for food and clothing. Entitlement to the services of this agency would cease when an initial decision had been made on an application, but it is not clear what would happen to those who appeal against an initial refusal.

Asylum seekers can be detained if an immigration officer suspects that they will fail to keep to the terms under which they are admitted to Britain, or fears that they may abscond, or because of problems with their documentation¹⁰⁵. They may be detained in centres specifically for refugees, or in ordinary prisons. Those who are detained have fewer rights than convicted prisoners, and because they may be detained until their claim is decided upon, they are in effect imprisoned indefinitely without trial. At any one time there are approximately seven hundred and fifty asylum seekers in detention in Britain, with the average length of detention being sixty five days, though some are held for much longer. The United Nations Committee Against Torture has criticised the detention of asylum seekers in Britain, since they do not believe that prisons are an appropriate place to hold persons who are not suspected of any crime¹⁰⁶. The period spent in detention can be extremely distressing for all asylum seekers, but especially for those whose health is fragile or who were imprisoned by the regime from which they fled. Though some of those who are detained will eventually be deported from Britain, a substantial proportion will eventually be given refugee status or exceptional leave to remain¹⁰⁷.

The future for refugees in Britain

Immigration and Asylum Bill

The Immigration and Asylum Bill introduced to parliament on February 9th 1999¹⁰⁸ contains several proposals concerning the treatment of asylum seekers and the process of claiming asylum. The main points relating to asylum are:

- removal of all rights to welfare benefits from all asylum seekers
- introduction of a new system of support for asylum seekers who are unable to find support from their family, friends or community
- regulation of immigration and asylum advisers
- reform of the appeals system for those refused asylum

In addition to these proposed legislative changes, the White Paper which preceded this bill contained proposals which did not require legislation and so were not included in the bill¹⁰⁹. These included:

- continuing the provision of funds to voluntary organisations for the settlement of refugees
- consultation to determine what further measures might be developed to assist integration
- reform of procedures to speed up the decision making process
- measures to deal with the backlog of asylum applications
- changes in the regulations governing indefinite leave to remain

Together the Immigration and Asylum Bill and the White Paper on Immigration and Asylum propose wide ranging reform of the asylum system. Though some of the proposals may be considered as benefiting asylum seekers and refugees, others are more contentious.

One of the major proposals is that in future no asylum seekers will be able to claim welfare benefits. Responsibilities under the National Assistance Act and homeless legislation will be removed, and instead a new national agency will be established

which will be responsible for the support of asylum seekers. All support will be in kind. The agency will make a single offer of accommodation, which may be for any area of the UK. The areas to which asylum seekers will be directed have not yet been announced, but the Home Secretary has said one of the aims is to relieve the 'burden' on local authorities in London and the South East ports, which means that the most likely areas to be chosen are those in the Midlands, the North and Scotland. Those who refuse this offer will not be entitled to any other state support. The agency will provide packages of support through local authorities and the private and voluntary sectors which will include food and shelter, and other essentials such as phone calls to lawyers would be covered. This will be a service of last resort, with asylum seekers expected to initially look to friends and relatives for support. The mechanism for this support has not yet been announced publicly, though Jack Straw has said that it is likely to be operated via hostels.

This proposal, if accepted, will radically change the situation for asylum seekers and groups that work with asylum seekers. The Refugee Council has suggested that this is an expensive way of supporting asylum seekers, and a return to the former system whereby asylum seekers claimed income support would be far cheaper. In addition, this system will delay the time when asylum seekers are self sufficient considerably, and will thus have a detrimental effect on their self esteem. It could also lead to the creation of a greater degree of dependence among the asylum seekers affected. The government appears to be under the impression that it is usual for asylum seekers to have friends and family already established in Britain who may be in a position to offer shelter. Whilst this may be true of economic migrants, there is no evidence that this is the case for asylum seekers. The direction of asylum seekers to particular areas, unless implemented carefully, could lead to asylum seekers being unable to find support that from members of their community, and so increase the amount of time they are likely to remain dependant on state support. Moreover, if the areas selected are located in the North of the country, as expected, where the rate of unemployment is high, this can have grave consequences for the refugees.

Another proposal is that the usual time taken for a decision to be made would be greatly reduced. In May 1998, there were 52,000 outstanding asylum applications where an initial decision had not been taken. Of these, over 10,000 were more than

five years old. Through a variety of measures, including reducing the time in which an appeal can be lodged, the government hopes that by 2001 the average time for an initial asylum decision will be two months, and a further four months on average for appeals¹¹⁰. Whilst this may be welcomed by refugees and asylum seekers, there has been no mention of what is to happen to the vast numbers of people who will, after a short time in a hostel, be eligible for benefits in the same way as members of the general population.

The Home Secretary has said that “those who are accepted as refugees or given exceptional leave to remain should be helped to integrate into local communities.”¹¹¹ He recognises that permanence of status is important for integration, and the White Paper resulted in changes to the rules on indefinite leave to remain (ILR), so that those given exceptional leave to remain can apply for ILR after four years for settlement, instead of seven years before July 1998, and those given refugee status are given ILR immediately instead of after four years. Other than this, there is no reference to integration and there have been no moves to establish a policy on the integration of refugees.

Proposals to regulate immigration advisers have been included in the White Paper. The intention is to provide a measure of protection from some advisers who have been over charging and providing poor advice. All immigration advisers who are not legally qualified will have to be registered, whether their advice is offered voluntarily or for reward. Although this proposal has been welcomed by many refugee organisations, it does have important implications for smaller refugee groups. Until the proposals are made more explicit the effect is uncertain, but many smaller refugee groups may find it hard or too expensive to register, or may find it difficult to remain registered. Since community organisations may be the primary source of information for refugees the proposal may cause some difficulties. There will be a need to explain the proposals to refugee groups which offer advice, and possibly training schemes to enable their workers or volunteers to continue the services they offer at present.

The current system of legal aid for asylum seekers may be reformed, with the green form scheme being abolished. The Legal Aid Board is considering using a franchising system for the provision of legal advice and assistance. This may have benefits for

asylum seekers, but will need to be implemented very carefully to ensure that asylum seekers in all parts of the country are able to access legal advice.

Influence of European Harmonisation

Member countries of the European Union have made several moves towards the harmonisation of legislation on asylum, and there are likely to be more in the future. Changes thus far have included agreement that an asylum seeker could make a claim in only one country of the EU, harmonisation of visa requirements, and measures concerning the tightening of Europe's external borders whilst opening internal borders¹¹².

These measures have almost always been in the direction of greater restriction of asylum seekers, and there is no reason to suppose that future changes will liberalise asylum laws. In addition, harmonisation of refugee rights and reception policies in the future will have an impact on the integration of refugees.

The provision of funding for refugee projects by the European Union has the potential to develop new or improved work with and on behalf of refugees. The emphasis that the European Union places on networking and information sharing should lead to an improvement in practices, though this depends upon the availability of good quality assessments of projects and a willingness to learn from the examples of others.

Return

Return to their country of origin is a central concern for many refugees, and the process of settlement is fundamentally affected by it. A proportion of refugees return when the circumstances that forced them to leave their homeland have changed, notably some Argentineans, Chileans, Uruguayans, and Bosnians. It has been shown that unsuccessful settlement frequently leads to unsuccessful returns, but it is seldom an easy process, and refugees themselves have stressed the importance of good preparation.

Refugee organisations have played an active part in preparations. The country of settlement could play a proactive role by reaching agreements with the countries of

origin of the refugees in order to facilitate their return, particularly in practical matters such as pension arrangements and through restitution of civil rights. In the case of refugees from Bosnia, return visits can be made in order that the refugees can decide for themselves whether it is safe to return, without jeopardising their status in Britain. This facility has not been extended to refugees from any other countries as yet. Refugee agencies insist that it must be ensured at all times that return is voluntary and that no pressure is put upon refugees to return. To date such pressure has not been applied to refugees in Britain, and when the situation has changed in their homeland refugees have been allowed to remain. But the UK has been prepared to force Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong to return, which, taken together with adverse publicity and the proposals in the Immigration and Asylum Bill 1999, may herald a general change in approach.

Refugees from Kosovo

The latest refugee crisis in Europe concerns Kosovo Albanians. In January 1998 the population of Kosovo stood at 1,956,200, of whom approximately 1,800,000 were ethnic Albanians¹¹³. Between the beginning of Nato's engagement in Kosovo on 24th March 1999 and the 20th April 1999 (the date of writing), at least 586,000 people have fled Kosovo. The majority, 355,000 people, have arrived in Albania; a further 127,500 are in Macedonia and 72,000 in Montenegro. In addition UNHCR estimates that 800,000 people have been displaced from their homes in Kosovo but have not yet crossed an international border¹¹⁴, though it is likely that the majority will do so at some point in the future. A further 100,000 men or more are unaccounted for and not included in the figures¹¹⁵. There are tremendous difficulties providing food and shelter for such a large number of people, and it is likely that some form of programme will be started soon by UNHCR which will involve moving some of the refugees to various European countries and the United States. The British and French governments are strong supporters of policies of providing aid in the region rather than dispersing refugees, but the Home Secretary has stated that Britain would accept several thousand if asked by UNHCR. These would be persons nominated by UNHCR and there would be some form of organised programme for their reception and support. At the time of writing no programme had been started but arrangements were being made should refugees begin to arrive¹¹⁶.

In recent years throughout Europe there has been a trend towards refugee groups being awarded a lesser status¹¹⁷. The continuance of this trend is indicated by the Home Secretary's recent pronouncements¹¹⁸ on the status to be awarded to any refugees arriving as part of a programme for Kosovans. Despite having a prima facie case for refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention on the Status of Refugees, those included in the programme would not be given refugee status. They will instead be given temporary protection status, meaning that they would be expected to return to Kosovo as soon as it was deemed safe for them to do so. In fact, Kosovans are even less likely to be able to return than Bosnians, who in any case are mostly still here up to seven years after arriving with temporary protected status. This is likely to mean the repetition of mistakes made with those on the Bosnian programme, which have led to their disempowerment and their lack of participation in British society¹¹⁹.

Conclusions

This report throws light on the lack of detailed knowledge and understanding about refugees and asylum-seekers. A combination of reasons account for this:

1. The arrival of refugees in substantial numbers is relatively recent compared to the establishment of substantial communities of labour migrants, and it has often been assumed that refugee issues could be subsumed under those of immigrants and minority ethnic groups.
2. Although refugees have hit a high note on the political agenda and attracted the attention of policy-makers, this has remained focused on issues of asylum and access to the country.
3. The refugee population is fragmented and does not muster political clout as the vast majority of them do not have political rights.
4. Refugees' movements are assumed to be an accidental rather than a structural phenomenon and this has implied a lack of commitment to the question of their reception and settlement particularly on the part of central government¹²⁰.

5. There is great diversification among the refugee population which renders the delivery of services more difficult.

The end-product has been ad hoc initiatives and the absence of institutional memory when reception programmes were implemented, little in the way of well-thought out provisions, and sometimes no provisions at all for non-programme refugees. There is still overlap and a lack of co-ordination between the agencies dealing with this issue; local authorities have been saddled with responsibilities in this area without any preparation nor ear-marked funding. Nobody has a clear idea of the demographic profile and detailed characteristics of the majority of refugee groups and their location in the UK. Finally the voice of the refugees themselves is seldom heard through research, consultation on services delivered or on their needs. Mistakes are repeated and few lessons learned. For instance, the dispersal policy which was implemented for a long time and proved a total failure was eventually corrected with the Bosnian programme, but the new government plans seem to be re-introducing it in practice. The total prioritisation of housing to the detriment of employment is maintained and will be reinforced by the new government proposal despite the disastrous results one can surmise for the refugees' integration and relationship with the majority society. Another unintended consequence is the worsening effect which these policies may have on race relations in Britain as a result of the marginalisation and negative image projected about refugees. One serious problem is the existence of different categories of refugees with differentiated rights which raise issues of discrimination enshrined in the law. Questions of human rights standards are also raised by the detention of some asylum-seekers in detention camps and in prisons when those are full.

Investigation and action are needed in all the major areas examined in this report, including:

- A good statistical analysis locally and regionally based which looks at the demographic profile, the country and group of origin and maps out refugees' level of qualifications and areas of skills would be a precious tool for policy-makers.
- The interaction between central government, local government and NGOs needs to be scrutinised and concerted action agreed between them.

- A thorough study must investigate the obstacles to employment and the most propitious avenues leading to employment opportunities for refugees. This has to be linked to questions of education and training.
- Housing and health provisions reveal numerous gaps and ways of remedying those must be sought.
- One has to gain an insight into the differing roles and modalities of community groups which does not oversimplify those and enables policy makers to promote them adequately.
- Attention must be paid to asylum-seekers, new groups of refugees and to specific groups such as women , children and elderly refugees.
- The training of policy-makers and practitioners in all the areas mentioned above is paramount.
- A scrutiny of politicians' discourse must be followed by training sessions and by campaigns of education for the general public, and the effect of adverse asylum policies on refugees' integration must be addressed.
- Lessons need to be learnt from earlier programmes for refugees arrivals, in part to avoid repeating the negative impact of temporary protected status, the use of which appears to constitute a trend in Britain and Europe. This is a matter of urgency, with the impending (at the time of writing) arrival of several thousand refugees from Kosovo, for whom temporary protected status is being actively considered by the Government.
- Finally, the impact of the new provisions planned by the government is the subject of speculation and needs to be monitored closely. It is critical that past research and experience, not only in the UK but also in the rest of Europe, be called upon to improve results.

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