

NEW ISSUES IN REFUGEE RESEARCH

Research Paper No. 142

Refugees and asylum seekers in the Caribbean region: library service implications

Tamara Brathwaite

Librarian, Institute of International Relations,
University of the West Indies, St Augustine
Trinidad and Tobago

E-mail: TBrathwaite@fss.uwi.tt

June 2007



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Policy Development and Evaluation Service

**Policy Development and Evaluation Service
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
P.O. Box 2500, 1211 Geneva 2
Switzerland**

**E-mail: hqpd00@unhcr.org
Web Site: www.unhcr.org**

These papers provide a means for UNHCR staff, consultants, interns and associates, as well as external researchers, to publish the preliminary results of their research on refugee-related issues. The papers do not represent the official views of UNHCR. They are also available online under 'publications' at www.unhcr.org.

ISSN 1020-7473

Introduction

Seven years ago I had an atypical encounter. A man walked into my library and I did not know how to help him. He had no form of identification, he spoke Arabic and could barely communicate in English, and you could read in his eyes that he needed help. Only at the United Nations Information Centre (UNIC) for the Caribbean Area could he get it. He wanted information on the United Nations and, more specifically, he wanted to seek asylum in Trinidad and Tobago. Luckily, the UNIC Director at the time spoke Arabic and we were able to define a suitable course of action for him.

This unusual encounter raised two questions. How did someone from the Middle East end up in Trinidad and Tobago? And is the Caribbean region becoming an area of refuge for people seeking asylum from other parts of the world?

Since that time I have had encounters with nationals of other countries in Africa and Asia, who also claimed that they were being denied their human rights in their own country and who were also seeking information on how to apply for asylum. As they undertook their research, I became curious and wanted to discover what was behind this development. The more I read, the more I discovered that a new trend was indeed emerging. I also realized that this new trend has some important implications for libraries and librarians. That is the subject of this paper.

Population movements in the Caribbean

The Caribbean region is no stranger to population movements. As stated by Elizabeth Thomas-Hope, “present-day Caribbean societies were largely formed through immigration, both forced and free.”¹ In more recent times, a number of significant migratory and refugee movements have taken place within the region, many of them involving the departure of people from Cuba, the Dominican Republic and Haiti, and their arrival in places such as the Bahamas, Cayman Islands, Puerto Rico and the USA.

In addition to these intra-regional flows, the region has also been grappling with the issue of deportees – people from Caribbean countries who have been sent back to their country of origin, usually due to a criminal infraction in another state, or because they entered and remained in that state in an irregular manner.

While the deportee question raises some difficult socio-economic and cultural issues, the people concerned are citizens of the state to which they are readmitted, and generally enjoy all of the legal, civil and human rights associated with that status. The same is not necessarily true of the refugees and asylum seekers who make their way to the region from other parts of the world.

The number of people in this situation appears to be growing. In recent years, the industrialized states have introduced a variety of different restrictive asylum policies and procedures. At the same time, and largely as a result of events on and after 11

¹ Elizabeth Thomas-Hope. 2003. “Irregular migration and asylum-seekers in the Caribbean”. UNU Wider Discussion Paper no 2003/48.

September 2001, people arriving from the developing world, especially those of Middle Eastern and Islamic origin, have been confronted with a new degree of xenophobia. Refugee resettlement opportunities in the USA also dropped significantly during this period.

As a result of these different factors, combined with the growth of a 'migration industry' that facilitates the movement of people from one country and continent to another, often by irregular means, people who wish to leave their own country are looking for and finding alternative destinations. The Caribbean is a relatively new and attractive one, not least because of its proximity to North America, where many people who are on the move hope to end their journey.

Other considerations are drawing people towards the region. Many countries in the region score relatively highly on UNDP's Human Development Index and have a stable political profile. Refugees and migrants who speak English, French or Spanish can all find countries in the Caribbean where they are able to practice their languages. Both UNHCR and IOM have recently strengthened their presence in the region, so as to strengthen the legal and institutional capacity of states to address the issues of refugee protection and migration management. Such activities may also have the effect of attracting an additional number of new arrivals to the region and establishing a greater awareness of their presence.

Where do libraries fit in?

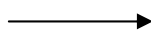
In the absence of dedicated centres for refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in the Caribbean region, libraries have an important role to play in providing such people and local communities with relevant information. Addressing this issue, Olden (1999) notes that libraries are not often the first place to which new arrivals turn for such information; they usually prefer to approach community or religious groups with whom they have some affinity.

In the absence of such groups, however, public libraries can act as safe and neutral locations that enable clients to exercise both their right to privacy and their right to information. Additional support can be provided to refugees and asylum seekers by means of prison libraries (in situations where they are held in detention), school and academic libraries, as well as UN Information Centres.

In providing information services to asylum seekers, library staff must remember that such people may not have a legal status or identification papers. Refugees, asylum seekers and irregular migrants may appear disoriented and exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder, whether as a result of the events that prompted them to leave their own country, the experience of flight, or the shock of arrival in an unfamiliar location to which they have no personal connection. Indeed, recent research suggests that people who use the services of professional smugglers may not even know where they have landed when they reach their final destination. The information that is most frequently needed by such new arrivals falls into four principal categories, as represented in the schema below.

Basic needs

Language support
Directional information
Orientation guides
Reference services/maps
Orientation/cultural guides
Computers/internet access
Literacy training



The provision of these services should not affect current library practices as all libraries should be equipped with such information and services

Survival needs

Information on advocacy groups/
religious groups
Where to find food/
healthcare/shelter support
Referral contacts with international
organizations/ legal units
Application forms



The library may have to produce a pamphlet or create a website and get it translated into different languages so as to make this information available

Research needs

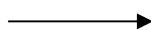
Public services: how to access jobs,
how to seek asylum, how to find
detention centres
Tele-centre access
Multilingual resources, books and
newspaper access



The library may have to assign a person to answer question related to seeking asylum and tailor its collection development policy so as to access databases and multilingual resources, source information on and about refugees and maintain an up-to-date listing of web resources

Human needs

Refuge: a space to retreat
Meeting room to have discussions
Membership/ID card
Finding a job or activity
Personal contacts
Counselling
Entertainment and leisure



This would require library personnel to acquire training in providing services to asylum-seekers in an effort to meet other humane needs and have sufficient capital and human resources to meet these requirements

Caribbean library services to refugees

To what extent are library services in the Caribbean able to meet the information needs of new arrivals in the region? On one hand, the library network in the Caribbean is very disparate and diverse, geographically, linguistically, and culturally. The Association of Caribbean, University, Research and Institutional Libraries (ACURIL), the largest Caribbean Library network, brings together over 100 institutional members who serve approximately 40 million people in total. At the same time, and as in many other developing regions, libraries in the Caribbean are

characteristically underfunded, understaffed, technologically challenged and oversubscribed.

Providing a service to the growing number of refugees and asylum seekers in the region and establishing a set of good practices in this area may be one means for library services to attract publicity and funding. As well as offering a substantive and much-needed service to the new arrivals, such efforts would provide an important means of highlighting the plight of refugees and dispelling myths about them. The following sections identify some basic principles that would help to guide these efforts.

Language

Because of the complex and somewhat random nature of contemporary population movements, there is no guarantee that a refugee or asylum seeker who speaks French or Spanish, will necessarily find that their journey ends in a French or Spanish speaking country of the Caribbean. Moreover, and as demonstrated by the example given at the beginning of this paper, one can anticipate that a significant proportion of the new arrivals will speak languages that are not generally practised in the region. In this respect, libraries will have to develop an array of multilingual resources.

The National Library of Canada has produced a useful gateway in English and French to help libraries develop multilingual and multicultural resources, which can be found at: <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/multicultural/>. As the site says, “the gateway offers targeted resources for information service providers who work with diverse communities, as well as entry points for new Canadians, educators, students, and researchers.” The site has a useful toolkit, which includes a sample inventory sheet for developing multilingual resources.

Rather than focusing on a collection of printed versions of international newspapers that are easily available online, libraries could purchase classics and popular novels in foreign languages or subscribe to the international versions of popular magazines that are not available on the internet. Library staff could also contact embassies, High Commissions and consulates in the region and asked to be placed on their mailing list, in order to increase the resources available in different languages.

Another useful service for libraries to maintain is a contact list of agencies that offer translation services within the country, so that refugees, asylum seekers, the national authorities and international organizations can be helped to access such expertise when it is required. In addition, libraries could contact local migrant, immigrant, expatriate and diaspora groups who might be able to offer a space for regular support meetings, remedial teaching services, orientation courses and language tutorials for new arrivals.

An example of good practice is provided by the Leeds Library and Information Service in the United Kingdom, where information on the activities of the Service is available in ten community languages, including translated versions of the application forms that have to be completed in order to borrow materials. These can be found at <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/Reference%20and%20research%20services/page.aspx>.

Bearing in mind the language limitations of foreign users, libraries may find it useful to use iconic or illustrated signage to assist such clients to locate useful areas in the library, including the information desk, audiovisual and multimedia resources, computer hubs and reference materials, and, of course, the information desk.

Reference tools

As indicated in the schema presented earlier, refugees and asylum seekers need access to specific kinds of information, some of which may be connected to their application for refugee status, and some of which may relate to more general issues of adaptation to the society in which they find themselves.

While taking due account of the resource limitations mentioned above, libraries in the Caribbean and other developing regions might take account of the website maintained by the Birmingham City Council in the UK, which has a page specifically titled 'Library and Information Services for Refugees and Asylum-seekers'. This site, which can be accessed <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/libraries.bcc>, provides online links to international newspapers, as well as an Information Book for Newcomers to Birmingham and a separate resource on Library Services for People from New Communities.

The internet would be the most useful tool for finding information online, and refugees should be allowed and encouraged to use computing resources to find useful information. A library with the necessary financial resources can create electronic information hubs to network with refugee information centres internationally. This is particularly useful for persons who are seeking information about missing family members, as well as those who have IT skills and who might want to create an electronic support centre for dislocated families.

Many libraries offer free internet access, and as mentioned earlier, some go as far as to develop websites specifically for refugees. The Nottingham City Library Service in the UK has developed a site with information about online translation services and dictionaries.² *Multikult* is another website that offers information on welfare benefits, housing, immigration, health, employment and debt, and which is translated into a range of languages including Albanian, Arabic, Bengali, Chinese, Farsi, French, Gujarati, Somali, Spanish and Turkish.³

Telecentres

The more developed and well-funded libraries could work in conjunction with advocacy groups and/or UN agencies to provide support services to refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR, for example, has been working assiduously to reconnect and reunite displaced families via technological means. In February 2006, UNHCR established libraries in Tanzania and Zambia to deliver health information to refugees, with the support of the pharmaceutical company Merck Sharp & Dohme and the

² http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/sitemap/leisure_and_culture/libraries/Library_services.htm.

³ <http://www.multikulti.org.uk/about/> Accessed 19 May 2006

International Council of Nurses.⁴ This is an excellent example of partnership that might be emulated in the Caribbean.

Assistance and advocacy

The library has both a direct and indirect role to play in offering assistance to refugees and in becoming an advocate for them in the community. Direct support can come in a number of ways. The provision of a temporary visitor or library card may give a sense of self-worth to someone who has lost everything due to social or political upheaval and who may have few if any other forms of identification. Offering multilingual registration forms and simplifying membership procedures may also assist in making them feel safe and secure in a library. After being interrogated by immigration officers and other government officials, another interview is the last thing a refugee would want to face!

Refugees may also be hired as volunteers, especially if they have specific language skills or have worked in a library before. A job, no matter how small, empowers a person and gives them a feeling of purpose. Additionally, it occupies their minds and allows them to think of others rather than about their losses. It also encourages them to interact with other people in their new society; accelerating the adaptation and integration process.

Indirect advocacy on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers may come in the form of organized exhibits, discussions and lectures to educate the public about relevant issues. Raising awareness within a community makes it easier for refugee groups to be accepted and understood. Expanding collections to include titles that address refugee experiences, as well as preparing relevant exhibits around UN events such as World Refugee Day (20 June) and Human Rights Day (10 December) are but some examples. Hosting lectures and public discussions with UN officials, academics, legal advocates, lobbyists, decision-makers, service-providers, migrant and community groups may also help to dispel the myths that are often associated with refugees and asylum seekers.

Conclusion

Seven years ago I could not put a face to the notion of a refugee. Since that time, the gentleman who came into the information centre where I work became a friend and our best library volunteer, with excellent IT skills. He demonstrated an unbridled ambition to learn and gained fluency in English within a short space of time. Due to the lack of legislation in Trinidad and Tobago, however, he was unable to gain a work permit or a job and with the assistance of UNHCR, he has since been resettled outside the region.

Despite that outcome, it is important to recognize that growing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers are likely to arrive and remain in the Caribbean region, where they will require many different forms of assistance, advice, practical and

⁴Hélène Caux, UNHCR. New partnership to bring better health to Africa's refugees. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=43ff36594>. 24 Feb. 2006.

psychological support. As indicated in this article, libraries have a modest but as yet undeveloped capacity to provide such a service.

REFERENCES

- Amnesty International. Trinidad and Tobago: Fear of torture or ill-treatment. <http://web.amnesty.org/Library/prin/ENGAMR490012004>. 28 December 2005.
- Books and services in world languages. <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/living/libraries/Library%20services/Books%20and%20services%20in%20world%20languages/page.aspx?style=>. Accessed 19 May 2006.
- Birmingham City Council. 15 May 2006. <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/libraries.bcc>.
- Caux, Hélène. February 2006. UNCHR. *New partnership to bring better health to Africa's refugees*. <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/news/opendoc.htm?tbl=NEWS&id=43ff36594.24>.
- Clark, Lesley. 2006. "At Guantanamo, what's a bored detainee to do? Read." *The Herald*, 31 October.
- ECLAC. *Expert group on migration, human rights and development*. [LC/CAR/L.57] Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, 14-15 September 2005.
- Graham, Jessie. 2006. "Guantanamo Bay's Library, *PRI's the World*. 29 August.
- Hoffman, Roald. 2001. "Not a Library" *Angew Chem Int Ed*. Vol 40, no 18, pp 3337-3340.
- Irwin, Tim. "For a refugee from Saddam's Iraq, a new home requires a global odyssey". UNHCHR/reliefweb, 23 May 2006. Accessed 13 February 2007.
- Irwin, Tim. "One of a kind network promotes refugee protection in the Caribbean" *Alertnet* 27 December 2006. <http://www.alertnet.org>. Accessed 15 February 2007.
- Jinkson, Bethan. "Hmong's new lives in Caribbean" *BBCNews*. <http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/34980>. Accessed 28 December 2005.
- Leeds City Council. Reference and research services. <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/Reference%20and%20research%20services/page.aspx>. Accessed 19 May 2006.
- Library Services. Nottingham City Council. http://www.nottinghamcity.gov.uk/sitemap/leisure_and_culture/libraries/Library_services.htm. Accessed 19 May 2006.
- MacDonald, Morag and David Kane. 2005. *Public Library services to refugees and asylum seekers in the North East. Final report to the Northern Chief Librarians Multicultural group of the North East Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (NEMLAC)*. University of Central England Birmingham.
- Mason, Elisa. Aug 1999. Against all odds: Refugees coping in a strange land. *American Libraries*. Vol. 30, no. 7. pp. 44-47.
- Multikulti. <http://www.multikulti.org.uk/about/> Accessed 19 May 2006.
- National Library of Canada. *Toolkit – Multicultural resources and services*. <http://www.collectionscanada.ca/multicultural/r25-300-e.html>. Created 22 May 2005, Updated 15 August 2005.

- Nurse, Keith. 2006. *The World Today. Migration and development in the Caribbean*. <http://www.uwi.tt/iir/news>. March 2006.
- Olden, Anthony. 'Somali refugees in London: Oral culture in Western Information Environments,' *Libri* 1999. Vol. 49, 99 212-224.
- Pineiro, Niurka. Trinidad and Tobago – IOM to open new office and provide support in migration management. 23 September 2005. IOM Washington [http://ww.old.iom.int/en/archive/PBN230905.shtml#item5] Accessed 21 February 2007.
- The Network: Tackling social exclusion in libraries, museum archives and galleries. 5 April 2006. *Services for asylum seekers and refugees*. <http://www.seapn.org.uk/refugees.html>.
- Thomas-Hope, Elizabeth. 2003. "Irregular migration and asylum seekers in the Caribbean". *UNU Wider Discussion Paper*. No 2003/48. http://www.unu.edu/hq/Library/collection/PDF_files/WIDER/WIDERdp2003.48.pdf.
- Renwick, Shamin. Fall 2002. "What Caribbean librarians want from Caribbean publishers." *World Libraries* Vol. 12, No. 2.
- Sinkovits, Tom. "Document examination and intelligent profiling." 5 December 2006. IOM Port of Spain [http://www.iom.int] Accessed 13 February 2007.
- United Nations. *Convention and protocol relating to the status of refugees*. <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/txis/vtx/home>. November 2005.
- United Nations. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Article 14. <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>.
- United Nations Information Centre for the Caribbean Area. *Basic facts on asylum seekers, refugees and internally displaced persons*. November 2004.
- United Nations Resident Coordinator. UNDP. *The United Nations Resident Coordinators system for Trinidad and Tobago: The Convention on the Status of Refugees*. 28 December 2005.
- UNHCR. Country operations plan, overview. UNHCR Regional Office for the United States of America and the Caribbean – planning year 2006. <http://www.unhcr.org/home/RSDCOI/432540d72.pdf> Accessed 21 February 2007.
- UNHCR. *State of the World's Refugees, Human displacement in the new millennium*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- UNHCR. Summary of the strategic oral presentation of UNHCR's operation in the Americas, 23rd meeting of the Standing Committee. 5-7 March 2002, 1-6.
- UNHCR. Regional Office for the United States of America and the Caribbean [www.unrefugees.org/usaforunhcr/uploadedfiles/rowdescription.pdf] Accessed 15 February 2007.
- US Department of State. "Refugee admissions program for Latin America and the Caribbean", US Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and the Migration. Fact Sheet , 16 January 2004 [http://www.state.gov] Accessed 15 February 2007.