

Introducing Integration: Some Personal Views



IN DIFFERENT STAGES OF MY EXPERIENCE AS A REFUGEE, a volunteer, a resettlement worker, or in my capacity now as a government official in my new home, there were times when I was about to lose hope of seeing indicators of a better future for refugees and meaningful responses to their plight from the international community. In each of those stages there was a critical event that kept my hopes alive. As a refugee, resettlement was the most significant event, which revived my shattered hopes. It was a departure from nowhere and an opportunity to restore a normal life. Being accepted by the host community, and enjoying the privileges and fulfilling my obligations as a citizen was another significant event in my life. Today as a professional and a stakeholder in the resettlement and integration of refugees I see the development of this Handbook as a cornerstone in building the capacity of the international community to respond meaningfully to the plight of refugees. It is another significant event in my experience which will keep my hopes for a better future for refugees alive for some years to come.

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AFTER 26 YEARS IN THE USA, I HAVE BEGUN TO examine my own integration into the complex fabric of American society. In some ways it has come naturally, but there are times when I have had to be intentional about integrating. Integration is a long and personal journey involving self-examination, acceptance in a new community and a sense of belonging. It requires a level of pride in one's identity, and a willingness to adopt aspects of the cultural practices of the host community. Integration is more than achieving self-sufficiency. It includes a commitment to participate fully in the receiving society and to expect responsible reciprocity from host communities.



Although integration is a personal journey, external factors can influence the degree and willingness of individuals or groups to integrate and enhance mutual respect. Receiving communities which demonstrate acceptance, and embrace newcomers by respecting their cultures and valuing their contributions, will empower newcomers to integrate with ease and confidence. These welcoming communities see newcomers as a gift, rather than a threat. Unfortunately, however, many refugees escape hostile environments only to resettle in another hostile and foreign society.

This Handbook is a resource to support host communities and resettled refugees to work in partnership to create an environment which fosters leadership, and to institutionalise policies that support newcomer contributions in meaningful ways. It will, I hope, empower resettled refugees to organise and mobilise their communities to continue to seek freedom and justice in their new home. It will help resettlement countries to understand better the challenges involved in resettlement, while creating innovative programs to help refugees rebuild their lives with dignity.

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INTRODUCING INTEGRATION: SOME PERSONAL VIEWS



IN 1987 MYSELF AND MY FAMILY – MY WIFE, BOYS aged 6 & 3 and my 60-year-old mother – were forced to flee our homeland. Even now, memories of our flight can keep me awake all night.

All through that agonizing experience, my biggest worry was the uncertainty of the future. As a refugee, without a place to call home, I often wondered: Does anybody care? Will we be accepted somewhere? What will happen to my children?

Starting over in a new country was at times overwhelming, even for me, and I was a seasoned traveller who had studied and worked in several countries. I learned first hand that resettlement – in a generous country like Canada – can be as hard as the escape from our homeland was.

In my family, each of us had a different integration experience. Although we were willing to work hard, we needed people to accept us for who we were, to see us as equals and to give us the opportunity to be fellow citizens.

Looking back, I can say that people did care. We were accepted for who we were and we were given a place to call home and the chance to call ourselves Canadian. In return, we have given back as much as we can by working hard and taking the responsibility of Canadian citizenship to heart. This was all possible because there were programs in place and a community willing to help us.

Resettled refugees need to have hope for the future. Hope can be nurtured – and realized – if refugees are seen as equals and given the chance to engage fully in all aspects of community life. This can best be achieved by fully involving the grassroots community in a refugee's settlement.

I hope this Handbook, which explores the many facets of the resettlement process, becomes a real tool to enhance refugee integration around the world. That would enable refugee families who face the same uncertainty as mine once did, to have the opportunity we had to find hope and a place to call home.

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