WORKING WITH REFUGEE COMMUNITIES TO BUILD COLLECTIVE RESILIENCE

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The Association for Services to Torture and Trauma Survivors (ASeTTS)
Occasional Paper 2008
**ASeTTS Vision** is for a more peaceful and just world where human rights are recognised, violations of human rights are challenged, and where there is support for people who have endured torture and trauma, and for their families.

**Mission Statement:** ASeTTS aspires to be a leading organisation of recognised international excellence in:

- the provision and promotion of comprehensive & holistic services to people who have endured torture and trauma resulting from unjust persecution and violent conflict.
- continuous research & development into their needs, and
- service innovation & quality improvement.

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Working with Refugee Communities to Build Collective Resilience
Introduction

The following information is intended to guide and inform practitioners and community members about working with refugee communities to build collective resilience. It is based on a research project that set out to construct a shared understanding of collective resilience with refugees and the role community plays in recovery from trauma and resettlement. In this document the terms ‘refugees’ and ‘people with a refugee experience’ are used interchangeably.

How do refugees survive their experiences of trauma? What strength can people gain from community? This paper explores collective resilience understood as the bonds and networks that hold communities together, provides support and protection, and facilitates recovery in times of extreme stress, as well as resettlement. These social bonds are variously referred to as social networks, community facilities and activities, active citizenship, or social capital.

The term collective resilience distinguishes this work from previous research on community resilience (strengthening one community) and individual resilience (strengthening a person). It refers to groups of traumatised people whose old communities have been destroyed and who are learning to survive in a new world, where community may be non-existent, new or emerging, or multiple. Refugees must adapt to whatever environment they find themselves in, and the evidence shows they are stronger when they do this together. This link between the collective psychosocial effects of trauma and the social bonds and networks that strengthen people illustrates collective resilience.

Refugees demonstrated that re-creating community structures generates collective resilience. Collective resilience is played out as a two-way process: building community so that more people may gain support from the community. Recovery from trauma and resettlement is assisted through collective resilience. It is important to recognise the strengths and skills that people with a refugee experience bring to generating collective resilience. Links with the host society are also necessary to generate resources and long term resilience.
Collective Resilience

There are three ways to create and maintain resilience:

1. Risk prevention or reduction – risk factors are disabling cultural, economic or medical conditions that deny/minimise opportunities for a person and place him or her in jeopardy of failing to become a meaningful member of the home, school and community. Risk factors can be internal (within the individual) or external (involving the family, school and community).

2. Asset enhancement – this is linked to community support, networks, empowerment and participation, and communal coping as well as community infrastructure and resources.

3. Facilitating protective mechanisms in the family, school and community. Protective factors are qualities or situations that help alter or reverse expected negative outcomes. They can also be internal or external. Protective mechanisms are most effective when communal, lay and professional support work in tandem with community ownership and a focus on both problems and emotions.

This matrix illustrates the community protective factors that create and maintain resilience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMMUNITY PROTECTIVE FACTORS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Support</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community support</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Community

Community is difficult to define: it may refer to a particular place or to a group of people with similar interests or belief (Twelvetrees 2002); a group with common identity and solidarity (Kenny 1999); or an ongoing process of identity construction (Ife 2002). Sometimes community has a moral or political imperative (Etzioni 1993), or community may be an unachievable ideal (Bauman 2001); sometimes community is a distraction for class differences (Bryson & Mowbray 1981). Hoggett (1997) states community is often a site for contestation about inclusion and exclusion, and he provides some important reminders for service providers about community:
Community may be neighbourhood, of interest to both insiders and outsiders. Communities in this sense are heterogeneous and complex but policy makers are rarely aware of this.

Social networks within local residential areas are important. Women play an important role in these networks, but policy makers still often use formalised procedures of consultation and speak to men as the only representatives of communities.

Sentiments and emotions are an important but often neglected part of community life. Communities are often portrayed as if there is a warm glow attached to community life. It is less often that feelings of fear, anger, jealousy, pride and longing are reported. These are the emotions which fuel the process of boundary construction, which distinguishes insiders from outsiders, those who can be trusted and those who cannot.

By the time refugees arrive in a country of resettlement they will have experienced community formation and change in different and difficult circumstances a number of times.

Thus, community has a number of meanings for refugees, the most important being:

- The functional and emotional aspects of community: the functional referring to the tasks of everyday living; and the emotional referring to memories and connection with the past, status and role, and sharing feelings and values.
- Community before violence and trauma disrupted their lives (community then and there), and community in the process of resettling (community here and now).

**Collective identity**

Theories about collective identity are particularly pertinent to refugees who find that ethnicity has become a defining factor in their life course. Castells (1997) suggests the basis of collective identity is the human being’s need to build intimacy and trust. We form different collective identities as a way of coping with a network society. A network society is the result of a disjuncture between local and global forces and separation between the social, cultural and political spheres. Castells states that a collective search for meaning takes place through the reconstruction of defensive identities around communal principles. He identified three types of collective identity:

1. Legitimised identity is formed by dominant institutions that want to extend and rationalise their domination. It is associated with a formal authoritative role and generates civil society. Identities such as service provider, mayor, teacher or citizen are collective legitimised identities. Refugees speak of the challenges of developing legitimised identities as citizens of their new home. Whether the host country will engage in this process of legitimising identity building is beyond the control of refugees. Where people feel excluded, different and unwelcome, the difficulty of attaining a legitimised identity becomes a significant obstacle to collective resilience.

2. Resistance identity is generated when people feel devalued or stigmatised, are alienated or
excluded, oppressed or victimised. This creates a collective identity of resistance and survival. Refugees have experienced exclusion and oppression as minority groups and have had to develop resistance identities: they were segregated out of their society as minority groups and had to work out survival tactics as the forces of oppression restricted their lives and destroyed their communities.

3. Project identity is created to redefine the position of those who have been stigmatised by society and seeks to transform societal structures. A collective approach is taken to create a different life. Refugees develop project identities in each new situation they find themselves – during flight, moving groups across borders, in refugee camps, establishing leadership and survival strategies, managing limited resources and unsafe environments, and in the country of resettlement.

These constructs of collective identity help us to understand the collective experiences of people who have been oppressed within their own country; who have been unsupported by their own government; and who have had to flee their homeland and are trying to re-establish their lives elsewhere. These are people who have been collectively identified as minority groups, refugees, and who re-constitute themselves as survivors and resettlers in countries like Australia, where they may be collectively identified as ethnic minority groups.

Where collective identity is mobilised around ethnicity, an individual may experience identity conflict as he or she is given a social identity (how we are defined by others, and how we are regarded in terms of social categories such as ethnic group) that does not match personal identity (how we define ourselves).

Thus, each of these forms of identity and sub-identity can interact with individual and social circumstance, meaning there is a constant process of definition and re-definition which entails the possibility of identity conflicts. This construct of collective identity is useful in understanding factors that impact upon collective resilience.

**Culture, identity and community**

Culture is an important contributor to identity and community. Jayasuriya (1990) defines culture as having aspects from the past, present and future - termed archaic, residual and emergent - all of which are important to a collective sense of cultural identity. Community holds both opportunity and responsibility to manage these three aspects.

Cultural groups retain ideals and values, often in the form of icons and stories from the past, which are considered so important that the community takes responsibility for maintaining and passing them on over time. The community draws on these values and patterns of behaviour to help its members navigate challenges. In refugee communities there is a disjuncture in this cultural continuum. The connection to land and history is broken. This is why traditional values, responsibility to community, and the need to celebrate functions and ceremonies – archaic and residual forms of culture - are so important to refugee communities.
The connections to the future - emergent forms of culture - often become a collective, future-oriented goal or ideal for younger members of the community. These goals usually focus on attaining higher social status within the larger society. They are connected with the ideals of the past, and require the community to negotiate the present social, economic and political conditions to achieve them.

**Social capital**

Collective resilience is connected to social capital. There are many interpretations of social capital. The main elements of social capital are social networks, norms, trust and resources embedded in a shared social structure. Putman (2000) highlights the elements of trust and cooperation and regards social capital as networks and norms that enable participants to cooperate effectively to pursue their common interests and shared objectives.

The refugee experience is that trust, cooperation and shared networks - their social capital - has been shattered.

In re-building the social capital of refugee communities, it is important to address both horizontal and vertical links. Horizontal links refer to:

- Bonding social capital – strong ties connecting family members, close friends and relatives. Refugees identify strongly with the bonding social capital that reflected their community then and there.

- Bridging social capital – less strong and equally important ties between people or groups who are in similar economic and political positions, but in different locations, occupations or ethnic groups. Bridging social capital was present in the original communities of refugees but the differences were manipulated and used to create divisions in the society.

Vertical links refer to the alliance between the poor and the sympathetic and powerful people or organisations beyond the community, by which the poor can get resources and information. Examples of the difficulties when vertical links are not available include: getting a driver’s licence; having qualifications recognised; finding out how to get into an occupational group; locating schools for children; getting support for parents and adolescents.

As newcomers, refugees must develop these vertical links. This can only happen with the good will and actions of powerful people and organisations beyond the refugee community. The supportive relationships refugees have with service providers are crucial. These relationships help refugees feel welcome, secure and provide somewhere to go for advice.

Refugees, have, by definition of their status, been dependent on others in order to survive their flight. Their tasks in resettlement are to maximise their independence: to seek ways of earning a living, to secure the resources necessary to themselves and their family. They are very aware of their position in a competitive economy. Often they have to learn the local language first, and then local practice, in order to gain entry to the labour market. The role of bonding and bridging social capital, and vertical links, is very relevant to this process.
However, social capital cannot be a substitute for a more equitable distribution of resources. Social capital must be linked to economic development and redistributive initiatives in order to positively impact on the quality of life and health status of disadvantaged communities.

There is a down side to social capital, one that many refugees will be familiar with.

For example social networks can be used for exclusionary purposes; they can deny some people access to resources; they can be use to promote vilification of particular groups who are perceived to be different from mainstream social networks. The negative consequences of social capital can include an over-reliance on voluntary work; excess claims on group members; and restrictions on individual freedoms.

**Habitus**

Habitus is a word for the taken-for-granted ways of doing things, made up of routines and behaviours from the past (our history) and the common knowledge and practices in the present that we do not even notice. Habitus is significant in the experience of resettling refugees, both for the incoming refugees and the host society, as we rarely think about what we take for granted, until something significant is so incongruous we cannot help but stop and wonder what is wrong.

When refugees resettle in a new country the host society has its own habitus, with its own taken-for-granted practices and everyday expectations. A refugee cannot know that habitus, just as a local person cannot know the habitus of a newcomer. Habitus causes points of incongruence; things don’t make sense.

Refugees rely heavily upon empathy for each other and sympathy from the host society as they attempt to negotiate the pattern of life in their new country. Most refugees have had to adapt to different cultural and social arrangements along the way that have demanded various levels of engagement and investment. Many are traumatised, and restricted in the habitus challenges they can manage.

**Community practice**

Rothman (1976) first identified three models of community practice: local development; social planning; and social action. Two decades later Popple (1995) extended the list:

- Community care – in which practitioners help to build social networks and voluntary services.
- Community organisation – in which practitioners help to improve coordination between services.
- Community development – in which practitioners facilitate groups to gain the skills they need to improve quality of life.
- Social planning- in which practitioners analyse the social conditions and implements and evaluates programs.
- Community education – in which practitioners engage community members in education activities.
• Community action – in which practitioners lead direct action at a local level.

• Feminist community work – in which practitioners work collectively to challenge gender inequalities.

• Anti-racist and black minority ethnic community work – in which practitioners challenge racism.

Ife (2003) warns that community practice should not take the place of government policies, international treaties and market regulation. He highlights the danger of community practice assuming a technocratic, apolitical, value-free vacuum by ignoring aspects of community life such as the social, political, environmental and the personal/spiritual. Ife concludes that community practice must work from the assumption that people can and should have collectivist and altruistic motives, recognising the connection between rights and responsibilities.

Of interest to the research project is the proposition that the tasks of resettlement and recovery from trauma can be achieved through the use of groups, community and networks. This collective strategy builds collective resilience: group work can enhance members’ strengths and often leads to community; community practice can create and enhance community so that more people may gain support.

**Hearing the Voices**

*We know it is a huge challenge for the Australian community to receive us and we are grateful for the privilege, but if time will be given to us, within five to ten years from now, the Australian people will never regret to have accommodated us here* (Aisbett 2006).

This section highlights the myriad types of community that refugees experience. It also demonstrates the wealth of adaptive skills and abilities that refugees draw on to survive.

**Reflecting on community**

Community is seen to be important to the task of recovery and resettlement in both a functional and emotional sense.

**Community then and there**

For refugees, talking about ‘community then and there’ elicits feelings of nostalgia, sadness, loss, grief and bewilderment. For many, the past conditions of war in their home country and the fear associated with people from that world is still present, particularly while the conflict continues. While not all experiences or memories of community are the same, generally connections to place and other families as well as ideas of social obligation and care for others are featured.

As conditions forced people to flee, refugees encountered new experiences of community. Immediate shared interests and needs drew disparate people together, creating situational community, an arrangement that was temporary, apparently harmonious, but soon fraught with class tensions and fears.
As refugees, people belonged, and sometimes were assigned, to different communities as their circumstances changed. These experiences of community in flight, mostly tenuous and precarious, reflect how vulnerable refugees are, dependent on the good will of strangers.

Traditional leaders were lost in the process of upheaval, violence and exodus. Groups tried to work out new forms of leadership in flight, in refugee camps and again in the process of resettlement.

At each new crisis people looked for a leader. In refugee camps both camp organisers and residents recognised the importance of leadership, but the task of selecting leaders was difficult. People took on leadership roles in contentious circumstances; one person took goods intended for the community; another represented the views of the community without consultation; camp organisers did not always understand the good intentions of residents who wanted to lead.

Community in refugee camps sometimes reflected traditional values where relationships with other people as a means of dealing with adversity replaced the traditional succour of family; and children were generously supported. At other times, the situation was dire: refugees became more traumatised and humiliated because few leaders were left alive; food and resources were scarce; residents had lived in the camps for many years; and there was overcrowding of many different cultural and language groups. In these circumstances there was little evidence of community.

**Community here and now**

In a country of resettlement, refugees are keen to fit into a host society and gain a feeling of belonging. They long to feel normal, able to love and be loved, to contribute to their community and be active members of society. Forming community is different again from the refugee camp and from the experience at home.

Community ‘here and now’ is sometimes formed between individuals who would not have had anything to do with one another in different circumstances. As one participant stated:

*Here we all come together as one, but back home each one would stick to her own tribe (5).*

This is not always preferred: for some refugees there were concerns that people in the host country did not recognise the differences within their group.

The functional and emotional aspects of community are reflected in the business of resettling in a new country, and finding support by doing these tasks in community.

They include:

- Maintaining culture, customs and traditions.
- Having common language, values and food.
- Forming connections with the past and the future.
• Sharing knowledge and skills.
• Learning new cultural competencies.
• Seeking friendships.

In discussing what helps and what hinders community, research participants named love, honesty, humour, sincerity, tolerance, hopes and dreams, respect, frankness and forgiveness as features of a supportive community. Selfishness, cynicism, jealousy, suspicion and hatred caused strain for community.

Community is seen to give hope and courage and create connections and relationships. Members benefit by being in community where they can share interests, feel valued and respected, and feel united.

_In my opinion, community means every individual has something in common. We share a common life. We live in this country, we respect others and we love nature. In an ethnic community we also share the same language and culture. People need to communicate to understand each other, and they have to respect other people’s differences. When we gather in community together, we gain experience from other people. They learn other cultures, they do not think they are number one. And another thing, as we get to know other people’s problems, they can reduce our problems. So not only do we gain strength, but we share_ (6).

There are other uses of community. Community can also be used to create boundary, as a means of excluding others. It can be approached as if it were a political body, where outsiders assume community is a homogenous body and select representatives inappropriately.

**Strains and challenges for community**

Some of these challenges relate to the social and economic pressures of being a refugee that impact upon an individual’s ability to function as a community member: the loss of status and networks from the ‘community then and there’ to the ‘community of here and now’; unrealistic expectations from home that provoke strong feelings of guilt, resentment and helplessness; the pressure of time and juggling study and work to make ends meet; the competition for recognition leading to gossip and jealousy.

**Role confusion and conflict**

Inter-cultural and inter-generational conflicts produce high levels of anxiety for parents and grandparents. Confusion and bewilderment about parenting roles and responsibility is prevalent. Many refugees are concerned about parenting and the effect of State intervention on families. The child is the parents’ responsibility and State intervention shames parents, causing them to lose face in front of the children. In the midst of resettlement, parents and children have access to new, different and sometimes conflicting information. Instead of parents being in the position of elders, and wise for their children, they find themselves in difficult situations: adults must learn language, culture and new employment skills, while being parents to children who are also learning about living in a new culture.
Parents with a refugee experience feel discipline has become almost impossible, as it seems as if other people and systems are telling children they do not need to pay attention to their parents. Parents fear their parental role is undermined because children do not like what their parents are telling them; they are learning about a new society and feel their parents cannot advise them in ways of growing up in this new society. One research participant reflected the strains in this way:

> Parents are concerned with their daughters. In Africa, children remain with their parents. This creates a greater sense of unity and togetherness. Here, we do not want to lose children, through separation of love, connection or intimacy. Parents are worried about their children leaving. It seems that 50-60% of mothers are not on good terms with their children, especially at age 17 or 18.

> From the age of 16, parents feel they have no control over their children. They can go to Centrelink and be considered independent.

> Within an African context, no matter how old the child is, they are obedient, respectful, connected; they do not have knowledge of staying alone. Here it seems that the government is changing things so that children have no respect for parents (4).

Similarly the role of elders, people of wisdom who work for the good of the community and/or hold important cultural or religions knowledge, is under threat from conflicting belief systems. These inter-cultural and inter-generational conflicts make the task of resettlement complex and fraught with misinterpretation. Research participants were concerned about the effect of weakening families which in turn weakens community.

**Law and culture**

The issue of learning the difference between law and culture is complex. An elder may be wise in the old ways of culture or religion, and yet have no knowledge of laws in the new country. Parents can draw on their own life experience, some of which may be culturally specific, while children come home from school with other interpretations of their rights. Adolescents may want advice from their parents and elders which will help them negotiate their way into adulthood in a new environment but they are unsure if they can help. Such situations are particularly distressing for people who have experienced significant loss and are trying to build a future together in an unfamiliar environment.

**Complexities of community**

Community can sometimes be challenging and contradictory. Although community can provide support, security and a forum for finding solutions to problems, there may be some situations where heavy handed measures are taken and issues are magnified beyond reason. Counterbalancing this, people need to know they can rely on community to help. Refugees face the competing demands of trying to integrate with the host society which is sometimes welcoming and sometimes hostile; learning how to function in a new society while at the same time belonging to a community that shares a past; and dealing with feelings of jealousy and rivalry within one’s own community.
However, although community presents challenges, it also provides a necessary buffer to the vicissitudes of a disrupted life.

**Strains of resettlement**

Refugees want to integrate into Australian society, but they also want to maintain their own culture. There is security in one’s own culture, which is strongly related to a sense of identity. It is not easy to become an Australian. The efforts refugees make to feel part of Australian society are complicated by past experiences which affect one’s ability to trust strangers; language differences can create a barrier; there are many demands on one’s time; people move house and neighbourhoods frequently; and speaking English is a priority in meeting new people.

The following quote reflects the panoply of demands that refugees are dealing with which impact upon resilience

> Everybody is so busy, especially with trying to interact within the community and to make a living, while still trying to keep up your standards. Everyone wants to go forward and achieve something at the end of the day (3).

The biggest difference in lifestyle that refugees are dealing with is a lack of extended family, which limits the social support network and sharing of responsibilities and tasks that people were used to. In Australia, houses are built for a smaller number of people and affordable housing is often in outer suburbs, which means distances between resettling families is great. People feel more isolated and have to manage life’s challenges in difficult circumstances.

The work of Castells on collective identity is reflected by the refugee experience. When refugees reach a country of resettlement where they dream of legitimising identities, they find they are once again a minority group. At times they feel excluded by language and customs, and then can be excluded from the workforce and/or are competing with other minority groups for scarce resources.

The loss of status, home, security and familiar environment, the trauma of violence and torture, the underlying emotions of fear, despair and grief, are refugee experiences that challenge community and collective resilience.

Gaining collective strength through community is restricted when suspicion and jealousy prevail, yet this is a likely outcome when resources are scarce, difficult to access and the environment is unfamiliar and competitive.

**Young people with a refugee experience**

The experience of young refugees has its own features. Their childhood has been significantly affected by trauma. They do not share the same memories as the adults of community and their experience is of traumatised adults in their community. Some young people’s only childhood memories are of the refugee camps. The losses faced by refugee children – home, safety, parents’ guidance, education – have potentially robbed them of a secure future.
Young people raised concerns that they need to be able to come to the community to ask for support and guidance. They listen for information that will help with the formation of their own identity. They would prefer to get this from parents or from elders in the community, but don’t feel heard. Sometimes they are ignored or not taken seriously. As one participant stated:

They need to take young people’s problems seriously, because if they can’t go to the community then where can they go? (5).

Young people present a challenge for communities in general, and for refugee communities in particular. The future of the community’s culture is in the hands of its young members. Refugee young people often do not share the good memories of the past with their parents or elder members of the community. Nor do they share a cultural history with their peers at school. They share a trauma history, but they long for knowledge of their community’s history (the legends and heroes of the past, artefacts of beauty and significance). Like all young people, they need support and guidance to benefit from shared values and to strive to achieve a better future, individually and collectively.

Their views have to be listened to, because sometimes their contributions are very important (5).

Reflecting on resilience

The research participants’ understandings of collective resilience reflected both emotional and functional aspects, and were associated with positive effort by the individual on behalf of the community, which featured attributes such as humility, strength and kindness.

Refugees seek the familiar to help them recover from trauma and resettle, and many efforts are made to form community as they struggle with these tasks. While an individual may be able to face difficult decisions by drawing on his or her value base, community can strengthen those values in situations of oppression and moral dilemma. Where members of community can be open and balance their needs and views through dialogue, collective resilience is strengthened.

Sharing problems with a sense of humour is another way refugees try to gain strength. Collective resilience is about knowing there are people with whom you can share upsetting experiences and make light of problems, if only temporarily.

The damage caused by torture and organised violence is experienced at intrapsychic, social and community levels. Refugees benefit from both therapeutic interventions and social and cultural celebrations. As they reconcile their trauma through counselling and therapeutic group activities, which enhances their individual resilience, they become more open and able to merge this new strength with community, thus integrating individual and collective resilience.

Community is not something that naturally occurs – community requires effort, both practical and emotional. An idea of collective resilience emerges as individuals gain strength from being in community, from being open and accepting of each other, and from providing support to each other. The openness towards others is framed in terms of love, respect, an acceptance of others as equals, and a
willingness to give to the community.

_If you try to deal with things alone, they may be too big. Talking to the community gives you hope and courage. There are some things you don’t want to tackle alone, like functions and ceremonies. With these, help from the community can boost you up. Hope keeps you going._ (RIG)

This quote illustrates the value placed on community as a source of strength. When you feel things are ‘too big’ to handle alone, you can find support from community. This is a strong indicator of garnering collective resilience through community bonds.

The complexities associated with leadership in refugee communities are significant and impact upon collective resilience. Feelings of suspicion and cynicism that may have helped in survival under oppression now undermine the efforts of those taking on leadership roles. A leader is expected to reflect the collective cultural ideals of the community but this is difficult to do in formative communities still in a state of flux.

Communities can be inclusive and generative, where positive hope for the future is built, beautiful things from the past are retained, the load is lightened through sharing and members can join in celebrations. Participants reflected that they appreciate sharing common concerns within their own community, and feeling support and sympathy from the host society. Collective resilience is strong in such communities.

However, communities can be exclusionary, where neighbours ignore or complain about new neighbours, or when employers require local experience for unskilled jobs. The energy available through community is used in keeping people out, creating minority groups and resistance identities. These are some of the social and emotional aspects of community process that affect collective resilience.

Collective resilience in communities here and now requires assistance and support from the receiving society. It is beyond the capacity of refugee communities to do this on their own.

Collective resilience can be built when there is:

- Contribution from community members.
- People from the same country of origin or people who share values.
- Respect for each other.
- Empathy and support of local people.
- Community members talking, negotiating, discussing and balancing their needs and views.
Applying the Learning

Although organised violence is designed to break the bonds that hold community together, the research demonstrated that refugees have the capacity for collective resilience and re-building their lives in community. Recovery from trauma and resettlement can be facilitated when refugees work on these tasks in community groups. This represents an opportunity to work with refugees in ways that recognise and value the strengths and experiences they bring to the resettlement process. There are significant implications for service delivery where more group work and community practice is indicated.

Management of resettlement

There are three stages of resettlement: the welcome stage; an early settlement stage; and long term settlement. Research participants strongly advocated the advantages, both emotional and functional, of working as a community to manage resettlement.

Community in the welcome stage

Receiving support and information from community members in the first stages of settlement helps as newly arrived refugees are getting to know a new place and feeling lonely and isolated. Individuals garner strength from being with people who share some features of history and culture, and who can provide a sense of familiarity as they face the prospect of re-building their lives in a new environment.

The orientation period for resettlement would be more effective if spread over a longer time. A huge amount of information is delivered within the first few weeks of arrival, after which refugees feel alone and bewildered. While the information is appreciated, trying to absorb and integrate the information in such a short space of time is highly stressful.

Immediate tasks must be dealt with in the first few weeks, such as registration with Medicare and Centrelink, health checks and English classes. Practical assistance to link new arrivals with services is more usefully provided as a staged process – accompanying the person in the first instance, and modelling how to deal with new organisations – and supplemented with group discussions about rights and obligations.

Paid bicultural workers could follow up the initial information provision and practical assistance with orientation at a pace that suits new arrivals.

The practice of arranging rental accommodation for refugees from the day they arrive has meant that people often find themselves isolated in low cost accommodation in under-serviced areas without contact from compatriots. Cluster housing in the early period of resettlement can help reduce feelings of loneliness and the risk of isolation. Being housed in isolated areas with little or no public transport does not support the benefits of collective resilience.
Community as early support and transition

Collective resilience is enhanced when refugees can meet and provide support within a familiar community during the transition phase of resettlement. Finding support in attending to the business and tasks of resettling and sharing knowledge and skills helps to ease individuals through the early stages of settlement. In this stage refugees are short of time and resources: there are so many practical tasks that must be done, usually with little money and no transport. Being able to discuss these challenges with service providers in community group settings allows for sharing of information about how to do things here; maintains connections with familiar customs, while meeting new people; and provides opportunities to recognise strengths and create supportive networks.

It is helpful to have someone from one’s own culture who is available for questions and explanations as the need arises. This must be balanced with the strain it can put on any one member of the community to be the source of resettlement information.

The challenges and tasks associated with the early stages of resettlement can be further complicated by the effect of a succession of demoralising experiences. Refugees report feelings of hopelessness; repeated sense of failure; lack of confidence; not knowing what to do; put downs; frustrations; misunderstandings; humiliation; hatred; discrimination and ignorance; competition and hostility.

In the face of these challenges, having access to basic services and someone from one’s own background to direct them correctly is beneficial.

Organisations can provide more effective support in the early stages of resettlement through:

- Having trained bilingual staff in critical services.
- Coordination of trained volunteers to maintain regular social contact.
- Outreach services by resettlement staff.
- Giving information in groups, which increases the spread of people who hold knowledge about the ways of the host society, thus building social capital.
- The use of community work approaches and paying attention to community processes, which enhance collective resilience.

Example of best practice

Participants made positive reference to the Families in Cultural Transition program conducted by ASeTTS. This program consists of a series of interactive workshops facilitated by bicultural workers in which people learn from each other and local service providers about how to overcome the challenges of living in a new culture.
Community for successful long term resettlement

Group meetings provide opportunities for refugees to meet and discuss common challenges of resettlement. It is important to facilitate frequent opportunities for refugee communities to have contact for functional and emotional reasons. The functional aspects provide leadership, resources, checks and balances as well as opportunities for learning and adapting to integrate and function in a new society. Members draw from community the strength to survive; to hope for the future; to celebrate; and to retain important links with the past, which are essential emotional aspects of community.

Through this process, community itself becomes a source of strength and collective resilience is enhanced.

Social capital is essential for the functioning of displaced communities, and also for the successful integration of new communities with the host society. However, segregation, oppression and organised violence destroy many important features of social capital: trust; taken-for-granted relationships; and vertical links. Without these, the ability to build social capital is severely compromised.

While refugees can often maintain the bonding links of the immediate family, they need to develop bridging links to create social capital – the looser bonds with other members of their ethnic culture, members of their new neighbourhoods and with other members of the society into which they have moved. Members of the host society can help by developing bridging links through, for example, neighbourhood welcomes, volunteering to be a support person, forming and participating in multicultural play groups.

Crucial to establishing long term resilience and social capital are the vertical links with members of the host society for connections to employment and education opportunities, to generate added resources and build an economic base. When the employment market is competitive refugees are severely impacted by the lack of vertical social capital.

There is no doubt that engagement with employment is a significant factor in successful resettlement and we need to look at creative means of building vertical social capital. It is important to have good information and access to jobs and training as soon as possible.

Bicultural workers could be employed to assist new arrivals with entry to the workforce. Refugees want to find work as quickly as possible, and many have specific needs related to trauma backgrounds, language and cultural diversity. Community members and trained volunteers can support job seekers, for example, by taking them to employment and training exhibitions and job fairs which provide non threatening and inclusive opportunities to meet with employers and training institutions and to learn about how to join the workforce.

Employment assistance programs such as Personal Support Programs (PSP) and Job Networks need to
cater for job seekers with trauma backgrounds and those who are at the early stages with language and culture integration. The Department of Employment and Work relations could consider inviting local employer groups and leaders in relevant industries to mentor job seekers.

Communities constantly struggle to balance competing values, leadership, authority and coherence. When this dialogical activity is conducted with good will, energy is created that benefits community members. These are the times for individuals to meet in groups to experience support and group cohesion. This kind of social capital is effective in helping refugees navigate the changes associated with resettlement after trauma and to achieve competency as citizens and community members.

**Example of best practice**

Over several weeks a group meets with a bicultural facilitator. They discuss some typical scenarios around a particular topic related to resettlement, and at the end of the program, a group of people leave with some important information, a support group and a sense of being able to deal with problems related to settlement. By thinking collectively, rather than individually, the focus is placed on rights and responsibilities and individuals develop their skills while supporting others.

**Conscientisation**

Taking heed of Paola Freir’s (1970) construct of conscientisation, we need to listen to what refugees say about their experience. Refugees have suffered significant losses – loss of family members, status, shared habitus; dignity, and loss of elders – and these were identified as strains for refugee communities. There are also feelings identified as causing strain - jealousy, suspicion, hatred, despair and isolation. As part of the refugee experience there are cross cultural strains – discrimination and ignorance, feelings of not belonging, misunderstanding, communication problems, having to overcome deep cynicism and fear to assess new authorities and governments.

The importance of maintaining open dialogue both with refugee communities and with the host society is crucial. Points of tension may revolve around the changes between traditional expectations and new roles in Australia; they may involve disagreements between generations within the same cultural group; they may be the result of adolescents from different cultural groups meeting without planning or introduction. It is important that these differences can be discussed in respectful ways.

Public awareness should be raised of the value of diversity as a way of redressing the heightened fear of stranger which has had prominence in the last few years. Education may be needed in organisations and places of employment about the added trauma of negative experiences of discrimination and exclusion on refugees in order to improve the host society’s response to refugees.
Building collective resilience

The evidence from the research suggests that communities contain unlimited good will under the right conditions. Even as refugees are in the process of flight and resettlement, the formation of communities can and does provide a means for supporting and facilitating collective resilience. Refugees have lost access to their own place, land, economy and resources. This makes it more important to work with the intangibles of community, such as those related to resilience and people. Leadership, sharing optimism for the future, belief in education, and building supportive relationships were emphasised.

Collective resilience is built when there is community to keep hope alive; to discuss and manage big problems; to celebrate important occasions; to hold ceremonies which need to be performed in community with others who share values.

The connection between culture and community as interpreted by Jayasuriya is a source of collective strength. For refugees community holds or contains the elements of culture in its archaic, residual and emergent forms. These elements are important when habitus has been so seriously disrupted. They are essential for young people to learn customs, language, and history and for elders to pass on wisdom and collective experience.

The emotional and social aspects associated with being in community are important indicators of collective resilience. While highlighting the great value placed on community, refugees also acknowledge the complexities and contradictions associated with community.

Castells’ theory of network societies is played out in the importance of networks to refugees. The need for support from the host society to build resources, vertical links and processes to generate economic activity is very clear. Research participants demonstrated a strong desire for collaborative relationships that could lead to more economic independence. Offers of help are essential in developing new vertical social capital links. Access to education, employment and other economic activity can quickly lead to successful resettlement.

How service providers can help

Research in Queensland has highlighted the important role service providers can play in enhancing community resilience. For example, when practitioners recognised natural helping networks as community strengths and provided support for natural helpers, this contributed to community resilience.
Refugees value the support they receive from service providers in the process of resettlement. Help which is practical, timely, relevant to the problem, offered with good will and recognising community strengths, has been identified as reducing the social distance between the helper and the recipient.

The ways in which refugees gain strength include:

- The feeling of safety experienced by refugees when they access and work with services.
- The group activities which provide opportunities to meet and learn from others.
- The personal growth and feelings of strength gained from counselling.
- Working with service providers who know about the backgrounds of refugees.
- Working with service providers who speak the same language.
- Attending group programs that helped refugees learn about the social, education, health and legal systems in Australia.

**Example of best practice**

The Canadian drug strategy emphasised links between helping professionals and community helpers; encouraged participation within the community; and recommended focusing on both practical and emotional problems (Atlantic Health Promotion Research Centre 1996).

Service providers can help in the following ways:

- Create a safe space for community groups to discuss confusion, difficulties, learning new ways, integrating old and new knowledge, sharing experiences and wisdom.
- Recognise that refugees have often had a number of varied experiences of forming community groups, finding leaders, and supporting each other under challenging conditions before arriving in a country of resettlement.
- Be aware that emotional aspects of forming and being in community will reflect nostalgia and trauma from the past, together with frustrations and pressures of present experiences. It may not be a straight forward task focussed activity.
- The benefits of working in community outweigh the challenges. Patience and support and opportunities for links to other community groups assist with integration into the host society.
Consultation

In order to support and enhance collective resilience, we need to listen to what refugees tell us they find helpful, and then support new and emerging communities in ways that we know strengthen community and enhance resilience. The first important steps are about how we relate to refugee communities. Acknowledging that consultation is often fraught, strategies for contacting acceptable representatives should be discussed in advance. This does mean a more complex workload for those organising meetings, but it is only for the initial resettlement period while communities are re-forming, and it will lead to better outcomes and a greater level of trust.

Crucial meetings should not be called with short notice, and if there is no choice information should be shared and participation arranged by other means. Individuals are busy with resettlement tasks, but if representatives do not represent the community, the consultation is worthless. It is to be expected that leadership will change hands and will not be consistent during the formative stages of communities in resettlement. Sometimes it is difficult for outsiders to know who to contact to represent the community in wider consultations and decision making processes. Particular attention must be paid to who could reasonable represent the needs and views of the community. For example, it is not reasonable to expect men to represent women’s needs, or older people to represent young people’s needs.

Supporting leaders and natural helpers

In countries of resettlement, as new groups or communities form, service providers want to consult about a community’s needs and they look for a leader. Sometimes these can be quite unreasonable expectations, and they create more tensions within emerging communities. Leadership tasks require coordination and communication at the very time that these are most difficult.

By the time people arrive in a country of resettlement, this experience of selecting and dealing with a new leader may have recurred a number of times, with a variety of outcomes.

It is important not to confuse acts of leadership with selection of a leader by outsiders. Refugees’ traditional forms of authority, along with trust, have been diminished or destroyed by repression and organised violence. Every cultural role has been disrupted by social breakdown and dislocation. Outsiders make their own assumptions and significant tribal, religious or cultural differences are not recognised.

Offers of help need to recognise and support acts of leadership and natural helpers in resettling communities. Natural helpers will benefit from collaboration with outside professionals. Links between professionals and community helpers encourage participation within the community. Importantly, these links should support community processes, as support for positive community efforts will generate trust. For example, all service providers would benefit from having a client reference group with whom they can plan and review their services. Trained facilitators can support community leaders to talk through divisive issues, if crisis occur in the community.
Community practice

Resettling refugees have to manage recovery from trauma at the same time as learning the local procedures for everyday life at a time when they have few resources. Participants demonstrated that community based activities assist in this process.

The most appropriate community practice model will match the problem identified through consultation with community members, service providers, helpers and funders.

The task of matching mode of intervention to problem is more complex than it first appears.

It is important not to define problems in technical terms, as issues will be complex with physical, social, economic and emotional aspects, and require multi-level multi-pronged approaches. During resettlement and integration the issues will change, as will the services needed. The strength of a community practice approach is its focus on process, or how problems are addressed.

In applying community practice, the community protective factors that create and maintain collective resilience (refer matrix page 2) are crucial: linking community, volunteer and professional support; the host society in collaboration with community ownership and participation; and a holistic approach that addresses both functional and emotional aspects of communal coping.

Community resilience literature can emphasise economic development at the expense of social relationships, while social capital literature can distract from economic development and redistribution of wealth. Refugees need to address both economic and social needs concurrently in the process of resettlement.

Example of best practice

Efforts are being made to look at recovery from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) taking more account of the environment. Silove (2005) presented a plenary paper at the International Health and Human Rights conference proposing a model he named Adaptation and Development after Persecution and Trauma (ADAPT). He suggests that individuals and their communities make active efforts to survive and adapt after exposure to mass upheavals such as armed conflict and that supportive environments can help reduce the impact of PTSD.

Finally, we can say the following:

- The strengths and experiences of refugees can be garnered to collectively address the tasks of recovery and resettlement.
- Collective resilience is an important feature in the successful resettlement of refugees. Working
with and for community as part of the reconstruction of one’s life helps people gain strength and courage.

- Refugees who are in the process of rebuilding their lives benefit from working on the tasks of resettlement collectively.

- When shared social structures are developed, social networks, norms, trust and resources are created. This in turn builds the social capital necessary for collective resilience.

- Efforts are needed from the host society to create and maintain collective resilience. Creating collective resilience refers to the horizontal links of bridging social capital, or the looser social bonds between new and emerging communities and the local established communities that can be enhanced through acts of welcome, exchange of ideas, and sharing things of beauty. These relationships hold communities together and become the basis of trust and friendships.

- Maintaining collective resilience refers to the vertical links that facilitate newcomers’ asset enhancement and access to economic independence and strength.

- The social bonds which were so seriously disrupted by repressive regimes and statelessness need to be nurtured and strengthened. By approaching these tasks collectively refugees are provided opportunities for acts of kindness, leadership and active citizenship. These are the building blocks for collective resilience.

- Professionals and service providers can aid the recovery process by supporting acts of leadership and natural helpers; ensuring coordination between service providers; linking people with resources; and by employing community practices and supporting community processes that enhance collective resilience.

- Recovery from trauma requires attention to individual intrapsychic healing and repair and reconstruction of social connections. The latter facilitates the risk prevention/reduction, asset enhancement and protective mechanisms necessary to maintain resilience.

- Healthy communities help members to feel safe, to respect one another and to provide support for recovery. Refugees can move from collective resistance identity to legitimised identity; re-create the archaic, residual and emergent aspects of culture that are important to a collective sense of cultural identity; and develop habitus.

- Collective resilience derives from both functional and emotional aspects of community, taking into account the benefits and strains of community. Members draw from community the strength to survive, to learn and adapt, to retain important links with the past and to take up the challenges of integrating and functioning in a new society. Members also form and maintain community bonds necessary for these activities.
Characteristics of Collective Resilience for Refugee Communities

The Centre for Community Enterprise in Canada looked at community resilience - defined as a community’s capacity to shape its own ways of life and work - and identified four important dimensions necessary to enhance community resilience: people, organisations, resources and processes. This model has been adapted to describe the characteristics of collective resilience for refugee communities.

Resilience related to people in a refugee community

- Collective resilience is enhanced when members of a community can share optimism, pride and hope for the future.
- As communities are reforming and becoming established, opportunities are available for acts of leadership which enhances the interests of the community.
- If leadership tasks can be shared among more people, no single person would be seen as representing the community’s views and the responsibility can be shared.
- Collective resilience grows with respect, acceptance and love for one another.
- An important feature of community is its capacity to maintain values through a connection to cultural history.
- There is shared vision and power, involvement in decision making, and mutual assistance, cooperation and attachment among community members.

Resilience related to organisations in a refugee community

- Collective resilience is enhanced through links with local service providers who can advise and support employment related activities.
- Collective resilience can grow when new and emerging groups form links with local organisations, which can support the formation of community associations and activities.
- When service providers use community practice strategies to manage resettlement, collective resilience is built: this in turn builds individual and community strength.
- Organisations have partnerships and collaborative working relationships, link people with resources and support the development of community processes.

Resilience related to resources in a refugee community

- The resources which are important to new and emerging groups are not only physical. The bonding, bridging and vertical links which form social capital are crucial. These links must be established within one’s own community, as connections with other community groups, and as
vertical links into the host society.

- Resilience grows with belief in, support for and participation in education which enhances job opportunities.

- Increased participation in paid employment helps build physical resources for community members.

**Resilience related to processes in a refugee community**

- Resettlement of refugees is a government driven process. Inclusion of service providers and service users in the processes for service planning and evaluation will enhance collective resilience.

- Maintenance of dialogical space in which contentious issues can be discussed and negotiated respectfully will enhance collective resilience.

- Celebrating together enhances collective resilience as members have the opportunity to share joy, to remember significant past events and to acknowledge current milestone achievements.
References


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