

## **A Human Rights Discourse: Language Education and Refugee Resettlement**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper argues for increased language education for refugees in the Saint Louis area, particularly within the realm of adult education. Language education is the foundational key to successful resettlement because it allows refugees to effectively advocate for themselves and function as independent, resourceful individuals. Without being able to communicate effectively, an individual (regardless of their age, abilities, talents, determination, education, or resources) will be unable to fully function as an informed and valued member of society. The best and most economical way to provide for refugees in a long term and sustainable manner is to give them the tools to provide for themselves. In order to build this argument, this paper will provide a global background of this issue, outline national and local policies, address funding options, and consider current political structures.*

Refugees remain a marginalized part of society, both culturally and economically, and struggle with human rights abuses. Through the lens of human rights discourse, this paper examines the relationship between language education and successful resettlement. It argues for increased language education opportunities for resettled refugees, particularly within the realm of adult education. With the understanding that language education is the best way to prepare an individual to protect themselves from social harms and human rights abuses, this paper identifies current problems in the area of refugee language education. The Saint Louis metro area in Missouri is used as a case study for

better conceptualizing this issue. Since children and young adults often achieve greater language fluency than their older counterparts, this paper will pay particular attention to the challenges facing adult education.

Language education is the foundational key to successful resettlement because it allows refugees to effectively advocate for themselves and function as independent, resourceful individuals. Refugees have historically been denied opportunities, faced discrimination, and endured oppression. Lacking effective communication, an individual will be unable to fully function as an informed and important member of society, regardless of their abilities, determination, education, or resources. They will thus remain marginalized and subject to otherwise avoidable suffering. The best and most economical way to provide for and protect refugees in a long-term and sustainable manner is to give them the tools to provide for themselves.

The rights of a refugee are inextricably tied to human rights. Under international law, countries have a legal obligation to protect refugees from violence and rights violations. There are at least seven different declarations, conventions, and protocols that specifically protect refugee rights: the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, the 1966 Bangkok Principles on Status and Treatment of Refugees, the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees for Latin America, and the 1976 Council of Europe's Recommendation 773 on the Situation of de facto Refugees (Watkins et al., 2012). However, the fact remains that regardless of legal obligations, refugees are exposed to aggravated human rights abuses because of their compromised situation.

The United States is no exception when it comes to refugee rights concerns. Even within resettlement communities in the U.S., the so-called “melting pot,” refugees experience intolerance, discrimination, racism, xenophobia, and aggression. Such discrimination leads to human rights concerns

such as poverty, poor education, and a phenomenon called “learned helplessness.” Johannes John-Langba of the African Population and Health Research Center characterizes learned helplessness as “a person’s failure to take harm-avoidant responses even when such responses lead to reduced exposure to harm or risk of harm” (John-Langba, 2006). For example, if a refugee knows that they are being discriminated against in the work place, they may not utilize anti-discrimination policies for fear they will lose their job or be otherwise harmed. Another example may be that a refugee refuses to attend resettlement classes because they think they are incapable of learning (Bashir, 2013).

### **The Global Refugee Environment**

The plight of the refugee is not a new one, but rather it is a long-standing human concern that has been given modern day legal definitions. Refugee rights were not discussed on the international agenda until the early 1900s. In response to dire wartime conditions and human suffering at that time, the League of Nations was the first organization to formally define refugee status on an international scale. That definition has since been modernized and expanded to its present day nature, as defined in the Article 1 of the United Nation’s 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It states that a refugee is “someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 1951). According to the 2013 Annual Proposed Refugee Admissions Report prepared for the U.S. Congress, there are an estimated 15.4 million individuals that conform to this definition worldwide, excluding the approximately 12 million stateless people who are living in refugee-like conditions. In order to identify and protect refugees, the United Nations appointed the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in December of 1950 to coordinate international action to protect refugees and resolve refugee problems (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).

Although international law recognizes the rights of refugees, states are not obligated to provide long-term solutions for them. Once a refugee has fled their birth country, they have three legal courses of action: voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement. *Voluntary repatriation* is when a refugee chooses to return to their home country because the threat is no longer there. Repatriation is only legal when it is voluntary. Forced repatriation is called refoulement, which is illegal under international law. *Local integration* is when a host country allows refugees to apply for asylum and eventually integrate into society. It is a complex and gradual process, but it is the most common course of action in countries neighboring the refugee's home country. However, for various reasons, not all countries allow refugees to integrate. If integration is deemed illegal and citizenship not granted, then refugees stay within the confines of a refugee camp or live within mainstream communities as "urban refugees". A refugee camp is a temporary settlement built to satisfy only basic human needs for a short period of time. Many refugees are not allowed to legally work or attend school. Children born in refugee camps are also usually not granted citizenship of the host country. *Resettlement* is the third option. When repatriation is impossible and the host country refuses local integration, a refugee can either stay as a non-citizen or apply for resettlement in a third country (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). This paper focuses specifically on resettlement within the United States.

Due to the complex and very limited nature of resettlement, it can sometimes take decades from the time a refugee leaves their home country to the time that they are processed for resettlement. Many refugees flee their home countries under life-threatening conditions and are unable to provide for themselves, which helps explain the criteria of a "well-founded fear" of persecution. Refugees who must flee violence are often left without time to pack necessary documents, such as passports, and they frequently do not have the luxury of knowing what country they will eventually end up in. Due to such uncertainty, most refugees worldwide are currently subsisting in refugee camps located in developing countries (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). Once a refugee reaches a place of

relative security outside of their home country, they must apply for formal refugee status. In order to complete the application process, individuals must complete the paperwork, prove their identity, and rule out both integration and repatriation as reasonable courses of action. The primary goal of the UNHCR is to repatriate individuals to their home countries. The UNHCR sets up offices to formally interview and verify the status of the people living there. The resettlement application process can be incredibly time consuming and difficult. It is further exacerbated by the lack of resources within a refugee camp. Many refugees simply cannot provide adequate forms of identity, so a long and complicated investigation must be carried out by the UNHCR before any further processing can take place (Hamilton, 2013).

Resettlement is a realistic option for only a very small portion of the worldwide refugee population. Only a fraction of refugees will apply for resettlement, and of those applicants approximately one percent will actually be approved for resettlement. After they are approved, there are only 26 countries that participate in refugee resettlement and, despite the huge numbers of refugees worldwide waiting for resettlement, there are only around 80,000 resettlement slots open per year. Approximately 72,000 of those slots are for resettlement in the United States, Canada, and Australia. The majority of the remaining 8,000 slots are shared between 16 different European countries, and divided between very small "pilot" resettlement programs in five different Latin American countries and Japan (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). The UNHCR does not dictate global standards of resettlement, so resettlement countries around the world develop different theories and policies on how to accommodate and support the high-risk needs of refugees. In many ways, the process of resettlement still feels very much like a social experiment; each country takes decidedly different approaches in the pursuit of developing a successful program. For example, Australia focuses a great deal on the psychological needs of the refugees. The United Kingdom's decentralized system allows the individual to play a largely autonomous role in the resettlement process, while

Canada relies heavily on a network of decentralized ethnic organizations. The U.S. resettlement program, on the other hand, focuses almost exclusively on helping refugees become financially independent as quickly as possible within a centrally-controlled network (Nawyn, 2005).

### **Refugees within the United States**

The refugee resettlement system within the United States is a vast structure of centralized governmental departments and decentralized semi-independent organizations. On the government side, there is an alphabet soup of departments, including: the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Bureau of Population, Migration & Refugees (PRM), the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the U.S. Department of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). These departments are responsible for everything from organizing foreign processing centers to monitoring statistics and arranging financial aid opportunities for local organizations. On the other side are "Volags," or "voluntary non-governmental private organizations" that are contracted by the federal government and are generally responsible for addressing the needs of refugees and carrying out the demands dictated by the government. In particular, there are nine national Volags that have signed the Cooperative Resettlement Agreement. They are: Church World Service (CWS), Episcopal Migration Ministries (EMM), Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC), Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS), International Rescue Committee (IRC), Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service (LIRS), U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), and World Relief Corporation (WR). Each Volag has hundreds of local affiliates throughout the United States (Brick et al., 2010).

Under this structure and in response to the increasing numbers of refugees worldwide, the refugee population in the United States is large and ever diversifying. The first wave of *officially recognized* refugees arrived in the United States under the direction of the League of Nations in the

early 1900s. Subsequent waves arrived in response to the 1941 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This wave was a rapid influx of approximately 250,000 refugees from Communist countries such as Yugoslavia, Poland, Cuba, Hungary, and China following World War II (United States Department of State, 2011). Many refugees during this period already had relatives in the United States that could, at least in part, share the burden of accommodation and acculturation. This meant that although there were programs available to help incoming refugees resettle into the United States, many refugees were able to rely heavily on existing social networks during the resettlement process that operated independently of the state.

More recently, a broader spectrum of the worldwide refugee population has been resettled in the United States (United States Department of State, 2013). This subsequently means that more recent refugees usually have less of a social network to support them during the resettlement process, leaving them more reliant on state-sponsored assistance programs. There are refugees from over 69 different nationalities that come from approximately 92 different processing countries, with the current top three countries of origin being Bhutan, Burma, and Iraq. At least 50% of all refugees referred by the UNHCR are considered for resettlement in the United States every year, and in 2011 an astounding 70% of the total resettled refugee population was actually resettled to the United States. Yearly counts range between a high of 39,000 in 2001 to a low of 23,000 in 2008 (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.). In total, 1.8 million refugees have been relocated to the United States since 1980 (Gilmore, 2013). Around 35% to 40% of relocated individuals are children, with a staggering 95% of those children traveling alone (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, n.d.).

There are six groups currently entitled to resettlement assistance in the United States: refugees, asylum seekers, Cuban and Haitian entrants, human trafficking victims, Amerasians, and Iraqi and Afghan special immigrants. An asylum seeker is a non-citizen currently within the United States who is claiming asylum out of fear of persecution in their original country. A Cuban or Haitian entrant is any

national of Cuba or Haiti within the United States who has been granted parole but has not acquired any other legal status. A human trafficking victim is someone who has been subjected to forced or coerced international movement for exploitative purposes, including sex trafficking. An Amerasian is a person born in Asia to a U.S. military father and Vietnamese mother during the Vietnam Conflict from 1962 and 1976. Iraqi and Afghan special immigrants are people allowed into the United States as legal permanent residents if they can prove they have experienced “an ongoing serious threat” as a result of working for the U.S. Armed Forces in the Middle East (Bruno, 2011).

Recent budget restraints have caused policy makers to tighten eligibility requirements and limit refugee resettlement benefits to eight months. Traditional refugee aid and resettlement programs within the United States come in the form of various cash assistance programs, formal and informal education efforts, medical assistance programs, and employment programs. These programs generally fall into four different groups based on resettlement goals: (1) achievement of financial self-sufficiency as soon as possible, (2) English language education, (3) cash assistance programs, and (4) ensuring that women have the same access to resettlement programs as men. Traditionally, most refugees were eligible for cash assistance benefits for up to 36 months in the form of the “Reception and Placement Grant” which gives resettlement organizations \$900 to \$1,800 per refugee. This money is used for agency staff salaries, rent, furniture, food and clothing (Bruno, 2011). In 2010, the Obama Administration and the National Security Council conducted the first interagency review of refugee resettlement and in 2011 announced that the system was struggling financially. In response, the U.S. Department of State increased the Reception and Placement Grant provided to these agencies from \$1,800 to \$1,875 in 2012 (United States Department of State, 2013). They also made it possible for certain high risk individuals and refugees with families to apply for supplemental benefits for up to five years from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) program for up to seven years (Bruno, 2011).



## **Refugee Environment in Saint Louis**

The refugee environment in Saint Louis is a colorful mix of families and individuals, and it is constantly moving, growing, and changing in rapid and unpredictable ways. It is very difficult to track exact populations because refugees are allowed to take control of their lives the moment they step on U.S. soil. The only truly measurable counts of refugees in Saint Louis are the annual numbers of incoming refugees and those that are accepting aid. These numbers cannot accurately depict the total population of refugees living in Saint Louis, and they do not reflect typical financial situations, ethnic make-ups, or secondary migration movements in the city. Since 1979, approximately 19,927 refugees have been resettled to Saint Louis. Yearly numbers range from a high of 1,528 refugees in 1998 to a low of 257 refugees in 2003. The last complete yearly count was 541 refugees in 2012, with the majority coming from Myanmar, Bhutan, and Iraq (International Institute of Saint Louis, 2012). The huge differences between annual resettlement numbers from one year to the next reflect the rapidly changing political climates both in the United States and around the globe concerning refugee rights and resettlement.

Although there are many organizations that respond to the needs of refugees, there are only two organizations specifically responsible for resettlement in Saint Louis. They are the International Institute of Saint Louis (IISTL) and Catholic Charities of Saint Louis (CCSTL). As in any other city in the United States, refugees in St. Louis must be working within 90 days of arrival. There are a myriad of programs, classes, language support and social gatherings to help bridge the three-month gap between complete financial dependence when refugees first arrive to financial independence (Hamilton, 2013).

The IISTL is responsible for the lion's share of resettlement because they have access to governmental resources and are able to focus specifically on refugee issues. As an affiliate of the United States Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), the IISTL follows strict compliance rules and has

a three-tiered approach to resettlement. The first tier is *immersion*. Immersion includes English classes, counseling and social work, job training and placement, new arrival services, and immigration forms. The second tier is *investment*. Investment includes a small business center, the Community Development Corps, financial literacy, home childcare training, and a global farms program. The final tier is *inclusion*. This tier organizes the Festival of Nations community event, translation and interpretation, consulting, and workforce training (International Institute of Saint Louis, 2012). Newly arrived refugees get particularly intensive help. As mandated by national protocol, refugees have safe and affordable housing secured for them before they arrive in Saint Louis. Most of the housing is secured within walking distance of the IISTL because the proximity helps individuals and families come to classes and social events, even if they do not have other means of transportation. When refugees arrive at the airport, they are brought to their new homes and are provided food, climate appropriate clothing, furniture, and a brief orientation. Depending on their needs, many are signed up for language classes.

The Catholic Charities of Saint Louis (CCSTL) has a similar model of welcoming refugees, but on a much smaller scale. As an affiliate of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Office of Migration and Refugee Services (USCCB/MRS), CCSTL is associated with the Catholic Church but is not allowed to proselytize (Nawyn, 2005). They do not have the same expansive set of tiers specifically focused on refugees resettlement as the IISTL because their doors are open to a much wider part of the population, such as other immigrants, minorities, homeless populations, and other people in need. They are, however, able to boast a comparable resettlement experience for the few refugees that they receive every year. The CCSTL mission statement is: "In response to the teachings of Jesus Christ, our mission is to serve people in need, especially those who are poor and vulnerable; work to improve social conditions for all people in the community; and to call members of the Church and community to do the same" (Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Saint Louis, 2011). There are four different CCSTL locations in

Saint Louis that offer refugee and resettlement assistance: The Catholic Charities Community Services Catholic Legal Assistance Ministry (CLAM) on Spring Avenue, the Southside Center on Arsenal Street, Refugee Services on Wisconsin Avenue, and the Catholic Family Services Language Access Metro Project (LAMP). CLAM helps all immigrant populations, including refugees, properly fill out and file governmental documents. The Southside Center provides social services, counseling, and bilingual youth programming programs. LAMP provides translation and interpretation services within health care and other support services. The final location, Refugee Services, specifically resettles refugees by offering pre- and post-arrival management, financial support, and employment services (Catholic Charities Archdiocese of Saint Louis, 2011).

Saint Louis has come a long way in providing language opportunities for refugees, especially refugee children. The International Welcome School was opened in 2009 in order to accommodate young immigrants and refugees and allow them to adjust to the U.S. culture, school system, and educational expectations before transitioning them into regular public schools. The school offers “in-house” translation services in seven different languages, a “newcomer” program that offers English lessons, family literacy programs, parent support services, computer access, GED classes, and preschool programs. They also partner with local organizations to provide uniforms, shoes, and food for the students (International Welcome School, 2013). Saint Louis offers a myriad of different programs for adults ranging from free community classes at religious or other nonprofit institutions, one-on-one tutoring opportunities, and higher education English as a Second Language courses. At the IISTL in particular, there are seven levels of general English instruction offered every weekday, and they also offer literacy courses, pre-vocational courses, and cultural orientation language classes. These classes are free to the public, but spots are reserved for refugees (International Institute of Saint Louis, 2012).

The Immigrant and Refugee Women’s Program (IRWP) also offers a unique language opportunity for adult women. In an effort to reach isolated and poor immigrant and refugee women,

IRWP developed a program of one-on-one tutoring. They connect local volunteers with women who cannot attend formal English language classes due to the stress of resettlement, which can include caring for small children, work, transportation, or physical/psychological trauma. All classes are conducted in the private homes of the refugee and immigrant women. Volunteers receive lesson plans, books, workbooks, evaluation tools and continuing support from liaison teachers, the curriculum coordinator, and the executive director. These teachers also help students with “real-life” situations, including making medical appointments, using public transportation, and other daily tasks (Immigrant & Refugee Women's Program, 2007).

### **Resettlement Problems**

Of all the progress that has been made in Saint Louis, there are still numerous areas of improvement. A 2005 Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) report suggests that there have been decreasing employment and lower self-sufficiency rates (Halpern, 2008), yet the reasons for this remain unclear. These dropping rates may be tied to ethnic trends in recent admission rates. Watkins et al. (2012) argue that refugees coming from developing countries often have less education, lower English abilities, and little skilled work history that make them far less competitive in the already depressed Saint Louis job market. They conclude that if the refugee is less hireable when they first arrive, it is less likely for them to be successful in their resettlement (Watkins et al., 2012). However, a 2005 report contends that even with those barriers, new entrants are entering the workforce at a fairly high rate. Although it seems a logical assumption, there are no sound connections between long-term dependency and lower skilled refugees (Halpern, 2008).

Christie Shrestha (2011) identifies four areas of common concern during the refugee resettlement process: unrealistic expectations, tension between staff members and refugees, complicated bureaucracies, and the recent economic downturn. The first area, unrealistic expectations,

becomes a problem long before refugees enter the United States. Rumors of promises and unrealistic expectations float around in many refugee camps, leaving people feeling disenfranchised or lied to when they arrive and find that the rumors are not true (Hamilton, 2013). This results in a gap between what refugees expect and what is expected of them by the resettlement agencies. Such lack of understanding can facilitate long-standing mistrust, tension, and stress between refugees and resettlement staff (Shrestha, 2011). This ties directly to the second area leading to lower self-sufficiency: tensions between resettlement agency staff and refugees. Although local staff members are usually committed to helping refugees resettle, they can be overworked, under staffed, underfunded, and misinformed. One of the biggest problems between staff and refugees is inconsistency and misinformation as a result of the less-than-adequate support systems for both parties. Often refugees complain of ambiguities in resettlement policy and action. All of this leads to refugees perceiving staff as being “cold, calculative, and lacking commitment,” further exacerbating the stress and disappointment of resettlement (Shrestha, 2011).

Other major barriers for refugees resettling to the United States is learning how to navigate bureaucracies and finding employment. There are many mandatory processes that refugees have to go through while they are resettling; they have to have their immigration papers processed, apply for a social security card, learn about and apply for other aid opportunities, and have a comprehensive health screening. The stress of navigating these systems can be confusing, overwhelming, and estranging (Shrestha, 2011). Once the initial stress of resettlement is over, refugees must manage other long-term bureaucracies like paying their taxes, applying for and managing credit, and the various insurances that are required by law. The final barrier to resettlement is access to employment, and especially low-level employment. The very recent downturn in economy hit all levels of employment, but the very low-level jobs were especially hard hit. The influx of unemployed people into the job market made finding jobs best suited for refugees much more difficult. Jobs became much more competitive as employers were able to ask for more requirements from their potential employees. For example, companies who had in

the past hired non-English speaking workers were suddenly able to find English speaking people or people with a longer work history to fill vacant spots (Hamilton, 2013).

Another cause for concern is what Brick et al. (2010) have nicknamed the “lottery effect.” Due to local budgeting, staffing, and other limitations, some Volags and their associated organizations are not able to provide comprehensive care for refugees in their area. As such, refugees resettled into their areas are not getting equal care compared to refugees who had been settled into more financially secure locations. Since refugees cannot choose where they are relocated to, access to a good resettlement program is sometimes more like “winning the lottery” than it is due to a strong resettlement program (Brick et al., 2010). The lottery effect has escalated demands for diversified translators, greater cultural sensitivity within the resettlement system, and resources to treat both physical and psychological wounds caused by foreign conflict. The most common cries for reform are deemphasizing quick employment strategies, responding to the health care needs of individuals, minimizing the lottery effect, and increased English language instruction (Watkins et al., 2012). Andorra Bruno (2011) also makes a notable argument for increasing information sharing and coordination between struggling agencies, implementing better funding strategies, and supporting resettlement communities and secondary migration to reduce the load on over exerted agencies.

Overall, it has become clear that the resettlement system in the United States does not adequately prepare individual refugees for “American” life, nor does it protect them from avoidable human rights challenges. Despite the fact that refugees come from wildly different economic and cultural systems and in varying states of mental, physical, and financial health, the American refugee resettlement process still places “financial self-sufficiency as soon as possible” as the main objective during the resettlement process. Such a singular goal has forced refugees to “settle” with less-than-optimal jobs that prevent them from developing other skills that are necessary for full integration (Bruno, 2011). English proficiency, cultural understanding, health care, psychological care, and access to

culturally sensitive support networks are not always readily available or attainable. Without these tools, it is likely that refugees will remain dependent upon the state and other organizations, as well as marginalized and vulnerable to secondary human rights abuses.

### **Measuring Resettlement Success**

Even if the system was changed to accommodate refugee needs, there must be a concrete way to assess the success of those changes. Some scholars argue that the best way to determine the success of the resettlement system is to judge it based on key financial and social independence indicators. Other scholars argue that because the U.S. refugee resettlement system is hyper-focused on the individual, the only real measurement of success can come from individual assessments that take into account personal accomplishments and failures.

The first approach takes a practical view for measuring the success of the resettlement system. Blake Hamilton (2011) reasons that although the matter of resettlement is undoubtedly gray, the most useful way of measuring resettlement success in Saint Louis is through financial and social independence. “We know that people are doing well when they no longer need us. This usually happens when they have found steady employment and are able to navigate social systems,” said Hamilton (2011). His view is echoed by Shrestha (2011): “I refer to successful integration as refugees, who, through acquiring employment, are economically independent and are able to understand and balance cultural differences between their own culture of origin and that of the host nation.” Using this definition of success, the Office of Refugee Resettlement is able to generate “self-sufficiency” reports that they use to identify which Volags are the most successful. For example, the Church World Service (CWS) reported 60% self-sufficiency after 120 days, and 72% after 180 days in 2011, while the Ethiopian Community Development Council (ECDC) reported 47% self-sufficiency after 120 days, and 64% self-sufficiency after 180 days. The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI), with which the

IISTL is associated, reported 60% self-sufficiency after 120 days, and 72% self-sufficiency after 180 days (United States Office of Refugee Resettlement, 2011). Hamilton (2013) argues that although self-sufficiency is only one aspect of resettlement success, it is absolutely vital to use it as a measurement because it can concretely identify areas in need of improvement.

The second argument begins and ends with examining the individual and their success and failures. In comparison to other resettlement programs around the world, the United States' refugee resettlement program is undeniably focused on the individual. It will often go to the extent of breaking up family units in order to better provide for one person's needs, but rarely does it look to the individual to see if the system is actually working. In short, if policy continues to focus on a very narrow definition of success, it will inevitably overlook the needs of other individuals and, consequently it will neglect major systematic failures. Khadra Bashir (2013), Team Lead and Supervisor at the IISTL, echoes this sentiment by saying that refugee successes or failures are by-and-large the same as the successes or failures of other people. The only way to truly help someone is to truly understand his or her individual situation (Bashir, 2013).

To illustrate the point, we can compare four different people. For Person One, success is attained when they arrive in the United States. Not only have they escaped the instability of their homeland, but also they have also endured the confines of a refugee camp and successfully navigated the channels that led to resettlement. As a result, Person One may or may not feel motivated to attain other kinds of success or to participate in resettlement programs. For Person Two, personal success may be measured by financial means. If they are unable to provide for themselves or their family, they will feel dependent and unsuccessful. As a result, Person Two will have very specific goals during the resettlement process and will make specific demands from the system. If the system cannot meet those demands, Person Two will not feel like they are being supported even if they participate in other resettlement programs. For Person Three, success lies in how connected they feel to their family and



community. Even if a refugee were to manage survival and eventually work their way out of poverty, they may still feel unsuccessful if they are isolated or feel like they do not understand American society. This person will need an entirely different kind of resettlement strategy (Bashir, 2013). There is yet another person, Person Four, who may never feel successfully resettled because they are too deeply scarred from their past or they simply do not wish to be a part of American culture. A Bhutanese refugee said this of her situation: “We came here hoping for a better future for our children. As for us parents, we do not have any hope because we do not have hope of returning to our country. There was no hope of repatriation, and so we thought that coming here would at least ensure that our children’s future would be better” (Shrestha, 2011). Person Four will need programs suited to their psychological situation before they will ever feel successfully resettled (Bashir, 2013).

Although the implications of this theory are complicated, it shows why focusing on a narrow definition of success is insufficient. If the goal of resettlement is to *truly* protect the human rights of refugees, then the system needs to be responsive to the individual. Here are four different people who have wildly different standards of success, even though they live in similar situations and are being guided by the same resettlement policy. If the system caters to one standard of success over another, it will inevitably neglect the human rights and dignity of other individuals.

### **Why Language Education?**

Regardless of how success is defined, there is an undeniable connection between communication abilities and resettlement success. On the one hand, language education opens up vital social and economic opportunities better than programs that are focused solely on social or economic success. Feng Hou and Morton Beiser (2006) argue that these language education opportunities will ultimately lead to financial independence and social integration. Local refugee agencies focus a lot of their attention on helping the newly resettled refugees find employment, hoping that their jobs will

provide them with enough money and other benefits to take them off government assistance. The reality of the situation is that local refugee agencies focus their attention almost exclusively on low-level jobs that are notorious for inadequate pay and poor benefits packages. The IISTL, for example, has programs that train refugees to work in beauty salons, factories, and cleaning staff. Even if a refugee has multiple degrees and a long professional work history, it is not uncommon for them to “settle” with whatever job comes first (Hamilton, 2013). Resettlement agencies simply do not have the resources to put professionals from other countries into professional positions in the United States. Although a refugee has “found a job” and is “off the system,” they are still at a disadvantage. If programs increased their focus on “front-loaded” language opportunities when refugees first arrive in the country, then refugees would not be as limited in their employment prospects as they currently are. This phenomenon is exacerbated by racism and discrimination in the work place. Refugees often do not get paid as much as other people working in the same function (Grognet, 1998). Spending more time in the beginning on language opportunities is good for both the individual and the greater society, because it will take that person off social welfare programs and leave them better situation to *stay off* social welfare programs.

Language education can also be a relatively simple answer to the enormously complex theory of hyper-individualized success. All four the of previously mentioned refugee individuals have enormously different resettlement goals, but they are united by one factor; they need to be able to communicate in order to function on very basic levels. Language education can not only contribute to better job opportunities, but it can also decrease feelings of alienation, help refugees attain confidence, and promote cultural sensitivity between cultures. Ultimately, language capacity allows the individuals to act with dignity. When someone is able to advocate for himself or herself, they are less likely to fall victim to needless human rights abuses. Common human rights violations against refugees include discrimination, racism, and violence at the workplace and other public arenas. “The more you know, the easier resettlement is,” said Hamilton (2013). “Understanding processes help clients feel less lost, less

dependent. Language ability creates a sense of competence and that aides in their ability to navigate social structures.” Hamilton (2013) compares language education to the “teach a man to fish” proverb; if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. Oliver Wendell Holmes, an American jurist who served as an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, once said “language is the blood of the soul into which thoughts run and out of which they grow” (Merriman, 2006). Language is the main source of interpersonal human expression and understanding, and it lies at the very foundations of human society.

Organizations can and should continue to offer a variety of services to refugees, but giving people the tools to best advocate for themselves will ultimately lead to more independent, resourceful individuals. Bashir (2013) describes the process of resettlement in terms of a child first learning to interact with their environment. First, the child must learn to be comfortable in their environment. They must feel secure before they can learn to their fullest potential. Then a child must learn to communicate. Once the child knows how to speak, they will begin understand and adopt the culture around them. Only until a child is secure, able to communicate, and can understand the culture around them will they be able to fully function. This is a simplified analogy, but it testifies to the situation that when refugees arrive in Saint Louis; many do not feel secure, they cannot speak the language, and they do not understand the culture. Language education can be seen as the salve in this scenario. It is an alienating and frightening experience to be surrounded by people that you cannot understand and to know that they cannot understand you. It can exacerbate feelings of insecurity and inability, and ultimately lead to the feeling of helplessness. Although language education is not a “cure-all,” it will ease common tendencies that ultimately lead to the “learned helplessness” phenomenon.

It is also important to make a special argument for adult language classes. Adult refugees have a much higher risk of the aforementioned problems for a variety of reasons. It is undeniable that children and young adults are often more successful at language acquisition than their older counterparts. Allene

Grognet (1998) of the Center for Applied Linguistics provides a list of potential barriers that inhibit adult refugees from learning English: physical health, mental health, social identity, self re-creation, and cultural expectations. To elaborate, adults and elderly adults are entirely capable of learning and adapting to the new language and culture, but they are facing other challenges (Grognet, 1998). The most compelling barriers are those of social identity and self re-creation. As adults or elderly adults, many people have preconceived notions of where they should be at in their lives and what kind of roles and responsibilities they have, as well as the amount of respect they should command. As recently resettled refugees, they must restart their lives as very poor minorities, often without a meaningful way to connect with the community regardless of their social standing before they left their homeland. Many are reluctant to adapt to such a shocking realization and it can be a very painful awakening. Although language is the best way to reestablish themselves, it can also be very tedious. Slow progress and an already diminished sense of self worth can breed doubt or hopelessness. Depression, especially when it is exacerbated by other stresses common to refugees, diminishes a learner's ability to concentrate and reinforces negative habits or beliefs. Adult refugees also have greater social obstacles to transcend than their younger counterparts, such as familial duties, time restraints, and work obligations. Children and teenagers also have access to free public education that not only exposes them to the culture, but also to the language in a formal and comfortable situation on a daily basis. Adults are expected to learn the language and culture without that luxury. Adults also have tremendous pressure put on them from the very beginning to become independent, regardless of who they are and where they are coming from. It is important to remember that this a difficult task for fully functioning adults that were born in the United States, much less for people who are foreign to the American vision of "independence," "success," and "self-sufficiency." Lastly, adults are less comfortable in formal education situations. Either they come from an area in the world that does not have education structures similar to the United

States, or they have not been in a classroom for many years and are no longer used to the setting. This phenomenon gets worse the older the refugee is (Grognet, 1998).

## **Recommendations**

In order to best accommodate the needs of refugees and protect their human rights within the United States, the refugee resettlement system needs to switch from being primarily focused on financial independence to having a “front-loaded” language education approach, meaning that refugees should spend many more hours than they currently do dedicated to language. Refugees can and do find work and many become financially independent, but this does not mean that any of their other more personal resettlement goals have been met or that they are adequately being protected from avoidable human rights abuses. The lack of language proficiency jeopardizes growth opportunities and ultimately erodes human capital and increases the burden on government welfare programs. The reason language education should be “front-loaded” can be found in the University of Toronto Refugee Resettlement Project’s study of refugee language acquisition. The study concluded that the first few years of resettlement are the most important for language acquisition across a span of ten years. Researchers found that 17% of refugees in their study could speak English well two years after arrival, while 67% could speak moderately well, and 16% could not speak any English. Those numbers increased to 32% having good command of the language, 60% speaking moderately well, and only 8% having no English ten years after arrival. They attested that the most language improvement happened at the very beginning of the resettlement, meaning the first few years after arrival are the most critical for learning the new language. The chances an individual will learn the language after that period diminish rapidly (Hou & Beiser, 2006).

In order to best utilize prime language learning time, resettlement agencies should have invested interests in providing high quality language opportunities as soon as possible. Safe

environments should be created for adult learners, and incentives should be utilized to keep refugee interest high. If adult refugees could be given an education opportunity similar to the education opportunities of young learners, they would have better chances of success. In order to provide these types of opportunities, refugees need to be able to put education first, at least at the very beginning. They need to have extended periods of financial assistance from the government that will mitigate the pressure to find a job. They also need to have education that is appropriate for adult learners, in order to help adults feel more comfortable in the classroom setting. After studying why child refugees and young learners are able to learn languages faster and speak with less of an accent, Grognet (1998) argues that there is no substantial evidence that says adults cannot learn a language and that there are even some indicators that show their capabilities are actually superior to young learners.

Despite the serious barriers that adult refugees face in learning English, there are a few recommendations that could alleviate some of the issues. First, academic programs and teachers must always acknowledge the ages and interests of their students. Adult learners need curricula that relate to their lives, communities, and aspirations. The most common reason students drop out of classes is because the curriculum is too focused on meaningless grammar rules. Refugees attend classes for very specific reasons, so generalized curricula (even if they are fast-paced) are usually considered a waste of time. Adult learners most often benefit from curricula that use concepts they have already learned, and apply them to the language lessons. An example of this is teaching adult learners how to tell stories in English, how to read cookbooks, or how to read identify warning labels on common household items. Another strategy to accommodate adult learners is to take the lessons outside of the traditional classroom setting. Field trips to learn how to read and use public transportation schedules are invaluable lessons. Many adults will also have physical limitations that hinder classroom work. Using visual and audio cues together will help compensate for seeing or hearing deficiencies. Having classes in community centers or in homes will allow the student to relax in their own environment, instead of

being forced to sit in uncomfortable chairs. Finally, and most importantly, adult learners need to be at least partially in control of what they are learning. Language education should not aim to fulfill only one goal, but should aim to satisfy relevant cultural and situational needs as well (Grognet, 1998).

Beyond individual or personal problems that inhibit language learning, there are external factors that can sometimes make it very difficult for adults to learn English. They include not having transportation to and from classes, work demands that do not allow them extra time to go to classes, familial responsibilities that keep them tied to their homes, financial resources, or simply not knowing about the programs that are offered. Other problems include only having access to programs with very limited resources. When a student (regardless of age) goes to a class that is overcrowded or has a poorly trained or ill prepared teachers, they will not be as successful as the student who has access to better programs (Grognet, 1998). All of these factors must be considered in the development of language programs, and these unique challenges should be met with policy changes, community organizing, and other responses.

With global and U.S. refugee situations in mind, this paper has delved into the question of what makes refugee resettlement in Saint Louis successful or not. Although it is nearly impossible to discern what *exactly* leads to truly successful resettlement, local organizations need to be sensitive to the limitations of focusing solely on financial independence. If their goals are to resettle refugees in a way that fully protects refugee human rights, measures of success must be responsive to the actual needs of the individuals. As argued above, language education is the foundational key to successful resettlement because it allows refugees to effectively advocate for themselves and function as independent, resourceful individuals. Thus, the most pressing area of improvement is language education. Within the confines and structures of existing education programs, adult education is the area that needs the most improvement. Adult refugees have perhaps the most challenging set of barriers to face before they can

be considered effectively resettled, including: learning how to navigate foreign social structures, re-creating their own self image, repairing and recovering from deeply traumatic events, and above all, becoming financially and socially independent within three months of arrival. A resettlement program that is “front-loaded” with language education primarily for adults will not only help refugees in all aspects of resettlement, but will also provide more diverse employment opportunities for refugees and contribute to long-term independence from government welfare programs.

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