



# Life in the Promised Land: Resettled Refugee Youth Struggle in the U.S.

## Case Study: Phoenix, Arizona

Women's Refugee Commission

October 2009

### Executive Summary

Approximately 75,000 refugees<sup>1</sup> will be resettled to the United States in fiscal year 2009 (October 2008 - September 2009). Many young people come to the U.S. unprepared for the challenges ahead. Many have never seen the inside of a formal school. The vast majority have not had the opportunity to learn practical skills while they were displaced that will enable them to get a job. They have difficulties staying in school or finding a job—the latter is expected for those over 18 who need to contribute to their families. Since the majority of refugees are in long-term situations that last an average of 17 years,<sup>2</sup> the international community must ensure that time spent in displacement is not wasted but rather is used as an opportunity to prepare young people for their futures—whether they are resettled to the U.S., remain in their country of asylum or return home to rebuild their communities.

More than 3,200 refugees from 38 countries were resettled to Arizona in FY 2008.<sup>3</sup> The Women's Refugee Commission traveled to Phoenix, Arizona in August 2009 to learn about young people's experience resettling to the U.S. In particular, the delegation looked at what educational and skills training programs young people had access to while they were displaced that helped with their transition to the U.S.—and what additional services would have been helpful. The aim was to learn what more could be done during displacement to better prepare refugee youth for life in the U.S.

### Key Findings

**1. The lack of English language skills was cited by all those interviewed as the single greatest impediment to quick and successful integration.**

Without a basic working knowledge of English, many resettled youth struggle to go to school and find jobs.

**2. Resettled youth are disadvantaged by their poor education during displacement.**

Those who arrive with limited education often have a difficult time completing high school within the given time frame or even staying in school.

**3. Orientation provided before resettlement is often inadequate.**

Cultural orientation provided during displacement varies greatly and does not always adequately prepare refugees for life in the U.S.

### Key Recommendations

The following key recommendations are based on interviews with resettled young women and men, case workers, youth employment specialists, teachers, counselors and employers. For a complete list of recommendations, please see page 6.

**1. Appropriate formal and non-formal education should be available to all youth while they are displaced.**

Basic literacy and numeracy are essential for young people to succeed whether they come to the U.S., return

home or remain in their host communities. Where secondary school is unavailable or unrealistic for young people who have missed out on years of school, a comprehensive “package” of educational services is essential. This should include basic education and catch-up classes and training in transferable vocational skills, such as farming, healthcare, information and communication technology and financial literacy.

2. **English language training should be provided to all refugees before arriving in the U.S.** The lack of English language skills was cited by all those interviewed as the single greatest impediment to quick and successful integration. Providing basic English language classes in camps and displaced settings would facilitate a more rapid transition to employment in the U.S. as well as facilitate school attendance and retention. In many displaced settings, English instruction would be useful regardless where a young person ends up.
3. **An expanded and more realistic orientation prior to resettlement is needed.** Refugees we interviewed told us that the information they received prior to resettlement varies greatly. Refugees, including young people, need to know in advance about the challenges they will face in the U.S. In addition to English instruction, those selected for resettlement should receive training before their departure in basic transferable vocational skills, such as financial literacy and computers.

## Methodology

The Women’s Refugee Commission visited Arizona as part of the Displaced Youth Initiative, a global, multi-year research and advocacy project that focuses on improving formal and non-formal education and job training for conflict-affected young women and men during every phase of displacement. Through desk research, field assessments and innovative pilot projects, the Women’s Refugee Commission is looking at the skills and education young people (15 to 24 years old) need to move forward with their lives, both while they are displaced and when they are finally able to return home safely or be resettled elsewhere.

The Women’s Refugee Commission traveled to Tucson to attend the Arizona Refugee Resettlement Conference from August 17 to 18, 2009 and visited Phoenix from August 19 to 21. While in Phoenix, the team met with 25 resettled young women and men between the ages of 15 and 34 from Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), Burundi, Liberia, Iraq, Iran and Sudan; case workers and youth and employment specialists from the four local resettlement agencies; teachers, principals, counselors and other educators; employers hiring refugee youth and workforce specialists. The purpose of the interviews was to:

- learn about programs and services young people had access to while they were displaced that helped to prepare them for their transition to the U.S.;
- learn what programs and services would have been helpful to better prepare young people for their transition to the U.S.; and
- identify resettled youth’s current educational and livelihoods needs and opportunities to inform and influence programming in contexts of displacement.



Young people, including these young men and women from Iraq, Burundi and Bhutan, have resettled in Phoenix, Arizona.

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As refugees’ experiences resettling to the U.S. vary by individual and location, the following should be read as a compilation of observations, experiences and perspectives of individuals met, not as a comprehensive study. While the focus of the assessment was on displaced youth who have resettled to the United States, lessons learned and recommendations in this report may also be applicable for displaced youth who plan to return home or remain in their country of asylum. The delegation also visited innovative educational and workforce development programs serving out-of-school youth in the Phoenix area that could be adapted to displaced settings. This report

builds on findings from the Women's Refugee Commission's livelihoods assessment in San Diego in July 2007 (see *Rebuilding Lives: Refugee Economic Opportunities in a New Land* at [womensrefugeecommission.org](http://womensrefugeecommission.org)).

## Findings

### 1. Educational and Employment Challenges and Opportunities for Resettled Youth

*"It's really hard for people coming in because they thought that this was their final step in their long journey"*—International Rescue Committee staff member.

Adjusting to life in the U.S. in the best of times can be difficult for many refugees. In the current economic climate, finding a job and becoming self-sufficient within a few months is daunting. Resettlement agencies nationwide—including the four local agencies visited in Phoenix (Catholics Charities Community Service, International Rescue Committee, Lutheran Social Ministries of the Southwest and Refugee Immigration Relief Center)—are doing a commendable job trying to help refugees become settled in their new home. These agencies are providing vital services to an increasing number of clients (many refugees are returning to their original resettlement agency after losing jobs) while challenged by dwindling resources. Refugees are experiencing increasing job losses, home foreclosures and growing resentment. This frustration was evident when, on September 1, 2009, Iraqi refugees demonstrated outside the State Capitol in Phoenix to protest their living situation in the U.S. According to one refugee interviewed by the Cronkite News Service, "When you go there [to the resettlement agencies], ask them many times to find a job, they don't find any jobs for us." <sup>4</sup>

### 2. The lack of English language skills was cited by all those interviewed as the single greatest impediment to quick and successful integration.

The arrival in the U.S. of young refugees with no knowledge of English has a detrimental impact on their ability to become self-sufficient and contribute to their new communities. Without a basic working knowledge of English, many resettled youth struggle to stay in school and find jobs.

There was resounding consensus in all interviews with refugees, teachers, resettlement agency staff and employers that English-language training would have been the most helpful element in preparing refugees for resettlement and life in the U.S. With refugees 18 and older expected to find employment within weeks of their arrival, they have little or no time to become even remotely functional in English. This places severe limitations on the

#### **English Classes in a Refugee Camp Help Bhutanese Teen Adapt to Life in the U.S.**

*Shreeni (not her real name), 15, is from Bhutan.\* She was resettled to the U.S. from a refugee camp in Nepal, where she was born. Shreeni was able to go to a school in the refugee camp until the 10th grade. In school, she studied five hours of English and three hours of Nepalese. A week after finding out her family was accepted for resettlement, Shreeni left for Phoenix. She received a brief orientation about life in the U.S. prior to her departure.*

*Shreeni currently goes to Alhambra High School where she is enrolled in the ninth grade. In Arizona, refugees who are 15 years and older are automatically enrolled in ninth grade regardless of their literacy or previous schooling. Shreeni claims the education that she received in the refugee camp helped her transition to the educational system here and adapt to life in the U.S. In particular, she credits learning English as the most important thing that helped with her transition to her new life in Arizona.*

*\* Since the early 1990s, more than 100,000 refugees of ethnic Nepalese origin from southern Bhutan have been living in camps in eastern Nepal after they were arbitrarily stripped of their nationality and forced to flee Bhutan. These refugees constitute about one-sixth of the population of Bhutan. After many years of repressive policies and human rights violations against the Bhutanese refugees, the U.S. has offered to resettle 60,000 people.*

Sources for information on Bhutanese refugees: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/all-countries/bhutan/page.do?id=1011119>; [http://www.globalyouthconnect.org/country\\_bhutan.html](http://www.globalyouthconnect.org/country_bhutan.html); <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/03/25/bhutan.refugees/index.html>.

employment opportunities available to them. The present economic climate, where jobs are few and far between and where refugees are competing for entry-level jobs with Americans and immigrants with better English skills, further exacerbates the challenges these refugees face.

Free English as a Second Language (ESL) classes are provided by Lutheran Social Services at various locations in Phoenix, including at apartment complexes where refugees live. The ESL classes are primarily provided to adults as it is assumed that children and adolescents are in school. The delegation was told by a number of refugees that the instruction quality is poor as it is difficult to teach many people who are at various levels, speak different languages and must bring their young children as they do not have any childcare. Insufficient funding for ESL classes was cited as one of the primary reasons that instruction quality suffered.

### **3. Resettled youth are disadvantaged by their poor education during displacement.**

*"In refugee camps, priority is not learning, it is surviving."*—Burundian refugee resettled in Phoenix.

Those who arrive with limited education often have a difficult time completing high school within the given time frame or even staying in school. Teachers expressed concern that some refugee students arrive without any concept of school and lack even basic literacy and numeracy in their native language. For those refugees who are not even literate in their own languages, it is all the more difficult to become so in English. As one high school teacher shared, "Students without basic skills go into a failure cycle."<sup>5</sup>

Many of the refugees interviewed had minimal or no secondary education. According to 2007 data from United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) field operations, only 20 percent of refugees are enrolled in secondary school,<sup>6</sup> with girls accounting for only 30 percent of the students enrolled.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, research shows that having formal education is a strong predictor for career advancement and economic self-sufficiency.<sup>8</sup> It is notable that the young refugees in Phoenix who appeared to be adapting best to the U.S. education system were those who had access to secondary education during displacement, for example, the Bhutanese arriving from Nepal—although even these young people pointed out how helpful it would have been to have had more English language and relevant vocational skills training.

### **4. Orientation provided before resettlement is often inadequate.**

*"We considered U.S. a paradise, but when we came here it was very disappointing."*—Iraqi young woman, age 17, resettled in Phoenix.

The delegation heard how cultural orientation provided during displacement varied greatly and did not always adequately prepare refugees for life in the U.S. There are inherent challenges in managing expectations, but so many of those interviewed were unprepared for the need to become self-sufficient almost immediately and to take the most menial of jobs. This is a particular challenge for the caseload of Iraqis who are arriving better educated and with expectations of continuing their studies or finding jobs in their chosen profession. During the September 1st protest at the State Capitol, Iraqis carried signs that read, "Real hell in Iraq better than false paradise of America."<sup>9</sup>

The vast majority of refugees and those assisting them interviewed complained that expectations upon arrival in the U.S. are too high. The delegation met with a number of young people who wanted to go to school, but instead had to get a job immediately to help support their family. This was especially true for those who came with only a mother and siblings. The U.S. Reception and Placement Cooperative Agreement (Cooperative Agreement) states that if refugees are between 18 and 64 years old they must find a job. The primary goal of resettlement is self-sufficiency, not education. In order to further their education, refugees can go to adult education classes or to Job Corps or other workforce training centers, if available. As one employment specialist said, "Expectations are high. Eighteen-year-olds want to go to school but must find work immediately to help support the family."<sup>10</sup>

Orientation must be seen as a process beginning while people are displaced and continuing throughout their initial months in the U.S. An integral part of this process is ensuring that key information on refugees is gathered and shared with appropriate service providers. For example, the health screening conducted prior to departure should document physical, sensory, cognitive, emotional and mental disabilities. This information should be shared with relevant teachers and counselors while respecting issues of privacy.

## Soccer Gives Young Men a Sense of Belonging

*Emmett Kamara is a Liberian refugee who was resettled to the U.S. 30 years ago. He is a determined young man who has established an informal group to help newly arrived Liberian refugee resettle in Phoenix.*

*Emmett and his team, with the help of Phoenix resettlement agencies, assist families to adjust to their new life in the U.S. They volunteer as guides to help them navigate the social welfare system and assist families and their children enroll in school, get health insurance and find jobs. Since the creation of his group, Emmett and a number of Liberian youth realized that most Liberians resettled in the U.S. were from female-headed single-parent households. Most of the time, the parent had to work two jobs to support their family, which left the children and youth without supervision.*

*He and his group saw that they needed to keep the idle adolescents and young people busy. They formed a soccer team, called the Desert Lone Star of Arizona, to give the young men a sense of belonging and to keep them off the street. The players learn life skills—showing up on time, practicing and working together—which help prepare them for the future.*

*Since its creation, the team has played many soccer games in Arizona and is heading to Sacramento, California for a national tournament.*



Members of the Liberian soccer team in Phoenix.

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## Gaps in financial literacy and basic computer skills also limit opportunity.

*“Job readiness needs to start overseas.”—Employment specialist, U.S. resettlement agency, Phoenix.*

Most refugees interviewed—even those who have had some schooling—had no experience with computers before coming to the U.S. But basic computer literacy is a key factor in facilitating integration, whether in schools or the workplace. And when so many employers require online applications, it can be a real barrier to employment.

Financial literacy—including something as basic as how to open a bank account—is also critical. The resettlement agencies in Phoenix are finalizing a job preparation curriculum that includes financial literacy, training in interviewing and other relevant job hunting skills that could be adapted for use with refugees overseas.

## Jobs for Resettled Refugee Youth in Arizona

### Jobs currently employing resettled refugee young women and men

Airport (cleaning, car washing/parking)	Grocery store
Assembly line (packing/assembling)	Health care/home care attendant
Baby sitting/daycare	Hospitality industry (dishwashing, housekeeping, laundry)
Bakery	Office administration
Cleaning/janitor	Security guard
Construction	Textile factory

### Sectors of potential growth

Advanced manufacturing	Green jobs (i.e., construction jobs using green products, solar power, etc.)
Bio science	Information technology (IT)
Certified nurse assistant (CNA) program	Pharmacy technicians
Food service	

### Jobs that employed resettled refugees hit hard by economic crisis

Airport jobs	Hospitality/Hotel businesses
Factory jobs	Retail

## Recommendations

*"Refugees want a hand up, not a hand out."*—Eskinder Negash, Director, Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR).

The time refugees spend in displacement should be used as preparation for life after displacement. Services should be viewed as a continuum of care from displacement to durable solution (return, local integration or resettlement to a third country). For young people, this should include a greater emphasis on education and job-readiness skills that are transferable whatever the durable solution.<sup>11</sup> In particular, donors, such as the State Department's Bureau for Population, Refugees and Migration and the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement, policy makers and operational agencies working with refugees overseas and in the United States should:

- 1. Ensure access to appropriate formal and non-formal education to all young people while displaced.** Basic literacy and numeracy are essential for young people to succeed whether they come to the U.S., return home or remain in their host communities. As secondary school is often unavailable or unrealistic for young people who have missed out on years of school, a comprehensive "package" of educational services is essential. This should include basic education and catch-up classes and training in transferable vocational skills, such as farming, healthcare, information and communication technology and financial literacy.
- 2. Make English language training available to all refugees before they arrive in the U.S.** Those selected for resettlement should receive training in English before their departure. In some displaced settings, existing English classes could be expanded to include approved refugee applicants. In other settings, existing educational facilities or U.S. government processing centers could be used to provide the classes. This would require enhanced coordination and increased funding but would be much more economical and give refugees a better head start than just providing English classes and extended public assistance once refugees are in the U.S.

**3. Expand the cultural orientation provided prior to resettlement.** Refugees, including young people, need to know in advance about the challenges they may face in the U.S., as well as the benefits, so that their decision to pursue resettlement is an informed one.<sup>12</sup> Efforts should be made to ensure that as many members of the family as possible attend cultural orientation. This might require flexible hours and ensuring childcare is available. It is important to tell refugees before they come that self-sufficiency is the immediate goal and that securing a job to support the family must come first. Refugees considering resettlement should be given the essential information—in their native language—pertaining to expectations. For example, they should be told that, as outlined in the U.S. Reception and Placement Cooperative Agreement, refugees must be economically self-sufficient within the first 120-180 days.

**4. Establish job training opportunities for young people while they are displaced as well as once they arrive in the U.S.** Youth need help accessing hands-on practical skills training that link them to job opportunities in both situations of displacement and in the U.S. Internships and apprenticeships can play an important role in providing youth an entry point to the job market. Service providers working with displaced youth should collaborate with local businesses to provide job-training opportunities. Businesses may require incentives, such as stipends or equipment support, to participate. Similarly, resettlement agencies in the U.S. should partner with employers to arrange internships, job shadowing or volunteer opportunities for refugees in the weeks or months before they find jobs in order to gain work experience. Resettlement agencies do not need to establish parallel training programs but should continue to partner with and outsource to existing youth workforce development agencies. Refugees can be referred to local programs working with out-of-school youth, such as the Department of Labor-funded Job Corps and programs associated with the Phoenix Workforce Connection in Arizona.

**5. Improve data collection and information-sharing among service providers overseas and in the U.S.** Agencies resettling refugees need to receive more comprehensive information on their clients prior to arrival, such as health-related information, including disabilities. While privacy issues must be respected, appropriate information should be shared with resettlement agencies and schools so that they have a better idea of the needs of their refugee clients and students.

**6. Establish stronger linkages between international and resettlement programs.** Enhancing communication will allow overseas programs and resettlement agencies to learn from best practices, share training materials and provide for a smoother transition for refugees who are resettling. Greater coordination can lead to more appropriate and effective services in displaced settings and in the U.S.

## **Next Steps**

The Women's Refugee Commission is sharing these findings and recommendations with policy makers, donors and service providers working with displaced youth worldwide to help better prepare young people for life during and after displacement. These organizations and agencies are encouraged to use these recommendations as they make decisions about funding and develop programs to support young people affected by conflict.

Information gathered from this mission will help to shape a "pilot project" in which the Women's Refugee Commission will partner with an operational agency to try out an innovative practice or creative idea to prepare young people for resettlement. Lessons learned from this demonstration project, as well as additional pilot projects focused on other durable solutions (return and reintegration), will inform the Women's Refugee Commission's global Displaced Youth Initiative.

Over the next two years, the Women's Refugee Commission will visit other resettlement sites in the U.S. to build on these recommendations and compare variations and models in different locations. Brief reports will be produced after each assessment.

Lessons learned from field visits to resettlement sites and displaced settings, global desk research and pilot projects will culminate in a resource toolbox for donors, policy makers and practitioners that will offer guidance and practical steps to improve programs and policies for displaced youth.

## Acknowledgments

This report was written by Jenny Perlman Robinson, senior program officer, Shogufa Alpar, program coordinator, and Hazel Reitz, board member, all of the Women's Refugee Commission. Background research was conducted by Chantal LaParl-Green, intern. The report was edited and designed by Diana Quick, director of communications. The International Rescue Committee-Phoenix made all arrangements and provided the logistical support for the trip. A special thanks to all the IRC staff and especially to Jennifer Doran, Kate Reid and Vital Ntibushemeye for their time and support. The Women's Refugee Commission is extremely grateful to all the agencies, businesses, schools and individuals interviewed, in particular the young women and men from Bhutan, Myanmar (Burma), Burundi, Iran, Iraq, Liberia and Sudan.

This research and report would not have been possible without generous support from Unbound Philanthropy.

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ISBN:1-58030-083-9

## Organizations Interviewed

Arizona Call-A-Teen Youth Resources  
Arizona Department of Economic Security, Refugee Resettlement Program  
Arizona Department of Education, State Coordinator for Refugee Education  
Catholic Charities Community Services  
Glendale High School  
International Rescue Committee  
Jewish Family and Children's Service  
Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest  
McCann Erickson  
Milum Textile Services  
Phoenix College

Phoenix Job Corps. U.S. Department of Labor  
Phoenix Workforce Connection  
Pro's Ranch Markets  
Refugee and Immigrant Relief Center  
Refugee Works  
Sudan American Center in Arizona  
The Episcopal Church, Office of Government Relations  
Tumbleweed Center for Youth Development  
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)  
Washington High School  
YMCA

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Proposed Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2009: Report to the Congress. <http://www.usccb.org/mrs/fy09admissionsreport.pdf>. Speech by Eskinder Negash, Director of Office of Refugee Resettlement. Presentation at Arizona Annual Refugee Resettlement Conference. Tucson, AZ. August 17, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees. *Protracted refugee situations: Millions caught in limbo, with no solutions in sight*. [www.un.org/events/tenstories/06/story.asp?storyID=2600](http://www.un.org/events/tenstories/06/story.asp?storyID=2600)

<sup>3</sup> Arizona Refugee Advancement Coalition. <http://azracweb.org/home/powerpoint/Refugee101/Refugee%20101.swf>. Last date accessed October 15, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> "Iraqi refugees protest treatment by relief agencies." Cronkite News Service. September 1, 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Women's Refugee Commission interview with teacher. Washington High School. August 19, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR. *Report on International Protection of Women and Girls in Displacement*. Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme. 29 May 2009.



<sup>7</sup> UNHCR. 2007 Global Appeal. <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4565a6dd2.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Halpern, Peggy. *Refugee Economic Self-Sufficiency: An Exploratory Study of Approaches Used in Office of Refugee Resettlement Programs*. Prepared for U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Washington, D.C. November 2008.

<sup>9</sup> "Iraqi refugees protest treatment by relief agencies." Cronkite News Service. September 1, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> Women's Refugee Commission interview with Azur Priganica. IRC employment coordinator. August 20, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Women's Refugee Commission. *Rebuilding Lives: Economic Opportunities in a New Land*. August 2007. [http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/us\\_sandiego.pdf](http://www.womenscommission.org/pdf/us_sandiego.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> International Rescue Committee. *Iraqi Refugees in the United States: In Dire Straits*. June 2009.

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Since 1989, the Women's Refugee Commission has advocated vigorously for policies and programs to improve the lives of refugee and displaced women, children and young people, including those seeking asylum—bringing about lasting, measurable change.

