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How Refugee-Centric is Cultural  
Orientation? The Examples of  
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## **Abstract**

The current refugee crisis resulting from wars and civil unrest in many parts of the world has led to the displacement of an unprecedented number of people; 65.6 million of whom 22.5 million are refugees (UNHCR, 2017). While the vast majority of asylum seekers flee to neighboring countries, resettlement in a third country is the last and durable option and is only available to a very small number of refugees. It is also one of the most fundamental tools of international protection for refugees.

Resettlement is a life-changing experience with many rewards and challenges for refugees. To help facilitate the integration of different categories of migrants, “pre-departure cultural orientation” programmes are offered by host countries. These programmes have

become central to the resettlement process, with governmental and non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) providing a variety of basic practical information and services to help with migrants' resettlement.

It has been widely recognised that managing the expectations of resettling refugees is one of the most positive outcomes of pre-departure cultural orientation services. Setting more realistic expectations means refugees can access important services more efficiently upon arrival, and gain more self-confidence which in turn enables them to develop a greater sense of belonging in their new environment.

This paper will focus on Pre-departure Cultural Orientation (CO) programmes for refugees resettled in Canada and Australia; two top resettlement countries in the world. Both countries rely on the extensive experience and expertise of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to facilitate the resettlement process. Given the often traumatic circumstances of refugees' lives and the move to a new country, this paper will explore the extent to which the CO is refugee-centric. In particular, does the CO give enough attention and care to their psychological well-being? Finally, how does the CO contribute to highlighting the potential contributions refugees make to the receiving societies?

**Keywords:** Refugees, resettlement, cultural orientation, COA, AUSCO

## Introduction

The current refugee crisis resulting from wars, civil unrest, and natural disasters, especially across Asia, the Middle East, and Africa has led to the displacement of an unprecedented number of people; 65.6 million people of whom 22.5 million are refugees (UNHCR, 2017). This humanitarian tragedy is believed to be the worst since the Second World War. Syrian refugees top these figures with 5.5 million people having fled their country since the start of the civil war in 2011. The vast majority of asylum seekers flee to neighbouring countries. Given that all the current conflicts are in the global south, the highest concentrations of refugees (84%) can be found in developing nations.<sup>1</sup>

Resettlement in a third country is the last and durable option and is only available to a very small number of refugees.<sup>2</sup> It is also one of the most fundamental tools of international protection for refugees. The first two internationally accepted, durable solutions available to refugees is voluntary repatriation, which gives refugees the right to go back to their home country when it is safe for them to do so. The second solution is called “local integration” and refers to the local resettlement of refugees in the country of first asylum, once that country grants them the right to re-settle.

Mandated by its Statute and the UN General Assembly Resolutions, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) plays a critical role in the resettlement process

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1 Top five hosting countries are Turkey (2.9 M), Pakistan (1.4 M), Lebanon (1.1 M), Iran (979,400), and Uganda (940,835). (UNHCR , 2016).

2 In 2015, there were 16.1 million refugees of concern to UNHCR but less than 1% were resettled that year.

and includes all three durable solutions. There are several resettles where is closely linked with a country's resettlement programmes which are often limited in scope. There is the need for specific criteria in order to focus efforts.

The number of states taking part in the resettlement programme remains very small, especially in light of the current large scale crisis, when the needs for resettlement far exceed the number of available places. Over a period of eleven years, there has been a noticeable rise in the number of countries offering resettlement programmes; from 14 countries in 2005 to 37 countries in 2016.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this expansion, the UNHCR has seen a sharp increase in the number of submissions of cases for resettlement; from 74,835 in 2012 to 145,568 in 2016. At the same time, the number of refugees who secured resettlement in a third country also rose during the same period; from 69,252 to 114,916 departures. The increase in the number of countries that pledge their commitment to resettlement is key to the global protection programme refugees have available, however, this has been met by growing skepticism towards migrants and refugees, in particular. The United States under President Trump has been leading this recent trend of anti-immigration rhetoric and policies to significantly reduce the number of resettled refugees. Until 2015, the United States was the world's top resettlement country. Today, Germany holds this ranking given

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3 Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belarus, Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Republic of Korea, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States of America, Uruguay.

its liberal migration policies. Canada and Nordic countries also provide a sizeable number of places annually (UNHCR, 2016).

Resettlement is a life-changing experience with many challenges and rewards for refugees. More often than not, refugees resettle in a place that is not of their own choosing. Therefore, they must adapt to a new country, a new language, and a new culture under uncertain circumstances all with an insecure future. The challenges linked to this change in values, traditions, and practices is a bigger issue for refugees coming straight out of camps, since they tend to have little or no knowledge of life in an urbanised and industrialised society. Undergoing a period of adjustment is inevitable, and it can be long and fraught with difficult obstacles. But the rewards some refugees can reap from such a move are undeniably important.

Host countries offer refugees the opportunity to enjoy safety and security, as well as physical and legal protection. At the same time, refugees have the opportunity to make a fresh start, rebuild their lives, and contribute to the fabric and development of their adopted country. Receiving states also benefit from having refugees. The existing discourse, however, tends to put much emphasis on the (negative) security and humanitarian impacts the refugee situation will have on the host countries, especially across the European Union and the western world more broadly. The notion of “refugee burden” has been used by government and humanitarian actors as the basis of their policy-making vocabulary.

All migrants (whether voluntary or forced) impact growth, security, economic development, social change, and cohesion in

their adopted homes. Their integration has been recognized as key in the formulation of migrant policies in destination countries (Castles & Miller, 2009). It is, therefore, in the interest of both sides, the new arrivals and the host countries, to take steps to ensure the foundations for integration are laid in the countries of first asylum. Given the various challenges involved in the resettlement process affecting refugees, there is an increasing awareness of the need to provide services to help facilitate their integration. For a newcomer, accessing everyday information can be complex and daunting, in what some have described as “a culturally alien information environment” (Mehra & Papajohn, 2007).

A program known as “Pre-departure Cultural Orientation” takes place in the country of first asylum and has become central to the resettlement process. It has been widely recognised that managing the expectations of resettling refugees is one of the most positive outcomes of pre-departure services.

This paper will focus on Pre-departure Cultural Orientation Programmes (COs) for refugees resettled in Canada and Australia; two top resettlement countries in the world. As the humanitarian refugee crisis continues to deepen, and when both populist and official discourses tend to blame refugees for the woes of the world, this paper will address the extent to which the particular circumstances of refugees’ lives are being addressed through the COs. On top of challenges faced by voluntary migrants everywhere, including social isolation and exclusion, all refugees suffer directly or indirectly as result of trauma, loss, war, or displacement. How can the CO education ensure that specific needs and concerns, especially the health and well-being of refugees, are being met at this initial stage of

the resettlement process? Are the COs being used as opportunities to help counter the widespread prejudices against refugees? What messages, if any, about refugees and their potential contribution to the host countries are conveyed?

## 1. The Myths Surrounding Refugees and the Refugees Crisis

The recent sharp increase in the number of refugees since the start of the current crisis in 2011 is largely caused by the civil war in Syria, as well as by the unrest in many parts of the Middle East and North Africa. In 2015, at the peak of this crisis in Europe, the number of refugees who reached European shores rose to over one million. By 2016, this number dropped dramatically, by two thirds, to 364,000 people. However, the number of refugees who died whilst making the perilous journey across the Mediterranean sea rose during the same period; over 5,000 deaths in 2016 compared to 3,777 in 2015 (UNHCR & IOM, 2016). A number of factors can account for the decrease in the number of migrants trying to reach Europe. The implementation of the Turkey-EU deal meant that Ankara had to take back migrants and refugees who crossed by sea to the Greek islands. Legal channels of resettlement were put in place to try and put an end to irregular migration from Turkey.<sup>4</sup> Tighter border controls along the western Balkans also contributed to this.

This influx uncovered some serious problems with the Common European Asylum System (CEAS)<sup>5</sup> which was originally

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4 In return, the EU promised Turkey it would help speed up its membership to the EU

5 This regional refugee protection project was set up in 1999. It is a legislative framework which covers all aspects of the asylum process. It also has a support agency – the European Asylum Support Office (EASO).

established to lay down minimum standards for all asylum seekers within Europe. But instead of harmonizing the asylum systems, it soon transpired that different states within the European Union (EU) adopted unilateral measures to deal with the flow of asylum seekers in their country. Consequently, what we have been witnessing is the emergence of rather contradictory approaches to this refugee crisis. On the one hand Germany, for example, has adopted a liberal approach to the issue.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, countries like Hungary have used a right-wing nationalistic approach which breaches both EU and international law.

This crisis generated a lot of discussion and controversy especially in mass and social media circles given its magnitude and perceived (negative) impact on countries of asylum and host countries. Whilst various reliable sources confirmed that the world was witnessing the highest number of refugees since World War II, what did not get much attention was the fact that countries neighbouring war-torn Iraq and Syria, where most refugees originated from, received the largest proportion of refugees. They include Turkey with 2.9 million refugees, followed by Lebanon (1.1 million or a staggering 20% of the total population of Lebanon) and Jordan with over 685,000 refugees amounting to about 10% of the population (UNHCR, 2016).<sup>7</sup>

As this crisis shows no sign of abating, much emphasis

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6 According to the UNHCR, of all European countries, Germany has accepted the largest number of asylum seekers (over one million in 2015), more than the number of refugees accepted by the US in the past ten years (Refugee Processing Center).

7 Between 2011 and 2016, Germany and Sweden received 64% of Syrian asylum applications in Europe. The remaining 27 EU countries (excluding Germany) pledged to host 51,205 refugees or around 1% of the Syrian refugee population (OCHA, UNHCR and IOM)

continues to be put on the negative socio-economic impact of refugees on the host communities. They are frequently seen as a source of criminal activities, competitors in the local labour market, and a pressure on public services and infrastructure. Populist politicians, policy makers, and the media have targeted migrants to further their own agenda and increase their profit margins. This myth about refugees has been challenged by countless studies that have proven over and over again the overwhelming economic and social benefits to host countries. It has been argued that overall and in the short term, the fiscal costs of caring for refugees can indeed be sizable. Governments incur large costs as they have to pay not only for the processing of asylum claims, but they also need to offer temporary shelter, food, and medical care to these new arrivals. In the medium to long term, however, the negative view of refugees is often wrong and misleading. Existing research shows that in the medium and long term, the impact of refugees on host communities is a positive one and that they add value to the local economy (Kalena Cortes, 2004; Alexander Betts, Louise Bloom, Josiah Kaplan, Naohiko Omata, 2014). One striking example is that of Syrian refugees who now make up 20% of the Lebanese population. Has the Lebanese economy collapsed since this massive influx of refugees began? According to the World Bank, the Lebanese economy has in fact experienced growth beyond expectations; 2.5%, the highest since 2010 (World Bank, 2015). A recent joint study by the UNHCR and the UNDP analysed the impact of humanitarian aid on the Lebanese economy since the onset of the war in Syria. It concluded that there were far more positive implications from hosting refugees than previously estimated. Such economic resilience in the

face of a large influx of refugees has been witnessed in Jordan and Turkey too. Both economies have experienced consistent growth since the Syrian refugees' inflow began.<sup>8</sup>

## 2.The Resettlement Process

Prior to their resettlement, many refugees undergo a process whereby an official delegation from the host country visits the country of asylum to interview the refugee, often including a security check, and to kick start the resettlement process. This is followed by training sessions involving international organisations, governmental and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) offering a variety of services to help facilitate refugee integration. Pre-departure Cultural Orientation Programs have become key in this process. They are used to offer basic practical information about life in the host country covering issues like employment, education, health, cultural norms, climate etc. Refugees are thought to be better equipped to respond more effectively to experiences in the receiving societies. Setting more realistic expectations means they can access important services more efficiently upon arrival and gain more self-confidence. This in turn is believed to enable them to develop a greater sense of belonging in their new environment and supports the broader goal of social cohesion. There is a growing consensus that these educational tools have direct and concrete benefits for the resettled refugees. However, as has been argued by the IOM, the integration of migrants and refugees in particular must be seen as a continuum. In other

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8 A 2011 study by the UNHCR urges receiving countries to allow refugees to become self-reliant by giving them the right to work, have some freedom of movement, and pursue economic opportunities.

words, the process must start in the country of asylum and continue after their arrival in their adopted homes, as this will help them forge new relationships and be better equipped to fit in the new society (IOM, 2016).

Pre-departure settlement support has been in place since the 1970s. While the core objectives of this service remain unchanged, they are reviewed and updated to suit the needs and abilities of the groups receiving the training (IOM, 2004). In fact, since the 1950s, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has been actively involved in facilitating the transfer and integration of resettled refugees (Stephen, 2016). In the last decade, over one million refugees have benefited from the IOM services which were offered in almost 190 locations around the globe (IOM, 2014). Canada and Australia are two of the top resettlement countries that rely on the expertise and experience of the IOM. At the request of the two governments concerned, the IOM has been implementing these orientation programmes for over 25 years. Working closely with the Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA) and the Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO), the IOM helps identify key issues and priorities affecting refugees and their successful resettlement (IOM, 2014). So how do these programs work and how refugee-centric are they?

### **3.Canada**

#### **3.1 Immigration policy**

Canada is a country of immigrants. It is also one of the few countries in the world with an active immigrant recruitment drive and programme that accepts both economic migrants and refugees (George, 2010). Until the late 1960s, the Canadian Government's

immigration policies discriminated against non-European migrants. However, some Chinese and South Asians were allowed in to meet labour needs. A decrease in the number of European (white) immigrants and the increased need for more skilled labour, as well as national and international pressure to change its discriminatory laws,<sup>9</sup> pushed Canada to finally adopt its 1978 Immigration Act. This opened Canada's doors to newcomers from around the globe (Henry et al., 1995).<sup>10</sup>

Canada has also regularly received refugees escaping conflict, political repression, and natural disaster including Jews fleeing Nazi Germany in the 1930s, political refugees from Chile and Uganda, and the Indo-Chinese boatlift between 1975 and 1980. In keeping with its international responsibilities as a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Canada's target is for the refugee population to constitute approximately 10% of the annual flow of immigrants. This figure does fluctuate during major international emergencies. For example, it reached 25% during the Vietnam war (Dirks, 2015). Over the past ten years or so, Canada has received about 26,000 refugees annually. It is predicted that in 2017 Canada will have received the highest number of refugees in the country's history. The current liberal government under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has been more welcoming of refugees (Government of Canada, 2016).<sup>11</sup>

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9 It was not until 1969 that Canada belatedly signed the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 18 years after it was adopted by the United Nations, and 15 years after it entered into force.

10 The Act also stipulated for the first time that refugees constituted an admissible category of immigrants.

11 As soon as he came to power at the end of 2015, Justin Trudeau drastically increased the number of refugees from Syria. Canada has admitted almost 40,000 refugees under his administration. (Austen, 28 January 2017)

### 3.2 Canadian Orientation Abroad (COA)

When it was first set up in 1998, the COA operated from five sites including Bosnia, Croatia, Kenya, Serbia, and Vietnam. It has since expanded to more than 40 countries, with 20 permanent sites and 67 locations around the world, catering to refugees, economic immigrants, family class immigrants, and caregivers.<sup>12</sup> This initiative is funded by Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and implemented by the IOM. From its inception until 2016, the COA trained a total of 92,332 refugees which accounts for 45% of all participants. Between 30% and 50% of all refugees resettled in Canada have received the CO training. As such, it is considered to be the longest standing and largest overseas orientation initiative in the world.

The provision of the CO in Canada is in line with the strategic direction of Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) which states that through the settlement programmes “newcomers and citizens participate to their full potential in fostering and integrated society” (CIC, 2010). Pre-arrival orientation delivered by the COA takes place in a variety of challenging environments, including refugee camps and border areas close to conflict zones. The objectives of the programme are very much in line with those highlighted by the IOM and other cultural orientation providers. In other words, the emphasis is on the following:

- offering accurate information about life in Canada;
- increasing and developing awareness and skills necessary to successfully adapt to a new life..

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<sup>12</sup> Orientation to caregivers was suspended in December 2015

- increase capacity to integrate the Canadian labour market; and
- address any questions and concerns regarding the move to Canada (COA, 2016).

Unlike similar training programs for other migrants which last one day each, this programme for refugees lasts three days (five days for camp-based refugees). The curriculum used for each category of migrants is designed to reflect the differences in objectives and the migrant groups they target. However, all curricula cover common themes (eg; employment, overview of Canada, and rights and responsibilities). The depth of the issues covered varies though. The one day session for economic migrants focuses less on general factual information and more on employment-related issues. It is conducted in the mother tongue of the refugees. Its contents are specifically devised to address the needs and abilities of refugees.

Apart from the above details, not much information about the substance of the orientation or its format is made public. What is available is a list of broad factual topics covered which include pre-arrival preparation, arrival procedures, first days, first two weeks, government support, settlement support, language classes, cultural adaptation, rights, freedoms, responsibilities and obligations, housing, health, education, employment, budgeting, taxes, and transportation. Concepts like multiculturalism, discrimination, and culture shock are also covered during the CO training (IOM, 2016).

This practical and essential information about Canada is believed to help refugees develop certain skills and attitudes they

need for a successful transition to their new homes. Much emphasis is also put on helping refugees develop a more realistic picture of life in Canada. This in turn is thought to significantly help reduce any anxieties or fears the refugees may have about their new life. One example that illustrates the importance of managing refugee expectations includes the story of some refugees believing that once they reach Canada, they will not be able to meet basic needs like paying for rent or school (COA, 2016). Others have questions such as:

*“Will I live in a refugee camp in Canada?” Do Canadian children and immigrant children study separately or together in school? Can I practise my religion in Canada in the same way I do here? Will Canadians discriminate against me or treat me differently because of my background?”*

Such pre-conceived ideas can have a major impact on the refugees’ preparation and mindset.

The CO training is interactive and includes group discussions to encourage participants to engage as much as possible whilst learning about Canada’s history, geography, society, culture, laws, norms, and values. The COA facilitators use techniques such as case studies, scenarios, and a mix of visual aids to enable participants to use their own experiences, whilst learning about the new host culture. These materials are developed to cater to the needs of participants with varying levels of literacy, different medical conditions, and different histories of persecution (Vunderink, 2011).

Existing materials from the COA note that many of the trainers used during the CO sessions come from the same country and/or

ethnic groups as the refugees themselves. Whether the trainers are themselves refugees who have been trained to offer this service is not clear from the literature available. If that was the case, they would be in a better position to identify with, and possibly meet the needs and concerns of the participants. They would also help project a more positive image of refugees.

The contents and formats of the CO for refugees appear to be rather different from the contents of the CO given to economic migrants, for example. Because their selection is based on the skills and knowledge they take with them to contribute to the Canadian economy, the focus is more on labour market information and less on factual details like the climate and housing (AMSSA, November 2014). The information required can therefore vary significantly by immigrant category.

Participants in the CO sessions are given a COA Handbook called “Glimpses of Canada” together with the ‘COA Refugee Participant Workbook.’<sup>13</sup> These printed resources are made available in the local language of the refugees and include lots of pictures and activities to help the learning process of participants, especially those with limited literacy levels (COA Newsletter, 2016). Audio-visual materials and pamphlets are also included.

The 2012 evaluation of pre-departure CO services targeting all categories of migrants produced some very interesting and revealing findings.<sup>14</sup> One such finding is the unanimous consensus that the

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13 Both documents are not made public hence lack of information about the extent of their refugee-centric nature

14 This document “Evaluation of the Overseas Orientation Initiatives” is vital in getting a thorough and more in-depth analysis of the COA.

CO is vital in addressing initial settlement and integration challenges that refugees face. Participants surveyed were not only satisfied with the information provided prior to their departure, they also indicated that the nature and depth of this information was enough to prepare them for their departure. The evaluation also confirmed that, due to the difficult circumstances surrounding their migration, together with the fact that they were offered asylum on humanitarian grounds, and were not selected because of their ability to integrate, refugees faced more difficulties and obstacles when trying to make a new life for themselves (Yu soojin et al, 2004). And yet, the majority of refugees (between 63.4% and 85.4%) agreed that the CO was very helpful with understanding different aspects of life in Canada (banking and health care systems, housing, public transportation, and multiculturalism etc...). Most respondents also agreed that the information provided was accurate, sufficient, and useful in helping them manage their expectations of a new life in Canada.

However, this evaluation falls short of looking at the more refugee-centered issues that do not appear to be included in the COA programmes. In fact, the evaluation makes no mention that such a gap needs to be addressed in future training sessions.

The Canadian example shows awareness of some of the needs of refugees. Besides basic factual information provided at the pre-departure stage, refugees are also given the opportunity to develop some critical skills and behaviours to help them find their way once they reach Canada. Such skills can help them during the initial stages of their resettlement. However, what appears to be missing from the CO courses are specific references to help address

the concerns and needs of the refugees. The fact that refugees originate from countries with very different socio-cultural values and traditions suggest that they are very likely to experience severe culture shock, more than other migrants might. Evidence of psychological disorders suffered by refugees has been reported in many host countries. According to some, the psychological experiences of resettlement are complex. Beginning with pre-departure when refugees experience a mix of emotions like trauma, fear, and anxiety as a result of the persecution they experienced. These feelings do not subside when they reach the country of asylum. In fact, it is argued, those feelings are made worse when mixed with the elation and relief, as well as resentment, at being forced to flee their homes (Berry, 1988). While there are some services offered upon arrival, caring for refugees' mental well-being needs to start before their departure. Taking into account the anthropological, cultural, and psychological aspects of resettlement can help refugees with the acculturation process.

## **4. Australia**

### **4.1 Immigration policies**

Australia, too, is a country of immigrants. Since World War II, Australian society has been transformed by immigration. Many residents of Australia are immigrants or are children of immigrants. More than one-fifth of Australians were born overseas (23%), compared with 10% in the United States and 17% in Canada. Between 1945 and 2000, most of Australia's population increase of 59% (from 7.4 million to 19.1 million) came from immigration.

Historically, however, Australia's immigration policy was far from fair or in line with international standards. The 1950s and 1960s were known for having some of the most racially discriminatory immigration policies. In the 1970s, Australia's refugee intake began to diversify with the arrival of the so-called Vietnamese boat people after the fall of Saigon in 1975. It was this wave of refugees that was believed to have prompted the rethinking and reorganisation of Australia's refugee programme (Refugee Council of Australia, 2012). The country's first formal refugee policy was launched in 1977 and implemented in accordance with Australia's obligations under the Refugee Convention. A Special Humanitarian Program was set up and dedicated to resettling those who fell outside the strict legal definition of refugee, but who were nonetheless in desperate need of protection.

Since that time, Australia's management of the needs of refugees has changed dramatically. Later governments have adopted much tougher and often controversial methods in response to refugees seeking protection there. From the late 1980s onwards, detention centres in remote locations were set up to process asylum applications. Today, Australia adopts a hard-line attitude to border protection. Since 2013, anyone intercepted arriving by boat, and seeking refuge in Australia, has been sent to the pacific islands of Manus or Nauru. This response, to what is after all, a global responsibility, has been described by some as crimes against humanity (Foreign Policy, 2017) and by others as draconian (Human Rights Watch, 2016). The Australian Government's offshore operations are highly secretive, with reports of poor cramped conditions, and endemic and systematic abuse in detention centres (The Guardian,

2016). Even when these asylum seekers are found to be refugees, they are not resettled in Australia but in Nauru or Papua New Guinea.

Australia's hardline approach to refugees is reflected in their very low intake over the past 10 years. From 2005 to 2015, Australia resettled a total of 139,398 refugees or 0.99% of the global refugee population. This number dropped even more at the end of 2015 when Australia resettled a mere 0.48% of the global total of 14,129,593 (Australian Refugee Council, 2016). In response to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the Australian Government announced in 2015 that it would allocate 12,000 places for Iraqi and Syrian refugees. As of March 2017, visas for all 12,000 refugees were granted (DIBC, 2017).

#### 4.3 Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO)

Australia's pre-arrival orientation programmes have evolved significantly since they were first introduced after World War II. During the 1950s and 1960s, as most immigrants travelled by ship to Australia, Ship Board Information Officers were hired by the government to offer English language classes and orientation during the journey. In the 1980s and 1990s, written materials about Australia in the form of booklets entitled "Living in Australia" were given to new immigrants upon receipt of their visa. It was only in the late 1990s that cultural orientation courses, held in classrooms, were organized for refugees fleeing the war in the former Yugoslavia (DIC, 2009).

Today, the AUSCO is responsible for the first leg of the resettlement process of refugees and humanitarian visa holders. Although it is not mandatory, it aims to reach 70% of refugees and humanitarian visa holders who are sponsored by their family

members based in Australia. Established in 2003, the AUSCO programme comes under the Department of Immigration and Border Protection of the Australian Government. Since 2006, the IOM has been contracted to deliver the AUSCO courses on behalf of the Australian government. The programme is offered in four global regions; Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and South East Asia. Similar to the COA's mandate, the AUSCO programme is designed to ensure refugees and humanitarian entrants have enough practical information about Australia to help them settle there. More specifically, its four key objectives are:

- prepare visa holders for travel
- enhance settlement prospects
- create realistic expectations about life in Australia
- provide information about Australian laws, values and lifestyle (IOM, 2017).

The AUSCO's courses last five days each and take place in urban centres and refugee camps. The four main target groups for these orientation classes are adults, youth, children, and people who are pre-literate. Around 300 courses are offered each year and they are delivered by trainers recruited by the IOM.

The AUSCO curriculum shares much with the Canadian one in that it is primarily designed to prepare participants for their new life in Australia by providing them with factual information about the country, skills for independent new beginnings, and managing socio-economic and cultural expectations. A broad range of topics covering nine main themes is provided in the course of the five

day session. These topics focus on giving an overview about Australia, travel arrangements, assistance upon arrival, housing, Australian laws, healthcare, education, employment, and money management (Cultural orientation – refugee Council of Australia, 2016). The composition of each class, however, is key to determining what programmes are delivered and the methods of delivery. The curriculum is, therefore, a flexible tool that adapts to the specific needs of participants.

The IOM trainers who deliver these pre-departure courses use different teaching methods such as brainstorming, case studies, and role plays in order to engage the participants as much as possible. Participants are also provided with reference visual and audio-visual materials (CDs, videos, DVDs, maps, posters, etc...). The curriculum and supporting materials are reviewed and updated regularly based on the perceived needs of each group of participants, and to achieve AUSCO’s main objectives (AUSCO Global Coordinator, March 2017).

The Australian Government’s Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) carried out a comprehensive evaluation of the AUSCO programme in 2009. One of the main outcomes of the evaluation noted how the majority of stakeholders were positive about the programme and its objectives, especially in relation to the provision of practical information, travelling to, and settling in Australia. It was also found that many of these stakeholders thought the AUSCO’s courses changed their lives for the better. They acquired new skills, improved their health and nutrition, practised better personal hygiene and gained more self-confidence. This was confirmed by 96% of the AUSCO trainers who said they observed

an increase in clients' confidence over the duration of the training (DIC, 2009).

In 2015, another evaluation of the AUSCO curriculum was commissioned by the Department of Social Services (DSS) and the IOM. Since the report is not a public document, it is difficult to point to some of its key findings to help address the objectives of this paper. Information received from the DSS highlights the fact that the review recommended the replacement of the AUSCO Student Handbook with a "Student Folder".

The new pack, which started being implemented in January 2017, is available in nine languages. It includes an activity book and seventeen information pamphlets covering a range of issues to help with the refugee resettlement process. The priorities set out in the AUSCO curriculum focus on three areas. First, "English language awareness" is identified as the most important indicator of a refugee's successful transition to a new life in Australia. Second, "Intercultural understanding" includes themes like women's rights and family safety, and permeates the entire curriculum. It is thought to equip new arrivals with the confidence to interact with people in their new environment. Third, "expectations" refers to giving new immigrants the tools to manage their expectations of life in Australia. Recognizing the likelihood of experiencing culture shock, orientation also offers information about support services dealing with mental health issues.

With the information available, it is difficult to assess the extent to which refugee-specific issues and needs are being dealt with during the CO sessions. Whilst the curriculum and materials

provided address critical questions that affect refugees' new lives in Australia, they do not seem to make any reference to their psychological health and well-being. Past traumatic experiences and anxieties associated with having to adjust to a new life in a new country make these vulnerable populations prone to various psychological disorders that can last for years after they are resettled. The CO trainers are expected to observe the behavior of participants and watch for any signs of mental problems, but obviously they are not qualified to do more than that. Furthermore, because much emphasis is put on different aspects of life in Australia, the contribution of refugees to the very fabric of Australian society and its history is not given any prominence during the CO training. Refugees can compare aspects of their daily lives in their homes with what they might be doing when they move to Australia. In that process, they have the chance to reflect on the differences between the two worlds, and learn about the adjustments they will make in their new homes. Furthermore, the absence of refugees from the CO courses to act as 'role models' can make it more difficult for refugees to imagine themselves making a success of their lives in Australia.

## Conclusion

Refugee resettlement has long been a critical tool and an integral part of the global protection framework. With the onset of the war in Syria and the subsequent refugee crisis, refugee resettlement has received increased attention at the national and regional, as well as the international levels. The search for a solution to the refugee crisis has led to a rise in the number of resettlement states, the formulation of new refugee/migrant policies (which are

not always in support of refugee rights), and a scaling up of existing resettlement efforts.

One of the key components of managing the efficiency of refugee resettlement is pre-departure cultural orientation. As more and more receiving countries are tightening their vetting process because of security concerns, refugees waiting to be resettled can experience delays and extended security screening measures. Whilst these are deemed necessary by the host governments, they can contribute to heightened levels of stress for the refugees. As such, refugees face a complex set of challenges which need to be managed carefully and thoroughly to ensure a more effective and timely period of transition.

On a more personal level, many refugees have experienced the loss of their friends and relatives, social support system, housing, income, and position in society. Psychological distress and other short or long term health problems are not uncommon amongst refugees as a consequence of experiencing wars and through separation of loved ones. Adjusting to a new country can be fraught with difficulties and obstacles, even more so today when negative sentiments against refugees are widespread. The hostility they face when resettling in new communities can add to their grief, loneliness, and feeling of alienation.

The benefits of providing support to refugees at the pre-departure stage through cultural orientation courses have been well documented and further evidenced by the findings of this study. As the examples of Canada and Australia show, these host governments have tried to capitalise on the potential benefits of pre-departure programmes and have invested much time and resources in ensuring

these new citizens are prepared for the journeys ahead. The actual impact of pre-departure programming has recently been questioned, though. For example, New Zealand is now opting for a six-week residential training and orientation class after the refugees have arrived in the country. The reason for the policy change has been attributed to the refugees' limited ability to absorb large volumes of information at the pre-departure stage (Beirens & Frantzke, 2017).

Furthermore, the sometimes life-threatening experiences prior to and on top of the challenging experiences of life in exile, make refugees prone to mental health problems. Their emotional resilience can and should be tested prior to their departure, especially with delays and long-distance travels ahead of them. Profound psychological distress can be triggered as they embark on this life changing journey. The early detection of these problems would benefit these individuals. Yet, this critical aspect of refugees' lives receives no special attention at the pre-departure stage. Developing a culturally-sensitive mental health screening at this early stage is necessary and can literally save lives.

As multicultural societies and countries of immigrants, both countries recognise and value the positive contributions of these newcomers. Enabling their successful integration into local communities is one key objective of not just the CO courses, but also the post arrival support services available. However, the CO programmes in both Canada and Australia put much more emphasis on what awaits refugees in their adopted homes, including the practicalities of daily life, norms, and values. Little space is allocated to the positive role these refugees can play in the host society

and how their socio-cultural background, for example, can help enrich these societies, thus changing the dominant negative narrative. The absence of previously resettled refugees from these training sessions as trainers and/or facilitators makes it difficult for them to imagine that refugees can have important roles. One practical simple solution to this specific concern has been recently proposed by the Director General of the IOM who recommended the use of video-conferencing at the pre-departure stage to add a more human touch to the CO by introducing resettled refugees from the same country who can act as mentors (Swing, 2017).

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