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## NEW ZEALAND'S REFUGEE SECTOR: PERSPECTIVES AND DEVELOPMENTS, 1987-2010

**T**his report presents a descriptive analysis of stakeholders' perspectives on significant changes in the refugee resettlement sector since 1987. These stakeholder views have been supplemented with information from written sources, providing extra detail and context for the changes that have occurred over the last two decades. This study is part of the wider Department of Labour research programme 'Quota Refugees Ten Years On: Perspectives on Integration, Community and Identity'.

In-depth interviews were carried out with individuals who were working, or had previously worked, in the refugee sector. This included government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and refugee-led organisations. A total of 22 interviews were conducted across the country with 39 individuals.

### FINDINGS

#### DEVELOPMENT OF THE REFUGEE VOICE

There was a strong sense that former refugees had increased their voice in the sector and had moved well beyond being passive recipients of services. Instead, former refugees themselves were now seen as agents of change, representing themselves rather than being spoken on behalf of by others.

The development towards a highly participative refugee voice in the sector was welcomed by participants in this study. An increased refugee voice in the sector was seen to lead to an increased sense of empowerment and control for refugee communities, as well as improvements in the responsiveness of services provided to former refugees.

#### INCREASED PROFESSIONALISM OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANISATIONS

The last two decades witnessed the increased professionalism and expansion of NGOs. The increasing diversity of refugee arrivals in the 1990s saw an expansion of services, particularly to cater for the mental health needs of former refugees resettling in New Zealand. Over time, NGOs were perceived as increasingly responsive to refugee needs. In relation to such changes, there was an acknowledgement of increased government support for the sector, particularly in the last decade.

#### GOVERNMENT AGENCY DEVELOPMENT

Government agencies also made significant improvements in the way they work with former refugees and in the way they respond to the needs of former refugees. Policy on family reunion was identified as an ongoing challenge. At a higher level, many participants noted a desire for a cohesive policy on refugee resettlement.

#### INCREASED COLLABORATION AND AWARENESS

Over the past two decades, agencies and individuals in the sector strengthened relationships and were seen to be working more collaboratively. Regular and formalised inter-agency forums were seen to help facilitate this process.

- PACIFIC
- YOUTH
- LISNZ
- SETTLEMENT
- ISMP
- ECONOMIC
- GLOBAL MOBILITY

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## DEVELOPMENT OF REFUGEE COMMUNITIES

Refugee communities were seen as having developed extensively over the last ten years. Of particular note was the establishment of inter-ethnic refugee coalitions, which served to bring a more unified refugee voice to the sector. Furthermore, the past decade also saw a proliferation of incorporated ethnic societies, as refugees become more established in New Zealand.

Training and opportunities for learning through collaboration were viewed as being highly beneficial for developing the capacity of refugee communities. Community size was also seen as playing an important role in building community capacity and in former refugees having their voices heard. Participants acknowledged the importance of effective leadership in building strong communities.

Established refugee communities were seen to play an important role in supporting new arrivals, helping newcomers to navigate the New Zealand context while providing social and cultural support. Such support was often seen as complementary to services provided by other agencies in the sector.

## RELATIONSHIPS WITH HOST SOCIETY

In recognition of the two-way process of integration that involves adaptation and accommodation from both the host society and the newcomers, participants were asked about how public perceptions towards accepting refugees had changed over the last decade. Participants expressed a range of views on this. Many participants commented on the increasing ethnic diversity of the New Zealand population, which together with an associated increase in public awareness of cultural diversity, was seen to make it somewhat easier for former refugees to resettle in New Zealand.

The role of the media was acknowledged as playing an important role in both shaping and reflecting public opinion. The way former refugees were portrayed was generally seen to have improved over the last decade. Many participants supported increased public education to foster understanding and awareness of refugee issues.

Recent initiatives to build relationships between Māori and refugee communities were often heralded as highly successful. These included partnerships to run community programmes as well as formal welcomes for new refugee arrivals.

## EMPLOYMENT

Employment was identified by participants as an important facilitator to long-term settlement. Employment was seen as an opportunity at both individual and community levels, but also on a broader societal level. However, it was noted that this is an area where much progress still needs to be made to support former refugees into suitable work, which will in turn enable them to participate more fully in society.

## CONCLUSION

Stakeholder perspectives on the development of the refugee sector since 1987 reflect the breadth and depth of growth over this period. The findings from the in-depth interviews contribute a valuable context for the Quota Refugees Ten Years On research programme, and for a greater understanding of the historical changes in the refugee sector more generally.

- This report can be obtained from the New Zealand Department of Labour website at: [www.dol.govt.nz/publications/research/refugee-sector-perspectives-developments](http://www.dol.govt.nz/publications/research/refugee-sector-perspectives-developments)

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