

FORMER REFUGEE VOICE:  
REFLECTION ON THE REFUGEE AND SETTLEMENT JOURNEY<sup>1</sup>

Govinda Regmi<sup>2</sup>

INTRODUCTION

From March 1992 until October 2010, my prime youth years were spent in exile as a refugee. It's hard to imagine what a refugee life is like, a one-way journey without a return ticket. Even more surprising is that I was a refugee from Bhutan, a country so-called as 'having the happiest people in the world'. I was one of 120,000 evicted southern Bhutanese, the victims of the discriminatory policy of the government of Bhutan called 'One nation – one people'. This means that the government of Bhutan implemented a policy that Bhutan is not a country of diversity. Instead, all Bhutanese should wear one dress code and speak one language, which means the ruling class's language and dress. The Bhutanese were also to follow one religion and practice no different customs. This policy resulted in unjustified atrocities and ethnic cleansing against the Lhotsampas from southern Bhutan.

Initially moving to a refugee camp at Nepal, life there was full of uncertainties and miseries with a dead end. Over the course of time, I saw extreme poverty, illness, scarcity of basic needs, and a lack of health care resulting in untimely deaths, more than a dozen a day. In the midst of this tough time I worked as a teacher in a private school with very little salary. I was not able to improve my financial condition and experienced hatred from the local people, who opposed us working as they thought we had taken their jobs.

For Bhutanese refugees, registration with the UNHCR occurred in 1992 and 1993. The resettlement process, however, only began in 2008, after the UNHCR declared third country resettlement for the Bhutanese a year earlier, realising that repatriation to Bhutan was impossible. Our family expressed interest in resettlement in January 2010. The UNHCR submitted our documents to the New Zealand government and we learned around 10 months later (and after 19 years in the refugee camp) that we were accepted to settle there. All I knew

about New Zealand was that Sir Edmund Hillary was from New Zealand and that it was a peaceful, multicultural country.

When I heard that we were flying to New Zealand, I felt excited and my dream started floating with the cloud high in the air believing that ‘my difficult days were over’. After an eighteen hour flight from Tribhuvan International Airport at Kathmandu, via Singapore, we landed at Auckland International Airport, my longest flight ever. During that long flight, my daughter, aged 6 years old at the time, asked, ‘Is New Zealand in earth or in space?’ I was delighted by her curiosity.

On the morning of 28 October 2010, we landed at Auckland International Airport. Everything seemed quiet but a bit strange. I felt glad when we were met by the same immigration officer who had interviewed my family in the refugee camp in Nepal. After completing the immigration procedure, we boarded the bus to the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, along with other families from Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Africa.

During our six week stay at Mangere, we were preoccupied with English language classes, orientation and health screening. We had a family link to Nelson and, with excitement, we arrived there just a couple of weeks before Christmas. The volunteer support from Refugee Services was fantastic in providing orientation of the city and for supporting access to services. We developed a great relationship with the volunteers, who were trained by Refugee Services; they were like extended family members and we are still in contact with them after nine years. That official volunteers’ support, however, ended at six months and I felt I had not learnt enough to survive on my own.

Indeed, the honeymoon period did not last long and my days of excitement came to an end. Walking a distance of two kilometres carrying shopping items from the shop to home was definitely not fun. I realised that without transport and an ability to drive that my life was paralysed. I had to wait for six months to obtain my driver’s license and start driving in New Zealand. It was hard to find the volunteers to be the instructor, as there was no driving programme with Refugee Services. Being a driving instructor was not everybody’s cup of tea either.

At the same time, we were in a state of culture shock, lost in the transition to the new world. I could speak English and could communicate but the accent was a big problem and my English was limited to formal English. Encountering slang, acronyms, and idioms wrecked my nerves.

Having worked with the Red Cross in Nelson, my job took me to Dunedin in 2016 in order to help the resettlement of new Syrian refugees. When I moved to Dunedin, the community atmosphere was great. In fact, they rolled out the red carpet for former refugees. This was such a great welcoming and very empathetic.

Since my arrival at Nelson until now, a lot has happened. Settlement services have improved. For example, a driving program and the Pathways to Employment scheme, two crucial projects run by the New Zealand Red Cross, exist today, which were not there when I arrived. These have made resettlement much easier today. This is the result of community feedback to the government and the willing heart of the New Zealand government to address urgent issues.

#### CHALLENGES OF SETTLEMENT

The challenges of settlement were of a different nature. Although language was not a big challenge for me, it still was difficult to accurately understand the spoken accent in this country. For instance, I attended a seminar organised by a work broker but could not understand the English spoken. As a result, I went home in a completely broken state and felt helpless.

Along with my settlement, I was actively involved in helping other Bhutanese to settle in Nelson. I realised that others were facing even more difficulties than I did. When I was involved in supporting the other community members, I got the opportunity to understand how complex is it to access the services and supporting networks. The challenges discussed below are very common and taken from knowledge gained from communities and from my own experiences.

#### Accessing health services/supports

Understanding how the health system operates is a big challenge not only due to the language barrier, but also the complexity of the system. People whose family members are not educated and who need to depend on an interpreter struggle constantly with using health facilities. There are many stories of people who easily missed different steps of their medical management because of the lack of a proper education. One current example is of a diabetic person who requires multiple tasks to be carried out by the GP, nurse and a dietician. The patient does not easily understand the role of the dietician and the importance of education on their diet. Instead, their understanding is that New Zealand is an advanced country and that GPs alone can cure everything. The outcome is

that they are very stressed and have lost faith in health professionals and the health system.

### Education

In the home country, the education system is based on grades whereas in New Zealand it is based on the age of the person. The teenager arriving in New Zealand with little or no English language skills finishes high school without NCEA achievements and they end up nowhere. They cannot enter universities or polytechnics and find it difficult to fit into vocational training schemes due to language barriers and not meeting the standards. People above 55 years of age attending English Language Partners classes are stressed and not making progress in learning. This is often because they were not even literate in their first language.

### Inland Revenue Department

In the community, the information relating to the IRD is a big issue. Tax refunds and tax filing is a complex process. There are many examples that the term self-employed is misunderstood and they are traumatised in dealing with the wrong process to correct it later.

### Isolation of elderly people

Isolation of elderly people is a big issue in the former refugee communities. There are no activities to engage them, while their children are preoccupied with jobs or school but the elderly are not. Elderly parents (over 55 years of age) are controlled by their children in financial matters and in decision making. This reliance on their young children, and the controlling manner of their offspring, has added stress to the stress of the elderly and to many parents. They are not able to connect themselves to the wider New Zealand community due to language issues and so have to wait until someone visits them. They also like to communicate with people who speak their language.

### Managing expectations

Managing expectations is another challenge for the former refugee communities. It is thought that only former refugees are facing challenges with housing, health, finance and employment. Most of the refugee community think they are the centre of attention and that everyone should pay attention to them and help them whenever they need assistance. The new arrivals expect that the

Red Cross would do everything for them, including raising the paid benefit by Work and Income. They are not aware that there are similar issues existing throughout the wider New Zealand society.

### Other challenges

There are also other cultural, psychosocial, social, physical and mental health issues. Former refugee communities struggle with keeping or losing their culture, experiencing an adjustment in the new culture, grieving their lost status, and dealing with loss, grief and trauma. These hidden challenges impact on settlement.

### Things focused differently

There are support networks and agencies to support the communities in settlement, but things are focused differently between the agencies and the communities. In terms of providing support, agencies focus on an overflow of information, teaching/learning English, training, education and employment in the hope of making former refugees independent as soon as possible. In contrast, the concerns of the former refugees focus on housing issues, finances, health, family reunification, and loss of contact with their family members in the other part of the world. As such, they often view their progress as minimal or negligible.

### SOLUTIONS

Despite having several challenges and issues, there are ways of solving the problems facing community resources. Community engagement is very important for the purpose of socialisation and learning from each other.

There is a strong need for community-led development projects. The formation of the communities provides the opportunities to create a platform to discuss and identify the common issues or need of the communities. It is important to educate the community members or individuals.

It is very important that former refugee communities run some seminars/workshops about New Zealand's culture, election process, funding process, and interaction with the police. They should also organise cultural festivals and invite the locals to attend the programs. This provides opportunities for the local people to learn about the culture of particular group/s.

Community workers from within the former refugee groups are needed to educate and support the communities. In the absence of these community workers, many people are not able to access the services in order to receive medical treatment and they often lose track.

Accessing interpreting support is not easy for elderly people and for the family who have no educated family members. They have to rely on someone who offers support to them.

Funding and resource location is very important. In the absence of sufficient funding, many projects will not easily be processed. One current example is that Immigration New Zealand seemed to be supportive and working for engaging the communities. In reality, there is no adequate funding and resources to set up an office and space for community members to come together to discuss and to participate in the meeting. One office in each settlement location, and at least one community worker for nearly every ethnic group, will help resolve the issues.

#### PERSONAL SETTLEMENT EXPERIENCE

The above mentioned needs and advices are not only theorised, but practical as a lot has been achieved. I gained an opportunity to work as a volunteer for the Bhutanese Society of Nelson and served the community for about five years. In those days I also had the opportunity to make connections with other former refugee communities settled in Nelson (including the Burmese, Chin, Zomi and Kayan from Myanmar and Khmer Krom from Vietnam) and to learn about them.

I was one of the drivers of the Community Led Development project for the Bhutanese Society of Nelson. With the support of the community members, I was able to register the community as an incorporated society and as a non-profit organisation. This allowed me to build up a relationship with the Nelson City Council, health services, education providers and many other community organisations. The successful projects were:

- Running Nepali Language class for teaching language and culture to Bhutanese children;
- Running a community Radio show through Fresh FM for sharing the stories and information for the community;
- Organising cultural events and inviting other ethnic groups and wider New Zealanders to participate in the Bhutanese/Nepali festival;
- Organising seminars for the communities, such as a workshop on how

to vote in the national and local elections, and discussing why we need to vote;

- Building relationships with other communities like the schools, police, Multicultural Council, and local MPs;
- Creating opportunities for volunteering services.

All the projects outlined above were 100% achieved. The Lottery Grant Board, Canterbury Community Trust, Nelson City Council, COGS, and Office of Ethnic Communities funded these projects. Victory Primary School is a great local resource to run the projects. Achievements in details can be seen in the report presented by the Bhutanese Society of Nelson at each AGM.

#### CHALLENGES FOR THE COMMUNITY/COMMUNITY LEADERS

The community and the community members do, however, face the following challenges:

- Lack of vision for long/short term in the community groups;
- No strategic plans;
- Lack of motivation and commitment;
- Poor mentality and lack of support by the community members to the executive body;
- Lack of funding and resources;
- Lack of leadership skills to motivate the community members.

#### OPPORTUNITIES

There are many opportunities available if community groups perform well:

- Meaningful community engagement;
- No isolation to the elderly members;
- Transformation of cultural values to the new generations;
- Utilisation of the community resource through volunteering opportunity;
- Keeping the community connected;
- Platform to bring people together and discuss the common issues;
- Find the solutions for the problems;
- Creation of the learning centres

#### CONCLUSION

The challenges and opportunities for the former refugee communities have been outlined and acknowledged. A lot has been achieved, but not enough. Settling in a new country with a different language and culture is as challenging as getting

to the summit of Mt. Cook or Everest. It takes time. More research is required to identify the needs of the communities and the issues to be addressed.

Despite the great efforts of volunteers and agencies, the vulnerable people in the communities are not able to pick up the support and services available in the system. There is a great need for community workers to fill this gap, and to educate the people and make them aware of their role in accessing the services. It is important for the community members to identify the needs and look for ways to address the issues. Someone needs to initiate and it is okay to ask for help, but waiting does not help.

#### NOTES

- 1 I use refugee in reference to experiences before arriving in New Zealand, and former refugee after that.
- 2 Govinda Regmi was born in Bhutan as the eldest child in the family of a farmer but had to leave in 1992 due to the politics of One Nation – One People. With his family, Govinda lived in refugee camps in Nepal for about 19 years. He studied in both India and Nepal as a teacher before travelling to New Zealand. He now works for the New Zealand Red Cross helping forming refugees to settle in the community.

Email: [Tika.Regmi@redcross.org.nz](mailto:Tika.Regmi@redcross.org.nz)