SITES: NEW SERIES · VOL 17 NO 1 · 2020

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.11157/sites-id473

– ARTICLE –

LEARNING FROM THE PAST?
CAMBODIAN AND SYRIAN REFUGEE EXPERIENCES IN NEW ZEALAND, 1979–2019[1]

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ABSTRACT

This article utilises interviews with Cambodian and Syrian former refugees in Dunedin, New Zealand, to evaluate whether knowledge of previous refugee experiences can assist the resettlement of new refugee arrivals. It reveals that refugees to Dunedin have encountered similar challenges in both the past and the present – particularly concerning work, language, family reunification, health, and conflict within communities. Despite such similarities, drawing on past knowledge cannot fully assist with current responses for there is much that is new in our present times including different political and social contexts and the cultural characteristics of the refugees themselves. Further, by utilising interviews with former refugees from Cambodia and Syria, the article also offers up recommendations from the newcomers of ways to facilitate the resettlement process.

Keywords: refugees; Cambodian; Syrian; Dunedin; history; resettlement challenges

In 1981 political scientist Barry Stein criticised refugee studies for seeing refugee problems as temporary and unique, leading to 'a failure to evaluate programs, to prepare for the next wave of refugees … and to learn from the past' (Stein 1981, 320). Historian Peter Gatrell (2017, 33) has similarly stated that 'Each response to a new "crisis" shows little awareness of what happened in the past'. Likewise, the editors of a recent collection on refugees in Europe argue that 'There has also been an overwhelming presentism … which tends to focus on current policy and practice at the expense of understanding past migrations'. Part of the explanation, perhaps, is that the past holds little interest 'because attention is consumed on each new emergency' (Reinisch and Frank 2017, 8; Gatrell 2017, 34). Compared with these comments referring to policy implications, Philip

Marfleet (2007, 145) highlights the agency of refugees contending that 'We can learn much from [refugees] who have tackled similar problems', even though 'They are often unable to articulate publicly their experiences and needs and it may be years before their voices are heard.'

Within this broader historiographical context, this article sets out to examine the experiences of Cambodian refugees who resettled in Dunedin, New Zealand, from the late 1970s with their Syrian counterparts who, since 2016, have made the city their home. In doing so, it attempts to evaluate whether knowledge of previous experiences can assist the resettlement of new refugee arrivals. I focus on Cambodians and Syrians since these two groups are the largest cohorts of former refugees to have resettled in Dunedin. Further, the extent of Syrian arrivals in Dunedin is such that between 2016 and 2019 the city was the largest resettlement centre in New Zealand.

The analysis that follows draws on a range of sources including interviews, press reports, medical records, and published accounts. The Dunedin branch of English Language Partners, a nationwide organisation teaching English, helped organise interviews with the Syrian participants, with one further participant recommended by the Red Cross. Interviews with Cambodians were the result of contacts within the community. In all, twelve interviews in both single and group format were undertaken involving eight interviews with Syrians and four with Cambodians. Of the interviews with Syrians, three involved more than one person so eleven individuals in total were interviewed (six male and five female). They ranged in age from twenty to fifty-three years old and around half had only primary level education. Many came from large and dispersed families around Damascus, Kamshle, Aleppo, Idleb, and Daraa. They arrived in New Zealand during 2016 so had been in the country for approximately a year and a half before the interviews took place. The four Cambodian participants were all male. Two had arrived as refugees in Dunedin in the 1970s and 1980s (with one remaining in Dunedin, the other now in Auckland). The additional two Cambodians were in Auckland and Wellington. All Cambodian participants chose not to be anonymous.

These semi-structured interviews were conducted between January and March 2018 and each took around two hours to complete. An interpreter facilitated the interviews with Syrian refugees, translating the responses during the conversation, which prompted additional questions. The interpreter also subsequently transcribed the recordings into English. The interviews with Cambodians were undertaken in the English language. All participants were advised that they could refuse to answer questions or stop the interview at any time if they

felt uncomfortable. Ethical approval for the study was obtained through the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (Ref 17/189).

Among the topics traversed during the interview were reflections on growing up, the conflict back 'home', applications for refugee status, knowledge of New Zealand, initial impressions of the new country and experiences in New Zealand. Questions were generally open ended, thereby enabling participants to identify the issues they considered important, rather than asking them to comment on pre-selected concerns. Syrians were asked if they would like to know anything specific from earlier Cambodian arrivals while Cambodians were encouraged to offer advice on the topics that Syrian former refugees sought information about.

What follows commences with a comparison of the conflicts in Cambodia and Syria that led to extensive population displacement. Such context is necessary to recognise the complex and dire circumstances that propel people to seek safety elsewhere, and to appreciate the difficulties that they confront in adjusting to new places. It then examines the processes by which refugees from these countries moved to New Zealand, and their experiences after arrival, paying particular attention to the challenges of family reunification, language, work, health, and conflict within the community. The article then summarises the advice that the Cambodians interviewed for this article offered in response to some of the key challenges that Syrian former refugees are confronting with their resettlement. Overall, the article argues that while evidence suggests that many of the same concerns characterise Cambodian and Syrian resettlement, drawing on past knowledge cannot fully assist with current developments for there is much that is new in our present times including different political and social contexts and the cultural characteristics of the refugees themselves.

HOMELAND CONFLICT

From 1970 to 1979, conflict in Cambodia led to the death of between two to three million people, or one quarter to one third of the country's population (Etcheson 2005, 118). A further 600,000 became refugees seeking new lives in neighbouring countries and further afield (Um 2015, 2). The conflict occurred in two broad stages. The first phase of Cambodia's civil war spanned the years 1970 to 1975 when Prince Sihanouk was exiled and Lon Nol, as head of state, proclaimed the establishment of the Khmer Republic, which was opposed by the Khmer Rouge. This phase of the conflict saw many Vietnamese ordered to leave Cambodia or be murdered. The second phase of the conflict, and the most brutal, began after 17 April 1975 when the Khmer Rouge (formerly known

as the Communist Party of Kampuchea) defeated Lon Nol's government and entered the capital Phnom Penh declaring Cambodia the Democratic Kampuchea (Etcheson 2005; Chan 2004). The Khmer Rouge would be in power until 1979 with their actions constituting the Cambodian Genocide, one of the bloodiest in history.

The initial aim of the Khmer Rouge was to evacuate the general public from cities to the countryside where men and women were segregated in labour camps and forced to work more than fourteen hours a day. They had only two possessions: a bowl and a spoon. The regime played lectures every evening to indoctrinate the people into working harder and growing more rice (Twining 1989, 109–50). As one Cambodian recalled, 'The only thing was to work and wait for the day we died' (Quinn 1989, 189). Nee was around twelve years of age when the Khmer Rouge took control. He recalled being separated from his family and receiving just one small bowl of rice and water each day.

As part of the communist revolution, the Khmer Rouge abolished money, schools, private property, courts of law, markets, business, the practice of religion and nearly all personal freedoms (Kiernan 1996, 8). Buddhist monks were prevented from practising their faith and Buddhist and other religious relics and structures faced destruction and desecration (Hawk 1989, 212). Buddhists were a particular target because of the concept of karma, which gave a rationale for inequalities within Cambodian society that the regime sought to dispense with (Jackson 1989, 71). Before 1975, Cambodia had around 60,000 monks but within four years there were fewer than 1,000 who returned to former monastic sites (Hawk 1989, 212). All told, sixty-three per cent of Buddhist monks died or were disrobed while ninety per cent of Buddhist texts were lost or destroyed (Um 2015, 181). Among other prominent targets of the Khmer Rouge were members of the previous regime including the military and police, bureaucrats, landowners, teachers and students, intellectuals and urban dwellers (Etcheson 2005, 7). To escape detection from the Khmer Rouge, some, like Bun Rith who would later move to New Zealand, acted deaf and mute and stayed silent.[3]

The Khmer Rouge's policy of executing their enemies took place in grounds that came to be known as the killing fields. In less than four years approximately 2.2 million of Cambodia's population of 7 million had died from hard labour, disease (especially malaria), starvation, execution and disappearances. At least half of the deaths were executions (Um 2015, 2, 75, ch. 5). All told, mass graves have been discovered for more than 1 million victims, with an average of 169 victims per mass grave, though some graves range from just a few to thousands of bodies. The largest grave contains the remains of 7,000 individuals

(Etcheson 2005, 111).

The methods of execution were brutal. Some Khmer Rouge soldiers would lead prisoners to a ditch and make them kneel down. A guard would then strike the prisoner on the back of the neck with an iron bar. If they did not die immediately, they would be repeatedly hit until they fell into the mass grave (Hinton 1998, 94). Other soldiers stuffed the mouths of those they executed with rags and grass to prevent them screaming before cutting their throats (Quinn 1989, 186). Khmer Rouge soldiers 'would rape a Vietnamese woman, then ram a stake or bayonet into her vagina. Pregnant women were cut open, their unborn babies yanked out and slapped against the dying mother's face. The *Yotheas* also enjoyed cutting the breasts off well endowed Vietnamese women. Vietnamese fishermen who fell into the hands of the Khmer Rouge were decapitated' (Quinn 1989b, 238). Phalla Chok in New Zealand recalled, 'Intestines and other organs were hanging from bodies lying along the road. One man was still alive. Although his guts were hanging out, he was still breathing and making a painful noise. I thought he would be better off dead' (Young 2015, 25). Bun Rith, who resided in Dunedin before relocating to Auckland, had a stake embedded in his jaw and suffered beatings that left him in a coma.[4]

Among the most brutal perpetrators of the violence were children, recruited by the Khmer Rouge to be soldiers from as young as six years of age but more often from the age of twelve. They held power over adults with their ability to ensure life or death. These youngsters, together with those recruited to the Khmer Rouge from poorer areas who were neglected under the previous regime, carried out the brutality. Once enlisted in the army, children were removed from their families and villages and put in indoctrination camps. There, 'Torture games became their principal training tool' and they would be hardened by killing animals with clubs and bayonets (Quinn 1989b, 236–238).

The conflict in Cambodia was part of the larger Indochina struggles that saw more than 3 million people leave their homes in Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos. Almost 1.5 million went to the United States, 260,000 to China, 200,000 to Canada, 185,000 to Australia and 130,000 to France (Robinson 1998, 2). New Zealand also agreed to assist with resettlement, though numbers were small. Until 1992, New Zealand resettled just under 10,000 Indochinese refugees, with Cambodians numbering 4,661 and Vietnamese 4,107 (Liev 1995, 105). All told, more than 5,000 Cambodians would settle in New Zealand, the largest single group of refugees in the country since the Second World War. It was not, however, the first choice of resettlement, most wanting to go instead to the United States, Canada or Australia.

This brief summary of the context to the Cambodian refugee exodus of the late twentieth century shares some similarities with the background to the outflow from Syria in the early twenty-first century. First, both countries had broader histories of colonial rule, with Syria previously divided between the British and French, while Cambodians had also lived under French colonial rule. Both countries also have histories of various ethnic and religious groups living within their borders. Within Cambodia were Chinese, Muslims (Cham), Vietnamese, Indians, Pakistanis, and ethnic Thais (Robinson 1998, 11; Kiernan 1996, 5). Syria's assorted population included those who sought refuge within the country before the Second World War such as Armenians, Kurds, Assyrians, and Palestinians and after 1946 Palestinians, Kurds, Lebanese and Iraqis (Chatty 2018, 11–13). Both countries were also subject to authoritarian regimes, but the conflict and violence differed in significant ways.

In Syria, power was centralised in the presidency when in 1970 Hafez Assad seized control through a coup with Alawi Sunnis benefiting to the detriment of Sunni Muslims and Kurds (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, 11–13, 22; van Dam 2017, 45). A surveillance society arose together with corruption and nepotism (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, 14, 31). In early 2011, several events served to deepen tensions: a man set himself alight to protest against the regime; the police beat the son of a local trader at Damascus; and in March of the same year, schoolboys who wrote revolutionary slogans on public walls were tortured. When the fathers of the boys were instructed to forget their children and make new ones with their wives, or send their wives to the president's cousin to make new ones, thousands rose in peaceful demonstrations (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, 35–37). The government of Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafez, responded forcefully to these civilian mass demonstrations, which the government labelled as terrorism. Killings, arrests, and disappearances took place. The demonstrations became a civilian war at the end of 2011, with the conflict attracting other radical extremists from the Middle East. The displacement was initially internal before those in Syria took flight to neighbouring countries like Lebanon and Jordan. By 2015, the United Nations (UN) estimated that 8 million Syrians were displaced and by 2017 the number reached around 12 million, of whom 5 million had crossed international borders to seek safety (Chatty 2018, 231–232). A further crucial difference between the civil wars in Cambodia and Syria was the style of warfare. While civilians were subjected to bombings in both countries, in Cambodia there was a greater degree of coercion upon civilians to punish and kill friends and family. The response of the Syrian people to the conflict also differed. In Syria, as a result of compulsory male military training, militias were quickly organised and the Free Syrian Army launched 'hit and run' guerrilla attacks (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami

2018, 82, 87). The regime, however, had better weapons and support from international allies (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018, 92).

As we will see, similarities and differences between Cambodian and Syrian former refugees were likewise evident after resettlement in New Zealand. Before exploring those aspects, I turn to consider in what ways the Dunedin community has been instrumental in the relocation of refugees to the city.

RESETTLEMENT IN NEW ZEALAND

Before arrival in New Zealand, both Cambodians and Syrians spent time in other countries and refugee camps. For Cambodians, the time in camps, often in Thailand, ranged from one to twelve years (Liev 1995, 122). Nee's family were at Camp Mairut where they were squashed together in rows and rows. They had carried their ailing mother, weak from a lack of food, on a stretcher for five days. The family were at the camp for six months, their mother dying during that time. Unlike many others from Cambodia who spent years in refugee camps, Nee's family were there for only six months before flying to New Zealand. The Syrian refugees consulted for this study, meanwhile, had spent from a few months to four years in refugee camps.

For both Cambodians and Syrians, their initial arrival in New Zealand was spent at the Mangere Refugee Reception Centre at Auckland. Cambodians underwent physical and dental checks, chest x-rays, blood screening, immunisations, screening for Hepatitis B and a faecal exam to exclude cholera, enteric fever and parasites.[5] Only from 1987 did authorities begin to assess mental health issues. Cambodians also received information about the history and geography of New Zealand, home life, work conditions, education, finance, transport, the legal system, health and welfare, communications and leisure. The English language was taught every day for four hours.[6] For Nee, the time at Mangere included learning to use the oven, fridge and lights (ensuring hands were dry so as not to receive a shock) and trying to acquire the English language. Food was also a strong memory, particularly eating toast. Among other food provided to refugees at Mangere in the 1980s was 'mutton, cabbage, eggs, roast, apples'.[7] Despite their reservations, Nee's family did eat anything, grateful after having spent years restricted to dining on one small bowl of rice and water and no meat or vegetables.

Among the first Syrian refugees to arrive at Mangere in 2016 was Participant 1. Finding no other refugee-background people there, his family's initial desire was to return to the Middle East. Every two to three days, however, new arrivals

from Syria came to the Centre and the family made good friends and became happier. Syrian participants for this study summarised their first few weeks at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre as a demanding one, with considerable learning taking place: 'We had groups visit us every week in the first week. We had Housing New Zealand visit us. In the second week we had the police, third Work and Income support, fourth road code and also some New Zealanders from the public visited us … We were always busy visiting doctors and doing lab test' (Participant 2).[8] This busy period, according to one Syrian, meant there was some confusion and they did not learn as much as they wished to, therefore recommending that time be set aside for rest: 'In Mangere while we were sitting in class they would come and interrupt us and tell us you have an appointment with the doctor or a medical test. As soon as we focus we get distracted by other things' (Participant 4).

Sponsorship is another area of contrast between the Cambodian and Syrian cohorts. Until 1987, no New Zealand government agency assisted early Cambodian resettlement so churches and other groups were instrumental in resettlement initiatives. The Interchurch Commission on Immigration and Refugee Resettlement (ICCI), which helped organise sponsors for the newcomers, was especially influential (Heang 1988, 43). This organisation had formed as the Interchurch Commission on Immigration in 1975 to represent New Zealand churches on matters relating to refugee resettlement and immigration more broadly. Among sponsors for early cohorts of Cambodians in Dunedin were St Alphonse Catholic Parish, St Francis Xavier Catholic Parish, St Andrew's Street Church of Christ, the New Zealand Reformed Church, Knox Presbyterian Church Group, the St Vincent De Paul Society, and St Brigid's Catholic Parish Committee. Sponsors outside of the ICCI included the Indo Chinese Refugee Aid Group and the Brownville Crescent Community Group.[9] These volunteer sponsors supported new arrivals through providing furnishings and equipping a home, helping with employment, enrolling the children in schools and families with doctors, assisting with access to social welfare benefits and English language tuition, and being a friend and support. At this early stage of resettlement, there were more sponsorship offers than refugees.[10] Cambodians were also primarily sent to main cities where Cambodian students could assist with their resettlement (Heang 1988, 43).

A different context operated for Syrians moving to Dunedin from 2016 onwards. Following the dislocation caused by the conflict in Syria, the New Zealand government decided in 2015 to prioritise Syrian resettlement, with refugees arriving as part of the formal quota intake of 750 annually along with an emergency intake of 600 individuals (Spoonley and Terruhn 2018, 1–2).[11] At that time

there were five formal resettlement regions encompassing Auckland, Hamilton, Manawatu, Wellington, and Nelson.[12] In Dunedin, the Refugee Steering Group (established in 2015) decided to provide a submission to the Minister of Immigration for the city to become an official refugee resettlement area. As part of the application, the Group highlighted Dunedin's institutional knowledge and skills in the refugee arena since several members had earlier worked to assist the resettlement of Cambodian and Vietnamese refugees. The application further noted a list of groups in support of the submission and a statement that the city already had a cohort of Syrians who could assist new arrivals.[13]

As news of the planned submission came to light, an online petition tried to encourage the Dunedin public to oppose the arrival of Syrian refugees. In response, a couple of hundred people turned out in public to provide solidarity with refugees.[14] The Refugee Steering Group's submission was, however, successful and in 2015 Dunedin was declared the country's sixth official resettlement centre. The first Syrian arrivals to Dunedin under the scheme landed at the city's airport in April 2016 to a welcome from the Mayor and service providers. As at August 2019, more than 500 Syrians have been resettled in the city. Some were able to enter under New Zealand's health criteria, an option that was not in place when Cambodians arrived. Instead, health checks for Cambodians only took place after arrival (Liev 1995, 103, 108–109).

While the work of sponsors characterised the Cambodian refugee resettlement in the city, Syrian refugees were aided by the Red Cross since it holds a government contract to provide settlement assistance for quota refugees for up to twelve months. The Red Cross receives support in this endeavour from various other agencies including English Language Partners. Volunteers, however, are still crucial in assisting newcomers though they receive formal training from agencies. Recent Syrian arrivals in Dunedin, for instance, point out that despite being grateful for the help of the Red Cross and other agencies, this initial support vanishes after a year since agencies are obliged to focus on each new arriving cohort. Important for participants, then, is that earlier arrivals not be forgotten and that agency support should be ongoing. As Participant 8 put it, 'I am one of the first groups to come to Dunedin. The Red Cross helped all refugees in training for their driver license. I trained for two hours with the Red Cross for the driver's license. Then … Red Cross stopped my classes and focused on the new groups … I said to them why would you treat those who come one month ago differently to those who had been here for two years here, but they did not answer me.' Participant 7, meanwhile, expressed concern that staff within agencies prioritise certain individuals over others. Knowledge of their compatriots elsewhere in the world also enables Syrians to challenge

decisions in New Zealand. One Syrian advised that in Sweden, Holland, and Germany former refugee groups are asked to demonstrate their culture, such as cooking their native foods. In Dunedin, when this is undertaken, the Red Cross 'would choose two families for cooking only … [yet] All the Syrians know how to cook. Each area is known for a famous dish or sweet. The other people feel sad because they cannot contribute' (Participant 8). These comments point to jealousy and competition within the community, which extends beyond food to complaints about housing differences. There is, for instance, disgruntlement within the Syrian community about the diverse quality and size of the allocated housing with some seen as receiving better accommodation than others.

A key problem that Syrian former refugees have with agencies is the sense that Dunedin is 'federal', in that there is no central organisation dealing with the issues that they encounter. As Participant 7 pleaded, 'Please record this, that they should provide a person for the refugees to be able to come and talk to them about their problems. We go to English school. They say it is not our area and the same thing with the hospital'. There are also difficulties with agencies responding to such issues: 'As much as I want the housing to reply back to us and sort out the house situation no one is answering us. WINZ [Work and Income New Zealand] is the same. No one is answering us in terms to our request to increase the income. They treat people differently. For some people they increased their benefits and others they did not' (Participant 1). Here, however, former refugees seem not to realise that organisations such as WINZ make their decisions in conjunction with various official criteria.

CHALLENGES

If the circumstances surrounding their departure from home and their initial resettlement have some variation, similarities characterise the challenges that Cambodian and Syrian interviewees have confronted in their new homes. Even so, the broader structural context between the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries differs and means that the same issues of concern do contain disparities between past and present. What follows focuses on five areas of commonality: family separation and reunion; language; work; health; and community conflict.

Family separation and reunion

For refugee arrivals in the past and present family reunification has been a key issue. For Cambodians, however, (unlike today's refugees with widespread access to electronic communication), staying in contact and knowing the

whereabouts of family members, let alone trying to facilitate a reunion, was difficult. Communication in the 1980s was largely restricted to the telephone or mail. Indeed, one mother and daughter were separated for twenty years until their reunion in 1993. Khath Ray had spent the years since 1972 digging irrigation canals and foundations for buildings with little food, until her escape from Cambodia in 1979. She spent seven years in a refugee camp before travelling to Dunedin in 1988. A letter to her mother in 1989 reached its destination and they remained in contact until Dunedin businessman Hain Seng Te helped to reunite mother and daughter. Mrs Sar Leng arrived on a six month visitors' permit but planned to apply to settle in Dunedin since 'She never wanted to be separated from her daughter again'.[15] Other separated family members were aided by the Red Cross Tracing Service, whose 'overriding goal is that families be reunited either through establishing contact between separated family members or through assisting with reunification.' Not all wished to establish contact, and the Red Cross respected that.[16]

Although Syrian refugees are able to use electronic forms of communication, like Whats App, to keep in contact with family and friends, challenges in trying to reunite families still exist. One couple stated that the UN provided incorrect information about family reunification, noting they were advised at a UN interview that relatives under twenty-four years of age could join the family in New Zealand permanently and that anyone aged over twenty-four could visit. This was a major reason in the family's decision to accept resettlement in New Zealand. Yet kinsfolk wanting to visit were denied visas with the authorities alleging that relatives would visit and not leave the country. Participants felt affronted by such statements, arguing that is not the intention of their family members. They also maintain they told the UN about all other immediate family members, but are unsure if this was recorded in their files and that some relatives initially did not want to resettle permanently in New Zealand but now wished to. In addition, they revealed they were unaware of a three-week window each year when they could apply for family reunification (Participants 6 and 7).

Another participant indicated the need for the government to prioritise family reunification rather than facilitate the ongoing arrival of additional Syrians: 'I think they should decrease the new families and try to reunite the families that are already here. When there is half a family here they will not able to support New Zealand as they are not stable especially when young men are still overseas'. He concluded that divided families cannot give all that they wish to give to their new society (Participant 8).

Language

Challenges learning the English language is another shared area between Cambodian and Syrian refugees. For Cambodians, learning the English language took place twice a week in large classes of around twenty with all ages and levels combined. They were required to attend these free language classes and the teachers often had to learn some Khmer to communicate.[17] Once the Cambodians obtained a degree of language efficiency they then took more advanced classes at Otago Polytechnic along with home tutoring. The latter was particularly vital as it offered one-to-one tuition.[18] In 1984, there were 104 volunteer tutors for 107 students, with 158 students participating in classes. Maly Chum, who arrived in 1987, began learning English through an Access course and absorbing newsletters from her child's school with the help of a Khmer-English dictionary. She eventually taught Cambodian adults at Dunedin's Polytechnic, noting, 'They're older, and they learn better with a bilingual teacher … A lot can't read and write in their own language, so it is hard for them to learn English. It is slow for them'.[19] By 1994, the local polytechnic also offered twenty hours of language training over five weeks with home tutors providing a minimum of one hour a week language tutoring.[20]

For Syrian newcomers to Dunedin in the twenty-first century, language classes offered by English Language Partners and the Otago Polytechnic are smaller, centrally funded, and provide learning at a range of levels. Yet several participants (2, 3, 4, 8) pointed to the difficulties in learning the English language and asked for more opportunities to use English beyond the formal classroom setting since early and regular contact from sponsors and neighbours has declined over time. One suggested, 'If they could create more social activities, so if my language is weak it will improve' (Participant 4). Syrian refugees also perceive volunteers as important in the pathway to learn English with some reflecting on the value of such contact:

> The idea of a volunteer is a good way because we are mixing the Syrians with the Kiwis. The volunteers come to our houses for six months. Sometimes we would have other Syrian families over and they would also meet new volunteers. I always ask the volunteer if she would like to visit other Syrian families with me. They always agree. My volunteer knows many Syrian women which is a good idea. When we go to the swimming pool every month it is a good opportunity to meet people and a chance to speak English. Once we went to do a barbeque in the garden. Over there we meet a New Zealand family celebrating New Year. They greeted us and we exchanged food with them. (Participant 2)

Communication with neighbours complements these formal ways of learning. According to Participant 10, 'The communication with our neighbours helped us improve our English language.' Her husband mentioned that 'my neighbour would repeat the word many times until I learn it. If I do a mistake they would repeat it again until I pronounce it correctly' (Participant 11). Another participant observed, 'I understand when they speak but it is hard for me to speak back' (Participant 2). According to Participant 11, this is because 'most of the Syrian people are shy. They do not like talking to other people unless they knew them.' Here, again, cultural dimensions influence efforts at resettlement.

Work

The challenge of obtaining work is another hurdle that Cambodian and Syrian interviewees identified but for Cambodians securing work came more readily. Nee's father and older brother, for instance, obtained initial employment in a shoe factory. After one year at intermediate school and a year and a half at high school, during which time he spent his evenings cleaning and working as a kitchen hand, Nee joined his brother at a local takeaways, becoming the owner in 1982. Bun Rith initially encountered difficulties since his qualifications as a registered nurse had been destroyed but eventually could work in his trained field.[21] Indeed, one authority reckons that Cambodians had little difficulty finding manual or processing work, though professionals, like today, encountered problems in having their overseas qualifications recognised (Liev 1995, 112).

For Syrians, both male and female, obtaining employment is complicated due to a lack of English language skills, but they noted that the English needed for work was most likely to be acquired on the job. As Participant 4 revealed, 'I learned the name of the tools while I was working. I learned everything related to building during the six months of work'. Work experience was seen as valuable in helping to improve English language skills, including for one Syrian working at a Chinese restaurant: 'There were people that were not New Zealanders. They were Chinese but they spoke to me using the English language. I would joke and talk to them. I could easily remember the words and the English alphabets' (Participant 1). At the same time, 'The most challenging problem we have is when we go and ask the Red Cross about work and they tell us to learn the language' (Participant 4).

Yet even those Syrians in work met with difficulties. One couple worked at a meat factory outside of Dunedin, which meant a two hour commute: 'It was hard for me because I worked a night shift which ended at four AM. Then I would have to take my children to school at eight AM and then I would have to

go pick them up from school. I would only sleep for three hours a day. It was a really hard time' (Participants 10 and 11).

Not all Syrians are in a position to take up full-time work, seeking part-time work instead, sometimes due to study demands. According to one young man, 'I went and applied for a job after [some] time they called me back to do an interview. They offered me a full time job but I can't do a full time job, I want a part time job.' This is because he can only obtain $240 before tax without having his StudyLink allowance ($259) cut (Participant 9).

Further difficulties included few job vacancies in Dunedin, the need to prepare a CV, and applying for jobs and receiving no answer (Participants 9, 10, and 11). The situation has prompted some to indicate that there are better opportunities in Wellington and Auckland to work 'under the table' (Participant 8). Other Syrians have discussed the possibility of setting up their own employment, such as a bakery, 'but it is difficult because we need to sort out rent, a certificate and [the] instruments we need' (Participant 9). Another explained, 'I ask the Work and Income, I want to open one bakery in Dunedin, because this kind of bakery is not available in Dunedin for Arabic bread. They refused because I don't know how to speak English' (Participant 1). He observed further:

> Actually this country, the government and people everything is really nice but the problem is in getting a job. Other countries the refugees opened restaurants and shops. I am in contact with many of them and they are all working. When I started working with the Chinese restaurant a journalist interviewed me. I told him that we hoped from the NZ government to help open businesses and not make the language a barrier in terms of finding a job … This is what I did before. I used to bake pastries and sell it at the market, but where will I sell it here? There are some Arabic dental students here. Sometimes they would conduct parties, ask me to make pastries for them and they pay for my services. When I informed WINZ they said if I made more than eighty dollars I have to pay taxes, even though I work from home. Honestly, the government is so strict about this. I have contacted refugees in other countries. They said that they are not dependent on language schools. They are all working and have opened their own shops. If they give us the opportunity to do the same here I swear this would be the best city.

The difficulty obtaining work in Dunedin has left some concluding that 'Dunedin is for study not work' (Participants 10 and 11).

The absence of employment for Syrian males also creates complications in the household with men often confined to home and bored and nervous, compounded by still feeling stress about the situation in Syria. As Participant 6 pointed out, 'The man is sitting at home most of the time. Men find themselves when they are working they don't like other things like money being given to them without effort'. Her husband added that 'stress and boredom' were the two main consequences of not working (Participant 7).

While it is unusual for Syrian females to work, some emphasise their need to do so as the salary is not enough if only one partner is working (Participants 10 and 11).

Health

My interviews with Cambodians raised very little in the way of health issues, either after their initial arrival or years later. Health officials were, however, preoccupied with their physical health. Cambodian and other refugees underwent medical clearance at Mangere and health records from the 1980s show that physical health was a concern with a number of Cambodians and Vietnamese diagnosed with tuberculosis and intestinal parasitic infections.[22] Records also show that physicians complained about the lack of documentation for refugees who were referred for follow-ups, including previous x-rays.[23] Researchers have also examined the health needs of Cambodian refugees, noting that a high proportion suffered from poor health. One survey of approximately 240 Cambodian adults in Dunedin, from a population of 1,000 Cambodians, noted the physical complications of malaria, worms and heart problems along with the background understandings of Cambodians in supernatural causes of health and a tendency towards traditional treatments such as folk healing and herbal medicine (Cheung and Spears 1995, 257–265).

For recent Syrian arrivals, physical rather than mental health was a key concern. Some of this related to housing issues. According to one man, 'I am not concerned about myself but I care about my children. I can see my children getting sick in front of me and having asthma. When we came from Syria the only one sick was my wife. My wife became better but now the others are sick' (Participant 1). This particular example was a consequence of poor housing that was rife with mould, damp, peeling paint, and poor insulation. As one participant put it, 'God forbid that the house would not fall on our heads'.

Dental problems were a particular issue among several Syrians, particularly the extraction of teeth. One stressed their disquiet that when going to the dental

school 'they would tell me that I need an extraction. They prefer to extract the teeth rather than solve the problem.' There was also unease at not being told why an extraction was required (Participant 2), although research points to high sugar consumption among Syrians. Another participant noted that teeth extractions have left gaps between teeth which, without implants, has resulted in all the teeth loosening causing stomach problems due to an inability to chew food (Participant 6 and 7). Yet another Syrian revealed that in Thailand bridges in the mouth were cleaned regularly but there are no routine dental appointments for such services in New Zealand (Participant 9).

Specific questions about interpretation were not asked during the interviews but some participants highlighted the problems arising from a lack of interpreters especially for urgent hospital appointments. When trying to resolve an issue with a receptionist, the participant explained that 'The problem is that I speak loudly. She told me don't shout. My friend explained to the receptionist that is my usual way of talking. The receptionist told me that this appointment has been cancelled that you will get appointment within two months … It has been three months. I did not receive a letter or a call from them' (Participant 7). In coming across as argumentative and confrontational, such examples reveal a need for learning different cultural behaviours among both host and former refugee populations.

Community conflict

The final similar challenge confronting both Cambodians and Syrians is that of conflict within their communities. The political divisions that led to conflict in Cambodia were replicated in communities in New Zealand. There were those loyal to the monarchy (more likely to be devout Buddhists), to communists (the Khmer Rouge), and to republicans (Lon Nol). Indeed, the Dunedin community was shaken when former persecutors resettled in their midst. Some, according to Dyna Seng, 'were stubborn and arrogant, while others felt guilty and repentant'. Learning of this, the Cambodian community asked the New Zealand government to screen out those with possible Khmer Rouge links, but the government's response was that it could not discriminate on the grounds of politics. For some Cambodians, 'people could not be condemned for past connections with the Khmer Rouge because as the Khmer Rouge gained control of the countryside, illiterate and easily-influenced villagers often just did as they were told.'[24] There were also Cambodians who did not want any engagement with past ideology. Diverse ethnic minorities among Cambodia's population were especially subject to the cleansing regime of the Khmer Rouge and that ethnic diversity had repercussions in New Zealand. Nee's family were

among the first Cambodian refugees to arrive in Dunedin in 1979. Resettlement, however, was challenging since Nee's widowed father was born in China and although in Cambodia for many years was not recognised as Cambodian. He could not speak Khmer (the native Cambodian tongue) but survived due to his ability to speak Chinese.

Such distinctions can also be found in the Syrian inflow, with friction from Syria continuing in the new land. Some Syrians acknowledged that difficulties and tensions continue in New Zealand with everyone following their own opinion (Participants 1, 2, 3). Another participant rued, 'Before the conflict occurred in Syria we used to respect each other's customs and cultures. When the conflict happened there was no respect left for religion and traditions' (Participant 4). Other participants stated that there is no conflict as most Syrians have grown tired of it (Participant 9).

Participant 1 mentioned feeling like a visitor in New Zealand and hoped that once the conflict was over he would return to Syria: 'You do not feel it but we feel it. Not only me – all the Syrians – may be in one, two, three or four years, we will return back to our country. We cannot stay permanently here.' Some Syrians have already left Dunedin, including a family that moved to Auckland as there were more jobs and more opportunities to source Arabic food (Participants 2 and 3). Another said that the family had moved 'Because he has a big family he did not find a suitable house for them. That is what I heard' (Participant 8). Another similarly noted that 'There is one family who left. The reason is the house was rental and the contract of their house finished. They didn't find him a bigger house here. So he asked them to find him one in another area because he has a big family. He moved to Auckland either yesterday or today' (Participant 5).

What light does Cambodian resettlement throw on issues of return or mobility elsewhere? From a population of 1,000 Cambodian refugees in Dunedin in 1995, by 2019 an estimated 25–30 families were still in the city. Most, however, had chosen to move to Auckland, Wellington, or overseas to Australia facilitated by their ability to become citizens after three years and acquisition of a New Zealand passport. Their reasons for moving included a warmer climate, better employment opportunities, and because larger Cambodian communities could be found elsewhere (Liev 1995, 111, 125; Liev 2011, 140, 142). For those who remained in Dunedin, like Nee's family, owning a business was a key factor.

Learning from earlier refugees

Of those Syrian participants who wished to learn from the experiences of

Cambodians, they sought advice on three key aspects. First, they wished to know how adept with the English language Cambodians were upon arrival and what suggestions they had to make learning English easier. Second, Syrians wanted to know how they could socialise more with New Zealanders. Third, concern for their offspring meant Syrians longed to learn about the Cambodian journey of caring for children, as they feared one day their offspring might not listen to them. Linked to this point was the desire to know how to maintain their 'home' culture.

Cambodians responded to these issues by acknowledging the difficulties in learning English but emphasising that success in doing so depends on individual motivation rather than support. Upon arrival in New Zealand, no Cambodian participants spoke English and, even after lessons at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, their English language skills were still poor. They emphasised that English could not be learned over night and older people did find it much more difficult than the younger cohort who could play together and learn. Their key advice, then, was to stay strong and persist by trying to learn at least one word a day and speak English at home some of the time. Another Cambodian participant learned to speak, read, and write English at night school and Saturday school (two hours on a Saturday morning), while another joined Toastmasters.

In relation to establishing friendships with New Zealanders, Cambodians emphasised that Syrians should not be afraid to make friends, that New Zealanders were polite and friendly, and to live as a good citizen in the new land. One participant stated that he missed Cambodia for three years before committing to life in New Zealand.

Thirdly, Cambodians stressed that children will always listen if taught right from wrong. Nee and his wife, for instance, had their children in New Zealand and they still maintain aspects of their Cambodian culture. While use of the Khmer language in the third generation has lessened, Cambodians have stressed that they ensure their children speak the home language to maintain that part of their culture. As well as the Khmer and the Chinese language, Cambodian music and food were all important aspects of their culture. Cambodian respondents stressed that if refugees miss their home culture they will preserve it and it is important to recognise that nobody is trying to 'rob' newcomers of their culture.

Here it is interesting to query how much weight such advice from earlier refugee cohorts carries among new refugee arrivals, or whether information from

professionals is deemed more significant.

CONCLUSION

This article has pursued a comparative approach to examine the experiences of refugees over time. It reveals that Cambodian and Syrian refugees to Dunedin have encountered similar challenges in both the past and the present: work, language, family reunification, health, and conflict within communities. Why, then, are the previous challenges that faced refugees rarely acknowledged in relation to the arrival of new refugee cohorts?

One explanation, which derives from broader studies of history and modernity, is the differing context of the society that each new refugee cohort enters. In other words, the present differs from the past. Certainly, the challenges identified in this article play out in different structural contexts. Cambodians, for instance, entered a society where they had more opportunities to obtain work compared with the recent Syrian arrivals. The mental health of Cambodians only became a concern to authorities over time, whereas it is a central element for recent former refugees to New Zealand, including Syrians. Learning the English language was also a challenge but whereas previously there was minimal funding and students of all levels and ages came together in large classes, today there is central funding and smaller classes catering to various levels of learning. The ability of both refugee cohorts to reunite with relatives also varies due to government policies and different communication environments.

Other aspects of society also differ now compared with the time of Cambodian resettlement, particularly the greater difficulties that Syrians have in accessing appropriate housing. The international political landscape also varies, with Muslims often suspected of terrorism. The changing social, political, and cultural contexts in which refugees arrive into new societies is therefore one explanation for the failure to draw on previous knowledge. Also important to consider is that those individuals and groups who worked with previous cohorts do not necessarily remain working within the resettlement space, and so prior knowledge does not always transfer over time. In this respect, societies seem to perceive each refugee crisis as a 'temporary blip' (Gatrell 2016, 176). Further, as Barry Stein has argued, the cultural and ethnic characteristics of refugees today also differ from the past, and agencies 'have problems aiding and understanding the needs of the new refugees' and little understanding of their beliefs and practices (Stein 1981, 330). Greater awareness of cultural difference among the host society is also pertinent to successful resettlement.

If there is minimal comparison between past and present situations in relation to former refugee resettlement, there is also a dearth of comparison across geographical zones. Yet we know from studies emerging from other national arenas that even though the context differs, these current challenges among refugees are universal. Cross-national comparisons are therefore critical in order to gain awareness of solutions to common challenges that have worked elsewhere and to assess whether they might be readily applied in other locales, perhaps with some relevant adjustments.

NOTES

1 I am grateful to Barbara Johnston and Paul Naidu for their comments on this article.

2 Angela McCarthy is Professor of Scottish and Irish History and Director of the Centre for Global Migrations at the University of Otago.
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3 'One Kampuchean family, now living in Dunedin, tells its story', *Otago Daily Times*, 23 October 1985.

4 'One Kampuchean family, now living in Dunedin, tells its story'. *Otago Daily Times*, 23 October 1985.

5 I.J. Jeffery, Medical Officer of Health, Department of Health, Manukau City, December 1980, Welfare Services – Indo Asian Refugees, DAHE D469/60/b, Archives New Zealand Dunedin [hereafter ANZD]. I am grateful to Wesley Bachur from the Southern District Health Board for permission to quote from these records.

6 *Taieri Herald*, 2 April 1980.

7 Inspector's Report of Notifiable Disease, 3 July 1980, Welfare Services – Indo Asian Refugees, DAHE D469/60/b, ANZD.

8 Information about the Road Code is no longer part of the refugee orientation at the Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre, but is now outsourced to other agencies.

9 Various documents in Welfare Services – Indo Asian Refugees (1979–1980), DAHE D469/60/b, ANZD.

10 *Otago Daily Times*, 1 July 1980.

11 100 of the emergency intake arrived in 2015–26 while 500 arrived 2016–18.

12 Christchurch was a resettlement location until the earthquake of 2010 but in 2019 was reinstated as a resettlement centre. Invercargill became a resettlement area after Dunedin.

13 Dunedin Refugee Steering Group (Dunedin), to Hon. Michael Woodhouse (Wellington), 28 September 2015.

14 'Mayor blasts racist petition', *Otago Daily Times*, 15 September 2015; 'Have a heart for plight of refugees', *Otago Daily Times*, 17 September 2015.

15 'Cambodian mother, daughter reunited after 20 years apart', *Otago Daily Times*, 20 July 1993.

16 'When the lost are found', New Zealand Red Cross (1999).

17 Author's discussion with Barbara Johnston, 16 December 2019.

18 Otago Polytechnic Language Programme (Adults), c. Mar-June 1984, Health and Welfare Services – Immigrants and Refugees – Indo-Asians (1983–1984), DAHE D47/61/a, ANZD.

19 'Former refugee provides good role model', *Otago Daily Times*, 18 March 1993

20 'Home tutor scheme', *Otago Daily Times*, 1 August 1994.

21 'One Kampuchean family, now living in Dunedin, tells its story'.

22 See files in Health and Welfare Services – Immigrants and Refugees – Indo-Asians (1981–1983), DAHE D47/60/f, ANZD.

23 Respiratory Physician, Dunedin Hospital, 3 September 1982, Health and Refugee Services – Immigrants and Refugees – Indo-Asians (1981–1983), DAHE D47/60/f, ANZD.

24 'Cambodians discount witch-hunt', *Otago Daily Times*, 24 July 1990.

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