Strengthening Refugee Voices in New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

The attached white paper – The state helps the refugee speak: dialogue, ventriloquism or something else? – on the funding of refugee voice organisations was prepared between November 2018 and April 2019. In the wake of the terrorist attacks on two Mosques in Christchurch on 15 March 2019 the need to address the issue of refugee support organisations becomes acute as they a significant role in the representation of many Muslim citizens in New Zealand. Specifically, the lack of funding for organisations that are tasked with connecting with refugee communities and representing those voices to government, media and the public undermined the ability of these organisations to respond after the attacks. We particularly note the absence of "democratic communication infrastructures" owned by refugees for representing their voices in New Zealand.

In particular the authors of this white paper see the need for these organisation to be resourced for:

- The establishment of democratic communication resources owned and run by refugees
- The establishment of a dedicated communications role for the largest of these organisations
- An increase in baseline funding that takes into account the actual and expected everyday work
- The recognition of media and communication expertise among refugee communities
- The establishment of paid governance and expertise roles that assist with upskilling of former refugees to lead these organisations
- The establishment of a mentoring scheme where the largest organisations establish and oversee similar and independent refugee voice organisations in new resettlement locations as needed

- The creation of communication processes, pathways and channels for refugee voices to be presented to government, media, and other key stakeholders, with the control of the communication in the hands of refugees

- Adequately representing refugee voices to the government to improve the National Refugee Resettlement Strategy

We see MBIE's Strengthening Refugee Voices programme as the best way to resource these organisations to properly carry out the work identified above and justified in the longer white paper. As noted in the longer version of the paper, we see these refugee voice organisations at a crossroad: long term strains on funding have led to a situation where the authors see an emerging likelihood of a split between these organisations and government as in Australia.

The state helps the refugee speak: dialogue, ventriloquism or something else?

On 7 February, 2019 Immigration Minister Iain Lees-Galloway, Whanganui Mayor Hamish McDougall and Green Member of Parliament Golriz Ghahraman announced five of six new refugee resettlement locations. The coalition government deemed these new locations necessary for a refugee quota that will have doubled from 750 to 1500 over twenty-four months. One prominent refugee resettlement organisation criticised the announcement and decision for having gone forward without discussion or consultation with them or other similar organisations. In this paper we consider the organisations created by resettled refugees to represent their needs in negotiation with the government, United Nations and civil society groups. In particular, we focus on the concept of voice and the complexities of government funding, or lack thereof, in assisting refugee voices.

The question of voice is a central question in the expulsion, displacement and (im)mobility of refugees across global spaces. The displacement from claims to citizenship, constituted in erasures, violence, and state-sponsored are anchored in the structural displacement from spaces and infrastructures for voice (Dutta, 2011, 2013, 2018; Dutta & Shome, 2018). How then do refugees go about seeking spaces and infrastructures of recognition and representation where their voices can be heard? What are the challenges to the voices of refugees through the different parts of the movement, from the spaces of expulsion to the spaces into which they seek refuge? The mobility of voice as a construct that flows through different spaces and across different time-frames poses important questions for refugee representation and recognition. The culture-centered approach (CCA) proposed by one of us, Dutta (2011), offers a framework for voice by noting the voice infrastructures for the subaltern margins are critical to developing just societies. These voice infrastructures, when owned by the subaltern margins, strengthen democratic processes and simultaneously anchor them in critical questions of human rights (Dutta, 2014). Drawing on the culture-centered approach, this white paper delves into the question of refugee voice, interrogating the challenges to and opportunities for refugee voice. Locating itself within the context of refugee articulations of voice in New Zealand, the white paper seeks to offer some conceptual anchors for co-creating infrastructures for voice.

The state plays a uniquely proactive role in accepting refugee in countries where an United Nations Human Rights Commission (UNHCR) refugee quota is the primary form of entrance. In contrast to the reactiveness of refugee determination in Europe, the majority of refugees who come to New Zealand have already been determined. In line with our understanding of the state as facilitating the entrance of refugees through the UNHCR quota, we consider the possibilities and pitfalls associated with government funding of refugee-led organisations in New Zealand. Is there something unique about New Zealand that makes government funding more benign than elsewhere? Or do these funding models undermine the very voices that they are ostensibly set up to amplify?

Voice, refugees, and communicative structures

One of the key tenets of the culture-centered approach (CCA) is the recognition of voice as the anchor to transformative social change (Dutta, 2011, 2013). Voice, located at the intersections of culture, structure, and agency serves as the foundation to processes of social change. Culture, as a dynamic site of meaning making, reflects the contested space where social change is understood, theorized, and acted upon. Culture offers the script for the work of social change; meanings voiced by hitherto erased communities at the same time disrupt the dominant cultural formations in society, creating entry points for cultural transformations. Voice is rooted in cultural scripts, stories, and symbols, and at the same time offers opportunities for transforming these cultural scripts and stories. Structure reflects the framework of organizing of resources, depicting the patterns in society that constitute who does and who does not have access to resources. Structures are embedded in the economy, and at the same time shape the access to a wide range of economic resources and pathways of mobility. Structures constitute the resources for voice that are available to communities at the margins, shaping the economics of voice. Agency, reflecting the cognitive capacity of communities at the margins to make sense of the structures that shape their lives, to negotiate these structures, and to participate in transformative processes of change seeking to transform the structures, serves as a fulcrum for conceptualizing social change communication from the bottom up. Agency enables the reworking of cultural tropes to create entry points for transforming structures.

It is the recognition of the refugee agency that is central to the conceptualization of voice. Rooted in and as an expression of agency, voice narrates community-grounded stories. These community grounded stories re-circulate scripts of structural transformation by bringing about transformations in cultural processes. For instance, stories of refugee communities voiced in key discursive spaces, mobilize the processes of social change. Through the narratives that are voiced by refugee communities at the margins of social systems, the hegemonic ideas are challenged. The ownership of voice infrastructures by communities that have been systematically erased introduced new meanings into the discursive space, forming the basis for re-organizing structures. In other words, voice anchors the transformation of structures. Drawing from the concept of subalternity, the CCA suggests that voice interrupts the erasure of communities from spaces, processes, and infrastructures of decision-making. Whereas historically, refugees are reproduced in dominant discourses as passive objects of policies and programs, voice offers a conduit for the enactment of refugee agency. Through their voices and the ownership of voice infrastructures, refugees challenges the dominant structures and the logics of organizing embedded within these dominant structures.

Refugee voice

Refugees as speaking subjects invert the erasures produced through their material displacements from the spaces of articulations. The displacement of individuals, families, communities from citizenship and their in-acess to sites for claiming citizenship constitute the condition of voicelessness. A stateless refugee in the global structure is disconnected from pathways of mobility and laying claims to mobility through the citizenship structures of the state, and is fundamentally mobile. This interplay between (im)mobility and mobility as the basic aspects of refugee life constitute the frameworks within which we conceptualize the question of refugee voice.

The capacity of subaltern communities (such as refugees, who are often erased from pathways of mobility) to be recognized as a collective and to participate in various processes of representing themselves is integral to transforming structures that often reproduce conditions of marginalization. That communicative inequalities are intertwined with socioeconomic inequalities offers the basis for conceptualizing the role of voice in bringing forth anchors to transforming structures that perpetuate inequalities. In the realm of experiences of displacement, expulsion, and forced movement, the erasure of refugee voices from sites of articulation is then tied to the experiences of violence and material disenfranchisement. Not having a say in the structures of the state forms the fundamental condition of being turned a refugee. A community, household, or person becomes a refugee because she is displaced from the nation state and its structures of voice. The struggle for voice then situated in the context of the negotiation of structures to seek anchors into recognition and representation.

Economic logics of voice

Voice infrastructures are embedded within overarching economic logics (Bradford & Dutta, 2018; Dutta, 2014, 2015, 2018). The neoliberal transformation of infrastructures of voice has contributed on the one hand to the erasure of spaces where voices can be represented and recognized, and on the other hand, the commoditization of voice into spaces of profiteering (Dutta, 2015, 2018). The overarching logics of military-industrial aggression, climate change, and capitalist expansion that form the expelling forces underlying the creation of refugees, also profit from the precarious labour of refugees that is released into the global flows of capital. In this backdrop, the funding of voice infrastructures is often located within state-market agendas promoting commoditization and privatization. The challenge for co-creating infrastructures for refugee voice therefore is one of resisting the neoliberal forces and simultaneously exploiting the economic openings within neoliberal structures to create transformative spaces of articulation.

Whereas in many instances, refugee voice finds its presence through its co-optation into the neoliberal status quo, in other instances, infrastructures for refugee voices can emerge as spaces for articulating freedom, sovereignty, and community ownership. In the rest of the white paper, we will specifically explore the infrastructures for voice in New Zealand, the challenges these infrastructures experience, and the opportunities for transformative change.

Background to Refugee Resettlement in New Zealand

Refugee movements into New Zealand have mirrored international trends in both law and migration. While there were early migration patterns that matched what we might call a 'refugee movement' today, these were not processed under international law, but through domestic immigration schemes. Jewish refugees fleeing Germany before 1939 made one of the starkest of these groups fleeing persecution. As Ann Beaglehole (1988) writes in A Small Price to Pay, the processes of who was and was not allowed was ad hoc and without anything resembling the formal structures which are in place today.

After World War Two, New Zealand signed up to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees, and then the 1967 protocol that extended those protections from people within Europe to those anywhere in the world. Subsequently, the genesis of the country's contemporary refugee quota system was created by the sponsorship and admission of a range of persecuted groups from South Asians escaping Uganda through to the Cambodians and Vietnamese fleeing war in Indochina. At this point the formal infrastructure for resettlement was church-based and relied heavily on communities and decentralised organisation. New Zealand was also a country with near full employment and a well functioning welfare state so contemporary issues around employment and housing were less urgent (Beaglehole, 2013).

The creation of a refugee quota in 1987 not only set an annual intake of refugees but also signalled the formalisation and professionalisation of refugee resettlement processes. Previously, the number of people arriving in New Zealand as refugees was a function of the capacity of community organisations to arrange sponsorship, based on the levels of public interest and sympathy around a particular refugee crisis.

By institutionalising the quota as an annual intake, a process was begun that would lead to the professionalisation and bureaucratisation of services within government and charitable organisations (Gruner and Searle, 2011). The predictability of the quota intake, as well as the move to clustering refugees of the same ethnic background together, meant that institutions could become established with the notion that the following year there would be a continued demand for their work. This has led to the establishment of organisations specialising with trauma recovery, adult education and – eventually – representing the voices of resettled refugee communities.

Infrastructures for voice for Refugees in New Zealand

Gruner and Searle (2011) describe how the first refugee voice or 'umbrella' organisations developed in Auckland in the 1990s through the Auckland Refugee Council (still functioning today, though with a different mandate, as the Asylum Seeker Support Trust) and the beginning of the National Refugee Resettlement Forums (NRRF) in 2004. In the initial years of the refugee quota, only NGOs, the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and government were represented in discussions of resettlement outcomes. In-depth interviews by Gruner and Searle (2011) show that, at least in the early years of the fifth National government (which served three terms, with various coalitions and supply and confidence agreements from 2008-2017), resettled refugees felt that the main change was that their voices were starting to be heard. There was also the admission that it would take some time before those voices had the prominence of the other groups represented at the NRRF.

This paper will focus on the organisations that were formalised in 2006 as part of the Strengthening Refugee Voices (SRV) initiative to resource refugee background community building, representation, research and advocacy in the four major resettlement centres of that time in Christchurch, Wellington, Hamilton and Auckland. When not referring to these organisations by their name, we will describe them as 'refugee voice' organisations. These definitions are not apolitical and we acknowledge the moves by Aotearoa Resettled Community Coalition

and now Changemakers to move beyond the discussions of refugees, former refugees and refugee background people to focus on the resettled category. We've also steered away from the phrase 'refugee-led' organisations as while the boards of these organisations and many of the staff are from resettled refugee backgrounds there are also places in the main organisations for non-refugee background people with particular skills. To describe them as 'refugee voice' organisations speaks to their relationship to SRV as well as to their capacity or mandate to speak for refugees who are not yet resettled but who may share community connections with already resettled people.

In January 2009, the four SRV communities formed the National Refugee Network to create, for the first time, "a collective voice for former refugees at the national level" (Gruner and Searle, 2011; p. 11). Elliott and Yusuf (2014) describe how the establishment of these refugee voice organisations helped refugee community leaders feel that their contribution to the annual NRRF was more than tokenistic. The total funding for the refugee voice organisations through SRV has been $250,000 per annum spread across all regions. In practice that has meant around $50,000 for the main centres with accounts of as little as $6000 for Manawatu Refugee Voice, which had been created as a forum to bring together the voices in Palmerston North and the surrounding areas. In Nelson, the Nelson Multicultural Council, as well as the New Zealand Red Cross, perform many of the services and functions that are achieved by refugee specific organisations in some of the larger centres.

ChangeMakers Resettlement Forum (rebranded from Changemakers Refugee Forum in early 2019), in Wellington, was one of the first four refugee voice organisations. They began their work as an informal group from 2001 to insist on refugee-background voices being a part of the policy development and service delivery discussions within the context of the first term of the fifth Labour government. As an incorporated society they expanded their work from advocating for the communities that were settled in Wellington to research and community development (ChangeMakers Resettlement Forum, 2018). Their research included at least eight documents analysing facets of resettled refugee experiences from disability support services, family reunification policies, tertiary education access

through to broader studies of health, youth issues and education outcomes (ChangeMakers Resettlement Forum, 2018).

Today the funding from SRV has evened out to a constant grant of $50,000 for Changemakers Resettlement Forum, and they have added to their budget of operations by fundraising and acquiring other grants from both governmental and private routes. In the 2016/17 year Changemakers received grants from COGS (Community Organisations Grant Scheme), Community Trust of Wellington, Good Shepherd NZ Trust, St Andrews on the Terrace, Trust House Ltd as well as through private donors. In addition to delivering the SRV Immigration service provision for Immigration New Zealand, via the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE), they also received funding from MBIE's Open Road fund for their Refugee Driver Training Programme, which was established to assist in increasing work opportunities for refugee background New Zealanders.

We might also consider infrastructure from the perspective of the media that creates the conditions of possibility for voice. For example, community radio stations around New Zealand have many dedicated shows specifically for migrant, including resettled refugee, communities. The communities on these shows are often singular ethnic communities, rather than representatives for 'refugee voice' and are most often in the languages of a single resettled community. In large areas like Wellington and Auckland, where more than a dozen resettled refugee communities reside, a stronger version of this media infrastructure will appear in an English, digital form and be just one of the outcomes from the refugee voice organisations focussed on so far. Resettled Radio, for example, in Auckland, provides a one hour overview of refugee related issues, which is also streamed and podcasted on the community access station Planet FM (2018). Other examples of media infrastructure used and create by refugee voice groups include portrait exhibitions, books, social media and other more traditional forms of journalism like press releases and opinion editorials.

It is also worth noting that other organisations and individuals also work to bringing specifically refugee voices together for a diverse range of reasons. For example, see Kale, Kindon and Stupples (2018) and their work bringing together refugee background youth for five painting workshops that premised itself on an activist project "enabling the individuals involved in the research to raise their voices" (p. 8). Unlike the refugee voice organisations that we focus on in this paper, these projects see themselves as amplifying or helping rather than giving or creating voice.

Finally, with the entrance of Green Party MP Golriz Ghahraman into Parliament in 2017 we see a different kind of infrastructure for refugee voices in New Zealand. Ghahraman, originally from Iran, arrived in New Zealand seeking asylum with her parents in 1990. Though Ghahraman's educational and career background is exemplary, much of the media attention around her candidacy focussed on her being the first refugee background member of parliament in New Zealand's history. Her party is in a confidence and supply agreement with the government which has given ministerial posts to several of her colleagues.

One of the more interesting about Ghahraman's position is that it brings party politics into the question about refugee voices. Very, very few discussions of refugee resettlement in New Zealand mention the relative differences of the political parties across the country's spectrum. Part of the reason for this lack of commentary is that many of the documents are produced by organisations that are required to be 'politically neutral'. This neutrality means they should not be seen to be favouring any political party and the best way to do this is often to not consider or contrast these parties. It is rare to see any discussions of the government's position in refugee resettlement as coming from party ideology.

At the same time it is also worth noting that while recent policies from Labour - such as SRV and a commitment to doubling the quota - have favoured refugees, there have also been notable instances of National Immigration and Foreign Affairs Ministers with very positive approaches. Aussie Malcolm is renowned as a National party Immigration Minister for his work in the 1970s on establishing and growing refugee resettlement in response to the wars in Indochina, while Don McKinnon can be thanked for opening up resettlement opportunities for African refugees in the 1990s when New Zealand was struggling to meet its quota needs from Indochina (Beagelhole, 2013).

Challenges to refugee voice organisations

We want to pause for a moment to return to considerations of how voice has been represented in the studies of refugee voice, as well as in the insitutionalisation of these voices. For example, in Gruner and Searle (2011) we have in-depth interviews with people involved in refugee resettlement. One-third of the subjects of these interviews were from refugee backgrounds while the others were drawn from NGOs and government. The voices in this document are selected and curated through the Department of Labor's researchers and transcribed onto the page. The voice in question is never really in question apart from the use of quotation marks in the first reference to participants claiming:

> When discussing the changes that had occurred in the refugee sector over the previous two decades, the resounding response from all participants was that one of the most significant developments was the increasing participation of former refugees in the sector. This was most often articulated in terms of refugees now having a 'voice' that could be clearly heard by agencies in the sector and that was taken into account in policy development and service provision. (Gruner and Searle, 2011; p. 6)

What can we see in the contrast of the need to attribute quotation marks to the word voice, in contrast to the emphasis that the response was resounding and universal? The voice was being clearly heard, we are told, by agencies in the sector and this is 'taken into account'. It is useful that Gruner and Searle (2011) include sections of the voices of refugee background people in this study but, compared to the study of Somalian refugees in Auckland by Elliott and Yusuf (2014) there is something too smooth and rounded about these voices. Curation and transcription of voices often stand in for more embodied forms. Sometimes we can read the excerpts from interviews and imagine the tone of the voice through repetition of words, ellipsis and pauses, if transcribed. But at other times the voices represented in these studies don't give away anything at all - there is a professional anonymity. Our study could be accused of the same professional anonymity, though by critiquing the lack of analysis of the concept of voice in the use of the term both by Gruner and Searle's (2011) Department of Labor document and in the work on SRV, a different kind of assertion is made that doesn't claim anything about whether voices are heard or not.

In a paper produced for a private funder, Sue Elliott (2007) pointed out the limitations for the SRV programme in using that funding for advocacy directed at government departments. She puts the matter plainly:

> The government may well provide some support for these initiatives in future but is unable to fund activities which involve advocacy aimed at government agencies. Independent funding is required for these sorts of initiatives. (p.33)

The line between strengthening refugee voices and funding advocacy is blurry at best. Alternatively, we might ask is it possible to both strengthen or centre voices without funding advocacy? If so, what would those voices look like? One interesting approach to voice comes from De Souza (2011) who describes a transformative approach in working with the women at risk portion of New Zealand's refugee resettlement quota, with a special emphasis on three of the

SRV organisations. Her study sought to focus on the strengths of women brought to New Zealand under the 'Women at Risk' category (at least 75 per year, including dependents, but which in recent years was as high as 150 people - or 20% of the quota prior to its growth). This bottom up, transformative approach to voice is a good example of an iterative research process with the aim being to strengthen the specific voices of the women involved rather than an abstract 'refugee voice'.

At present, and in addition to the questions of representing voice, there are three main challenges to refugee voice organisations. First, there is the ongoing challenge to the value of the SRV programme for refugee voice organisations. Second, there is the parliamentary environment where three political parties must work together to pass legislation and the Labour party must work with New Zealand First to make changes through Cabinet. Finally, there is the opportunities and challenges that will arise from the large increase in resettlement locations from 2006 to the post-doubled refugee quota period.

Can SRV be revitalised?

The role of SRV has diminished for some refugee voice organisations as they have acquired other charitable funding and/or expanded voluntary labour of community leaders within the organisations set up by initial funding. These new avenues for funding and service provision have allowed some of the refugee voice organisations to flourish more than others. In particular, Changemakers Resettlement Forum in Wellington and the Auckland Resettled Community Coalition appear to have maintained some of their former projects as well as having reached out to secure new private funding for alternative programmes. These funding changes have seen a move from research and advocacy work to service provision, including facilitating information sessions with refugee background communities alongside Immigration New Zealand.

There are challenges in working closely with government departments as the refugee voice organisations. These groups do not have the capacity to ensure that Immigration New Zealand delivers on the issues raised in these consultative processes and yet by acting as the facilitators in bringing resettled refugee experiences to the government, they can also be subject to a kind of capture. In situations where difficult or sensitive issues are brought up but cannot be carefully or compassionately dealt with in the type of mass forum required by SRV and Immmigration NZ, any ill-feeling towards the state can also be directed towards the refugee voice organisation who must fulfill responsibilities to both parties.

Despite some dissatisfaction with SRV as a strong vehicle for refugee voices the latest document on resettlement priorities, the New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy - Priorities to 2020, notes that "at the heart of the Strategy is the refugee voice" (Immigration NZ, 2018; p.3) before asserting the strategy was created "in conjunction with former refugees and the identification of strategic priorities is undertaken in consultation with refugee communities" (ibid). We do not doubt that these conjunctions and consultations took place, but are interested in how the refugee voice organisations are able to continue to participate meaningfully in this work when the budget for this work is so slight.

We are also interested in what these conjunctions and consultations would look like with refugee voice organisations that were able to more deeply research and present the findings from the communities they represent. Alternatively, what would these conjunctions and consultations look like if the participation in these processes was not driven by the imperatives of continued SRV work but by a refugee voice partner that was truly independent of the state? Similarly, how would resettled refugee communities' interaction with local government look if these organisations were more independent in their ability to advocate for themselves?

Parliamentary challenges

The challenges to the refugee voice organisations exist within a larger parliamentary and political context. As noted earlier, SRV was created in the third and final term of the fifth, centre-left Labour government. At that time Auckland, Waikato, Wellington and Christchurch were the main centres for refugee resettlement. Since then the annual refugee resettlement quota has grown to 1000 places, alongside an emergency intake of 600 additional Syrian refugees over three intake periods between 2015 and 2018. That additional intake meant that there was a practical increase to the quota to 1000 placed from the 2015/16 years onwards and that Dunedin and Invercargill have started welcoming resettled refugees, while Christchurch is about to begin again after the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes stopped their programme. The National government also changed the focus on resettlement to be more geared towards employment outcomes. Marlowe, Bartley, and Hibtit (2014) describe the five aims of the 2012 resettlement strategy, noting that employment is the thread that runs through them all.

Today, the sixth Labour government is a coalition with the centrist-populist New Zealand First and relies on confidence and supply from the Green Party. New Zealand First campaigned at the 2017 election on a quota of 1000 places, though their leader Winston Peters did say that he would consider increasing it to 1200 or even 1500 if migration was radically reduced to 10,000 per annum (Small, 2017). In contrast, the Green Party wanted to increase the refugee quota to 4000 over the coming six years, with an additional 1000 places for community sponsored places, much like in the early years of New Zealand's refugee resettlement policy (Davison, 2017). Despite the differences in policy among these political parties, agreement was reached on the refugee resettlement quota which, in line with Labour policy, is scheduled to grow to 1500 places by July 2020 (Bennett, 2018).

In addition to the refugee resettlement quota, refugees can also enter New Zealand through the Refugee Family Support Category, which sees 300 places a year offered to refugee families already in New Zealand to sponsor a family member to arrive.

These sponsored places receive permanent residency upon arrival, but families are generally responsible for taking care of the family member in term of income and housing. There are also accepted asylum seekers who add to the total number of refugees in the country. Though these numbers averaged 1500 people per annum twenty years ago, restrictions on access to air transport since the September 2001 terror attacks has meant this has dropped to around 350 applications per year with a five year average of 120 accepted claims, with another 50 accepted on appeal (Stephens, 2014).

Further people in refugee-like situations can enter into the country through other immigration categories, such as through spouse visas, students visas or business visas, but as these are not and probably can not be measured, I will leave these categories aside, except to say that the longstanding conservative commentary around indiscriminate numbers of family members arriving is not based in any evidence, as per former Prime Minister John Key's public apology around misleading statements on this in 2015 (Jones, 2015). It is also worth noting that we are relying on publicly available quantitative data from the Immigration New Zealand website, supplemented by other recordings of historical data. We do not have access to the Application Management System (AMS) that underwrites a lot of the research from MBIE such as their 2015 study of family reunification and asylum seeker, or convention refugee, numbers (see MBIE, 2015).

Quiet and loud: new regions of resettlement

This increase to the resettlement quota has already seen two new regions – Otago and Southland – added to the existing resettlement regions. Over the next two years there will be six extra regions opened up to resettlement - with five already being announced (Wilson, 2019). While the resettlement locations are described in terms of regions, the placement of resettled refugees has predominantly been in the main cities in these regions, with a few small exceptions such as refugees being placed in Fielding in the Manawatu, in addition to the vast majority in Palmerston North. It is also worth noting that while refugees are resettled in these areas,

where there already exist at least the beginnings of resettled communities, there is nothing to stop resettled people from moving both around the country, or to Australia, or to any other country that they're permitted to visit given their status as permanent residents.

The increases to the refugee quota mean there will be a total of thirteen or fourteen resettlement locations around New Zealand. While many of these new resettlement communities will begin with small intakes from one ethnic community that may be able to represent themselves through naturally evolving communal structures, in the medium and long term these groups will likely face the same challenges in being heard that led to the initial investment in SRV. The challenge is in how to use the lessons from the first fifteen years of SRV and the range of challenges faced and met in trying to fundraise outside of SRV to help these communities develop strong refugee voice organisations.

These challenges also hold the kernel of opportunity that might see refugee voice organisations strengthened. For example, though both the centre-right and centre-left parties increased the refugee quota in recent years, the commitment for these increases – documented in Stephens (2018) – is clearly stronger among Labour and the Greens. Given current polling and the tendency of parties in New Zealand to secure at least two, if not three, terms in government, there are opportunities to lobby both Labour and the Greens on the issue with respect to the 2020 general election. Similarly, the challenge of new resettlement centres also creates the opportunity to fund existing refugee voice organisations in a mentorship role so that these new communities are able to learn from the more than a decade of institutional experience. This is particularly pertinent with the new resettlement locations clustering in the lower North Island – Levin, Whanganui and Masterton. Similarly, Blenheim is close enough to Nelson to be represented by one larger organisation initially based in Nelson, while a Timaru refugee voice organisation could be mentored by Christchurch. If we are to think more broadly, this would also mean a more prominent national refugee voice could emerge, including those specifically youth focused voices.

Finally, though the cutting of the SRV funding might seem to be without a silver lining, the work to keep these organisations functioning in a more hostile funding environment has given some of these organisations the strength of diverse income streams meaning they are less beholden to any state led initiatives that they feel do not align with their goals or mission.

If we wish to think more broadly about what a refugee voice organisation might look like without SRV we only need look to Australia. In Australia, the anti-asylum seeker discourse and actions of both centre-left and centre-right governments have seen the cessation of most financial relationships between refugee voice organisations and the state. These Australian organisations take a range of forms with some deeply grounded in refugee voices such as RISE and others, such as the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, bringing together many voices, but on a much larger scale and with a larger fundraising budget than New Zealand has ever seen, even once accounting for the relative size differences. Though there have been some challenging moments between the state and refugee voice organisations in New Zealand, there have not yet been issues that have so adversely affected them that they have felt the need to distance themselves like the Australian refugee voice organisations. The prospect of working without direct state funding for programmes might provide a refugee voice organisations with greater flexibility around how they position the conjunctive and consultative work that the state relies on them to perform. At the very least, having confidence that refugee voice organisations could function without SRV and the state and that future consultation would be up for negotiation, both through private and public channels, gives refugee voice organisations a stronger negotiating position for a renewed and reinvigorated SRV programme.

Future directions: Voice in transformative politics

In working through the question of refugee voice, we suggest the following entry points to conversations on change. These entry points – broadly ownership, sustenance and engaging with power – are drawn from theories of transformative politics and are intended as a way for both scholars and community advocates to step back and consider the broader political issues that underwrite questions of voice.

That considering is not to replace the specific analysis of funding that we've already developed, but works in an iterative manner to help us have a view of what refugee voice might be outside of the annual budget cycles and three yearly reviews of the refugee quota system.

Ownership of refugee infrastructures

The question of ownership of the communication infrastructures among refugees is critical to the democratic transformations of the inequities, stigmas, and challenges refugees experience. Particularly critical in the question of ownership is the pattern of distribution of power in society and the relationship of power to community participation. The distributions of power within refugee communities and in the relationship of refugee communities with the dominant structures often shapes the opportunities for voice. Especially critical to consider are the voices of those that lie at the margins of refugee communities because of inequities that are reproduced. Who owns the communicative infrastructures and who participates in these infrastructures? These two questions offer important insights regarding the participation of refugees in democracies.

Sustaining communicative infrastructures

One of the key challenges for refugee voice is the sustenance of infrastructures of voice. With the limited access to spaces of recognition and representation, securing economic resources to sustain voice infrastructures is a challenge. The metric driven funding cycles in neoliberal economies often situate voice infrastructures within narrow economic-political logics. How to sustain the authenticity of refugee voice and simultaneously secure funding is a key challenge. Developing locally anchored initiatives and simultaneously building coalitions that engage with state-local government structures offer some of the potential ways in which communicative infrastructures for refugee voice may be sustained.

Engaging with power

When refugee voices engage with power structures, they negotiate potential entry points to structural transformation. However, to engage with structures in ways that can be transformative is to create anchors for disrupting power. Given the ways in which power is written into political, economic, and societal frameworks, one of the key challenges for refugee communicative infrastructures is to creatively seek out spaces for voice. Drawing from a wide array of strategies is critical, especially given the vast inequities in distribution of power that refugees find themselves amidst. In negotiating these strategies, refugee voice infrastructures offer potential lessons for the interplays of dialogic and antagonistic articulations. Strategies within and outside the established channels of parliamentary democracy need to be explored as the bases for change.

Conclusion

In this white paper, we have outlined the overarching questions of refugee voice. Drawing upon the various aspects of refugee voice in New Zealand, we have attended to the nature of refugee voice, the challenges to refugee voice, and potential directions for refugee voice. Refugee voice is a vital resource in processes of social change. Seeking ways for anchoring transformative processes that catalyze refugee voice in structural transformation is situated within the organizing of power in society. To disrupt existing forms of power and erasure is to attend to the creative possibilities in co-creating refugee voice infrastructures.

A speech in 2007 by then Minister of Immigration David Cunliffe put the total annual funding for refugee voice organisation through the SRV programme at $250,000 (Cunliffe, 2007). The comment was ambigious. While people might read it as saying each group would get $250,000, the reality was that this was the total expenditure on the programme. We wonder what was going through the minds of the speech-writer of Cunliffe when faced with the ambiguity of the original funding proposal. Was there something so preposterous that the voice of refugees could be secured by the state for this figure that they did not see the need to clarify whether the figure was per region, or per organisation? In highlighting the Australian approach to refugee voice organisations, as well as the reliance of MBIE on these voices, we have shown there is an alternative for these organisations and a challenge to the political parties seeking to capitalise on refugee voices.

We are left with the question of where refugee voices will emerge from as resettlement in Blenheim, Masterton, Timaru, Whanganui and Levin (with one more to be announced) becomes established? As with the other centres, we imagine that ethnic communities will be housed together and to begin with these communities will be able to represent their interests, at least at a local level. But if we are really committed to having refugee voices at the front of resettlement, there will need to be work done to support these communities to have a voice that is at least as loud as others in the resettlement process.

Concurrently, the refugee voice organisations in Wellington and Auckland are now well established and active in the media. In response to the announcement, Changemakers criticised the government for simply not consulting with them about where these new centres should be (Radio New Zealand, 2019). There are opportunities for these groups at many levels: they could mentor new communities, consolidate as a nationwide resettled refugee voice organisation, step back from government funding to allow more aggressive advocacy positions and fundraising, or other options that we haven't considered. More independent voices from this sector should not be something that government fears - instead it should be seen as the maturation of a process begun under the previous Labour government.

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