

“The Imported Underclass: Poverty and social exclusion of Black African Refugees in Aotearoa New Zealand”.

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ABSTRACT:

Changes in immigration and refugee policy since 1991 have led to an increasing number of minority ethnic groups settling in Aotearoa New Zealand. The number of Black African migrants and refugees granted permanent residence in New Zealand has increased substantially from about six in 1982 to over 770 in 1998 (New Zealand Immigration Services). The socio-economic, professional and cultural characteristics of this emerging Black African minority ethnic community are complex but fascinating. In mid 2000 the majority of the Black African community in New Zealand was refugee (Chile 1999A).

This paper is part of a broader study to analyse the nature and structure of Black African migration and settlement in New Zealand. It is an attempt to undertake applied migration research that addresses the expressed needs of the grass root level client community from a participatory methodology framework. The paper examines the socio-economic status of Black African refugees in New Zealand and analyses the factors and processes that create an impoverished community that is increasingly excluded from mainstream society. Strategies to reverse the process of marginalisation and create a healthy, vibrant community with the capacity to participate effectively in New Zealand society are examined.

1.0 Introduction: The context of Africa's refugee crisis

Africa has the most severe international cross-border refugee problem and internally displaced people than any other region. In 1994 the continent registered over 6 million refugees and a further 15 million internally displaced people (UNHCR 1994, p4). This was more than five times the number of refugees in Europe and three times that in Asia. Ethiopia alone generated an estimated 2.5 million refugees between 1990 and 1994 (UNCHR 1994, p26), and Rwanda over 1.7 refugees. "Globally, only Afghanistan surpassed Rwanda in 1995 in the number of refugees and displaced people" (Africa Recovery May 1996, p18). The situation has not abated, and in 1999 over half of the population of Sierra Leone was either internally displaced or crossed the border to neighbouring countries.

The refugee crisis has been brought about by the complex mix of droughts, famines, floods, civil wars and political instability. In Ethiopia and Somalia for example, there was the complex mix of civil war, the Eritrean war of liberation, famine and, and the collapse of the countries' economies between 1984 and 1994.

Table 1: Pattern of Refugee Crisis in Africa 1984-85 and 1993-97-98

	Number in 1984/85	Number in 1993/94	Number in 1997/98
Angola	250,000	284,00	not available
Burundi	55,000	389,00	not available
Chad	108,000	211,000	not available
Ethiopia	1.5 million	not available	391,000 (includes 330,00 from Eritrea)
Liberia	Not available	795,000	520,000
Mozambique	120,000	234,000	not available
Rwanda	185,000	2,257,000	18,000
Sierra Leone	Not available	275,000	310,000
Somalia	700,000	1,536,000	531,000
South Africa	2.5 million	not available	not available
Sudan	1.8 million	690,000	431,000

Source: Compiled from Africa Recovery 1988; Curtis *et al* 1988; Timberlake 1985; UNDP 1996, UNHCR 1998.

Another aspect of the complexity of the refugee crisis is the fact that many of the major refugees generating countries are also host countries with large number of refugees. For example, while there were an estimated 800,000 Ethiopian refugees in Somalia, 500,000 Ethiopian refugees in Sudan, and 115,000 Ethiopian refugees in Djibouti between 1980 and 1990, at the same time Ethiopia hosted 385,00 refugees from Somalia, 300,000 from Sudan and 10,000 from Djibouti (UNHCR 1994, p27). The conflicts in Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda and the Democratic Republic of Congo have also generated large refugee flows that affect each country in both directions.

The refugee crisis in Africa is intrinsically linked to the socio-economic and political crises both in their causes and effects. It has devastating effects both for the countries of origin as well as the receiving countries. For the sending countries the exodus of young able-bodied people away from the rural areas invariably takes away the human capital necessary for rural production, thus accentuating the decline in agricultural production. The 'urban refugees', the more educated, usually professional people, who make up about 15 per cent of the refugee population (John 1986, p91) are a drain on the sending country's human resources, a loss which most of these countries can ill afford.

Refugees have contributed to the deteriorating conditions of social services in many African host countries. The health costs associated with rehabilitating wounded, traumatised, malnourished refugees comprising mainly women, children and the elderly are very demanding. In some countries the sheer number of refugees alone changes the demographic structure of the towns and cities. In Djibouti for example an estimated 57 percent of the country's 42,000 refugees live in the capital city, while 14 percent of Port Sudan's estimated 300,000 citizens are refugees (John 1986, p91).

The large influx of refugees into poor neighbouring countries has both socio-economic and political implications. Host countries struggling to provide for their citizens under conditions of stagnating national economy have the added pressure of providing for large numbers of refugees. Political tension within host countries is also exacerbated, as in the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where the massive flow of Rwandan refugees to the eastern region of DRC between July 1994 and 1995 severely aggravated long simmering ethnic tensions among Congolese tribes in the area. The continuing political crises in Angola, Burundi and Uganda are the direct result of the complex flow of refugees across their orders.

To relieve the pressure on host countries as well as the humanitarian objective of providing opportunity for refugees to start a new life, signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention have undertaken to take a number of refugees every year. It is in this context that New Zealand has admitted an average of 750 refugees since 1987.

2.0 The Black African Refugees in New Zealand

The majority of quota refugees in New Zealand between 1987 and 1994 were from South East Asia and the Indian sub-continent. During this period the total refugee intake from Black Africa into New Zealand was only 375. The escalation of political crises in Somalia in 1992-1994, Ethiopia-Eritrea war between 1991 and 1993 and the Rwanda genocide in 1994 greatly enlarged the component of New Zealand quota refugees coming from Africa. Table 2 shows New Zealand intake of Black African refugees between 1996/97 and 1998/99.

Table 2: African refugees taken by New Zealand on the official quota by country of origin.

Country of origin	1996/97	1997/98	1998/99
Burundi	13	17	--
Eritrea	21	28	47
Ethiopia	130	74	151
Rwanda	14	16	14
Somalia	299	178	215
Sudan	9	24	33
TOTAL AFRICA	477	337	460
Total NZ refugee intake	780	729	601
Africa as % of total	61.15 %	46.23 %	76.54%

Source: Compiled from New Zealand Immigration Service 1997-1999.

During the same period the number of Africans granted asylum in New Zealand increased quite significantly as shown in table 3. With success rate of less than 25 percent, the number of successful applications indicates a fairly huge increase in the number of Africans seeking asylum in New Zealand during this period.

Table 3: Asylum Applications in New Zealand 1991/92-1998/99: Top Five African Countries**(Africa data represents those approved)**

Year	Total Applied	Total Africa	Somalia	Ghana	Nigeria	Ethiopia	South Africa
1991/92	1459	36	12	14	na	3	Na
1992/93	822	42	15	15	6	2	Na
1993/94	600	60	14	15	1	1	11
1994/95	976	124	44	43	16	7	5
1995/96	1965	190	72	36	31	5	5
1996/97	2782	151	31	6	19	7	1
1997/98	2605	227	56	6	20	29	31
1998/99	1744	108	16	8	10	12	9
TOTAL		938	206	143	103	66	62

Source: Compiled from New Zealand Immigration Service 1997-1999.

3.0 Refugee settlement Programmes and the concept of social exclusion

Refugee settlement programmes are designed to integrate refugees into their host community to give them the rights and privileges of citizenship and for them in turn to develop their talents to enable them to contribute in the best way possible to their new community. That is why refugees arriving in New Zealand are taken into camp at the Mangere Reception Centre in Auckland for a period of orientation. This is their 'home' for the first six weeks in their new adopted country, during which time they undertake health and medical checks, including dental and psychological referrals. They also receive basic lessons in conversational English and are introduced to the New Zealand law and social and political systems. Thereafter they are released into the community under the care of their mentors for a period of up to twelve months. They are now residents and members of the community. They are expected to integrate within their respective communities and in New Zealand society.

However, refugees come from highly traumatised environments. Settlement programmes for them must therefore address the profound trauma that accompanies the dramatic changes in their lives. Many refugees have experienced prison, torture and loss. Most have lost careers, relatives, friends, possessions, self-esteem and more. They face the daunting task of rebuilding their lives from nothing. Society cannot expect them to start a new life in a completely new environment, and forget what they have gone through. This in itself is a traumatic experience.

The concept of social exclusion used in this paper refers to the process of social alienation or social disaffiliation where the individual is unable to effectively engage in functional relationships within and with the community and society. This dis-functional relationship consists of three dimensions, namely economic, social and political dimensions as conceptualised by Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997). This paper argues that in a free and democratic society each citizen, resident and member of the society is guaranteed basic capacity to enable them attain basic standards of living and participation in social, cultural, political and economic functions of society. Where the individual citizen, resident or member becomes

disadvantaged to the point where they are unable to engage with and within the community, that individual citizen, resident or member suffers social exclusion.

Social exclusion creates an underclass. Hence the European Commission argues that:

“the problem now is not one of disparity between the top and the bottom of the social scale (up/down) but also between those comfortably placed within society and those on the fringe (in/out). European Commission 1992, p7 Quoted in Bhalla and Lapeyre (1997) p415.

Refugees are ‘imported’ into a country by the goodwill of the government and people of the country. Shelving them on the fringes of society effectively disqualifies them from social participation and consigns them to the status of underclass. This is the fate of many Black African refugees in New Zealand.

3.1 Black African refugee settlement and exclusion from political participation

African refugees in New Zealand are enthusiastic about democracy and the opportunity for them to participate in the political process in their new country. Upon arrival and settlement in their new country, refugees expect that the rights and privileges of the democratic society will be extended to them. These include freedom of association, freedom to form, hold and express opinion and the freedom to participate effectively in the democratic process. However, their capacity to participate in the democratic process is very severely limited by their lack of literacy skills.

The democratic system is predicated on a literate population. Citizens are expected to have basic literacy skills to enable them to understand basic democratic principles and processes. A literate population has the capacity to distinguish between policies of contesting political ideologies represented by individuals and political parties.

About 70 percent of African refugees arrive in New Zealand with little or no formal education. On arrival they are given six months of English Language tuition, of which many take advantage in their first year of settlement. The success rate of these programmes for the purpose of providing basic literacy skills is poor. Less than 20 percent of those surveyed reported that the English language programme improved their language skills enough to enable them read the newspaper. 14 percent reported that the English language programme equipped them with the communication skills to enable them find gainful employment. Only 32 percent reported that the English language programme gave them confidence to proceed to further education and training.

A complex number of factors accounts for the low level of attainment of outcomes for these programmes (see Chile and Brown 1999). One of the most prominent is the poor quality of training offered by some establishments. In the personal interviews and focus groups individuals and groups reported that the quality of outcomes from some training establishments was below expectation. Refugees reported that in some private training establishments teachers were not trained and did not demonstrate adequate teaching skills. For example, in one particular case some teachers were constantly late to class, some were undertaking a number of jobs concurrently, were irritable and lost their temper very quickly. A typical case in Wellington where a teacher was constantly late (fifteen-to-thirty minutes), did not apologise or explain to the course participants. Teachers were more interested in

covering curriculum content than the participants gaining understanding. Teachers would start the lesson by giving students work without explanation. At the end of the day they would deliver ‘homework’. Students concerns were ignored. Course evaluation by students gave a damning feedback on the course and some teachers. When the course director invited some course participants for an interview, afraid of the consequences of expressing their true feelings, these participants told the director that everything was fine. This training establishment could not find appropriate placement for refugees to undertake the requisite work experience. A student electrician (not an African refugee) waited for about three months after the course to find his own work experience placement as the training establishment could not find one for him during the six months of the course. Many course participants are unable to undertake conversation in English after the six-month programmes, least of all read and understand basic literature.

All those surveyed in the current study had lived in New Zealand for a minimum of 12 months. 75 percent of the respondents had participated in at least one election, either the general election or local government election. The analysis of how they voted and their motivation for voting the way they did is being analysed for reporting elsewhere. The critical question here is that if only 20 percent had the literacy skills sufficient to read the newspaper, how did they understand the manifestos of the respective political parties and other election material to make informed choices at the elections? Is this effective political participation or is it leading to exclusion from participation in the democratic process?

The inaction by government in addressing the lack of literacy skills amongst African refugees may in fact constitute the denial of human and political rights in terms of the capacity for freedom of expression, political participation and equality of opportunity. For example, none of the African refugees that participated in this study were on a school board of trustees, parent-teacher association or governing board of any community organisation except their country or tribal community (such as the Oromo community or Somali Community). This constitutes ‘incomplete citizenship’, as argued by Bhalla and Lapeyre:

“The political dimension of social exclusion involves the notion that the state which grants basic rights and civil liberties is not a neutral agency but a vehicle of the dominant class in society” Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997, p420.

The inaction of government to provide the literacy skills to enhance political participation and engagement in civil society constitute the creation of an underclass of refugees.

3.2 Income poverty, personal debt and social exclusion of African Refugees

Many refugees arrive in New Zealand with a heavy debt burden. Many borrowed large amounts of money to pay their way through corrupt cross-border officials to escape their home country. As part of their settlement process in New Zealand others have borrowed to pay airfares for partners, children and relatives to join them in New Zealand. Those who have not yet been reunited with their family are expected to send money home or to third countries to support their families. Yet others have borrowed like others New Zealand students through the student loan scheme for education and training. The amount owed in student loan range from \$5,000 to over \$20,000 with four refugees reporting to have already accumulated student loans of more than \$20,000. Table 4 shows the sources of debt amongst African refugees.

Table 4: Sources of debt**Total number of respondents: 46**

Source of debt	Number	% of respondents
Student loan only	16	34.78
Paying off debt in home country or third country	28	60.87
Paying off debt in New Zealand (including student loan)	43	93.48
Supporting family and relations in home country or third country	46	100.00

Source: Field surveys April-November 1999

The implications of the level of personal debt amongst refugees are huge. Despite the acquisition of huge student loans many of them have not entered the work force to enable them start repaying the loans. Many took the chance to enter tertiary education in the hope that the qualifications and skills acquired will enable them access employment. However, as table 5 shows only a small number of refugees have gained full-time professional employment (8.82 %). All together only 33.82 percent are in full-time employment, and 38.24 percent without employment or in training. (For a detailed analysis of the reasons for the high level of unemployment amongst African refugees, see Chile 1999A). Debt also impacts on the capacity to save, access to appropriate housing and accommodation, food poverty and participation in the social and cultural activities within the community. Even the ability to look for work, to undertake training and further study is limited by debt. When the question of debt is not addressed the individual and family gets caught up in the inevitable cycle of poverty.

Table 5: African Refugees economic status**Total number of respondents: 68**

Labour force participation	Number	% of respondents
In full-time professional employment	6	8.82
In part-time professional employment	4	5.88
In full time employment (including professional)	23	33.82
In part-time professional employment (including professional)	27	39.71
Not in employment but studying	37	54.41
Undertaking full time study	9	13.24
Not in employment and not studying	26	38.24

Source: Field surveys April-November 1999

The unemployed is excluded from participation in the labour market in what Dasgupta (1993) refers to as 'economic disenfranchisement' (quoted in Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997, p4216). Those disenfranchised from the labour market are also excluded from the main sources that provide income necessary to participate in consumption, investment and social relations including property rights. Many refugees thus tend to reside in the less affluent areas, often

limited in the choice of where to live either because of pre-arranged accommodation through sponsors, or the availability of state housing through Housing New Zealand accommodation. They cluster in locations where other refugees and people from their countries of origin who arrived before them reside. These areas provide some form of community base for the new arrivals. In Auckland these communities are found in state house estates and older housing sections of Mt. Albert, Sandringham and Mt. Roskill in the inner suburbs; Mangere, Otahuhu, Glen Innes and Onehunga in the southern suburbs; Glen Eden, Te Atatu and New Lynn in the west and Northcote in the Northshore.

These communities are often characterised by poverty and a high degree of social problems. In situations where the refugee gets stuck into this community their chances of breaking through the cycle of disadvantage becomes even more challenging. For refugees coming from traumatised backgrounds this increases their trauma and often leads to stress and serious mental health issues.

The lack of employment opportunities together with income poverty and debt often lead to frustration and loss of self-esteem. The euphoria of moving into a new country to start a new life after years of living in camps evaporates. The inability to meet contesting demands both in New Zealand and overseas leads to desperation, frustration and physical and psychological withdrawal and isolation. The feeling of worthlessness accentuates mental health issues that have been dormant, driving some refugees to the point of suicide and in some cases some have taken their lives. Poverty and the debt burden is therefore a significant factor in the creation of an imported underclass of Black African refugees who are excluded from effective participation in the economic, social and cultural life of the community.

3.3 Discrimination and social exclusion

Most Black African refugees report that they are unable to participate in social, cultural and economic activities within their community because of discrimination and prejudice. Access to employment is hindered because they look different, dress different and speak different. This is particularly the case with women, who constitute the majority of adult Black African refugees in New Zealand. Despite open discrimination both in finding employment, at work and in the community, most refugees are not able to complain because they do not know how to, or do not have the language skills to navigate the bureaucratic maze of the complaint process. Others are genuinely afraid to complain because they strongly believe that their complaints will not be taken seriously or may count against them when they apply for residence, citizenship or family reunification. The following is one of the several accounts of racism and discrimination by Black African refugees published in the research report currently being completed by this author.

I am a refugee that came to New Zealand on the quota in 1993. I was a registered nurse for 10 years before coming to New Zealand. I have done several trainings overseas, including one year of bio-statistics training in Sudan and six months of bio-statistics in Egypt. I worked in the Ministry of Health, with the WHO (World Health Organisation) collecting statistics and as a supervisor for health clinics for mothers and children. I was the head for WHO programme in Somalia before I fled to Kenya and worked in Kenya for nine months with the Red Cross. I was supervisor for supplementary feeding at refugee camps. I worked with a New Zealand nurse at the camp who wrote a letter to UNHCR telling them that I was an educated person and I should be given refugee quota to New Zealand with my children. With this

recommendation I had high hope to work as a nurse, continue my education and have a good standard of life in New Zealand.

I arrived at Mangere Camp and NZQA (New Zealand Qualifications Authority) assessed my qualifications as equivalent to New Zealand nursing qualification. With this I hoped to get a job as a nurse. I applied for many nursing positions, but for every position I was asked for New Zealand registration. I applied for Nursing Registration, but was asked to submit evidence that I trained as a nurse and worked as a nurse. As all my certificates and testimonials were lost when I fled my country I provided evidence from Red Cross but they would not accept that either.

So I enrolled for a nursing degree. I completed the first year and started my clinical. The clinical began at 7 am. As a sole parent with young children this was a problem. So I tried to negotiate for changes in clinical hours due to family circumstances. This was refused. In the end I failed my clinical because I was late two times during the year, all together, for less than ten minutes. My clinical supervisor suggested that I should stay with my children and when they grow up then I can start again. I was heart broken. This also affected my children's welfare. I stopped the course after one and a half years. I have never stayed home without going to work since I was 15 years old. So I started voluntary interpretation for the Somali community with a number of agencies. RMS and resettlement gave me part time job at clinic as Somali interpreter for 10hrs per week.

I would like to work as a nurse. One day I will be go back to my country or any African country and be able to work as a nurse. The whole community is isolated from the society. The group that you see today are the lucky ones. Most mothers stay at home. They have a lot of stress.

We have cultural issues because we dress different and we look different. In 1995 I was working in a rest home for three months. They said we will give you a job if you pass this trial. I passed the trial and after one week they called me. The supervisor told me there are three things you must stop. Because being a Muslim I pray 5 times a day. So when the other nurses are smoking I go to pray. They complained that I don't mix with the people and talk to them. She also asked me about the uniform. I explained that I could not wear short dress because of my religion but she insisted that that was the uniform. Even though I explained my position to her she changed her mind. I told her that I could not stop my daily prayers, I lost my job.

I went to the Human Rights Commission but they were Kiwi people. They denied the whole story and accused me of what I never did. They fired me but paid me for 9 months. I was heart broken so instead of applying for job and get heart broken I decided to work as a volunteer for the community.

There is a lot of discrimination even though they say they are not. For example one of the nurses told me that yesterday we were running away from war, today we are claiming cultural safety. But I always say that although I lost my country I did not lose my dignity.

Bhalla and Lapeyre argue that:

“employment provides social legitimacy and social status as well as access to income. Access to the labour market entitles individuals to awards and economic rights which are prerequisites for full citizenship. It brings with it human dignity which should alleviate the harmful effects of exclusion on human beings and increase the scope for social integration”

Bhalla and Lapeyre 1997, p419.

There is no doubt that discrimination in employment, at work and in the community has the effect of marginalising and excluding African refugees from participation in the social and economic life of the community. As Sen (1992) argues, discrimination excludes the individual or group from:

“social achievements such as taking part in the life of the community and being able to appear in public without shame” Sen 1992, p110.

Despite their adaptive skills, the experience of violence in their home countries and refugee camps is bound to re-surface in the face of violent discrimination experiences. Past traumatic experiences tend to predispose refugees to more violent reaction to verbal bullying and other forms of racism and discrimination than the average person. Racism and discrimination therefore have the potential not only to cast refugees on the fringes of society but to cast them away from society all together.

4.0 Community Development response to social exclusion of African refugees

The lack of community capacity within African refugee communities coming into New Zealand after a prolonged period in refugee camps often leaves the refugees with an inherent dependency on relief. The refugee camps are not a place to generate independence where the emphasis is on relief. On arrival in New Zealand the supporting non-government agencies strive to create programmes that enable the refugee to gain self-confidence and start on the process of becoming independent. However, the resource base of these agencies, such as the Refugee and Migrant Services (RMS) is very limited. The lack of basic language skills has the effect of excluding refugees from political participation and engagement in civil society and economic disenfranchisement. Rather than integrate in the host community refugees tend to gravitate towards areas where people from their region or country of origin live. In the majority of cases these are poor, low-income areas. In such situation the refugee community is deprived of basic community structures, cultural environment and social infrastructure that fosters independence and inter-dependence. There is therefore the urgent need to create capacity within the refugee communities for community development and social change.

A community development approach that is built on local expertise, local needs and principles of equity will serve to underpin a development process that is empowering and creates community capacity for sustainable development. Such programmes must imbibe the principles of participatory development. Refugee communities must be seen as part of the community development landscape rather than treating their needs in isolation. This means that community development has to be seen in the context of local people defining their needs, building upon local knowledge, skills and resources in defining the solutions to identified needs and issues. The community development process must incorporate the views, experiences and expertise of the refugees at all levels. It must aim at maximising the productive involvement of refugees in local community development to achieve a harmonious economic, social and cultural integration of the refugee population into the local community. This development process ensures the sustainable co-existence between the refugee population and its human, social, cultural and economic environment.

The role of refugees must also be articulated more in the context of their productive capacity rather than their negative definition as victims. By defining the refugee in the context of their productive capacity society makes the transition from labelling to accepting refugees in the same way that it accepts migrants. This provides the opportunity to create the capacity to participate more effectively in society.

Community capacity consists of the infrastructure which enables the individual, family or group within the community to carry out the full functions and responsibilities of citizenship at all levels of society (Chile 1999B). Creating community capacity is an empowering process, and consists of a series of activities aimed at giving individuals and groups the 'strength, confidence and vision to work for positive change in their lives individually and together with others' (Eade 1997, p4). For Black African refugees this consists of providing the basic infrastructure for language acquisition, employment creation and building self-esteem and reducing poverty and social isolation.

This can be achieved in a number of ways, including through the direct funding of employment and income generating activities to be undertaken by members of the communities themselves. This approach has many advantages. It makes the provision of services more accessible to the refugee because it is within their own community. The fear that accompanies the learning of a new language, for example, is minimised when the teacher and the learner can relate more intimately without the cultural barriers. Such programmes also provide employment opportunities within the community for members of the community. There is also the added advantage of the opportunity for bilingual and in some cases multilingual development. While many refugees require fluency in English language to enhance their participation in society, they are also fluent in other languages such as French, Portuguese as well as other African languages. At the same time there are those refugees that are fluent in English as well as these other languages, but who are currently unemployed. Some were successful teachers and professionals in their respective countries before becoming refugees. Providing the opportunity for them to work amongst their people is positive both in recognising their talents as well as helping to create capacity within the community to provide these services for themselves.

Establishing language programmes within the community also provides an opportunity for bilingual and in some cases multilingual development of younger members of the respective communities. There is also the opportunity for the wider New Zealand community to learn the language and culture of these communities. This creates better understanding of the culture and language of the minority ethnic groups as well as employment opportunities within the communities. Such programmes may form a basis for community based employment schemes.

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