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B5: Focus on settlement experiences

A top-down photograph showing several pairs of hands of different skin tones cupping a small green seedling with dark soil. The hands are positioned in a circle, with the seedling in the center. The background is softly blurred, showing parts of people's clothing, including a blue shirt and a red polka-dot shirt. The overall mood is one of collective care and nurturing.

Exploring the Relationship Between Volunteers and the Refugee Settlement Sector in Australia

By Anja Wendt

Volunteering and Refugee Settlement

Australia currently resettles around 18,000 officially recognised refugees per year. Australia offers them a new home and a range of services to assist them with settling and building a new life.

The influential Indicators of Integration from the UK Home Office point out that connection within own ethnic communities, with other communities and higher authorities is crucial for settlement.

Volunteers offer those connections AND support the sector in large numbers

Research Questions

What motivates volunteers to engage with service providers?

What motivates service providers to engage with volunteers?



Method

Semi-Structured Interviews

Two Groups: Volunteers and Settlement Service Providers (Settlement Organisations but also Community and Volunteer Organisations)

Volunteers: 21 Interviews

Service Providers: 15 Interviews



Motivation of Volunteers

Altruism & Helping

Career Enhancement

Learning

Socialising

Social Justice

Bridging Gaps

Giving back/Paying Forward

Guilt

Age and Migration Background Matter

Quotes

Career Enhancement:

“I have never even volunteered or even thought about volunteering until now. [...] I have no experience whatsoever within that sector. [...] I want to gain a position in that kind of thing I have to start volunteering, so at least just put in my resume and so I actually can apply for jobs in that sector.” (Bopha 2021)

Learning:

“I'm very interested in kind of cross-cultural experiences like for myself as well as the work.” (Mazza 2021)

Quotes

Paying Forward:

"[...] it's just kind of very aware of my reality where I was in India and I'm very aware of like how lucky I am to have come here. I feel like it's something I need to pay forward and do something." (Neha 2021)

Guilt:

"Working on this issue as an English economic migrant who hasn't ever really experienced any significant hardships that I haven't created myself. [...] So it helps to assuage some of my guilt that I definitely carry." (Molly 2021)

Connection as Underlying Theme

“I find often that I feel some sense of familiarity or even similarity to some of the students which is surprising. And that's sense is set up but it's a repeated thing. There are certain students. I think from Middle Eastern background who I feel some sense of connection.” (Shira 2021)

“I was mentoring him and helping him with his homework [...] as well as having a chat, building up that relationship and sort of getting to know him and his family a little bit better.” (Tyler 2020)

“Last year, I was conversational English for two girls [...]. Both of them got a job. I was over the moon. I told my husband.” (Susie 2021)



A background image showing several hands of different skin tones reaching towards the center and interlocking fingers, forming a circle. The image is semi-transparent and serves as a backdrop for the text.

Motivation of Service Providers

Volunteers as Free Resource

Volunteers as Community

- Opportunities for refugee communities to participate
- Opportunity to learn English and gain job skills
- Broader community connections & friendships
- Counteracting isolation & finding purpose
- Limitations of a caseworker
- Offering an entrance into the refugee settlement sector



Quotes

Broader Community Connection & Friendships:

“I think that sharing of the time and sharing of the spirit is the most remarkable and moving thing. For a newcomer, they are the stories they share. They don't share the stories of English or their health appointment or knowing how to access Centrelink or the bank. They will talk to you ‘Australia is now my home. I love it in Australia, I’ve made friends. This is what we did on the weekend.’ They’ll always tell you about that human interaction.” (Sabrina 2021)

Quotes

Limitations of a caseworker:

“one of the weaknesses of professionalised casework is that people who are not connected by blood connection or community language connection to refugees can be less likely to come into contact with newly arrived refugees if there is a heavy reliance on professionals services alone.

I think what we're trying to do is to try to create or recreate some of those links that were lost in the past because that actually opens up all sorts of happy coincidences and connections. It can actually help people to you know to find affordable housing, you know, through some sort of community network, get entry-level jobs, get introductions to people who may be able to provide advice and support.” (Philip 2021)

Summary

Motives like career, guilt and paying back play a role in volunteering. But largely volunteers continue volunteering because they build connections with the refugees, sometimes long-term relationships.

So, volunteers provide connection for refugees but connecting with refugees is also their motive to keep volunteering.

Service providers understand the important role played by volunteers in providing connection which is crucial for successful settlement. They support volunteers by creating opportunities and creating programs.



First Conclusions

With connecting being so fundamental to refugee integration and volunteers providing this crucial connection, is relying on volunteers sufficient for successful integration?

COVID showed how fragile a volunteer-reliant settlement service is, when services get disrupted, thus settlement providers should consider mixed models where volunteers are supported by dedicated case workers.



Thank you!



References

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