



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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A welcoming home for refugees: removing the stigma – increasing the support

Refugees across Canada are facing a structural housing crisis. Stagnant shelter allowances for the Government Assisted Refugees eligible to receive them, a federal retreat from social housing provision, and skyrocketing housing costs in numerous Canadian cities since the early 1990s, have all contributed to this. The Manitoba Interfaith Immigration Council (MIIC), the organization with whom we have partnered for our ongoing Manitoba Research Alliance funded-research into refugee housing outcomes, has been actively calling for innovative housing solutions for their clientele. This year, their sentiments were echoed by refugee-serving community-based organizations at the Canadian Council for Refugees (CCR) Spring Consultation 2015, held in Winnipeg May 21-23. As a result, refugee housing experiences are now part of an important national discussion about what it takes to build a home for refugees in supportive communities.

The consultation's theme, *Home, Dignity: Human Rights*, demonstrates the particular challenges refugees face when attempting to resettle in Canada. To borrow a term from the larger CCPA-MB initiative of which our research is a part, home is a matter "beyond bricks and mortar." For recently resettled refugees in Winnipeg and other Canadian cities, achieving a "home" necessitates not only dignified and affordable housing, but supportive community-based organizations, public sentiments of inclusiveness, social supports,

and de-stigmatization. Demonstrating such needs at the consultation's opening plenary was Muuxi Adam, a Community Development Coordinator, filmmaker, the founder of Humankind International, and former refugee from Somalia. He emphasized how refugee precarity is internalized and manifested in behavior, such as always smiling in order to combat public perceptions of refugees as unwelcome and dangerous others.

Refugees are not alone in facing stigmatization in Canadian communities. Speakers and panelists discussed common barriers facing refugees, Indigenous Peoples, and migrant workers as they establish or reclaim home in Canada.

Building solidarity with Indigenous peoples was a recurring theme throughout the consultation. The CCR advocates for the building of bridges through intercultural dialogue. Through community-based Indigenous organizations like Ka Ni Kanichihk, Indigenous peoples have taken a leadership role in building cultural bridges with newcomers in Canada. Gyepi-Garbrah, Walker and Garcea (2014) note that newcomers, like Indigenous Peoples, have been displaced by colonial structures. Moreover, as was noted at the consultation by Abdikheir Ahmed, a refugee from

there is an alternative.

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conflict in Somalia who resettled in Canada, refugees receive sparse, and often inaccurate, information about Canada's Indigenous Peoples prior to arrival. Providing refugees with pre- and post-arrival education from an Indigenous perspective will ensure that fair representation guides them through the settlement process. This means that the newcomer handbook ought to fairly and accurately represent the relationship that exists between Canada's first inhabitants and the Crown, as outlined in Section 35 of the Canadian Constitution Act, the history and contemporary relevance of the treaty signing process, and current calls for reconciliation after the forcible displacement of Indigenous Peoples through Canada's residential school system. In short, there is a strong need for Indigenous organizations to be front and centre in the welcoming of refugees in the latter's resettlement efforts.

Section 27 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms institutionalized Canada's multicultural nature and for many years Canada has cultivated a reputation for humanitarian conduct. To some extent this is justified. As Lori Wilkinson of the University of Manitoba demonstrated at the consultation, between 2009-2013, 122,486 refugees arrived in Canada. However, humanitarian sentiments and the recognition of cultural difference must be augmented by social supports in the communities in which refugees come to reside. In other words, refugee well-being is predicated not only on values pertaining to cultural recognition, but also on economic factors.

Refugees face impossible tradeoffs that all low-income people face in their quest for affordable and dignified housing. Our own engagement with MIIC demonstrates that refugees resettling in Winnipeg often deal with shortfalls in their monthly housing budget by using supports intended for other purposes, such as the Child Tax Benefit, running

down their own savings, should they have any, or moving into overcrowded conditions with other families. While organizations like MIIC have frequently performed the miracle of finding their refugee clients homes in Winnipeg's tight and expensive rental market, a solution to the structural housing crisis does not rest with market mechanisms alone.

An essential part of the solution is to be found in the Housing For All initiative (www.housing4all.ca), which calls for federal reinvestment in social housing so that all have access to affordable housing—adequate shelter that does not exceed 30 percent of household income. This initiative reports that one in four households in Canada lives in unaffordable housing, which at times forces people to choose between paying rent and feeding their families.

In short, for refugees to achieve a "home," increased support for housing, publicly supported community-based organizations, and progressive public sentiments of inclusiveness are necessary. Situating the refugee housing crisis within the broader movement to produce low-income housing solutions in Canada is a good start to these ends. The next step is making a collective effort to ensure that any discussion of Canada's "international" obligations to refugees involves putting our social resources to work in the communities in which refugees come to reside.

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Sources: Gyepi-Garbrah, J., Walker, R., & Garcea, J. 2014. "Indigeneity, Immigrant Newcomers and Interculturalism in Winnipeg, Canada." *Urban Studies* 51,9.

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