

Refugee Resettlement in the UK: Bhutanese refugees in Greater Manchester

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Refugee resettlement is one of three so-called durable solutions¹ promoted by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), and entails the organised migration of recognised refugees from their country of first asylum (in this case, Nepal) to a third country for permanent settlement (Wright *et al.* 2004: 6). In summer and autumn 2010, the first group of Bhutanese refugees arrived in the UK under the so-called Gateway Protection Programme (GPP). To date, 350-450 Bhutanese refugees have been resettled to the North West of England. The following paper is based on my current (on-going) PhD research with Bhutanese refugees in Greater Manchester UK, and draws on qualitative, ethnographic data obtained during participant observation with members of the Bhutanese refugee community in the UK.

The resettlement process in the UK

In 2004, the UK initiated the Gateway Protection Programme (GPP), which facilitates refugee resettlement to Great Britain. The GPP is funded by the British Home Office, and operated by the UK Border Agency (UKBA) in cooperation with various organisations, such as the UNHCR, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), Refugee Action (RAUK), and other governmental and voluntary organisations. Each financial year, the British government sets a quota, depending on international resettlement needs and available national resources. Initially, the UK limited resettlement places to 500 people, but it has since increased the number to 750 per year (RC 2004, Platts-Fowler *et al.* 2011: 4, Wright, 2004: 13-4, UNHCR 2001: 2-3). Similar to other resettlement nations, the UK conducts interviews, as well as security and health screenings, prior to offering individual places to refugees². Once the assessment is complete,

1 The other two are: (a) repatriation to the refugees' country of origin; and (b) local integration in the country of first asylum (Wright *et al.* 2004: 6).

2 In addition to being a 'recognized refugee' according to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol, the individual may not (a) be in a polygamous marriage; (b) have

and applications approved, the UK too offers Cultural Orientation and English Language Training (COELT) seminars run by the IOM in the Nepalese refugee camps. These provide refugees with background information on the UK and its systems of employment, finance, health and education (Wright 2004: 8 and 37, RAUK *et al.* 2008: 10, UNHCR 2001: 8). Moreover, local service providers and the general public in areas of resettlement in the UK are supposed to be informed about the arrival of refugees. Once all preparations are complete, IOM caseworkers escort applicants from Nepal to the UK with special travel documents (EU UFF) outside the regular UK Immigration Rules³. On arrival, resettled refugees receive Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), which allows them to stay in the UK indefinitely. The ILR status means that resettled refugees enjoy the same rights to live, work and study in the UK as any other citizen, including the right to claim benefits and welfare payments⁴. Moreover, the ILR allows individuals to apply for citizenship after five years of permanent residence in the UK (UNHCR 2001: 8-9, Wright *et al.* 2004: 15).

Once in the UK, refugees are welcomed by IOM and RAUK support workers, who transport new arrivals to their new accommodation (provided by local services, which can be either government-owned council housing or privately rented accommodation), and ensure that their primary basic needs (e.g. food, clothing, toiletries) are met. The first period of intensive support (see below) is followed by a second, forward-looking period of support, in order to address long-term needs. After approximately six to twelve months, organisations adopt an exit strategy, in which support is gradually withdrawn and support is outsourced to mainstream (public) services.

The UK adopts a Front-End (or Front) Loading (FEL) approach, which

committed political or non-political crimes, or (c) have a dangerous medical condition (UNHCR 2001: 8, Wright 2004: 14-5).

- 3 Refugees arriving in the UK under the GPP travel on a one-way European Union Uniform Format Form (EU UUF), which has been prepared and approved by local British diplomatic posts prior to resettlement (UNHCR 2001: 8-9), and which is a completely separate procedure from the standard application for asylum (or immigration) in the UK.
- 4 Most Bhutanese refugees in the UK are entitled to claim Job Seekers Allowance (JSA), which is a state benefit for people who are out of work (but able to work), and meet several conditions, such as demonstrating an active interest in looking for employment (also see below).

aims to provide support and resources only during the first stages of resettlement, 'in the expectation that less support [...] would be needed in later stages as (economic) self-sufficiency is attained' (Duke *et al.* 1999: 166). The underlying principle of FEL is that if enough initial support is provided, refugees avoid dependency and obtain self-sufficiency shortly after arrival, in order to successfully integrate⁵ into the mainstream society (Wright *et al.* 2004: 25). It is expected that after approximately twelve months, resettled refugees will have obtained sufficient language and socio-cultural skills in order to operate independently, seek employment or further education, and communicate with mainstream (public) services. This should ensure a smooth transition, and ultimately the full 'integration' of refugees into the host community.

Bhutanese refugees' experience of FEL

My research so far has revealed that Bhutanese refugees struggle to cope with the far-reaching changes and challenges posed by resettlement to the UK. The arrival to the UK is an important moment, as most Bhutanese refugees have never travelled by plane, not to mention visiting Europe. The rushed welcome was criticised by a long-established Bhutanese refugee, referring to the initial period of support as an 'assembly line system':

'These people arrive after a 15 hour flight; they are exhausted [...] and jet-lagged. But [the support workers] don't give them a break. [The refugees] know nothing when they arrive'. (female informant; fieldnotes April 2012)

RAUK offers a time-line of support in their Good Practice Guide on resettlement, and have an exacting and full timetable for the refugees'

5 The UK Home Office defines integration as (a) individuals obtaining employment, housing, education and health services similar to the host population; (b) individuals being 'socially connected with members' of their own and other communities, services and the state; and (c) individuals having satisfactory competence in the local language and culture, a sense of security, and 'confidently engage in that society in a manner consistent with shares notions of nationhood and citizenship' (Ager *et al.* 2004). The concept and definition of integration is widely debated in Social Sciences, and is referred to as 'integration' (with inverted commas) in this paper, in order to highlight the problematic nature of the term and related notions.

first week in the UK (RA *et al.* 2008). On the first day, the new arrivals are received and given a housing orientation and a health and safety brief: 'clients are shown how to use central heating, hot water and home security devices', and are informed about rubbish collection. The following day, they receive local orientation, being shown local shops and informed on how to buy groceries. On the third day after arrival, new arrivals receive a demonstration of public transport and are shown local health facilities, as well as signing tenancy agreements and other documents. On day four they visit the Job Centre Plus, and are provided with more useful information. One of my informants described this first week as 'completely crazy', and 'exhausting', and mentioned that he was hardly able to take in all the information, as he was jet-lagged and tired (male informant, fieldnotes October 2012). A Bhutanese refugee living in the UK for more than ten years shared this view and mentioned:

[The social workers] do everything quick. They tick all the boxes – "yes, we have showed and explained them all of this" – and then they go home and get paid. [The new arrivals] don't even know what a kettle is, so simply saying 'push this button' won't do – they [new arrivals] don't even know what a button is! [...] In the camps, they heat and cook with firewood – they have no idea how an electric stove works. Most are uneducated, and have never seen something like this before. Some people didn't eat for three days, because they did not know how a stove works! [...] But they are too shy to tell the [case worker], but call me or others in the [Bhutanese refugee] community, to ask for help. They are like children, but the [case workers] don't care, they just want to get it over with and go home' (female informant; fieldnotes April 2012).

The logic behind the support organisations' timetable is to assure quick self-sufficiency. But in most instances, the initial period of welcome and introduction overwhelms new arrivals, and they rely heavily on established refugees to visit them – notably after support workers have left – in order to repeat information in a more relaxed environment. The refugee community has to come together to visit new arrivals, and provide clothes, crockery, food and other basic essentials. Most established refugees comment negatively on the support provided in the first week,

and agree that the pace of welcome and introduction should be better adapted to the refugees' needs, and should consider their physical and emotional state on arrival.

However, it is also very important to highlight the difficulties NGOs are currently facing, especially in terms of funding. Even if support groups plan projects to improve services to refugees and asylum seekers in Greater Manchester, they are often hindered or cancelled due to funding difficulties. In the course of my current research, many support and NGO workers complained about the decrease of government funding:

'We had our budget cut by almost 80 per cent. How should we continue to provide services to these vulnerable people? We had to let [one support worker] go, but she is still coming in to volunteer, because we need the manpower. Honestly, if the financial situation does not improve, we might as well close down' (male support worker of refugee support network, fieldnotes June 2013).

'They cut our hours from 40 [hours per week] to only 15 [hours per week], but I still come in every day, and work, because people in need still come in en masse. We already had to cancel some courses [for refugees and asylum seekers] [...], and might have to close down [the community centre] for most of the week, to save on overhead costs. But then where will they [refugees and asylum seekers] go if they need help? [...] I feel bad when we have to turn them down' (female support worker of community support service, fieldnotes April 2013).

Government sources suggest that funding should be subsidised with public donations, but, as one support worker pointed out, the public seems weary of donating to NGOs working with refugees and asylum seekers (male support worker of refugee support network, fieldnotes March 2013). Charities, support and community groups are struggling to attract the funding needed to continue to provide and improve their services to refugees and asylum seekers. Therefore, vulnerable people are often left without adequate support, exacerbating problems such as unemployment, marginalisation and language difficulties, which directly affect the Bhutanese refugee community.

Unemployment in the UK context: 'I just want a job'.

One of the main measures of successful 'integration' in the second stage of GPP is employment. However, my fieldwork thus far has revealed that more than 90 per cent of Bhutanese refugees settling in Greater Manchester are unemployed. Young people are under especially severe pressure to enter the labour market, as they are expected to provide for their family. Some guidance literature argues that refugees often have 'unrealistic expectations about life in the UK' (RA *et al.* 2008: 15), and hopes are not met due to the 'extremely competitive labour market' in the UK (RA *et al.* 2008: 11). My informants are well aware of the current economic crisis in the UK (and in Europe), and lowered their expectations accordingly. When probed what area they would like to work in, most refugees mentioned that they would take 'any job':

It is important to view the Bhutanese refugees' employment situation in light of the current economic crisis, which has a major impact on their employment prospects. Since autumn 2008, the UK's unemployment increased from 5.5 to 8.5 per cent. Recent statistics reveal that in April 2013 the unemployment rate was 7.9 per cent, with a total of 2.56m people looking for employment. The rate is even higher for 16 to 24 year-olds: more than 21 per cent of young people – more than 1m – are out of work (ONS 2013a and 2013b). According to economists, the 'unemployment levels across Greater Manchester remain higher than the national average' (Begum 2013). Neither the UNHCR nor the UKBA could foresee the persistence of recession across the UK, and in this regard, the GPP-programme cannot be held responsible for the high rate of unemployment among Bhutanese refugees. Some refugees follow the British media keenly, and are aware of these issues:

'I hope [the labour market] will change soon. But I know it's very difficult. My family in America can have many jobs. Here we get nothing. I really want to [work], and I write many applications, but [employers] always reject me. So what can I do? I go to school, to improve my English, I volunteer, I hope I can go to university. So I can make something in my life'. (male informant, fieldnotes December 2012)

Despite great efforts, most job applications are unsuccessful, leading to frustration and anxiety within families and the community as a whole.

Pressure has been further increased by the recent benefit reforms of the British government⁶. Currently, UK residents⁷ (including refugees with ILR status) receive a minimum of about £56 per week in Job Seekers Allowance (JSA). In order to continue to receive these benefits, individuals have to attend the Jobcentre Plus once every two weeks (usually referred to as 'signing on'), in order to demonstrate to the case workers that s/he is actively looking for employment. That is, receivers of benefit payments have to apply for a certain number of jobs per week, and are not allowed to turn down any job, training or work programme offered to them. The exact conditions of an individual's JSA depends on their Jobseeker's Agreement, which job seekers receive from their individual case worker after their initial interview (HM Department of Work and Pensions, 2013: 4-6). If job seekers (a) miss a signing on session; (b) refuse to take part in work programmes and trainings by the Jobcentre Plus; and (c) do not apply for the minimum number of jobs per week, they will lose their benefits for one to three months. If individuals not comply with these rules, they may lose benefits all together, and are not allowed to re-apply for up to three years (HM Department of Work and Pensions 2013: 8-9).

Especially during the first months after arrival, Bhutanese refugees find it difficult to cope with the rules and regulations, as well as applying for suitable employment. The language gap (see below) aggravates the issue, as many refugees (especially those aged 50+) are not able to apply for jobs. There is a real possibility that some refugees may lose their Job Seekers Allowance altogether. Although community members support each other in times of hardship, and therefore reduce the likelihood of homelessness, for example, there is a serious threat that some may slip into poverty. Funding and support bodies are limited, and the rhetoric spun by the British tabloid media often portrays job seekers on benefits as 'scroungers' who do not want to work. This is far removed from the perspective of the refugees who regard JSA as necessary whilst gaining access

6 These issues are further complicated by the Welfare Reform Act 2012, which introduced the so-called 'bedroom tax', which has a significant impact on housing benefits (i.e. support with rent). Due to the limited scope of this paper, I am not able to discuss this in detail.

7 In order to be eligible for the UK's JSA, an individual must (a) be resident in Great Britain; (b) be between 18-64 (state pension age) years old; (c) not be in full-time education; (d) must be able and available for employment, and (e) demonstrate an active interest in looking for employment (HM Department of Work and Pensions 2013:4).

to the labour market. Most are not happy to receive benefits, and would rather have a job:

'I don't like benefits. It's not enough money. You can't do anything. And it's boring also. I sit at home, do nothing. I want to work and do something for my future and get some money. I want to be independent, I want to travel and visit my family [abroad]'. (male informant, fieldnotes December 2012)

One of the few employed young people in the refugee community remarked:

'Sometimes my job is not good, and I am not happy. But if I [quit the job] and go back to benefits, how should I live? I [earn] £800 [per month], but I would only get £250 pounds benefits [per month]. Why would I do that? It's so little money. I [would be] stupid to leave my job'. (male informant, fieldnotes January 2013)

However, two of the barriers limiting access to the labour market are (a) that even if refugees have job experience (from Nepal or Bhutan) or have qualifications from Bhutan, Nepal or India, they are not accepted in the UK, and (b) the severe language gap. The latter is directly linked to insufficient provision of English instruction prior to resettlement, and to limited access to language classes during the first stage of GPP. The lack of English proficiency has a major impact on the refugees' job prospects. As one of my informants' put it:

'The Job Centre is stupid. They stop paying job seekers allowance sometimes, and say we have to work. But so many people are made redundant. If English people and people who speak English well can't work, how should I get a job?' (male informant, fieldnotes December 2012)

The language gap and marginalisation

The lack of English language skills has an impact on both employment prospects and 'integration' with the local population. Research with other refugee groups in the UK demonstrates that the language gap is the main factor leading to unemployment, marginalisation, isolation and dependency (Platts-Fowler *et al.* 2001, Wright *et al.* 2004). Almost all

refugees criticised resettlement bodies that should have provided more language instruction while in the refugee camps and argued that more intensive language instruction is needed during the first year in the UK. For example:

‘When we arrived in 2010, we got some English classes, but the people that arrived after us they did not give them anything. They had a caseworker for six months, and then it was ‘goodbye’, and they are gone. They don’t give them English classes – only one hour a week. That’s not enough to learn. Some cannot even read the alphabet. But [the caseworkers] only give us translators and interpreters, and say that this must be enough. When the interpreters leave, they are all by themselves’. (male informant, fieldnotes February 2013)

Illiteracy and lack of proficiency in English creates an almost insurmountable barrier for Bhutanese refugees, especially when seeking employment:

‘I can speak English, but if people speak fast, I can’t keep up. It’s not the grammar, but I cannot speak freely [...]. [In the Job Centre training] they taught us how to talk in interviews and [how to] find work [...] but I still can’t get a job’. (male informant, fieldnotes November 2012)

The language gap also leads to isolation and marginalisation from the local population. Most refugees hardly have any contact with people outside of their community, which some of them directly link to the lack of English. Most feel shy speaking with people outside of their community (female informant, fieldnotes October 2012). Their low self-esteem (with regard to their language skills) leads to further marginalisation and a vicious circle. Refugees do not communicate with the local population due to their lack of language skill – but because they do not speak English with anyone outside of their community (and thus, only speak Nepali), they cannot improve their English. Some refugees acknowledge that they themselves have to work on improving their skills, and criticise some community members’ attitudes towards English classes:

‘[Manchester University] offered to teach us English [...], but after two months they didn’t pay [travel costs] anymore, and we have to

pay ourselves. So people say “we have no money, we can’t go”. But it’s only three or four pounds [for the travel ticket], and I say to [the other refugees] “but we are learning something – they [ESOL classes providers] try to help us!” How can we move on, if people don’t go [to ESOL classes]? It’s not so much money, and we can still go to learn. We have to learn, so we become better here’. (male informant, fieldnotes November 2012)

Older members of the community find it particularly difficult to acquire sufficient language skills, and rely heavily on children and young people, which puts further pressure on the young generation. One of the older refugees in the community remarked:

‘The kids are in a learning age. But my brain is old, and I cannot learn very well anymore. They [children] learn English very quickly, and make friends. But we [parents] have problems learning the language, and we make many mistakes’. (female informant, fieldnotes May 2013)

Furthermore, a high percentage of Bhutanese refugees are in fact illiterate: most refugees over the age of 50, as well as some younger community members, are not able to read the Latin (i.e. English) alphabet. Some never learnt Devanagari, the Nepali script, and are thus completely reliant on family and community members for dissemination of information both in English and Nepali.

Because ESOL classes include refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants from all corners of the world, individual levels of literacy are not considered. This makes it very difficult for students to follow language classes, and acquire sufficient language skills:

‘My parents go to ESOL classes for two years. But they cannot read the English alphabet. So they don’t understand what the teacher says or writes down. They have learnt nothing in classes’. (male informant, fieldnotes January 2013)

Some older community members face difficulties reading and using (Arabic) numerals, as they exclusively use the Nepali numeral system. This complicates the use of many household goods and gadgets, such as household appliances and phones:

'My mother cannot read English numbers. So she cannot use the phone. We cannot leave her alone, because if something happens, she cannot even call me'. (male informant, fieldnotes December 2012)

This means that older community members must be continuously supported, and families have to plan their lives around care for the elderly. The refugees' socio-cultural obligation to care for their elders puts pressure on the younger generation. Children and young people have to serve not only as sole income providers, but also as translators. Elderly community members rely on the youth to access health care and employment, and young refugees have to assist older refugees with the dissemination of information. In turn, some young people struggle to cope with the burden of providing for their families and the community as a whole. However, most young people regard this as their duty:

'This is family. I care for my family, because family is the most important thing in the world. Without family, you are nothing [...]'. (male informant, fieldnotes July 2013)

Family and community are important aspects of the Bhutanese refugees' lives, and continue to play a major role even for established members. Households almost always span three generations, and the elderly are treated with respect and care. Relationships between families and community members are continuously fostered, and established refugees do their best to support new arrivals. Community and family support replaces governmental support, and by establishing community charities, Bhutanese refugees are beginning to realize their own projects to improve the lives of community members. My research reveals a high level of agency amongst Bhutanese refugees in Greater Manchester, which is often ignored by refugee support groups.

Agency amongst Bhutanese refugees

As a final remark, it has to be highlighted that despite the many issues faced by the Bhutanese refugee community in the UK, they are not passive recipients of services. However, support workers sometimes perceive Bhutanese refugees as highly dependent on external support. My own research does not support this view, but highlights the exact opposite.

Most Bhutanese refugees display a high level of agency, and adapt quickly to their new environment. They prove to be exceptionally resourceful: for example, in order to lower costs for public transport, travel tickets are shared amongst families. Community support replaces governmental support, and established refugees seek to help new arrivals. Moreover, the large South Asian community in the UK (according to the UK Census 2011 (ONS 2011) more than 15 per cent of people living in the UK are South Asian or of South Asian-descent) allows Bhutanese refugees to access facilities (e.g. Hindu or Buddhist temples), and enables them to purchase familiar products (e.g. groceries, etc.).

Most young refugees are avid followers of British news, and have a good knowledge of Britain and British bureaucracy. Access to the internet and mobile devices allows them to maintain relationships with their family members in other resettlement countries. Most are happy to be in the UK (although some would have preferred to live in the USA) and all of them have high expectations and hopes for their future. Parents urge their children to seek higher education and most young people strive to go to university. This is especially relevant for female community members who regard education as a stepping stone towards empowerment.

'My husband sees pictures of Nepal on Facebook, and says 'oh, it's so nice, it's home, I want to go back to Nepal'. Then I say 'I am happy here [...]: here I can go to college and learn. In Nepal, when you are married [as a woman], you cannot go to school. You have to care for your family, for your in-laws. You are not allowed to go to college. You are not allowed to work. But here, I can go to college and do what I like'. (female informant, fieldnotes December 2012)

'My husband says, we should not have children now. We have to make our own future first [...]. I want to go to school, and have my own job. I want to earn my own money, and not depend [on my husband]. Here women are free [...], I am young, I want to enjoy it'. (female informant, fieldnotes August 2013)

But agency is not only relevant for women: all community members emphasise the freedom they enjoy here in the UK.

'The UK is a free country. Here I can be free: I can work, I can study, I can practice my own religion. I lived twenty years in refugee camps, and before we were oppressed by the Bhutanese government. But now we have freedom'. (male informant, fieldnotes August 2013)

Despite unemployment, marginalisation, and difficulties with language and English bureaucracy, most community members are very positive about their future. Some refugees are planning to establish their own businesses or become entrepreneurs. They look forward to receive British citizenship in order to be able to travel and visit their families and friends abroad. Most refugees are actively engaged in community development, and support each other on a daily basis. In conclusion, Bhutanese refugees display a high level of agency and resourcefulness, and encourage each other to improve their situation.

Concluding remarks

It would be unfair to regard the UK's GPP as a failed project. However, there are flaws and issues which need to be addressed in greater detail. It is disappointing that organisations involved in GPP do not follow-up with their clients to assess the successes and failures of their service provision. The findings of my research thus far suggest that FEL and GPP need to be extended and improved in order to guarantee a successful resettlement of refugees in the UK. However, as I have outlined, useful projects often fail due to lack of funding and resources. The current economic situation in the UK not only limits funding and the establishment of better services, but also leads to unemployment amongst Bhutanese refugees. Organisations and governmental institutions in the UK could not foresee these external issues, and FEL is not directly responsible for them. Nevertheless, marginalisation of Bhutanese refugees is linked to a lack of English language proficiency, which is a direct consequence of inadequate preparation prior to resettlement and insufficient language instruction on arrival and thereafter. This is particularly problematic for elderly community members, who are dependent on younger family members for support and care. This puts further pressures on young people, who already struggle to cope with education, employment and community support.

Nonetheless, Bhutanese refugees display a high level of agency and resourcefulness in their daily lives, which is often overlooked by case

and support workers. Therefore it is all the more important to engage in research, and to view Bhutanese refugee resettlement on a global scale. Workshops and meetings such as the SOAS project may provide valuable insights in order to assess refugee resettlement. More importantly, the active involvement of refugees in these research projects allows them to voice their views and experiences, rather than being treated them as passive recipients of services.

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