

# Before and after: New perspectives on resettled refugees' integration process

Not since the Second World War have so many people found themselves fleeing from their homelands as today. Many of them try to get to Europe, and many — as seen by the latest string of maritime catastrophes in the Mediterranean — die along the way. The Swedish government emphasizes resettlement as a good tool so that “...people in need of protection can come legally to Europe” (Joint statement on the ship-wreck in the Mediterranean from Minister of Foreign Affairs Margot Wallström and Minister for Justice and Migration Morgan Johansson 2015). Even at the EU level, resettlement has gained ground in recent years and efforts have been made to extend the number of EU countries that accept resettled refugees. This has

succeeded to a certain extent, but the number of resettlement places in Europe remains relatively low (compared to the US, Canada, and Australia) and is dominated by the Nordic countries of Sweden, Denmark and Finland, who account for 75% of EU's fixed resettlement places (see Krasniqi & Suter 2015). One concern of new resettlement countries is, among others, that the integration of this group will be slow. A previous publication by MIM “*Resettled and Included?*” (2009) also shows that the labour market integration among the resettled is initially slower than for other groups (former asylum-seekers and dependents of refugees), but after 15–20 years these differences have largely been erased.

**RESETTLEMENT** is one of the three durable solutions the UN's refugee organisation UNHCR has identified to protect refugees. Resettlement means that refugees are selected and moved from the state in which they have sought protection to a third state that has given them a permanent residence permit.

A **RESETTLED REFUGEE** (or quota refugee) is a person who has been part of Sweden's annual quota and been transferred to Sweden. Resettled refugees have not applied for asylum in Sweden, but rather already have residence permits and placements in municipalities when they arrive in Sweden. Sweden has in recent years received between 1,700 and 1,900 resettled refugees per year.



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The project “Before and After: New perspectives on Resettled Refugees’ Integration Process” provides new knowledge about the resettled group and how their integration may differ from other refugee groups. The project is co-funded by the European Refugee Fund and has, among other things, resulted in the anthology “Resettled and Connected?”. Integration is studied from a broad perspective, focusing not only on economic integration, but also on social and cultural aspects that have importance for a person's establishment in a new country. The project has also focused on the prevalence and importance of social networks among resettled groups. The study is based primarily on interviews with resettled refugees; however, interviews have also been conducted with municipality officials, migrant organizations and various experts. The study has a comparative element where half of the approximately 60 interviews were conducted with resettled Burmese (especially from the Karen group) and half with resettled Somalis. The interviews with the Burmese were performed both in Sweden and Thailand. The Somali interviews were conducted in Sweden. These two groups have been resettled in similar numbers between the period 2000 to 2012 and they were selected because of the assumption that their social networks would differ. Somalis have immigrated to Sweden prior to Sweden's resettlement of Somalis.

That was not the case with the Burmese; in principle, all Burmese refugees in Sweden have come through resettlement. More details on the two case studies and the comparison between them can be found in the aforementioned anthology. Some of the overall study results and their practical implications are presented below.

### **Results and policy implications**

The interviews with resettled Somalis and Burmese focused on social networks and how they have been built up during the time spent in refugee camps, as well as how they have been retained after they arrived in Sweden including, considering mobility among other things. The links between the time before resettlement and the possibility of mobility is highlighted by the project. The study has focused on the integration processes of resettled refugees but the results should not be seen as specific to this group; previous international integration research shows similar results regarding the importance of social networks for establishment in a new society. Three conclusions are presented below that have emerged in the study and that have direct relevance to the Swedish resettlement and integration processes. Policy implications are highlighted in the text box after each conclusion.

## CONCLUSION 1

Social networks function as bridge-builders and link different groups together. The importance of bridging networks for integration has been generally accepted. However, bonding networks, those that hold a group together, are seen as less useful for integration. This study shows that even the bonding social networks can have a positive impact on the integration process in that they:

- a. create security and reduce feelings of isolation and disorientation. International research shows that contact with people with the same language and/or history can lead to increased self-confidence and mental well-being. This in turn increases the ability to learn languages and to navigate in the new society.
- b. ease the situation for the “weaker” individuals in a group. People with less capital — in the form of language skills, contacts, information, and education — can benefit from the “stronger” network members’ capital in order to establish themselves in society.

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## CONCLUSION 2

Social networks that are based on a sense of belonging are crucial for the formation of official associations, including ethnic organisations. The social networks that exist before coming to Sweden or that develop when one has come to Sweden create opportunities for starting formal associations that can provide practical and emotional support as well as create

In practice this means that resettled refugees should have the opportunity to create and maintain informal social networks both before and after resettlement. It is important that:

- refugee camps are organized in a way that does not hinder the formation and maintenance of social networks. This means, among other things, that refugees even in camps should enjoy freedom of movement, access to education and work, and self-determination.
- the UNHCR continues to develop its work to keep families and other social networks intact during the resettlement process.
- resettled refugees are placed in the same municipality, or in neighbouring municipalities, with people they can feel connected to. Sense of belonging can come through a common history, nationality, ethnicity, language or religion.

links to other groups and the majority society. Social networks that are created and maintained by ethnic organisations fulfill a function in the integration process that public institutions cannot.

The role of ethnic organizations should be recognized to a greater extent. Their potential can be utilised by creating a dialogue between these organizations and other community institutions that work with integration.

### CONCLUSION 3

Several refugee groups, among them the Somalis and Burmese, have problems with, according to the Migration Agency's terminology, "prove their identity." In order to obtain a residence permit in Sweden, it is enough to make one's identity "probable." In order to obtain a residence permit in Sweden, it is enough to establish one's stated identity as "probable," e.g. regarding nationality or kinship. This, however, often does not suffice in contact with agencies and companies that require that one's identity is "proven." Producing identity documents that the Swedish authorities accept is important for the integration process in that it affects the possibilities for:

- a. family reunification, which plays a central role in the maintenance of social networks. Previous studies show that family reunification is extremely important for the individual's well-being and ability to take part in the new country's introductory programs, etc. If the Swedish authorities determine that one cannot "prove their identity", then one's opportunity to reunite with one's family is hampered. To solve this, the Migration Board introduced DNA tests to prove kinship. This only works, however, for parents and children. Consequently, childless couples cannot take part in this solution and cannot be reunited with each other if they cannot "prove their identity."
- b. citizenship, which facilitates travel and mobility. One of the requirements to obtain Swedish citizenship is being able to "prove

your identity." Both the Burmese and Somalis have difficulties meeting this requirement, which in practice means that the earliest they can obtain Swedish citizenship is after eight years instead of the four years for refugees with "proven identities." The Alien's passport that refugees can obtain allows travel; however, the results of this study indicate that Swedish citizenship creates more favourable conditions for mobility. Mobility in turn is essential to keep together transnational social networks.

- c. validation of education that can facilitate labour market entry. A large portion of the resettled Somalis and Burmese have a low level of formal education, which makes it difficult to enter the Swedish labour market. They are in need of interventions which allow them to utilise their informal experiences instead of focusing on their lack of official education. It is also important to support the individuals within the groups that have a higher formal education. In some cases it is not possible for them to validate their training because they do not have a "proven identity." This hampers not only their individual establishment in the labour market, but also their ability to help other "weaker members" in their social networks.

One might want to review the conditions imposed on identity documents. The requirements on "proven identity" have great importance for the integration process as they affect the possibilities to reunite with family, obtain citizenship, and validate education.