

“WE WANT TO CONTRIBUTE”

FORMER REFUGEES’ PERSPECTIVES AND ASPIRATIONS ON ECONOMIC INTEGRATION



**Report prepared for
Refugee Orientation Centre Trust, Hamilton
by**

**Associate Professor Huibert Peter de Vries - University of Canterbury
Associate Professor Nirosha Wellalage - University of South Australia
Dr Nadeera Ranabahu - University of Canterbury
Dr Ruth Helen Samujh - Capric Enterprises (NZ) Limited
Sandya Rajapakshe - Refugee Orientation Centre Trust**

ABSTRACT



The economic and subsequent societal benefits that former refugees offer a host country is poorly understood in New Zealand. These former refugees are noted to be a most vulnerable minority group within our society, yet they bring skills, experience, knowledge, and capacity to this country; that without suitable employment is potentially a wasted human resource.

We report on the employment/unemployment experiences and aspirations of 111 former refugees in New Zealand. This data was collected via nine focus groups and 23 semi-structured interviews. Our findings identified specific refugee personal factors, employer/workplace factors, and the New Zealand context as influencing the employment and unemployment outcomes of former refugees. These factors are discussed in detail in this report. Further, we draw conclusions and offer recommendations on how refugee support organisations can enhance outcomes for former refugees seeking employment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The integration of former refugees into a host country, such as New Zealand (NZ), is a multifaceted two-way process that depends on former refugees' ability to adapt to the host country and the corresponding readiness of the host community (New Zealand Immigration, 2023; UNHCR, 2014). In particular, economic integration requires matching former refugees' skills and capabilities with market opportunities in host communities (Garnham, 2006). Although former refugees are noted to be a 'most vulnerable' minority group (Henkelmann et al., 2020) within our society, they bring skills, experience, knowledge, and capacity to their host communities. Hence, if they are not in suitable employment, they are potentially a wasted human resource (Jonker, 2015).



In NZ, the potential that former refugees offer at an economic level and subsequent societal benefit is not clearly understood and, hence, former refugees are an underutilised source of human capital. Our findings and results can inform and benefit former refugee communities, former refugee support organisations, and the wider society. By examining former refugees' needs, aspirations, barriers, and challenges related to employment and unemployment, this research aims to provide three outcomes. First, scholarly evidence for support organisations for better addressing the needs of the former refugee communities; second, improving societies understanding of the challenges faced by former refugees; and third providing an evidence base for designing, or redesigning, targeted initiatives to improve former refugees' employment rates in NZ.



The main objectives of our research were to explore the underlying reasons, beliefs, attitudes, aspirations, barriers or challenges related to working (or decision to not work), and the work aspirations among former refugee adults and youth. We focussed on gathering data on how opportunities could be enhanced for former refugees to obtain economic integration through employment or self-employment.

Our literature review identified that there are very limited discussions on such matters as how former refugees are coping, what they want, what their aspirations are, what have they tried in respect of employment or self-employment, what they fear, what they have learned, what assistance they sought, and whether it was helpful. Little empirical research has been undertaken in NZ on the experiences and aspirations of NZ former refugees. One exception is the PhD thesis of Tuwe (2018), that records the stories of the Congolese migrants and former refugees. Although his work includes migrants and is not focussed solely on former refugees, he identifies issues of racism and discrimination, English language proficiency, and lack of recognition of prior qualifications. However, there is a lack of NZ-specific research available for policymakers and support organisations on economic integration for former refugees.

The welfare benefit rates and unemployment rates in NZ amongst former refugees are one of the highest rates among all vulnerable groups. Statistics gathered by NZ Immigration show that the average employment rate of former refugees, who had been in NZ for five or more years, for 2012 to 2017 was just above 40% - well below the national average of over 65% (Trading Economic, 2020). One potential challenge in integrating NZ former refugees seems to be their diverse demographic, economic, and social needs; they comprise a diverse range of people, with different ages, races, religions, and cultures.

2.BACKGROUND

FORMER REFUGEES IN NEW ZEALAND

Refugees[1] have been arriving in NZ for almost 150 years. The first documented group was Danes fleeing the suppression of their language and culture under German occupation in the 1870s[2]. Maintenance of the open-door approach has not been continuous. Prejudices in a growing population of a relatively non-diversified society saw neither Jewish people fleeing the Nazi regime or Chinese refugees in the 1950s welcomed (Beaglehole, 2005). Nevertheless, NZ signed United Nations Convention relating to former refugees in 1951 and 1967[3] (UNHCR, 2001). In 1959 NZ became one of the first countries to accept 'handicapped' former refugees.

In 1987, the government agreed to accept an annual quota of 800 former refugees, broadening the diversity of NZ's population. NZ raised the current annual former refugee quota from 1,000 to 1,500 in July 2020 ("New Zealand Refugee Resettlement Strategy," 2019). According to New Zealand Immigration (2023), the country continues to undertake 1,500 refugees a year under the Refugee Quota Programme from 2022/23 to 2024/25. In 2022, NZ agreed with Australia to resettle 150 refugees per year for three years from those subject to Australia's offshore transfer arrangements. These numbers are counted as part of the annual 1,500 quota (UNHCR, 2023).

[1] This study includes "the refugee status subgroup. Following, the [1951 Refugee Convention](#). The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees defines refugee migrants as: *A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war or violence. A refugee has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. Most likely, they cannot return home or are afraid to do so. War and ethnic, tribal and religious violence are leading causes of refugees fleeing their countries.* (<https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/>)

[2] A history of refugees in New Zealand and videos of individual's stories can be viewed from the following link: <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/2517761/New-Zealand-refugee-timeline>

[3] Further details of the 1951 convention relating to the status of refugees and its 1967 protocol can find in the following link: <https://www.unhcr.org/media/convention-and-protocol-relating-status-refugees>

Refugees considered for resettlement under New Zealand's Refugee Quota Programme must be recognised as 'mandated refugees' and are referred by UNHCR according to prescribed resettlement guidelines. They become Permanent Residents on arrival in NZ. In the community, these refugees are provided settlement support for up to 12 months including a community orientation programme that complements the reception programme and support to link to services they require to support their settlement in communities.

In 2012, the NZ government introduced its "Refugee Resettlement Strategy" which considers how government provides improved refugee resettlement outcomes. This includes how refugees achieve self-sufficiency, social integration, and independence quickly. This strategy, first implemented on 1st July 2013, focuses on employment-related services to align with the wider government agenda to move people off welfare support and into employment. In other words, the main focus of this strategy is to promote the social and economic integration of refugees which helps them to live independently and have a strong sense of belonging to NZ and their community. The overall success of the social and economic integration of refugees is promoted via the following five integration activities. The "Refugee Resettlement Strategy" promotes:

- (i) *Self-sufficiency* - all, working-age refugees or their family members are in paid work.
- (ii) *Participation* - promotes refugees' participation in New Zealand life and creates a strong perception of belonging to New Zealand.
- (iii) *Health and well-being* - promotes healthy, safe, and independent lives.
- (iv) *Education* - promotes language skills (English language) which enable them to participate in daily life and higher education achievement, and
- (v) *Housing* - creates a safe, secure, healthy, and affordable home for refugees and their family members with government housing assistance.

As part of the government support, all refugees in NZ receive the government-funded "Computers in Homes - Refugee Programme" to enhance their ICT skills (Díaz Andrade & Doolin, 2019). The target group is recently arrived refugee families with school-aged children and the programme is a 30-hour computer course, which covers basic computer skills, such as logging into a computer, web browsing, creating, and accessing email accounts, and using the basic office package. After completing the course, participants will receive a refurbished desktop, software, free broadband internet connection, and technical support for one year.

3.LITERATURE



There is a considerable and growing body of knowledge in the literature about former refugees and their integration into their new host country but without a special emphasis on work-related experiences or economic integration. Further, there is little synthesis of the literature as authors and researchers focus on the needs of their particular group of former refugees (mainly by country of origin) and the immediate needs of Governments to make policies and provide support to the new arrivals. The literature points out that most former refugees want to work (Strang, Baillot, & Mignard, 2018) but may not be able to afford to train or retrain to attain the qualifications to meet their aspirations. Additionally, the need to work is often derived from the need to achieve self-esteem, integration, involvement, contribution, status, and self-worth (Cheung & Phillimore, 2014; Correa-Velez, Gifford, & Barnett, 2010; Ruiz & Vargas-Silva, 2017).

The complexity of the way regulations, rules, and norms exist and are implemented in the host country (Al-Salem, 2020; Westray, 2020) adds to the hurdles that have to be overcome. Unfortunately, these barriers can cause a deterioration in mental health (Higgins, 2020).

Perceptions of the public and employers often appear to be based on ignorance of the potential contributions that can be made by former refugees (Jonker, 2015). Further, there are socio-cultural barriers, health and well-being concerns for former refugees to prevent them engaging in economic activities (Correa-Velez et al., 2020). Some studies point out that former refugees are highly occupied in unpaid or voluntary work (MBIE, 2021).

In general, the literature about the unemployment of former refugees strongly suggests that there is a need to work, employment or self-employment, for their well-being. It also identifies barriers to obtaining employment (or self-employment) such as network isolation, language proficiency, culture, skills, skills recognition, and perceptions of the public and employers. Further, likely economic barriers include such as welfare benefit abatement, childcare costs, travel costs, and difficulties in upskilling or retraining. An examination of these topics from the perspective of the unemployed former refugees, located in NZ, is absent in the literature.

Our work is informed by overseas experiences that need to be used with caution because they may not fully reflect the NZ environment. For example, Hebbani (2019) studies former refugees in Australia (from Ethiopia, Myanmar, and Congo) to find English language proficiency, lack of knowledge of how to secure the desired work, and personal and family members' ill health interfered with their ability to achieve their work aspirations. Our study reports on the needs and aspirations of former refugees, from Columbia, Congo, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, who resided in Hamilton (Waikato). The Waikato region (with 15.3%) is second only to Wellington in the percentage of quota refugees settled in NZ (New Zealand Immigration, 2020)

The goals of our research are in harmony with the purpose of the NZ Refugee Resettlement Strategy. The strategy is to facilitate the integration of former refugees so they can be

... participating fully and integrated socially and economically as soon as possible so that they are living independently, undertaking the same responsibilities and exercising the same rights as other New Zealanders and have a strong sense of belonging to their own community and to NZ (Immigration New Zealand, 2018, p. 1).

In particular, our research aligns with Priority 2 of Immigration NZ: *Connecting refugees to employment*, particularly as

Employment is critical to successful settlement. It contributes to self-sufficiency and independence, and provides networks and opportunities for greater participation and contribution to the community (Immigration New Zealand, 2018, p. 6).

4.METHOD

A total 111 former refugees participated in this research from four ethnic groups: 60 from Afghanistan and Pakistan, 35 from the Congo, and 16 from Colombia. Our research was guided by the Australian Council for International Development (2017) “Principles and Guidelines for ethical research and evaluation in development”. Further, ethical approval for this research was gained from the University of Waikato (Ethics application No 6166-2019).

We gathered primary data using 23 semi-structured individual interviews and nine focus group interviews. The opportunity match (or mismatch), work experience is also different among former refugee men vs women and former refugee youth vs adults (Collins 2017). Accordingly, we formed three subsets of the respondents for each of the ethnic groups, viz., Youth (18 to 24 according to the UN definition), women, and men. Interpreters were made available as needed to assist with translations at each interview (focus and individual).



FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were chosen because of the support that focus group members can provide each other. The focus group interviews, which were 30-60 minutes in duration, allowed participants to discuss with each other issues and experiences relating to post-resettlement employment and unemployment. This allowed social issues related to participation in the workforce to surface and gave insights into group patterns or behaviour relating to employment and unemployment issues. It also created an opportunity for observation as there were often means of expressing feelings such as awkwardness, shyness, and discomfort that are very relevant to such research. Experienced researchers and interpreters lead each group meeting and were aware that former refugees are members of minority groups, many have been traumatized, and consequently are vulnerable.

Table 1: Numbers of Participants in Focus Group Interviews

Focus Group Interviews	Colombian	Congolese	Afghanistan and Pakistan
Women	0	8	25 (2 groups)
Men	0	8	20 (2 groups)
Youth (18-25)	6	9	12
Total Number	6	25	57

We undertook nine focus groups of employed and unemployed (non-working or inactive) former refugees. Three groups of women, men, and youth (18-24 years of age). Recruitment in ethnic focus groups was achieved via Driver training courses for adults and Holiday Camps for the youth. We experienced low participation from Colombian former refugees compared to other ethnic groups.

Following the focus groups, individual interviews were conducted with 23 participants, who had not been included in the focus groups. In this sequence, issues of interest that arose out of the focus group discussions were explored further with the individual interview respondents.

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

The selection of participants for the individual interviews was made on a theoretical basis to include as many diverse views as possible (Dick, 1990). The 23 individual in-depth qualitative interviews of between 30-60 minutes in duration.

Table 2: Number of Individual Interviews

Individual Interviews	Colombian	Congolese	Afghanistan and Pakistan
Women	8	6	0
Men	2	4	1 Afghanistan 2 Pakistan
Total Number	10	10	3

Our experienced researchers sought a deeper understanding from the individual participants of challenges and aspirations, in a focused one-on-one environment. Further, it allowed for a more open discussion regarding issues that might be sensitive.

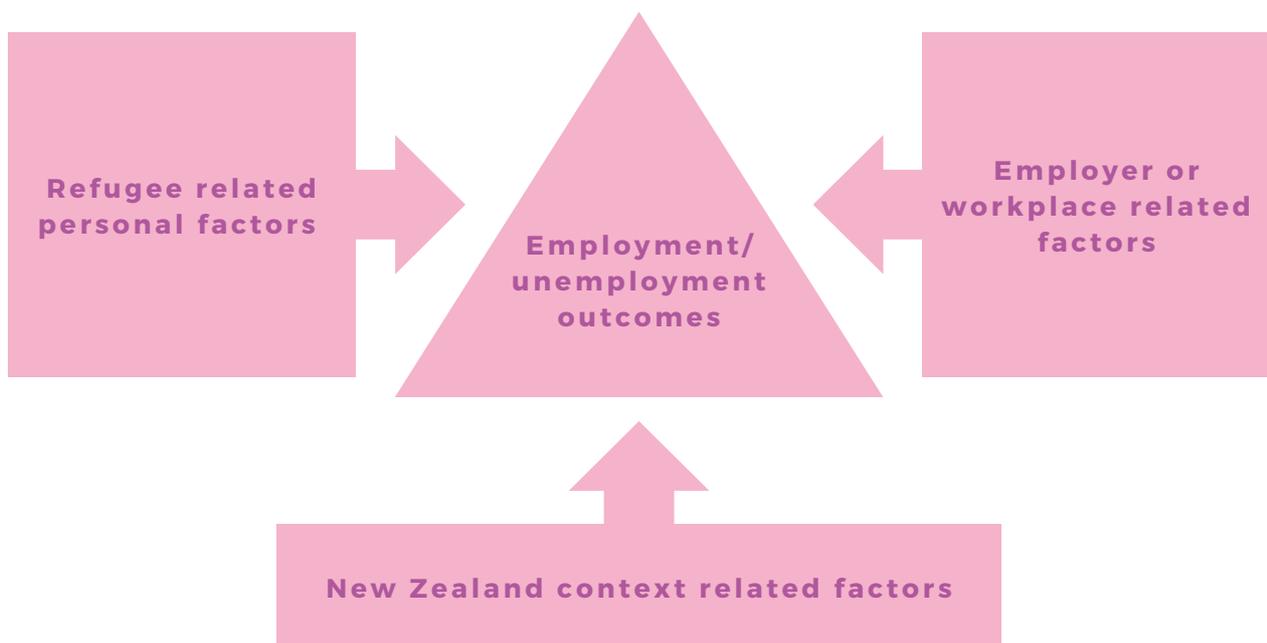
The discussions from the focus groups and individual in-depth interviews were transcribed, and the resultant scripts were processed at the University of Canterbury using the NVivo software, for coding and analysis.

The planning and reality of this research relating to data gathering were majorly affected by the Covid related lockdowns, sickness, and fears of assembling in groups that might spread the virus. The process of recruiting for the focus groups started and then the pandemic struck. Telephone interviewing for the individual interviews was abandoned after two interviews as impractical, as barriers such as the lack of face-to-face contact created hesitancy and suspicion about our intentions. The face-to-face individual interviews also enabled us to use interpreters and avoid using technology that was often unavailable to the former refugees at their home locations.

5.RESULTS

In this section, we present the key findings drawn from our interview and focus group data. We found that employment/unemployment outcomes are complex as they result from refugee-related personal factors, employer or workplace-related practices, and NZ contextual factors (Figure 1). The NZ context-related factors include social, cultural, and policy-level aspects. These complex interactions affect the entry and sustenance of any form of employment or the opportunity to enter their preferred forms of employment.

Figure 1: Factors that shape employment/unemployment among former refugees



Below we discuss three personal factors that appeared to influence the former refugees' perspectives about employment.

5.1. REFUGEE-RELATED PERSONAL FACTORS



5.1.1. MOTIVATION FOR WORK

Our participants spoke of three key motivation types that drive their desire to be employed and to continue to be employed. These included *personal growth, finances, and quality of life*.

The personal growth motivators were the most prominent. Both the interview and focus group participants indicated that work helps to build confidence and self-improvement. They explained their motivations for work using phrases such as:

I would like to work and plan for my future (Interviewee 12).

I can practice my English (Interviewee 7).

It makes me feel good about myself, I'm able to learn more (Interviewee 21).

We should [be] active here (Focus group 1).

My wife and my family, we have goals to achieve (Interviewee 11).

Active employment also gave former refugees structure in their lives, and a sense of purpose and belonging:

I get to interact with people. I get to mentally grow and I have a structure in my life, it gives me structure so I like that. I enjoy helping people, and being around people, I like that. I like my own personal development, that I get to learn new things every day, new people, so that's very intriguing for me and I love that (Interviewee 22).

Financial imperatives further shaped former refugees' work motivations. Former refugees gave reasons such as financial independence (Interviewees 9, 13, and 14) and building their financial base (Focus group 5). Interviewee 19 stated that she needed to send money back to her home country to support her family. This cultural element of looking after the family was also a financial imperative in providing for family members in NZ. This was especially prominent in comments made by youth participants:

I think still culture comes in, because when I work I give my money to my mom. Yeah, this is how our culture is. And I'm not complaining about it because I do with my own consent. And no one's forcing me. I could literally turn and say, I don't want to give you my money. But because my mom has taken care of me since I was a kid, right, And now that I'm 19 years old, I have my own job. I give my money, at least half of it to my mom. Just so she feels like you know, I'm helping her out. Even though she's on benefit, but still I'm trying to help her out (Focus group youth participant).

The third motivator that drives former refugees' employment behaviour is the desire for a better quality of life. They spoke about the unemployment (social welfare) benefit:

*Happy to get out of the benefit (Interviewee 4).
Benefits is just survival (Focus group 5, Interviewees 15 and 16).
Benefit is good just for eat. But nothing more (Interviewee 11).*

They have dreams to achieve. Interviewee 3 articulated the sentiment:

I do like to work you know, I like to earn my own money. I don't like to be dependent on the government, that money is not enough for living. [...] I like to work to get my own money, because when you work you get enough for your family and you can buy something, whereas what the government give us is not enough (Interviewee 3).

■ 5.1.2. SKILLS, NETWORK, EXPERIENCE, AND KNOWLEDGE

All interview and focus group participants spoke about how low English proficiency affected their entry into any form of employment. They believed that an inability to understand English, at level three proficiency, negatively affected their job prospects:

The barrier is the language,...improve the language to find work (Focus group 1).

For others, their level of language proficiency affected their ability to attain their desired job:

In NZ, there are a lot of jobs. I think getting a job in NZ is not a problem, because there are many jobs in NZ. I think the problem is [...] my career is journalists, journalism, and it's very difficult to get a job in journalist, because the language (Interviewee 11).

When I try to apply to many places as a medical, they give me the same answer. "We couldn't pay you because your knowledge; you need our level seven in English". That is really hard to do. (Interviewee 13).

Many participants also did not have driving skills or did not own a car. Some participants stated that the available driving instruction was too expensive:

[...] but studying to drive is somehow expensive, especially for people who are on benefits who are not working. They can charge you like \$20 something up to \$50 per hour (Interviewee 12).

Beyond the challenges with the English language and obtaining driving skills, participants spoke about the lack of connections (Interviewees 14 and 17), general knowledge about the NZ workplace and employment practices, such as preparing a CV (Interviewees 3, 14, and 15):

By myself I started going, [...] then I knock, "I'm looking for a job." They'd say, "Oh, you need to bring your CV." It will be difficult for some people, they don't know how to make a CV (Interviewee 15).

Former refugees suffered from a lack of NZ work experience, especially at the initial stages of seeking employment (Focus groups 5, 7, and 8).

Sometimes you go and search for a job and they ask you, "Have you been working in New Zealand?" If you say, "No, I don't have any New Zealand work experience," then they won't give you a job because you don't have any New Zealand experience (Focus group 5).

Some former refugees had home country skills and experiences or they had worked in country-specific sectors that were generally not considered to be valuable by NZ employers.

5.1.3. AGE, PERSONAL CIRCUMSTANCES, AND BELIEFS

These factors tended to be sub-group specific among the former refugees. For example, the youth explained that resettling at a young age was beneficial in gaining future meaningful employment:

Another thing: when you arrive to New Zealand and you are older, you don't have that time or opportunities to start from somewhere, like studying. If you have a good education or a good qualification, it will help you to get enough salary (Focus group 7).

Women former refugees permanently or temporarily halted work due to life cycle events such as marriage and child raising (Interviewees 3, 19, and 22). Additionally, circumstances such as single parenting (Focus group 6) or poor mental health (Interviewees 13 and 21) restricted job aspirations.

Our data was collected during the COVID-19 Pandemic, and therefore vaccination status and vaccine hesitancy were factors that affected some former refugees' employment prospects:

*I'm not yet ready to take the vaccine (Interviewee 6).
I don't have a job now because I'm not vaccinated (Interviewee 15).*



5.2.WORKPLACE AND EMPLOYER

We identified five types of workplace or employer-related factors that impacted the employment outcomes of former refugees (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Workplace and employer related factors



5.2.1. RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION PRACTICES

Participants told us that their qualifications were not recognised within NZ workplaces and that there was an expectation of NZ work experience and qualifications in any employment for which they applied (Interviewees 2, 9, 13, 17, and 21).

When I moved to New Zealand, I expected to be in my role as a paramedic or nurse. But well, I couldn't because the English was a big barrier. Man, it is like, I feel that all the years that I went to the University at Columbia, I put that aside. Now I'm six years working in another sector (Interviewee 13).

Some former refugees felt that they were not even considered for positions in NZ organisations if they did not have host country work experiences (Interviewees 4, 10, and 13):

Like experience...you are new in the country. When you come you are new, but when you go apply for a job, they will ask you to give any experience, "What experience do you have? With your CV, show us what you can do, or here in New Zealand like a referral...", you can say "oh I already did this, I can do this" but you're still new in the country, and you don't have that experience (Interviewee 10).

This lack of NZ experience or qualifications has led to the underutilisation of their skills:

When I was back home, I did pharmacy work. I have a degree in pharmacy, but when I came here, it was very hard. I think one of the big problems for most refugees is that they have skills, but when they came here, in some areas they can't use their skills (Interviewee 9).

Some participants who were selected for jobs felt that they did not receive a proper induction and were thrown into 'the deep end' (Focus groups 8 and 9).

5.2.2. WORKPLACE CULTURE

Participants spoke of the workplace culture in terms of experiences such as stereotyping, bias, and racism. They believed that these behaviours affected their entry into the workforce and the ultimate maintenance of a job. They felt that a level of racism, bias, and stereotyping that is present in NZ society was closely linked with the recruitment practices:

Getting a job here in New Zealand is not easy, because there are some places, like, they show they're loving people but there is inside racism. They see the colour and they see the language barriers - it's not easy (Interviewee 10).

About work culture, the interviewees discussed experiences with bullying (Interviewee 4), racism (Focus group 9, Interviewees 3, 9, 15, and 22), discrimination (Focus group 9, Interviewee 17), biases, and stereotyping (Interviewees 10 and 14).

... there are some people, not all of them, who are very racist. Not nice people (Interviewee 3).



Dress and religion were a concern for some. These factors affected well-being when working:

Even when I went for my prayers during my break time, they would tell me “Oh, you’re always going to be praying like this?” One of my questions to them was “If you’re able to go downstairs and have your smoke, and your other colleagues look after your patients, what is the problem with me praying during my own break time?” [...] Some of the challenges I face are the religious challenges. The culture, ... Sometimes I think racist comments or jokes, are quite normalized, and I think people don’t consider how much it actually hurts a person or how much it affects a person (Interviewee 22).

Within Focus groups 7 and 8, a lack of understanding of the NZ work culture further exacerbated these issues.

Number two is culture shock. Because the way we work is not the way New Zealand works. Like, let me say here in New Zealand, we have different shifts; we have morning shift, afternoon shift and evening shift. Back home, we have only a day shift, we don't have evening shift. So, this is another challenge (Interviewee 17).

■ 5.2.3. CO-WORKERS AND SUPERVISORS

Participants intimated that their relationships with their co-workers and supervisors shaped their work experience. Focus group 9 findings show that some had built good relationships with their co-workers and that led them to feel welcome. However, concerning the contribution of work managers or supervisors in their workplace, the opinions were divided. Some participants (Focus group 9, Interviewees 2 and 21) stated that their supervisors/managers were very kind and supportive. One recalled how an employer wanted to provide opportunities for former refugees to work:

I remember my interview; my manager explained to me they couldn't give me credit for my knowledge. She would like to give me the opportunity to start a new job in New Zealand (Interviewee 13).

Others experienced inflexible or unwelcoming supervisors. In one case the manager stated:

It is very hard to work with you because you don't understand me completely (Interviewee 2).

Another former refugee left his employment because the manager did not trust him:

One day I rang sick, I was sick, and this manager didn't believe that I am sick, so then she was pushing me to go to work. I said "How can I go to work when I'm not feeling good?" She said, "Ring before 9am if you are unwell." So I rang before 9, [...] she was trying to push me to go to work. And from that day I never wanted to do that job. I left because I was unhappy how she treated people (Interviewee 17).

■ 5.2.4. TASK/WORK FEATURES

Participants spoke of the hard or physical work in the sectors/industries in which they could find employment. Most former refugees referred to cleaning and farming work as tiring. They explained:

... worked for like one week straight. It was hardcore (Focus group 4).

It's too much for me. I don't feel well in this job only I do because I need the money. (Interviewee 2).

Fruit picking means having a sore back (Focus group 8).

It is physical work (Interviewee 12).

For me, sometimes it's very tiring work. I'm very tired. I spend a long time standing up (Interviewee 18).

There were comments about jobs not matching their skills (Focus group 7), COVID-19 and other sustainability concerns changing work practices (Interviewee 21) and not having optimal shift times (Focus group 9):

I don't like is the shift time. The night shifts, sorry, because I have to work all the night (Interviewee 9).

5.2.5. CUSTOMERS

Rude behaviours of customers shaped work interactions and satisfaction of former refugees. Both rude and kind customers were experienced:

Sometimes people are kind of rude but like when you see the elderly when they are nice, sometime they'll be like so nice that you are grateful to how they talk quietly (Focus group 9).

I spent four years in healthcare. I met a client who refused to let me to do his personal care because I'm a black man. And then he tells me, "Sorry, man, I'm fine." This was discrimination. (Interviewee 17).

Not all participants experienced this type of rejection but it displays an element of non-acceptance by customers with whom the former refugees had to serve as part of their work.



5.3. THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT



The former refugees in our sample did not elaborate on many NZ context-related issues. This could be partly because they do not have a wider contextual or policy-level understanding except for what they encountered in resettlement. The main area of comment related to the welfare benefits they received. Some expressed ‘free money’ (Focus group 11, Interviewees 11 and 14) as a disincentive to seeking employment. Some participants spoke of facing the dilemma of choosing between full-time work and welfare support.

If you work full-time and receive \$1,000 per week, and you lose \$200-250 to tax payments, then you have to care for your family only on what you earn (without the welfare safety net). Why then would someone choose to work full-time when they could choose not to work and receive welfare payments instead? (Interviewee 9).

Interviewee 9 further spoke of the frustration of paying for fuel or transport to get to and from work. All of this reduced the value of employment in comparison to welfare benefits. Another interviewee, who is currently employed, provided an insight into the expectations of the former refugees and how some were tempted to offer informal services and products:

And to work in an environment where you don't speak the same language, I can understand why [people] wouldn't want to do that. It's like, well, it's difficult. [...] When people come in, they assume they're coming in to live a comfortable life not to live a difficult life and for them, the language makes it difficult. So that's why they probably don't seek employment. Whereas you know, the government gives them some money. They're like, "Oh, well, give me benefit money. Then I can find a way to make adequate money". Put it this way, you work 40 hours a week on minimum wage, you make about \$600. You get on Work and Income about \$350. And then if you do some quiet jobs, the 'under the table' jobs, you can get up to \$300 in a day (Interviewee 14).

Circumstances may have fostered a tendency for informal and even illegal work behaviours. For many, to gain employment means they will have to forego their welfare benefits. To address this. One participant expressed the need for a difficult and timely discussion with the government and former refugee communities:

One big disadvantage is that when you become a full-time, when you're working full time job, is you're not eligible for many of the benefits such as social housing. This is a biggest area needed to be discussed with the government. Why the people are not working? I mean, you can't motivate them, because they have a very clear answer for that one: "If I start work, we lose my benefit, all benefits" (Interviewee 1).

Former refugees mentioned two other context-related factors that shaped work. These were industry-related factors of having too few vacancies and limited industry opportunities (such as creative industries), and being located in regional areas with limited opportunities for advancement (Focus group 4, Interviewees 1 and 22). COVID-19 rules and changes were also mentioned by two participants (Interviewees 12 and 21) as impediments to their work-related aspirations.

Wider policy or government-level changes to enhance employment outcomes for former refugees focussed on such issues as housing (Interviewee 12) and child care (Focus group 2). The untapped human capital of former refugees is a loss for the country which is focussed on attracting more workers:

The government needs to start a new project or thinking about how we can engage men and we can support the people who have a lot of knowledge. Yeah, because we know New Zealand is running out of workers. It's really hard to find people (Interviewee 13).



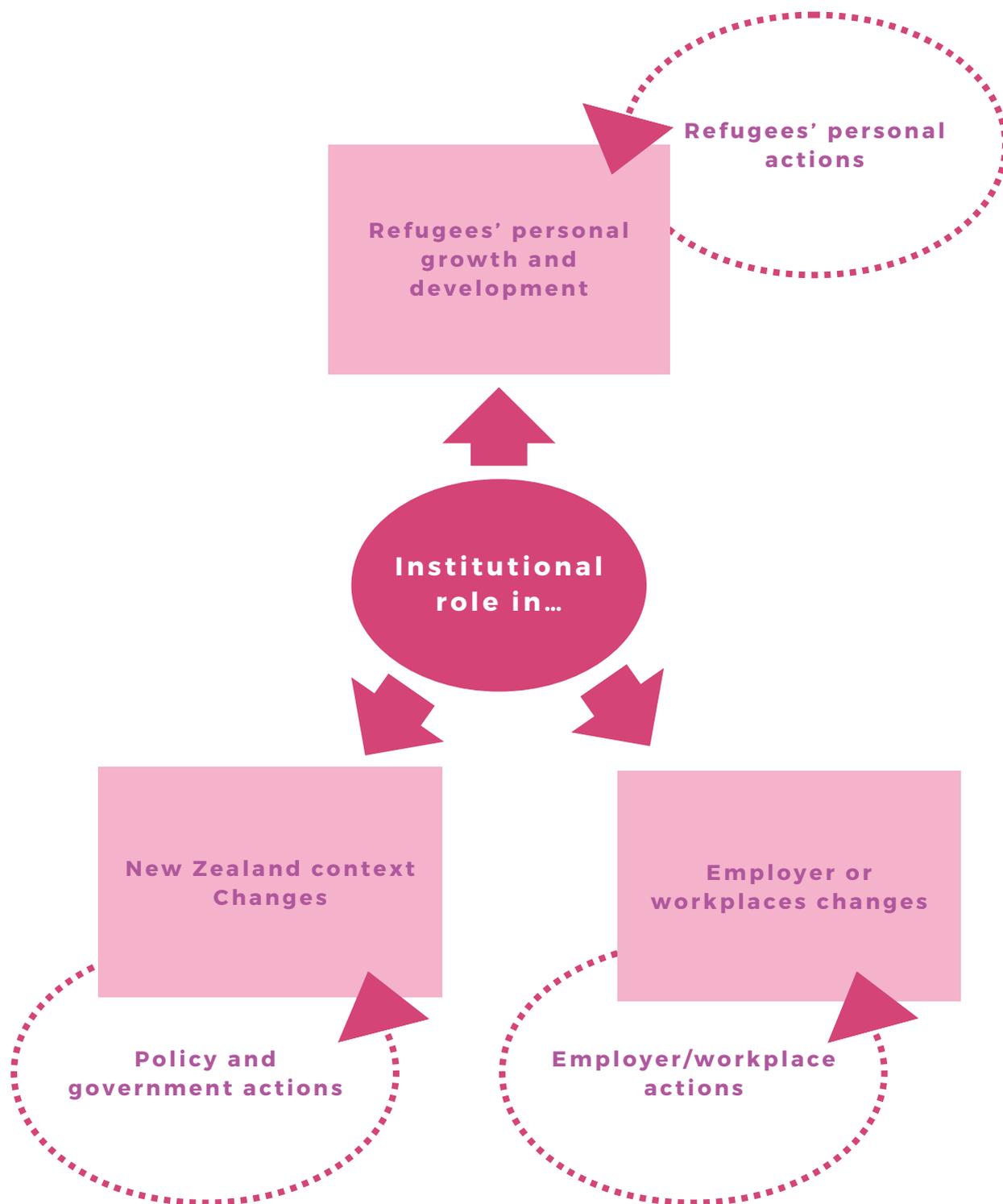
5.4. CAREER GOALS, ADVICE, AND SUPPORT

Our participants, including those who are currently underemployed or unemployed, expressed interest in different types of careers. The most common career aspirations included technical professions such as beauty therapy, hairdressing, electrical work, plumbing, painting, mechanic work (Focus groups 1 and 2, Interviewees 6 and 21), and health care (e.g., nursing, midwife, doctors) (Focus groups 2, 3, 4, and 7, Interviewees 3, 10, 15, 19, and 22). Some were interested in self-employment either as an additional source of income or as a career choice (Focus groups 1, 2, 4, and 6, Interviewees 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 15, 18, and 20). A few of the participants, mostly youth, were interested in employment within the forces (Focus group 8, Interviewee 7) or in sports (Focus groups 4, 7, and 8).

Those who are in employment expressed the need for progressing and/or changing their career trajectory for a managerial or policy-level employment position. These included counselling and/or social work (Focus groups 2 and 6, Interviewees 2 and 12), management (Interviewees 4 and 14), policy-related (Interviewees 13 and 14), engineering (Focus group 3), or architecture (Focus group 8), and a few other professions.

Our participants highlighted the need for career support and advice for securing and maintaining employment. These required changes by the former refugees themselves, as well as employers, workplaces, and government. The institutions such as the Refugee Orientation Trust (ROC) also had a role to play with former refugees' personal growth and development, employer/workplace practices, and government. See Figure 3 for an illustration of these areas.

Figure 3: Areas of former refugee support and development



5.5. PERSONAL ACTIONS FOR GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Our participants recognised that they had a part to play in the resettlement process. They identified several areas of self-development, relating to being positive, gaining host country skills, making connections (networking), and learning local norms.

5.5.1. DEVELOPING SELF-CONFIDENCE, POSITIVE BELIEFS, AND WORK ATTITUDES

The main advice participants gave themselves was to believe in themselves or develop self-confidence. The participants advocated drawing on inner strength to persist and keep going:

Take your first step and then just move forward and never give up (Focus group 2).

Everything is possible (Interviewee 12).

Try to do the best (Interviewee 16).

Be strong, believe in yourself, and do your best (Interviewee 22).

It just depends on yourself (Interviewee 3).

They emphasised a need to develop self-confidence when seeking employment. Elaborating on these further, the participants mentioned that hard work is required to learn, to develop, and to grow at least at the beginning:

I've consistently just worked hard... I've always tried to find a source to learn, and always grow and build myself (Interviewee 14).

We don't have the experience to work here. But I think at the beginning it was a little bit just hard. But we need to don't give up, carry on to try to find job (Interviewee 16).

The youth participants were very vocal about self-belief and confidence:

Trust yourself (Focus group 4).

You have to go for it yourself (Focus group 9).

They expressed positive attitudes and actions about work:

Believe in yourself. Like they have to believe in themselves. Like if they're struggling, just bear it. If you're struggling, just keep going. Keep trying. Everyone is from different countries. So everyone has difficulties. There are lots of other chances in NZ for you, to help you to get your points together. I'm trying to go for the opportunities. But it doesn't matter if you know, good or bad. Just try. You can improve or you can just get better. You can just learn. Yeah, doesn't matter if someone else tells you not to do it, just go for it. It doesn't matter if you can or I'm that good at it. You can just learn and don't think I'm gonna give up. Yeah, don't give up (Focus group 9).

The participants also mentioned that seeking employment could be sometimes emotionally draining but believing 'you can do' helped:

Doesn't make you feel that you can go, but you can. (Interviewee 13).

Other suggestions included developing "self-confidence" (Focus group 6) and "lose their shyness" (Interviewee 12) and learning. Participants also talked about having positive attitudes toward work, not relying on benefits, and wanting to work:

Don't look to the Benefit (Interviewee 1).

First thing you need is you actually need to want to work (Interviewee 14).

In addition, participants advised others to start with something they are good at, whether in employment or in self-employment:

You can start with anything, you can start with small things, just start with things that you're good at (Focus group 2).

5.5.2. DEVELOPING HOST COUNTRY SKILLS, EXPERIENCE, AND KNOWLEDGE

Learning English and gaining driving skills dominated the discussions about the necessary skills to achieve integration in the NZ environment. All interview and focus group participants talked about learning and practicing English. They used phrases like:

Improve your English, work on your language (Focus group 1).

Know the language of the country that they are coming in (Focus group 3).

Learn English (Focus group 4, Interviewee 19).

Language is the way to employment (Focus group 5).

make friends, especially with those who speak English better than you (Interviewee 14).

Similar sentiments were voiced by one participant:

Knowing English is one of the key subjects that makes the person to be more adaptable. So it will make it easier to make friends. And so when you make friends and you're probably lending to the first job, and after that you can prove yourself you can show that you can speak English (Interviewee 5).

Another participant explained that people learn the language when they are embedded in situations that require the English language:

I have some ideas about learning the language, it should be in the environment, not in the classroom. I mean for example if I want to learn some other language, some Tamils, something like that, where can I learn? Inside the class? I have to go to stay somewhere with [Tamil] people. For example, if I want to learn is Chinese, so I have to go, [and] make friends with the Chinese, [or] I have to stay in Chinese. So I will learn the language very quickly (Interviewee 1).

This will also help to “practice English” (Interviewee 21).

In addition to learning the English language, participants advised other former refugees to gain driving skills. Most participants ranked driving as the second most important skill they needed:

In New Zealand, you need to have a car and driving lessons. Yeah. So if you don't have that is really hard to find a job (Interviewee 2).

The first is language; the second is you have to have that knowledge of driving [...] If you want to go on the job, you need a car, you need transport to reach your job, so this is the second important thing you need to, driving skill, to improve your driving skill and you have to be licensed (Focus group 1).

The main issue is language, and second is driving license. Because you don't have your driving license, even if you get a job you can't do it because you will not reach to your workplace (Focus group 5).

Other participants considered driving skills is as equally or more important than language skills:

English matters at work, but when you have your vehicle and you have your licence, you can even join those physical work which will not require you much English, but the first thing I would say driving (Interviewee 12).

But with a licence you can have a job. Yeah, because you can speak English, you can have a job, but how are you going to get to work? Yeah, because public transport is not that available in New Zealand so you will need a car (Interviewee 19).

In addition to these, participants talked about learning computer skills (Interviewee 19), studying in NZ (Focus groups 7 and 9, Interviewees 4, 7, 14, and 22), attending training programmes (Interviewees 1, 4, 5, and 12), gaining work experience by doing volunteer work (Focus groups 3 and 9, Interviewees 2, 9, 13, and 22) part-time work (Interviewee 22) or any other work they could do (Interviewees 20 and 22).

5.5.3. NETWORKING

Our participants talked about the use of their networks and building their institutional links and connections to enhance their employment outcomes. Their family members always encouraged them to find employment and supported them in their endeavours:

My brother encouraged me to try my luck to apply for a few jobs. And I was like, Okay, let's just give it a try (Focus group 9). I have one friend from India [...]. My friend was talking to me in the office about an appointment one day. So I explained to my family, my young sister, can you help me at the appointment? We talked about it together, but for me I never studied at school, so very difficult to understand English. But my sister helped me in that appointment. The first time in the office my manager talked about more jobs for my sister. Do you like cleaning the job? Okay. My sister said "yes" [...] He said "Would you like go together with your sister and clean in the night, in the school?" (Interviewee 21).

Friends (Interviewees 12 and 18) also linked them with employment agencies: Further, the participants shared that regular contact with Work and Income (Interviewee 6), and Red Cross and their volunteers (Focus group 8, Interviewee 8, 12, and 16) also help in finding employment. Expanding this further, focus group 8 participants emphasised the importance of connections - it is not about what you know and who you know:

Sometimes it's not about what you know, but rather who you know. So, make connections as much as you can. Because if you know someone like the manager or something, the likelihood of you getting the job is a bit more. I'd also like to volunteer where it's like it started. Just make connections just to make ends meet. And then something will just pop up. You know people, the more people you know, the more chances if you're looking for a job then the more chance of job (Focus group 8).

Building on the network, and diversifying the network beyond the ethnic community was seen to open up employment opportunities and to help in improving English:

Network, network, don't just get stuck in your community, make friends, network, diversity network, make friends, talk to people, talk to former refugees, talk to other people, European people, talk to everyone (Interviewee 14).

5.5.4. HOST COUNTRY VALUES AND RULES

Our participants emphasised that former refugees should know about the host country's rules, values, and norms. Our participants recommended a proactive approach by the former refugees:

Become accustomed to the conditions here (Focus group 3).

Learn about New Zealand (Focus group 4).

Love New Zealand (Focus group 5).

Know the culture here in New Zealand (Interviewee 15).

Understand how the industry works (Interviewee 14).

Respect the laws and rules of the country (Focus group 1).

These were advocated to help understand of the cultural differences between home and host countries and get accustomed to the host country context. Research about the types of industries and availability of jobs also was recommended so that the NZ context could be ascertained:

So I would say would be really good. If they research what are the best jobs or the best kind of jobs that they could get. If it's painting, for example, it's a really good job here in New Zealand. So they can get quote in immediately. Or like construction, for example, that they can get. Maybe they start in the lower base if they don't have experience, but they can grow with time. So would be very interesting if they research about this (Interviewee 5).

Participants in general appreciated the welcome they received in their host country.

They are very respectable people, they're receiving us very well, giving us a very warm welcome (Focus group 1).

In this country is that they don't really discriminate at that level, saying this is black, this is white, but they try to treat everyone the same level. That is what makes us happy (Focus group 5).

However, this was not always the case as one participant shared:

So when I was here, first, you know, I was called terrorist, I got bullied all the time, I was physically attacked [...]. When I was younger, five, six, we got it bad. Now former refugees, to be honest with you, are treated quite well (Interviewee 14).

5.6.EMPLOYER/WORKPLACE ACTIONS

Workplace or employer support was required to enhance employment outcomes. Understanding the former refugees' situation could help:

I think the employers need to be more open to work with more ethnic communities (Interviewee 13).

If they have some English, just give them a chance. Give them a time and they will build on this. Learn in the environment, in the discussions, this is my advice (Interviewee 1).

Some of the participants mentioned that having people who speak the same language helped in entry into employment:

My first job was in Auckland, at a restaurant. I went to the restaurant and then he said...he is speaking the same language as me. So he said, "Oh, are you looking for a job?" And I said yes, and then we did all the process, and then I started work. It was so good (Focus group 4).

Once former refugees are in employment, having mentoring or a 'buddy system' aided progression in their employment:

And naturally my mentor, he was brilliant for me, because he told me "You can do this, but you need to work on this again." It was constructive criticism (Interviewee 14).

5.7. INSTITUTIONAL ROLES



Institutions supporting former refugees have a role to play in all three areas: former refugees' personal growth and development, employer or workplace changes, and NZ's social environment changes.

Our participants suggested they would like support for personal growth and development, and changes in approaches to service delivery. They had much to say about the way support services are delivered to the former refugees and made suggestions for changes.

Many participants talked about conducting or continuing the English language classes. A gap was perceived to be in the delivery of classes for older persons and those classes needed to be adjusted based on the target group of language learners:

English classes, English classes, so [we] can learn (Focus group 4).

I would like to see the language support for the elderly in all New Zealand. What happens if a person is over 65 year?[...] we are talking about the people around 50-55-65 years, they never went to school, but they want to be part of the New Zealand but they feel go to a study like an obligation (Interviewee 13).

Beyond language, participants highlighted practicing driving (Focus group 5) and empowering people to self-advocate:

People should be educated about how to speak for themselves” (Interviewee 22).

Also, they need work-related information (Interviewees 2, 16, and 18).

With good information about this job, about that job: what job they need, where they can find this job.... But then they need someone or some people who can help a specific way with this (Interviewee 18).

In addition, participants mentioned services related to work: document processing and identifying referees (Interviewee 2), CV writing (Focus group 3, Interviewees 12 and 14), and information on the availability of jobs (Focus group 6, Interviewees 12 and 18).

Self-employment support was sought by many, concerning information and other resources (Focus group 1, Interviewees 2, 4, 10, 12, 16, 18, 20, and 22)

I think one of the things that could help is to teach and educate people regarding how they could help their own businesses, because I think for a lot of us have the skills, we have had people who used to have businesses back home or where they come from (Interviewee 22).

It was suggested that service support should start with the young (Interviewee 14). Specifically, if the young were not inclined to work or have no career plans, they need mentoring to show the benefits of employment:

You may see some youth people 18,19, 20 and above, they are not maybe even going to classes, and they are not going to work. So, because they say, they are getting benefit, right. But I would say like, those people need the meeting [some mentors] to open up their mind (Interviewee 12).

These services should be also targeted at empowering former refugees, making them more independent rather than keeping them reliant on others by doing activities for them:

... when these refugee, when they go to external sources, and they get them to make the CVs and the interviews, that doesn't do anything. You're doing everything for someone. You're not actually like, supporting with each thing you're doing for them. And that's the issue. They're getting things done for them. That's the issue, because it's easier to get things done for them They don't learn to do things on their own. They just rely on these people to do it for them. (Interviewee 14).

Some services need to be better advertised (Interviewee 5) as

“a lot of people are in need but they don't get help. They don't know where to go” (Interviewee 13).

Additionally, it was shared that the services should be given by professionals as a former refugee may not have the correct knowledge for instructing other former refugees to find employment.

I would see changes in the in the support given, the support given to them is completely wrong. It's completely structured incorrectly, you have refugees giving support to other refugees. But it doesn't logically make sense. Because the refugees are giving support they don't know, can barely speak English [...]. So how are they helping other refugees get jobs and improve themselves [...] The system is completely wrong, the support system is completely wrong. What needs to happen, then is to restructure where professionals (who actually have achieved many jobs, and we've done well) support refugees to get jobs, not refugees who have never had a job themselves (Interviewee 14).

A role for advocacy with employers was highlighted. Focus group 5 participants considered it good to have a community member advocating for them. Similarly, one interviewee supported broad workplace-related advocacy:

I think sometimes the actual employees don't respect us for who we are. So sometimes I think we need advocacy support. Because I've had times where I've actually applied for a job or I went to place and I'm like "hey, I'm looking for a job, this is my CV" and people will literally say to my face "we've got other Kiwis who aren't working, why do you think we would employ you?" And that is very harsh and holds me back (Interviewee 22).

Public awareness and community education about former refugees was promoted:

*I would do is just public awareness of refugees in terms of how hard is [for them]. I think it's getting better and better. But more and more workplaces need public awareness to understand that hey, yes, a refugee might not be able to you know, they might not understand this initially, but hey, they will get better (Interviewee 14).
It's not actual policy procedures that lead to discrimination, ... but the people that do it" (Interviewee 22).*



6.FUTURE STEPS



Economic integration is complex and gradual. It comprises of distinct but inter-related social and cultural dimensions, all of which are important for the ability of former refugees to integrate economically as fully included members of the host society. The data we gathered during this research provided many ideas of ways that former refugees may be supported in their endeavours to make their contribution to NZ's social and economic environments. Most importantly these ideas emerged from the former refugees themselves and were not generated by well-meaning or well-intended 'outsiders.' The former refugees readily conveyed the sentiment that "we want to contribute". Our findings highlight areas that need to be strengthened and by organisations that support former refugees. We provide some suggestions here for ROC and other organisations:

■ Personal development sessions

- Training sessions on positive mindset, self-efficacy, and confidence
- Youth focus sessions on career pathways

■ Career readiness workshop series delivered in multi-languages:

- Career pathway sessions: plumbing, mechanics, nursing, beauty care.
- Information or section in a Newsletter on specific career related information
- NZ work culture, work ethics, and expectations
- The role of a CV and CV development
- Interview practice - mock interviews

■ Career readiness information in multiple languages

- Information section on the newsletter/website or social media on specific career related information
- Developing a multi-language short video series on career readiness

■ Employer/work related activities

- Job boards, meet-ups of potential workers and employers
- Informal or formal meet-ups for career development
- Recruiters or industry personnel giving talks on employment
- Sessions on how to deal with racism and biases at workplaces

■ Role models and others talking of benefits of working:

- Moving beyond social benefits
- Opportunities available/types of jobs

■ Self-employment

- Sessions/talks on self-employment start-up and development.
- Multicultural festivals/fairs to showcase talent, and ethnic businesses
- Social enterprise or community cooperative-type arrangements

■ Providing volunteering opportunities

■ Continuing training classes on language and driving

■ Advocacy and awareness

- Advocacy with employers for dedicated pathways for well-performing youth
- Awareness campaigns (newsletters, community meetings, etc.) of former refugees' contribution to the society

■ Links with Government Ministries for ethnic community training and resources

Examples of practical programs that are drawn from the participants' stories should focus on:

■ **Improve English communication skills**

English language will remain the pillar for integration, but its teaching must adapt to new techniques, and cater to the needs of the elderly former refugees.

■ **Matching former refugee skills and labour market needs.**

There is limited transferability of skills obtained abroad. Formal qualifications from overseas are not recognised and uncertainty exists about the former refugees' formal qualifications.

■ **Accounting for gender**

Many former refugees come from a country of origin that is characterised by high gender inequality. Many of the women lack qualifications compared with their menfolk or compared with men and women of the host country.

■ **Promoting social integration**

Social integration is most important in achieving economic integration.

As part of the duty to share the voices of the former refugees who were participants in this research, the ROC Research Team (the authors of this report), aims to publish and disseminate the findings as widely as possible through different avenues such as:

- i. Media: press reports, newspaper articles
- ii. Reports: to various Government Ministries supporting former refugees in NZ (e.g., Education, Internal Affairs, etc)
- iii. Information feedback sessions and workshops: for local body employees, community groups, employers, and former refugee support organisations.
- iv. Institutional websites and publications: ROC Newsletter and Website blogs/releases of the Universities.
- v. Non-academic publications: Conversation New Zealand, Research finding briefs.
- vi. Academic publications: Journals (this process to publication can take up to 3 years), book chapters.
- vii. Oral presentations: Conferences (NZ and overseas) and other institutional presentations (e.g., ROC AGM, Hamilton City Council, Research groups)

7.CONCLUSION



This research aimed to identify the reasons why some working-aged former refugee adults or youth do not engage in economic activities despite their diverse work attributes, expectations, aspirations, and needs. Specifically, our research provides empirical evidence to:

- i. Provide a knowledge base for an informed inclusive community that recognises the potential contribution of a diverse community
- ii. Promote improvements in social wellbeing
- iii. Tailor support services to the needs of the former refugees.
- iv. Fill a gap in knowledge re aspirations and experiences of NZ former refugees.
- v. Assist government policymaking.

Armed with the results of our research, support agencies, and individuals may be better informed to assist former refugees in gaining meaningful, productive work and raising the current low employment rate so that former refugees may integrate more successfully into the communities of their host country.

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