

Community-driven initiative tackles refugee crisis in times of diminishing political support

1. Summary of the impact

In collaboration with The Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre in Indonesia, Dr Lucy Fiske and her team conduct ethnographic research into community organisation of refugees in prolonged transit, and simultaneously assist the school by sharing their findings, providing professional development for volunteer teachers, securing funding and getting involved in the administration of the school.

Through this research initiative, Dr Fiske and her team have observed and supported the refugee community develop personally and professionally, acquiring the necessary confidence, language and cultural skills in preparation for resettlement.

2. Problem

Despite the fact that the number of refugees around the world has reached a historic high, refugee supports and resettlement places are constricting globally. As a result, the time that a person will spend as a refugee has extended from an average of nine years in 1990 to 26 years in 2016. What is more, most of the waiting period is spent in countries with very limited economic resources to support refugees in addition to weak or no legal protection.

One such country is Indonesia, which has a history of being a transit country through which refugees pass through on their way to Australia, or other countries. Indonesia now hosts around 15,000 refugees who will likely remain there for many years without access to protection, health, education, work or citizenship.

3. Beneficiaries

The immediate beneficiaries of the research project are refugees currently in prolonged transit in Indonesia who have no formal rights such as citizenship, rights to work, education, health care or social security.

While the key focus of the project is education, the team also addresses other needs such as teacher training, community development, leadership, human rights, mental health and well-being, information sharing and a range of other needs as identified by the community itself.

4. Approach to impact

The research project is lead by Dr Lucy Fiske who realised that despite the lack of formal support and services, refugees gather to self-organise and provide their community protection, income, health, and education as well as initiatives designed at maintaining cultural life, identity, and family life.

Uptake by policy makers is the 'gold standard' of social impact for most sociological research. This project however, seeks to embed impact throughout the research process – ensuring that the project itself delivers benefits directly to the researched community. Dr Fiske decided on this approach as the political context of refugee migration globally impairs evidence-based policy. Rather than relying on external uptake of the work, the project uses a methodological approach that yields immediate benefits for the community whilst also producing academically rigorous research. This intentional approach lies at the heart of the initiative as Dr Fiske combines social justice and scholarship in her work.

The research project began with interviewing refugees residing in Indonesia as well as key stakeholders (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], International Organisation for Migration [IOM] and local NGOs) involved in the transit process. Dr Fiske adopted an ethnographic approach, embedding herself within the refugee communities to better understand their needs and organisation. This approach allowed her to stay in contact with the stakeholders throughout the process, providing them with updates on the findings and interjecting with other forms of support where relevant.

Through her work in Indonesia, Dr Fiske has become involved with a specific community centring on a refugee-run school in West Java, the Cisarua Refugee Learning Centre (CRLC). The school opened in August 2014 as a collective effort by the community itself, and now has 200 students and 17 volunteer staff. Many other activities have grown from this initiative, including men's, women's and mixed soccer teams, art exhibitions, a karate club, and at least seven more refugee-run schools.

In addition to conducting ethnographic research by observing community and classroom interaction in and around the school, Dr Fiske supports the project by attending meetings and serving on the board of the school. Most importantly, she runs debriefs and brainstorm sessions with staff to identify their needs and responds to them using her networks and resources.

In one such meeting, the community voiced the need for teacher training to provide better education to the students attending the school. All the teachers at CRLC are volunteers

and most are not trained teachers but rely on the limited knowledge and resources they have.

In response to this, Dr Fiske reached out to colleagues from the School of Education at UTS and found much support. Dr Damian Maher and Associate Professor Nina Burrige have since teamed up with Dr Fiske and have both been volunteering by providing professional development on-site in Indonesia as well as remotely. Monthly sessions are delivered via an online platform and further support is provided through the CRLC Teachers Facebook page where they hold discussions about teaching, exchange resources, brainstorm teaching activities and ideas, and provide advice on lesson planning and behaviour management. In addition, Dr Fiske often shares her lecture notes with the teachers who are interested in taking and delivering tertiary level courses but have no access to the material.

The team is now looking for ways to build in UTS student involvement, for instance through UTS BUiLD or Shopfront. Two final year Communications students, Ushna Bashir and Ellie Slade, are doing an internship remotely with the school and following up refugees resettled in the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This project puts Ellie and Ushna's skills learned in their degree to excellent use and will provide CRLC with evidence of their success to report back to supporters and prospective donors, and of course, to the school community itself.

The community has also indicated it wants help to better understand the refugee status determination (RSD) process and the UTS team is currently planning a program in which members of the refugee community can receive training on RSD processes and how to write clear statements of claims and lodge appeals. As a result of this initiative, these members would then be able to advise and support newly arriving refugees to lodge their claims.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

5.1. The Outcomes

One of the key objectives has been changing the public discourse surrounding refugees and raising awareness among non-academic audiences of refugee situations. To do this, the team regularly reports and publishes findings and Dr Fiske has also participated in an art exhibition held at the Bob Hawke Gallery at the University of South Australia titled "Who Are We Anyway?"

This was the result of collaboration between two refugees from the community and one Australian film maker. In addition to publishing her own research on the community, Dr Fiske has co-authored a refereed journal article with one the refugees and is planning to co-present a paper at a major international conference in Canada next year with another. By involving the community in these publications and exhibitions, the project offers a platform for refugees to challenge their representation in public discourse as either

helpless or dangerous. On the contrary, these initiatives show that refugee communities are made up of capable, determined and creative individuals with an interest in engaging in the community and contributing to society. This collaboration has also given these individuals the confidence to research, analyse and write; skills and activities they never anticipated doing previously.

5.2. Impact

While it is still a problematic task to change the hostile environment for refugees in transit on a global scale, life in this particular community has been radically transformed through these initiatives.

The team has certainly had an impact on the quality of education that refugees have access to as teachers feel more supported and more professional, and thus more confident in their work. As a result of this, refugees are not merely trapped while they wait but continue to develop personally and professionally, acquiring the necessary confidence and language skills in preparation for their eventual relocation. Indeed, those who successfully relocated after attending CRLC have gone into their correct year level at school and make friends easily due to their English language skills. Their parents report being able to secure employment, feeling confident in negotiating working and living conditions, and feeling better prepared to start their new life as a result of the community interaction in Indonesia.

Through the collaboration with reputable Australian scholars who took a serious interest in their lives, the community has also gained a feeling of connectedness to the Western world. By having created one more link in their network, members of the community feel more empowered in finding solutions and know that there are people they can turn to.

As such, the team has certainly had a human welfare and educational impact in this community, and this approach could have a significantly wider impact if such resources and assistance were made available for refugees in transit globally.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

6.1. Personal enabling factors

According to Dr Fiske, much of the success of the project has been due to community collaboration and their willingness to trust the UTS team.

Having worked with refugees for over twenty years, both as a social worker and as an academic, Dr Fiske feels equipped with the practical skills to help the community whilst researching and gaining a richer insight into the social processes of refugee transit. Specifically, it is the love of people and commitment to justice which drives her work. This has shaped the philosophy for the project which is based on the belief that the process itself is usually the answer to an issue, and that small changes matter. In other words, the

team believes in a hands-on approach, rather than waiting for research outcomes alone to influence external policies.

In addition, the willingness and determination of the UTS staff involved in the project has been invaluable and has significantly boosted confidence among the volunteer teachers at CRLC.

6.2. External enabling factors

The initiative relies on the Dean's Discretionary funding as well as the Chancellor's Postdoctoral Research Fellowships. In addition, the team received direct support from the former UTS Chancellor Professor Vicky Sara.

According to Dr Fiske, people around UTS are generally passionate about social justice-oriented work and have thus created a very supportive environment where the research approach she takes is valued. Moreover, staff members across the faculty at all levels have shown their support, financially and otherwise, which greatly contributed to the success of the initiative.

7. Challenges

There are various challenges which the team has encountered over the course of the project.

One major concern is securing funding for the continuation of the project which is coming to an end in January 2018. While the team is determined to continue the work regardless of grants, the reach of the program and the resources available to the volunteer teachers will be limited if regular funding discontinues.

On a personal level, dealing with frustration is a continuous challenge as global events and political decisions can have a serious impact on the individuals the team works with. For instance, one of the community members was granted entry to the United States, however has been unable to relocate due to the Trump administration's decision to halt refugee intake. While this can make the whole team feel powerless at times, Dr Fiske affirms that this actually fuels her desire to continue her work.

Finally, Dr Fiske raises the important issue of timing. Political cycles move much faster than academic cycles and as a result, by the time academic research is completed and recommendations are made, the work may no longer be a priority for the current political administration. As such, the research may not achieve the policy impact that it intended. It is for this reason that the team is using a research approach that incorporates action-research methods and partnership with the community, so that research continues to be thorough and academically rigorous whilst responding to an immediate political and humanitarian need.

8. Associated research

Academic

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9. References

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