The resettlement of refugees selected abroad in Quebec, a well-kept secret!

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The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) now estimates that over 30 million persons are in need of protection, numbers that simply cannot be accommodated by resettlement (Metropolis World Bulletin, 2008, p. 2). What is Quebec’s contribution to the efforts of various rich countries to provide a safe haven for refugees where they can restart their lives? What are the means and approaches chosen by the Quebec government to receive the 1900 public refugees that it takes in each year? What challenges are faced by the refugee families arriving in Quebec and by the localities which welcome them? How can these players be best supported? Those are the main questions that we will attempt to answer in this article.

Does Quebec take in too many refugees?

In a context of government action to restrict the right of asylum and increasing anti-immigrant discourse under the guise of national security or the protection of the social rights of citizens, it is important to recall the origins of humanitarian immigration. During the Second World War, several countries refused asylum to Jewish refugees, thus contributing to the number of victims of genocide. To avoid repeating these errors, in 1951 the international community developed legal instruments, particularly the Geneva Convention, which defines the principles and basic conditions for refugee protection. A refugee is defined in the Convention as “A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to

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such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it”. Canada became one of the signatories in 1969.

According to the Canada-Quebec Accord of 1991, delegating the control of immigration to the Quebec government, including the program for refugees selected abroad, Quebec is required to take in a proportion of humanitarian immigration equivalent to its demographic weight in Canada, that is around 22% of humanitarian immigration taken in by the whole of Canada. In return, the federal government grants to the Quebec government an annual contribution calculated according to the formula established in the Accord. The contribution covers integration and francization services including the resettlement of the refugees for whom Quebec is responsible (TCRI 2007, p. 4). The amount of the contribution which will be paid to Quebec for 2011-2012 is anticipated to be at least $258.4 million, an amount which is much greater than what is actually spent on the reception of newcomers.

The Quebec approach to the reception and integration of refugees selected abroad: regionalization and autonomy supported by local communities

While the other provinces resettle refugees in large cities such as Toronto, Vancouver, Winnipeg or Calgary and accommodate them as of their arrival for a period of one to three months in “reception houses”, which provide integrated services adapted to the needs of refugees, Quebec has opted for an approach based on the regionalization of immigration and the rapid development of refugees’ autonomy.

When it was still in charge of immigration in the province, the federal government was already sending a good number of refugees to Gatineau, Quebec City, Sherbrooke and Trois-Rivières. However, following the signing of the 1991 Canada-Quebec Accord, the Quebec government accentuated this trend towards the regionalization of humanitarian immigration. The Quebec strategy consists in reducing the resettlement of government-assisted refugees (GARs) in Montreal, where immigrants are concentrated, and resettling them directly in localities situated within a radius of 250 kilometres of Montreal. Thus, Quebec receives annually around 1900 refugees selected abroad who are resettled in 13 localities: Quebec City (480), Sherbrooke (295), Gatineau (225), Montreal (130), Laval
(95), Brossard (95), Trois-Rivières (90), Drummondville (90), Saint-Hyacinthe (90), Granby (90), Victoriaville (85), Joliette (70) and Saint-Jérôme (65) (MICC 2010).

From 2005 to 2009, just over 9000 persons found a place of refuge in Quebec thanks to the program for refugees selected abroad. And it is through this humanitarian immigration that the reception structures for the settlement of immigrants in the regions have been strengthened. Each of the 13 localities can rely on an agency for immigrants which ensures, under an agreement with the Ministère de l’Immigration et des Communautés culturelles (MICC), the reception and settlement of refugee families. Beyond this specific resource, the local communities have mobilized and have initiated, at various rates and in various ways, a process of adaptation of their practices in order to support these families confronted with often complex and multiple challenges in their efforts to integrate in Quebec.

The approach preferred by Quebec is that of the rapid development of autonomy. Refugees are welcomed at the airport by an agency (YMCA) and transported to the host locality designated for them. At their destination, the refugee families are received by representatives of the local community agency for immigrants. It is these people who over the first year of settlement will ensure the outreach support for the families (finding housing, numerous steps towards settlement and integration in the areas of education, health…). The families will be put up in a hotel for two to four days before they are in their own accommodation. This very rapid autonomy is in itself a great challenge for persons who have often not had their own dwelling place for many years. It is crucial then for the community workers to be readily available over the first few weeks of settlement. For the next five years, the refugees will be able to rely on the support of the community agencies for integration, in particular professional integration, the support provided all newcomers with permanent resident status in Quebec.

**The integration of refugees, ever greater challenges**

The evolution of the profile of refugees has followed ethnic, religious and international conflicts. While the 1980s were marked by the arrival of the first refugees from Indochina, Quebec has over recent years taken in numerous nationals of Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Burundi or Rwanda.
The waiting period for refugees who hope to get the opportunity to resettle in a safe country is getting longer. According to a UNHCR report of 2004, the average duration of protracted situations increased from nine to 17 years between 1993 and 2003 (Metropolis World Bulletin 2008, p. 16). On the recommendation of the UNHCR, several countries, including Canada, have committed to take in these refugees. Quebec is thus receiving more refugees who have spent many years in camps. This is particularly the case with persons from South Asia (Bhutanese, Karen and Rohingya). Persons who have lived in extreme insecurity for a good deal of their lives will have to make greater efforts to adapt.

The traumatizing situations that the refugees have lived through in their countries of origin, during flight and also in the refugee camps have an important impact on their health, both mental (psychological distress, post-traumatic shock, etc.) and physical (infectious diseases, illnesses aggravated due to lack of adequate medical care in the camps). It is important to recall also that the long delays in family reunification (three to four years on average) as well as the effects of these separations, which resurface at the time of reunification, exert great pressure on refugees, on their finances, their emotional balance and their capacity to plan for the future.

Finally, in June 2002, the excessive demand clause, which prevented persons having severe health problems from applying for resettlement in a third country, was abolished in the wake of the adoption of the new Immigration and Refugee Protection Act (IRPA). This relaxation of the law allowed persons who are very vulnerable physically and mentally to find a refuge in Quebec, and in this sense it was a remarkable advance. The corollary of this advance is a very clear increase in the need for health and social services (examinations and medical care...). In this context, intercultural community workers in health and social services from community host agencies are solicited by families and by health care institutions to serve as interpreters and/or mediators. In view of the fact that four out of five selected refugees are allophones (81.5%), that learning the language takes time and that this learning is not materially possible for all members of the family at the same rate, access to experienced interpreters is a crucial concern in all the regions. Without an interpreter, the social rights of the refugees are

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2 “Protracted refugee situations” characterized by lengthy periods of exile involve approximately 2/3 of world refugees.
inevitably flouted (work, education, social protection, health). Furthermore, in all the host regions, workers are currently denouncing an overwhelming workload and their inability to adequately meet the needs of the refugees.

Since the GARs are young, 44.5% being under 17 years of age, educational integration is a major challenge for these families, which are often poorly equipped to support their children at an academic level (81.5% are allophones, and 70% have a secondary-school education or less). The difficulties of adapting to a new host society with its values, its rules and its behavioural norms, which are experienced by all newcomers, are increased for these young people who have lived in strategies of survival and of flight, and who sometimes distrust adults who in the past were persecutors rather than protectors. The physical and mental health problems linked to the precarious living conditions which marked their migration add to the complexity of the situations of the young people. The disruptions of schooling, related to the successive moves of fleeing families and the lack of a school in certain camps, mean that many young refugees arrive in Quebec with a level of education which is lower than what is expected for their age. Finally, the inadequacy of the evaluation tools and of the educational structures in the face of the reality of the refugees has as a consequence that certain young people who have potential do not perform well.

**The educational integration of young refugees, lessons from the host communities**

In the context of research carried out by the TCRI on the integration of young refugees, 80 workers from community and institutional settings (immigration, health and social services, education, youth protection, etc.) discussed the challenges and the favorable conditions relating to the educational integration of the young refugees. The following factors emerged as crucial to facilitate the pathways of these young people:

- Any approach must be made in conjunction with the family. The fact that many parents are allophones and have little education should not cause us to forget that the parents have their own strategies to encourage and support their children in their efforts at school and that they are the principal actors in the education of their children.
- A promising feature is the presence of intercultural community workers from the host agencies who have the confidence of the families and can facilitate the links between family, school, the youth
and the other resources of the host society. In the same way, experienced francization instructors, who are committed and have confidence in the capacities of the young refugees make a great difference in the success of the youth.

- All the actors involved in the integration of youth should feel concerned and should become engaged in the search for and the implementation of solutions.
- It is better that the workers from the agencies (host agencies, schools, health and social services, youth protection) work together, in a complementary way, with a multidisciplinary approach.
- To attain this quality of work in teams and in networks, it would appear essential to multiply the spaces for exchange of ideas such as training sessions, multidisciplinary working meetings to find solutions in particularly complex situations.

**Conclusion**

By providing refugees with the chance to restart their lives in a safe country, the Quebec government is taking essential action for international solidarity. We have seen that the experiences and living conditions of the refugees make them more and more vulnerable, and that this makes the task for the local communities which receive them more and more complex.

Despite the mobilization of the communities and the promising adaptations of practices in the host localities for the refugees in the regions, it must be acknowledged that the degree of preparation within the various sectors of the communities, which is indispensable for the smooth integration of the refugee families, remains very inadequate. It is the responsibility of the Quebec government to better assist the local communities in establishing optimal conditions for the reception and support of these families in their process of social, economic and cultural adaptation and integration. Quebec can count on the commitment of the local communities and the creativity that they are demonstrating to make the resettlement of refugee families a success. All that is needed is to give them adequate support.

**Bibliography**

